Independent Video Games and the Games 'Indiestry' Spectrum: Dissecting the Online Discourse of Independent Game Developers in Industry Culture

by

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ABSTRACT

The independent versus mainstream production culture is one spread across all media including videogames. The aim of the dissertation was to analyze and examine the patterns and use of online communication through Twitter, endorsed articles and their studio website content among three individual development studios – Studio MDHR and *Cuphead*, Vlambeer and *Nuclear Throne*, and Anna Anthropy and *Dys4ia.* These developers range in their involvement with first-party developers such as Sony and Microsoft as well as the size and diversity of their team.

The application of Burke's pentad and discovery of emergent themes through grounded theory yielded significant differences among the three cases. It is suggested that a spectrum of independent game development attitude and interaction with the audience is influenced by their involvement with mainstream game industry entities; the closer the independent studio is to first-party involvement, the more it resembles the habitus of the 'indiestry' of game development. Also, the research revealed there is no stated assertion of being 'indie' by the developers, but they use their online Twitter profile to convey the values of independent production culture.

These findings can be instructional to social media managers for independent production clientele as well as lending to the study of independent game developers, the sprawling definitions of "independent," and the addition of the term "indiestry" to the videogame development vernacular.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION: THE INDUSTRY OF PLAY

Videogames represent what Zimmerman (2014) called the 21st century medium, one in which humans find the ability to interact with computers, with one another, to become creators, to engage in the cultural turn toward play, and to become representatives of the shift which has placed videogames into the upper echelon of entertainment media. Videogames represent not only an engaging medium for play, but also an extremely lucrative industry. The Entertainment Software Association found that video game software, hardware and accessories represented a $36 billion consumer spend in the United States in 2018. This industry has seen tremendous growth, never reporting a decline, even during general economic downturns. The videogames industry also provides vast employment opportunities and economic stability in the United States (see ESA, 2018).

Compared to legacy entertainment media such as film and television, videogames offer a unique opportunity for user interaction that has become increasingly popular in the United States and abroad. Indeed, the Entertainment Software Association (2018) reported 60 percent of Americans play videogames, with the average player approaching middle age and spending three or more hours a week playing. Moreover, videogames bring with them a cultural shift that has led to the gamification of many aspects of daily life, thereby making an indelible mark on those who interact with games and find themselves increasingly bringing digital play into their routines. Predictably, alongside this rising influence an increasingly sophisticated intellectual discussion has emerged, one which remains divided in its views on the influence of videogames. One end of the scholarly spectrum, some (e.g., McGonigal, 2011) emphasize the utilitarian potential for

games and the "gamification" of life, while others decry these practices as simply an extension of extant ideologies into an increasingly solitary existence (e.g., Fisher & Harvey, 2005). Aside from these philosophical debates, there can be no mistaking the reality that videogames have emerged as a central cultural artifact, one which is having important impacts on communication ecosystems, technological progress, and product development.

Discussing videogames as the latest iteration of growth in the entertainment industry is not necessarily novel or ground-breaking. What should be considered, though, is the speed of its maturation and its strategies of representation in a matrix of cultural industries situated, sometimes uncomfortably, between art and profit. Positioning entertainment and art categories such as film and music alongside the digital gaming industry has long since been problematic as games and art have been at odds (Anthropy, 2012; Smith, 2013). Videogames are sometimes positioned as is the iteration of a single artistic expression which places the onus of action on the audience, who must actively drive the experience forward in a specific manner rather than have the audience be the passive spectator to the art (Ryan, 2012).

While traditional video game developers have enjoyed many years of financial success and influence on the gaming community, the year 2013 saw the rise of a new breed of independent creators, who, while having been present alongside the mainstream for well over a decade, became the focus of intense public interest, as evidenced by the unprecedented attendance of an independent games panel at the annual Game Developers Conference (Suellentrop, 2013). The year prior saw the rise of independently developed videogames, to be referred to hereafter as "indie" games, with *Journey*, an independently

developed and produced video game, winning the coveted Game of the Year award, as well as five other awards presented by the Game Developers Choice Awards. To paraphrase Vanderhoef (2016), videogames clearly matter, but independent videogames were beginning to matter a lot.

For the purposes of this work, I sought to examine the discourse of "indie" or "independent" as it is currently deployed in the games industry. It is valuable to note that the descriptor "independent" most often relative, used to situate a given producer in opposition to mainstream producers, who are seen to be invested only in streamlined and widely marketable products. For entertainment industries built on scale and the heavy usage of formulaic storylines, goals and characters, games are in a unique position to usurp this trope of the blockbuster and make the audience more involved in the creation and utilization of a rule-based experience (Bogost, 2007; Sniderman, 2005).

