

## Do Independent Games Exist?

No they don't.

It's possible to assert that there aren't any independent games at all; that the game industry consists entirely of mainstream corporate product; that the independent game is a myth; that the game industry is Hollywood *without* independent films, a hit-driven business that is all center and no margins.

Yes they do.

But it would be just as valid to say that independent games are alive and well; that there is constant experimentation in the industry; that garage-band game studios can make it big; that the diverse cultures and subcultures of gaming, from internet shareware to player-generated mods, represent the unsung margins of games.

Huh?

Just what are "independent games" anyway? What's the difference between an independent game and a non-independent game? And why should it matter whether or not they exist?

Before we dig down into these questions, let's take a brief sideways glance at cinema, a medium where the concept of the independent product seems to be indisputably alive and well.

"Independent film" is a term that the critics, creators, and viewers of films all seem quite comfortable using. So how do they differentiate an independent movie from one that isn't independent?

- 1) Independence can refer to the way that a film is **funded, marketed and distributed**. Was it a Studio production? Or was it financed from a grant? And where can the film be seen? In a corporate multiplex or in an alternative art house?
- 2) It can also have to do with the **film medium** itself. Was it a short or a feature? Was the scope of production a shoestring budget or a multimillion dollar extravaganza?
- 3) Lastly, the idea of independence in film can refer to something more vague, to the overall **spirit and culture** of the film. Is it the usual Hollywood formula, or does the storyline and cinematography somehow question mainstream filmmaking?

Independence in cinema is associated with the economic, technological, or cultural qualities of a film. The possibility of independent games can also be plotted along these three overlapping vectors. If independent games do exist, then they're independent because something about their economic, technological, or cultural status makes them so.

The initial question remains: Do independent games exist? But is it really a yes or no question? If it is, I'm not ready to come down on one side or the other just yet. I'd rather be able to speak out of both sides of my mouth. And so as I take a look at the economic, technological, and cultural factors which contribute to the answer, I'll be keeping a running dialogue with myself. Pick your favorite column.

## The Money Stuff: Economic Factors

**Games are big business.** Games are a multibillion dollar industry, with revenues growing every year. The bigger the overall size of the industry, the more nooks and crannies arise in which alternative economic models for independent games can emerge.

**The core business model of the game industry is sound.** The game industry shares the artist/publisher business model of other “content industries” like music, film, and books. The *game developer* creates the content (like the book author or musician) and the *game publisher* funds, manufactures, markets, and distributes the content (like the book publisher or record label). If the game is a success, the developer gets royalties. This model has helped games become the only form of digital culture that people actually seem willing to purchase. While there are well-worn genres in the game industry, some of the best-selling titles (Tetris, Myst, Doom, Sim City) have been true innovators.

**The Internet will make independent games possible.** In the future, game consumers will be able to purchase games online directly from developers, downloading data instead of buying a manufactured disk or cartridge. This encourages independent games by eliminating the distribution snafu: players can choose any game they like instead of being limited to the mainstream titles that retailers choose to put on store shelves.

**Other media have alternative contexts for production, distribution, and reception.** As the game industry matures, the equivalent of small record labels, college radio stations, and experimental DJs will come into their own.

**Games are big business: too big.** Compared to the more gradual development of other media, the commercialization of digital games has been blindingly rapid. The overwhelming economic scale of the global game industry means that the margins get squeezed out by the massive center.

**The game industry is completely screwed up.** Thousands of new games come out every year but only a handful turn a profit: this circumstance has led to a hit-driven industry in which publishers remain staunchly conservative, pumping out lookalike, genre-bound drek. Retail distribution of games is a cutthroat bottleneck, with a handful of chain stores running most of the show. If a game doesn't have an immense marketing budget that will guarantee immediate sales from launch, it will be yanked from the shelves. For a publisher, it's more advantageous to shoot for that one top ten hit that will carry a company through the holiday season rather than try new and experimental kinds of games.

**Nobody knows how to make money online.** The shareware business model, in which players download a free game demo and pay for the full version of the game, has rarely proven lucrative. CD-ROM games are often hundreds of megabytes of data, meaning hours of download time for most computer users. The internet economy, including online gaming sites, seems to be in a complete shambles.

**It's a chicken and egg situation.** These “alternative contexts” will come into being only when the game industry undergoes a number of major paradigm shifts in the ways that games are produced, distributed, and played. These shifts are unlikely to happen before the games themselves change.

## Geek Science: Technological Factors

**The technology is getting better.** There's no other cultural medium like games that reinvents its own technical capabilities every few years. New game technologies mean more depth, more complexity, and more ways to play. Technology drives innovation.

**Games are bigger than ever.** No longer the product of a single programmer, games are substantial undertakings requiring the kind of creative, multi-stage, interdisciplinary collaboration found in film. The increase of professional standards in regards to scope and process is a necessary step in the maturation of the medium.

**New game platforms keep the industry on its toes.** The constant competition between the major industry players means that games will always be maximizing the latest capabilities of PCs and that new consoles will appear on the market every year or two. Games must rise to meet these ever-changing technological needs and the result is a lack of stagnation in the games themselves.

**Games are merging with cinema.** Technological advances, particularly in real-time graphics, means that games are becoming more "realistic" and increasingly resemble film. The cinematic turn in games will allow developers a broader palette of expressive tools that will appeal to new kinds of game audiences. Games will absorb and replace film.