In short, it is the aim of this work to examine how the terms "independent" – and the more colloquial "indie" – are utilized and given meaning in discussions of game developers, in the game publishing community, and within the games themselves. Data below are retrieved from the public and easily-accessible messages of social media – namely Twitter – and articles endorsed through the medium via a retweet or posting of the article. The official websites of the games and the developers also shed light on the variation of the use of the terms "independent" and "indie." The analysis consists of three case studies, ranging from the highly corporate, potentially co-opted sector of independent game development to the niche production and audience of independently produced, so-called "serious" games. These games are – in order from most polished and widely-appealing to the most narrow and independent – *Cuphead,* by the family-founded

Studio MDHR; *Nuclear Throne* by the two-person team Vlambeer; and *Dys4ia,* by Anna Anthropy. These games and developers were selected as representatives of a spectrum of proximity to the mainstream, AAA game industry, because their games are easily accessible, and because conversations about these artifacts are still relevant and discoverable in publicly available electronic archives. This spectrum of cases reflect many facets of the video game industry. The size of the team, the amount of diversity of thought from the team, the level of first-party developer involvement in the title and the progression of time changing the attitude of what indie games can be.

As independent audiences tend to value the more personal nature of the product, the individual discussions in a forum such as Twitter are expected to be more spontaneous and less filtered than reviews written by game journalists. What this project sought to discover was how developers represent themselves to their audience in a medium without visible gatekeeping and editing. Even if the feeds were edited, it is the illusion that Twitter is a more "real and raw" source of communication directly with the developer and their respective audiences.

While formal games journalism articles were not part of the full analysis, available articles from games journalism sites were used to give background on each developer for the case study context. The retweet or reposting of an article about a developer appearing on the Twitter feed was assumed to mean the developer endorsed the information within. Direct quotes from the developers in the articles were used but no commentary from the author of the article.

For the thematic and pentadic analysis, the individual accounts for Studio MDHR, Vlambeer, and Anthrophy were exported using Export Tweet, with a maximum of 3,200

tweets per account. The tweets and corresponding images or links were read through once to develop the thematic categories for each independent game developer, then read through three times more and categorized open-coded into thematic categories based on Burke's pentad. The pentadic analysis of isolating the act, agent, agency, purpose and scene and their relation in the rhetorical object – in this case, tweets – clarified how the developer thought of themselves in relation to other developers, other games, and the industry and society at large; at the same time, the analysis also shows how developers were attempting to present themselves to their audiences. Burke's focus on the dramatistic aspect of human communication – and our propensity to tell stories and make symbols to legitimize or explain events, thoughts, and perspectives – puts the focus on the words rather than physical actions of the developers. Placing this importance on words within a medium of instantaneous contact creates opportunities to analyze the developers' strategies in sharing their stories with a variety of audiences.

The findings indicated the leverage of direct communication through Twitter worked in favor of presenting an accessible and responsive entity behind the games created. Each of the accounts and interactions were markedly different as the aims of each developer differed: Studio MDHR sought to gain interest and sell a game, Vlambeer sought to involve the audience in the act of creating a game, and Anna Anthropy sought to connect her personal, professional, creative and advocacy life in an open forum to build awareness and bridge social ties for herself and others who read or participated on the feed (Putnam, 2000).

This work sought to find how the terms 'indie' or 'independent' were used throughout the data written by the developers. Tellingly, the terms are not used in posts

written by the developers, save for coincidental instances. In public relations, an adage states that everything you *do* and everything you *do not do* is another opportunity to shape the way others view you. The absence of these terms in originally composed tweets indicated that being 'indie' was not something one could declare spontaneously. Rather, it is the unsaid performance of 'indie' traits that merit the gravitas of the distinction by the peers in the independent game development community.

Further, the medium of Twitter allowed the developers to publicly display traits of communication valued in an independent medial production culture. These traits emerged as sensitizing topics in the data and guided the analysis of the content of the Twitter posts, articles endorsed by the game developer and posts written on the personal or game website. Included in the sensitizing topics were transparency, humility, vulnerability, passion for the creation, personal involvement, rejection of systematic production/education, working with other independent developers, contributing to the independent development community, supporting and connecting others in a productive manner, and the sole ownership and control of the intellectual property of the game.

After the analysis and examination of the data, it also became clear that developing a game, for some developers, requires greater financial resources from other first-party developers such as Sony and Microsoft. This collaboration across what were once diametrically opposed ends of the media landscape has already occurred in the legacy media of film, music and other forms of media creation, but this iteration in game development is unique. The first-party developers do not involve themselves in the work of the independent game developer they are funding. Whereas the beginning of this partnership process was more restrictive and put more demands on the independent game

developers, the climate of 2019 independent game development partnership evolved into a hands-off approach.

I not only examine each developer's Twitter feed through the dramatistic lens of Burke's pentad as a performative act of 'indie' traits, but also to introduce the term of the games 'indiestry' as independent game developers are creating their own subset within the subset of independent game development. The range of traits maps over each case study's public performance – or lack thereof – of each trait displayed in conversations on their Twitter profile and their responses to other Twitter users.

This dissertation's contribution to the field of study spans three areas. First, the use of case studies to determine 'indie' characteristics may be useful to a social media manager in an independent games publisher seeking to communicate more effectively with the audience. By emulating and embodying the characteristics present in this work, those trying to promote a game or other independent media production may find greater receptivity from the audience as they may relate to the developer or social media manager in a more personal and genuine manner. Second, the utilization of Burke's pentad highlights the element of dramatic performance in the curated medium of Twitter. Each of the three case studies is evaluated based on the two most prominent elements of the pentad in order to isolate the assumed purpose of the act. Why the developers are even interacting on Twitter and how they are doing it is of primary importance to those looking to break into the independent game development area as it is beneficial to learn from the missteps and successes of those who came before. Third, this dissertation also proposes a new term to describe the blending of the larger game studios with the smaller independent game development studios: 'indiestry'. Other terms have been suggested

such as "small studio," but do not emphasize the term 'indie' and the cultural capital it possesses. A hypothetical game 'indiestry' developer would not want to discount the work and tenacity inherent in the independent game development community and process by offloading the designation of 'independent' once they found a consistent funding source in a first-party developer. It is also a cautionary topic as games with strong political or social statements may not earn the attention or support of a AAA studio. Similar instances have happened in film and the result of the collaboration is a film with subdued social commentary rather than the unapologetic and more personal statement it had the potential to communicate (Tzioumakis, 2014).

In Chapter 2 the existing literature regarding game studies, independent media production in film, music, and videogames are explored, as well as public relations research into relationship management theory, the utilization of social media in relationship management, and how independent game developers use the personal relationships they forge to reinforce their persona on Twitter. The full analysis of the utilization of Twitter and themes regarding the perception of each game developer are covered explicitly in the discussion of chapter 8. Chapter 3 discusses the method of grounded research and bolstering the findings using Burke's pentad analysis of performance.

For the cases chapters numbering 4, 5 and 6, the structure is based on a general to specific framing for the information. The introduction frames each instance, followed by the history of the developer/studio. Specific instances in the history are highlighted as adding to or detracting from the creation and sustained image of independent values for the developer. Lastly, the examples of communication in the Twitter feeds of these cases

are further investigated and ordered as the general statistics of the number of tweets and frequency of activity, then the style of writing by each case as well as tone taken with the audience is determined. A detailed thematic analysis is then outlined in each case covering the use of "indie" or "independent" in the sample, the contribution to the independent game development community, the relationships forged or attitude toward first-party game developers, the openness of the developers to their audience in their game development, instances of their publicly-performed independent characteristics listed above, as well as other permutations of these themes.

Chapter 4 begins the case study research of the most 'indiestry' oriented game, *Cuphead,* and the developers, Studio MDHR. The chapter covers the game as an artifact itself, the history of the development and studio, then follows with specific themes emerging from their Twitter posts from the @StudioMDHR account. Chapters 5 and 6 cover the same topics for Vlambeer and Anna Anthopy, respectively.

Chapter 7 begins the analysis based on Burke's pentad to determine the most relevant relationship conveyed through the posts these developers composed and shared to their audience. For these three cases, the relationship between the elements of the pentadic analysis shifted in relation to how each developer performed his, her or their version of the communication of "independent" in the development of games and involvement in the games community.

Last, the final chapter encompasses the majority of the analysis conducted through grounded theory. With the emergent themes from each developer compared and contrasted, chapter eight offers a look at how each of the developers perform the ideas of independent culture and creation in a public, online forum. This is also meant to be

instructive to social media managers of independent and mainstream games highlighting practices and characteristics important to the performance and public face of a game studio's original posts and interaction with the audience on a publicly accessible, non-synchronous micro-blogging platform. It is also where a more clearly defined notion of the term I propose, 'games indiestry', is explicated. 'Indiestry' in games is meant to suggest there is a significant crossover and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) within game development as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW: WHY (INDIE) VIDEOGAMES?

Video game studies continues to gain recognition as its own unique area of inquiry. Its position as one of the top-grossing media outlets (ESA, 2018) calls attention to this rapidly spreading form of communication as does as its consistent framing as something new and not easily definable (Kucklich, 2003). This ambiguity attracts researchers who seek to examine games in multiple paradigms, including psychology, media effects, philosophy, anthropology, communication, psychophysiology, computer science, art and many other disciplines.

Dmitri Williams (2005) encourages this multi-disciplinary and multi-method approach to the examination of games as a whole. After collecting studies submitted to the conferences of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) and the International Communication Association (ICA), Williams noted the range of methodological backgrounds displayed and said, "If our goals are to answer important questions rather than use some particular toolset, we should not begin by limiting the discussion to whose methods are better" (p. 2).