**Technology is overemphasized.** The game industry is completely technofetistic, with the value of games typically judged on their technical merits. Innovation in games needs to come from sources other than hardware and software technology.

**Games are bigger than ever.** As games get bigger, they get more expensive. And the most expensive games set the standard for production values in all games. Games are complicated to produce and low-fi approaches are frowned upon. It's possible for a band to record an album in a garage over a weekend. But not so with games.

**The industry indulges in planned obsolescence.** Platform follows platform like the Emperor's new clothes. The resulting plethora of standards makes archiving and playing older games a hobbyist's trade, rather than the more universal formats of the videotape or audio CD. The result is a medium without a history, in which tech innovation becomes an end, not a means.

**Games suffer from cinema envy.** What passes for "realism" in games is an awkward and unimaginative use of 3D computer graphics. It's time for game developers to stop trying to replicate the pleasures of film. Games need to find their own forms of expression, capitalizing on their unique properties as dynamic, participatory systems.

## The Little Boy's Club: Cultural Factors

### **Game developers care about their work.**

With lower average salaries than the rest of the software development industry, game developers make games because they love what they do. The game development community is fiercely dedicated to the craft of making games and almost universally disgruntled with the homogeneous nature of the game industry. With these attitudes, breakout independent games are inevitable.

**Games are diversifying.** Games are no longer the domain of young males. For example, the girls games movement made great strides in opening up new audiences for games. The internet has introduced gaming to an older, multicultural audience of both genders. An increasingly "interactive" society will demand interactive entertainment and as the cultural credibility of games improves, they will replace other media to become wired society's dominant leisure activity.

**Games are influential pop culture.** Fine artists are appropriating the imagery of computer games. DJs are sampling retro game audio effects. Videogame characters feature on Urban Outfitter t-shirts. Playstations have been a mainstay of London clubs for years. This kind of hybrid appropriation is how healthy and robust media operate and is the proof of the relevance of games in culture at large. Game soundtracks feature tracks from hot DJs. Independent games will emerge from the intersection of games with music, fashion, and other forms of culture.

**Game subcultures are thriving.** From user-created game levels and avatars to grassroots online game fan communities to the cultures of hacks and mods, the subcultures of games are incredibly rich. So stop complaining: independent games are already here.

**Games are made by and for hardcore gamers.** Until this cycle is broken, culturally games will remain stuck right where they are. Game developers are unapologetically geeky, blatantly anti-intellectual, and hostile to new ways of thinking about what they do. There are no established critical methodologies for game design and without ways of thinking outside the box, independent games are doomed.

**The more things change, the more they stay the same.** The legacy of the girls game movement isn't experimental, independent games: it is Barbie CD-ROMs. Games, like comic books in the US, will never shed their stigma as power fantasies for adolescent boys. Despite the incrementally diversifying audience for gaming, it's naïve to think that games will ever usurp film and television as dominant forms of entertainment.

**It's a one-way street.** It's true that games are being appropriated by other forms of culture. But the reverse just isn't true. The aesthetics and narratives of games are almost completely genre-bound. Game design and development needs to be seen as a cultural activity. This means, among other things, the development of a critical discourse that can bridge the theory and practice of games and help developers understand their work as both as a disciplinary activity and in broader terms as the production of culture. Games should appropriate from a broader array of cultural sources. Forget D&D: how about Cubism or Hitchcock?

**There's a difference between fan culture and independent games.** Game subcultures are composed of hardcore gamers and are focused inward, on their own communities, rather than being concerned with changing the face of gaming culture at large. A true independent games movement will be something entirely different.

Pop culture is an ecosystem. Music and fashion; film and graphic design; television and manga. In diverse economies of scale, pop media network globally and locally, influencing each other in every sphere of society. Do digital games take part in this worldwide dance of culture?

Of course they do – but somehow only as a geeky cousin, twice removed from the family of other, hipper pop media. Or perhaps I'm being too hard on games, unfairly stereotyping them without appreciating their subtlety. Maybe games are part and parcel of the landscape of pop – but as with all new forms of media, their introduction into the mix redefines the way we have to consider the whole.

I'm crossing my fingers that the oh-so-young young medium of digital games has many wonderful surprises in store for us, ways of constructing our lives and commenting on them that we have yet to experience. My hope is that games can offer radically new forms of culture, forms that are uniquely suited to the complex emergent systems which seem to increasingly constitute our understandings of the world.

The immediate question remains, however. The question that started this essay: Do independent games exist or not? You've heard from both sides of my mouth. So which voice makes sense to you? Which column seemed to speak the truth - the left or the right? Actually, the two columns aren't intended as two separate answers. They're more like two related arguments. Or perhaps they're two halves of the same argument.

Do you want to know what I really think?

If you're a tourist to this world, someone outside the game industry, someone that doesn't play many games but is drawn to their glittering surfaces and wants to know more, read down the left. Appreciate games. Look beyond the shoot-em-up stigma and try to see digital gaming as the deliciously complex and groundbreaking phenomena that it is.

On the other hand, if you're not just a tourist, if you're already in the belly of the beast, if you're a game player, a game critic, or even (can it be?) a game developer, read the right-hand column. Be disgruntled. Be dissatisfied. Demand more. Get angry with the state of things. Start a revolution. Do you need a place to begin? How about this: solve the unsolved problem of independent games.

If you don't, who will?