While a multi-method approach is supported from his view, many others preach a more specific call to investigative arms. Frans Mayra, the first president of DiGRA from 2002-2006, called academics to consider three theses for game studies:

> Thesis one: There needs to be a dedicated academic discipline for the study of games…
>
> Thesis two: This new discipline needs to have an active dialogue with, and be building on existing ones, as well as having its own core identity…
>
> Thesis three: Both the educational and research practices applied in game studies

> need to remain true to the core playful or ludic qualities of its subject matter (Mayra, 2005, p. 2).

This attempt at the disambiguation of game studies does not come without a price. By limiting its scope, game studies also limits the influence of some of the foundational pieces within game studies, leading it to prioritize "the material at the cost of the expressive" (Bogost, 2006, p. 45).

Game studies remains one of the youngest areas of scholarly research and, as such, is still shaping itself into a more cohesive form of inquiry. Though many divisions remain across the field, recent attempts to "defragment" the discipline show a concerted effort to arrive at a definition of the field that fosters multidisciplinary examination and exploration (DiGRA, 2012; Zagal, 2013), allowing game studies to inhabit a "hybrid nature, from their being neither fish, nor fowl" (Kucklich, 2003, para. 2).

Origins of Game Studies

To position oneself at the creation of the game would be to examine the very beginnings of human communication. This is the founding statement of Johan Huizinga (1955) and his seminal work *Homo Ludens,* or "man, the player." His analysis created the foundation of what play should possess in order to be considered "play": 1) it is voluntary, 2) it is a "stepping out" (p. 8) from real life, and 3) it is sequestered to a time and place until it is over. Adopting these tenants of play, Huizinga viewed it as occurring in "magic circles" of time and space and in a much broader way than previous scholars. Religion, tradition, and ritual all found themselves analyzed as a form of play, with participants voluntarily engaging in "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (p. 10). Accordingly, in Huizinga's

interpretation, play is often elevated as foundational to social participation rather than debased as something "not serious" (p. 3). Rituals of culture are presented not as a means to recreate the actions of the past, but, rather to engage in the willful suspension of disbelief and actually become a part of the re-presentation of the event in that space apart from the ordinary world.

What Huizinga (1955) resisted in his analysis of play in culture was a strict definition of a game. While Huizinga uses his analysis to help loosely define instances of play, he was careful to preserve the amorphous characteristics of games and found it difficult to use concrete language to define something abstract and "fun." To define the boundaries of games, he relied mostly on instances in which there was at least one other player, and therefore emphasized the rule-based dimensions of competitive play. Caillois (1958/2001) criticized this omission of games in and of themselves and theorized his own set of criteria for games, building from Huizinga: 1) they must be voluntary, 2) they must exist in temporal and spatial boundaries apart from the ordinary world, 3) they must have an uncertain outcome during play, otherwise play does not exist, 4) they must be unproductive inasmuch no physical goods are produced, but goods are exchanged, 5) they must be governed by an agreed-upon set of rules to set the play apart from the ordinary world's conventions, and lastly 6) they must exist in a realm of make believe or "a special awareness of a second reality or of a free reality, as against real life" (p. 9-10).

Caillois (1958/2001) also attempted a kind of taxonomy of games, positing a series of dualities. The first opposing pair Caillois isolated was *ludus* and *paidia. Ludus* is situated at one end, comprising the rule-based structure governing the magic circle of play, while the imaginative, free flow, and carefree aspects of play characterize *paidia* at

the other end of the spectrum. Also existing on similar axes are the dichotomies of *agon* and *alea* (competition and chance) and *mimicry* and *ilinx* (acting as someone else and the motion of the body to create a sense of vertigo). Caillois noted that, "within the mixture, it is always remarkable that one of the elements in the compound is always active and creative and the other is passive and destructive" (p. 76).

As videogames were beginning to gain momentum in commercial popular culture, James Carse (1986) collapsed the categories of games into two concise definitions: finite games and infinite games. Finite games are the games played against another opponent with rules limiting play, while infinite games are played with no end goal in sight and ever-changing rules that assure the game will continue. Carse then posited the two categories of games held very different goals and served the need for overcoming challenges in two distinct ways: expertise and prowess would be proven when one played a finite game with a specified end point. While most games are finite, the infinite games do not need to prove a player's prowess but their stamina. It is the person who can play the longest – not the best – who triumphs.

Ludology and narratology. Game studies would eventually find a significant point of fragmentation via Caillois's distinction between *ludus* and *paidia*. Among those who focus on the rules, structures and operations of the magic circle are the ludologists – the studiers of rules – while narratology – the study of the story – rose in a kind of vague opposition.

Ludology is the examination of the rules set in place for the alternate reality, and among its foci is the fact that games have a special ability to teach people about the function of a world rather than simply its visual representation. Anna Anthropy (2012)

has stated that "a painting conveys what it's like to experience the subject as an image; a game conveys what it's like to experience the subject as a set of rules" (loc. 80). It is also this ability to make the player part of the virtual world he or she inhabits – combative or not – that empowers skeptical commentary about the dangers of videogames (Jenkins, 1999; Jones, 2002; Bogost, 2007; McGonigal, 2011).

Using the I Ching – a form of divination using the generation of randomized numbers originating in China – as an example, Aarseth (1997) proposed a primacy of the control imposed by the player. This structure of the ergodic literature – literature that calls the reader to not just read the text but make a "nontrivial effort" (p. 1) in the navigation and construction of the text – situated the reader in the center of the work, vulnerable to a more complete involvement in the text or the failure to create a cohesive story. It is this aspect of control within the narrative that makes the reader/co-creator feel that the story is there for the taking – that it is no longer *a* story but rather "*my* story; the story that could not be without *me*" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 3). Even if this sense of control over the outcome is illusory (since literature and games created in the form of cybertext, with all their forking paths and possible iterations, can only provide a finite number of choices), the key is the agency the reader/co-creator/player *feels* while immersed in the cybertext.

The second perspective, narratology, sees the game as sort of interactive fiction. Using the metaphor of *Star Trek*'s fictional holodeck, an immersive virtual world in a limited area with limitless possibilities for interactive storytelling, Janet Murray (1997) saw the potential of a new medium – computers – used in the old art of storytelling. Murray posited that computers could be developed into to something more useful than

coding: "The more we cultivate it as a tool for serious inquiry, the more it will offer itself as both an analytical and synthetic medium" (p. 7). For Murray, the computer, with its ability to organize and explore information in news ways was still very much rooted in the structures of the book: "the child of print culture" (p. 8). Her greatest focus remained with what the literary experience could do for the reader/experiencer of the story. The "safe space" provided by a holodeck-type structure allows people to play with their most threatening fears and desires without becoming consumed by them in the ordinary world. In short, interactive narratives allow us to stare down fears by actively experiencing them with the knowledge that we can walk away from the narrative at any time, echoing the voluntary buy-in, spatiality, and otherness of play (Huizinga, 1955).

Narratologists have found some common language to borrow from film, literature and art. Galloway (2006, p. 7) uses the traditionally cinematic terms "diagetic" (elements that contribute to the creation of a second reality in the play space) and "nondiagetic" (elements that support the playspace but do not contribute to the advancement of the goals directly). Galloway (2006) expands upon Murray's (1997) approach to computers and games to frame storytelling in games as action: "What used to be primarily the domain of eyes and looking is now more likely that of muscles and doing – *thumbs*, to be sure – and what used to be the act of reading is now the act of doing" (p. 3).

Frasca (2003), though a narratologist at heart, never saw ludology and narratolgoy as wholly exclusive in the first place, and neither did many ludologists including Aarseth, Juul, and Ryan. Frasca (2003) made note of the attempts of other disciplines to "colonize" games and how this effort to subsume game studies may have fostered the more vehement opposition of existing theories by ludologists. Though the movement for

a more diverse mode of exploration is growing, game studies pushed against already existing theories of narrative communication in an effort to stake out its own unique existence. Juul (2001) made the separate nature for games as an object of study:

> Relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games: Such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player's actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions for the player. It is the unique parts that we need to study now (para. 54). In summary, the tension between ludology and narratology is unresolved, but it seems clear that those who study rules cannot ignore the narrative aspect of games, and those who study narrative cannot ignore the agency afforded to the player.

Rules, community, and social contracts. Rules must exist for a game to be played. These rules govern what players can and cannot do, but only to some extent. Rules of play are not laws; they are simply the boundaries within which players can choose to participate, which they can subvert to their advantage in some cases, or which they can completely shatter, thereby destroying the game for all those involved (Huizinga, 1955, p.10).

The unstated rule is one that retains a form of flexibility because it is not confined by the limits on language. In this way a variety of rule sets may exist for various instances of competitive play, especially as the context of the ordinary environment will always have an effect on the game space – this is sometimes referred to as "house rules." Juul's (2005) *Half-Real* also took this interaction of the ordinary and the extraordinary space afforded by play into account when he analyzed videogames. He highlighted the mundane space which we inhabit as the physical space in which we play videogames –

the couch, arcade, passenger seat of a car – and added its contribution to the affecting action in the virtual spaces of the game itself. Bogost contributed to the explication of existence in game space when he also took the backgrounds of the players into account: "Instead of standing outside the world in utter isolation, games provide a two-way street through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space" (Bogost, 2006, p. 135). This constant flux of rules lends itself to the constructivist view that the values of rules are socially agreed upon rather than dictated in most cases (Myers, 2008). By choosing to play with or against one another, players open themselves to a high level of vulnerability. This requires a level of trust among companions in play; each assures the other that their fragile world will not breached by their fellow player. Within this trust, "we can go on using (and revering) any system even if we acknowledge that it is artificial, arbitrary, challengeable and 'incomplete' as any game" (Sniderman, 2005, p. 502).

In some cases, a temporal suspension of the magic circle may occur; the concepts of "time out" and "time in" are ones not always clearly defined, yet human players generally understand when a game is in session, though no one can follow all the rules in a game or system (Sniderman, 2005). If there is some purposeful aberration or a shattering of play, that person is no longer a player operating within the bounds of the rules. While other players are constantly monitoring other players to be sure the magic circle of play remains intact, the spoil-sport stops playing by the rules – written and unwritten – and "robs the play of *illusion*, a pregnant word which means literally 'in-play'" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 11).

This "spoiling" the game, however, is distinct from cheating. According to Mia

Consalvo (2007), when people cheat, they do it primarily to gain unfair advantage in the game. She proposes that the use of cheat codes, walkthroughs, and other means of easing the process does more to harm the player's own initial experience than to that of any other player. Through her series of interviews with game players, she found that many of them were comfortable with the notion of cheating but didn't want to name it as such. They felt if they completed the game on their own accord, they had "earned" the right to cheat in some way. Some would try to find the rarest items while others would try to complete side quests they didn't know were available.

This culture of cheating also fostered a culture of production; namely gaming capital. Many of the manuals, tips, and walkthroughs exist on user-generated wiki sites where knowledge of the games intricacies is seen as the most valuable asset available (Consalvo, 2007, p. 4). When examining gamer culture through this lens of cultural production, the once heinous term of cheating becomes a more collective intelligence created through sharing and a meaning-making culture. Ultimately, though the rules of the game are subverted when players cheat, players must put on the guise of following the rules of the game, lest they lose their standing within the game. After all, players wouldn't cheat if the outcome wasn't important to them.

On the other hand, when spoiling or "breaking" the game, the offender doesn't want to remain a player in the game. The suspension of disbelief (Caillois, 1958) and the unwritten rules (Sniderman, 2005) mean nothing to the unwilling player. Through a participatory ethnography, Myers (2008) created a character, "Twixt," on a massively-multiplayer online game. At this point Myers examined all the written rules, chose to obey them, but set out on the process of "Garfinkeling" the game. The ethnographer

Harold Garfinkle used a method of breaking a given social order in order to document the specific processes and explanations given to justify the maintenance of that order. Much to the dismay of other players, Twixt broke the de facto rules of the game on a consistently maddening scale. When players ostracized Twixt, the once social game became a solo venture. After gaining fame on the game's message boards for being a destructive force in the game, Twixt began telling others the method behind the madness: nothing Twixt did was outside of the written rules of conduct. This was not received well by the other players and was deemed to be irrelevant in the success of the character. The Garfinkeling of this game through Twixt brought to the surface the unwritten rules and social norms of online play with very real isolating consequences. After all, in a social game, one of the worst fates is to play alone.

Summary of game studies. I have sought in the preceding paragraphs to characterize game studies as it is situated as a discipline at the moment. I chose to not engage with the media-effects-driven research of the link between violence and videogames at this time. Though the research helps shape the field of game studies, it is too tangential to the research of this current work.

The definition of play (Huizinga, 1955) and games (Caillois, 1958) yielded a further investigation into the nuances of infinite and finite games (Carse, 1986). Game studies found itself nestled in an uneasy valley between two paradigms, with those who chose to look at games as a new storytelling medium – the narratologists – on one side, and those who examined games based on the rules and structures that govern them – the ludologists – on the other. Frasca (2003) made the claim that while these are differing lenses through which one might study games, it does not mean that the two are mutually

exclusive. The two areas can, and do, cross paths more often than was previously thought. One of the primary reasons for the misconception, according to Frasca (2003) is the resistance game studies scholars gave other disciplines as they tried to "colonize" game studies.

The rules, communities of play, and social contract of play showed that even in the realm of the ludologist with the clear-cut defining limits of a game, there is still room for construction of *de facto* rules in addition to the *de jure* rules enforced by the curators of the game. Certain behaviors are frowned upon and can make a player sufficiently frustrated with play when rebel players "break the game" for them (Myers, 2008). Other ways of subverting the rules turn the player into a participant of the meta-game of the game, cheating, as it were (Consalvo, 2007). By looking to user-generated and collaborative works to help others advance through the game with greater ease, these players participate in the creation of gaming capital where knowledge is the premium goal.

Games Industry in Flux

The idea that games can come home was heralded with the breakout hit "Pong" in 1972 and the subsequent development of multiple consoles able to play multiple games through a user's television (Ryan, 2012). From that time on, major players in the video game industry have come to the helm. Companies like Activision, Blizzard, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft are the heavy hitters in the field of games. These companies dominate the creation, production and distribution of games and leave little room for smaller startup game companies (Consalvo, 2006; Williams, 2002) but the scales are tipping.

In a landmark shift in 2017, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA)

adapted the definition of a video game to include games released on smartphone and tablet platforms rather than only console and PC gaming platforms. What is relevant to this study is that data of its 2017 survey states that 64% of American households own a gaming device (ESA, 2018) and that every single American home has at least one PC, dedicated gaming console, or smartphone able to play games. This change was necessary as the popularity of what have been commonly termed "casual games," or games released with the intention of taking only minutes to play, experienced exponential growth (Apple, 2012). At the time of this writing, there is not a single person according to the findings of the yearly survey reported by the Entertainment Software Association (2018) who has yet to play a video game of some form.

It is not all good news for games, however. Many studios are closing their doors and culling employees in a desperate attempt to stay afloat amidst the economic downturn faced by the global financial structure. The stock of Sony, creators of the Playstation series and handheld PSP and PS Vita systems, is currently floundering and earned the designation of "BB" status. That mark designates a stock as an investment that is likely to default and not earn much in medium-term gains (Pearson, 2012). With such grim predictions, it is little wonder that many analysts are predicting a very bleak future for games.

Through this displacement of control from the major players to the smaller startups (Totilo, 2012), the whole of the industry seems to be teetering on the ability for these branches of game creation to find a successful middle ground. Thus, current climate of the video game industry as a whole still seems to be one of clearly opposing factions.

Facets of Game Creation

Game creation, publishing and distribution are have long been subjects of examination, with specific care given to the struggles and hurdles associated with developing for multiple platforms, game code breaking, changing certification processes, and meeting deadlines through the seemingly obligatory "crunch" time (Boswell, 2013; Frushtick, 2012; Grace, 2009; Morris, 2014). Though creative works of filmmakers, musicians, visual artists, writers and other creative artists are not dismissed in their complexity, each of these "legacy" creative fields have a fairly stable and repeatable method of creation and distribution to the audience. Games, by sharp contrast, are rooted in a perpetual quagmire of shift – not only in terms of the end product of the games themselves, but also in terms of the technology, programs, and skills needed to produce games as a consumable and tangible product (O'Donnell, 2014; Pitts, 2014). This facet highlights the need to create and publish games before a given platform is obsolete, creating an impetus for rapid release of a finished product.

Indie game development and creation, however, has found a place within the modern arena of entertainment production, with a two-pronged path that has led to the emergence of independent developer companies, and individuals desiring an outlet for personally relevant games. Anthropy (2012) suggested that individual designers should take advantage of extant open-source coding programs such as Twine, Game Maker and Scratch to create personal videogames from ideas that mainstream game development companies would not consider worthwhile. The continued progress in the indie game development arena underscores the shared desire among small-time producers and hobbyists to rally against hegemonic large-scale game developers, who have historically

been reluctant to accept ideas or productions from outside of their standardized wheelhouse of games.

Before delving into the process of independent game production, however, it is important to offer an overview of the independent, or indie, culture as a whole, by examining the much older culture of independent film and music production. Here I focus on the ways in which these cultures are similar to one another, and by extension, to the independent video game industry. Following this, I turn to independent games as a unique but nonetheless connected culture of artistic design and publication. After reviewing the relevant, current literature on the independent gaming culture, I turn toward the unique contribution of my project as a qualitative analysis of the independent gaming industry.

Independent Culture

The use of the term "independent" automatically acknowledges there is something from which one might seek to be independent. There must be a dominant force that requires effort for the producer to push against and define herself as an "other" in some way. While becoming independent is about growth and freedom to explore different creative avenues, it's also a quietly threatening concept. While one is independent, the rejection of traditional structures leaves a great opportunity for failure.

Independent or "indie" as a term carries with it an assumption of an attitude, a set of values, an aesthetic, and an orientation designed to appeal to a niche audience with extremely nuanced tastes rather than the "mainstream" consumer. As a result, "indie" refers to both a creation and the audience consuming it (Newman, 2009).

When used in reference to media – paintings, music, movies, books, games,

fashion, drawings, crafts and any other physical or digital media product – "indie" signifies as something more genuine or closer to the artist. Examples could include the claim that a single artist created a piece; or that there was only $100 spent to record the demo tracks, thus making the recording closer to the live experience; or that it took 60 hours of knitting to make an article of clothing. In the independent community, the closer the object remains to the artisan, the more genuine and authentic the creation is thought to be.

The goals of independent media are significantly different than more commercially viable products. According to Newman (2009), mainstream media are the products of an "industry that values money more than art" (p.48). Independent products are most often meant to be a personal or creative endeavor of challenging traditional methods or stories told in media to feature the artisan or auteur's individuality. Independent culture positioned as being in opposition to more popularly available and digested artifacts thus involves the rejection of mainstream influences as part of its definition. One is either indie or mainstream. If an independent producer leans too closely to the mainstream, they risk losing their authentic, personal expression. If mainstream leans too closely to indie, the mainstream audience may reject it for its obscurity. This binary definition was more prevalent – at least in film – before the 1990s than it is now, but the indie sentiment of having mainstream resources "dilute" the product is what formed the derogatory term, "dependies," signifying these films as non-indie and deserving of a separate classification from the "pure indie" (Newman, 2009).

The commercial and structural means of the dominant media are often the most readily apparent touchpoints when examining the resistance to the mainstream. Merritt

(2000) declared that the definition of "independent film" should be, "any motion picture financed and produced completely autonomous of all studios, regardless of size" (p. xii). If a small studio made an agreement to work with a larger studio for distribution of the completed film, he defined them as "semi-indie." He also discounted film content or style as too unsteady a foundation upon which to build a definition.

In contrast to the clean-cut definition of Merritt, King (2005) took a flexible definition of "independent film," suggesting it is a relative rather than absolute quality and can be defined as such at the industrial and other levels (p. 9). The point King was making reflected the constant evolution of any medium and negotiation of new boundaries for the creators in that medium; he resisted pinning one factor as the defining characteristic because film, and other media, are too nuanced to use a one-size-fits-all definition. Doing so could cheapen the efforts of the artists or welcome those whose intention of creating art to exploit that definition. That is not to say there are not those looking to exploit the definition already.

Even though independent production is supposed to be more focused on the art without having the thought of commercial or monetary success in mind, the products of independent creation are still products, and products are meant to be used and consumed:

While it's true that in the best of all possible worlds independent films are genuinely alternative, genuinely original visions, there's no such thing as an absolutely independent film. There's still an economy at work: the movie has to go out into the marketplace, and people have to want to see it (Vachon & Edelstein, 1998, p. 16).If there is no "absolute independent" in films or other creations, the artists must find another way to measure their successes, otherwise the drive to create for something outside of

monetary economic value would dwindle to nothing. Measures of success can come from notoriety in the community, esteem the audience or other artists have for the indie artisan, the monetary contribution the sales give to continuing projects, or simply being able to see someone else consuming the product the artist created.

If it was purely monetary, the artist would most likely abandon the individual effort and choose a more economically stable route. Some indie artists make it a point to shun stability in what Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Burton, 2012) considers "basics" in favor of their creative efforts. One example of this kind of decision making was featured in a documentary, *Surviving Indie* (Cook, 2017), as one independent game developer, Ryan Zehm, outlined his decision to be homeless and not work on anything aside from his game:

> I know I am homeless. I'm homeless on purpose. It didn't just happen to me, I allowed it to happen. This is a decision I'm making because I want to build a game studio. In order to get this thing done I needed to work on it full time, which means I can't pay rent, which means I'm going to have to be homeless in the beginning (Zhem quoted in Singletary, 2016, para. 12).

While examples like Zehm's are more extreme than most, independent creators often wear the hardships they face like a badge of honor in pursuit of their art.

Music. The culture of independent production can be effectively explored by examining the recurring themes that bind artists in the areas of music, film, and gaming, wherein one finds a shared desire to create outside of the realm, and control, of mainstream major production companies. Historically, the term "indie" is rooted in the music industry (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2014). Independent production and

development of music, as a culture of resistance to the major producers in the industry, may be best examined through the lens of the independent hip hop genre (Vito, 2017). Indeed, Vito argued that the culture of independent music, specifically hip hop, engages in active resistance to Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group (i.e., the majors; see Rose, 2008). In making this resistance real, the artists actively advocate against three elements of mainstream hip hop music: 1) fellow artists who have sold out by joining major record labels; 2) the radio stations that play music created by major record labels; and 3) the record label companies themselves. Myer and Kleck (2007) considered the impetus for this move toward resistance to be rooted in the corporate desire to secure profits through the homogenization of the hip hop genre, thereby removing the authenticity of the lyrical writing and musical (i.e., beat) composition. This move toward the more homogenized version of hip hop, which followed the "golden era" of 1990s hip hop, created a hegemonic view of hip hop as thematically limited to gangster rap or getting rich (Watkins, 2005).

In direct response and protest toward this corporatization of hip-hop music, the independent culture of hip hop has created its own records, often using extremely limited resources, and has frequently been barred from major radio stations because of the inability to compete with well-funded corporate labels (see Ball, 2009). The culture of indie hip-hop, and perhaps of independent music altogether, is characterized by the direct fight levied against the radio stations and record labels that hamper independent artists' efforts to be seen by the general public, often characterizing the struggle as a dialectic between remaining financially viable and trying to promote social change and support marginalized groups (Watkins, 2005). The artists who desire to wage this war against the

mainstream often do so by creating their own record labels, allowing them to control the music, and more importantly, the culture surrounding the art (Vito, 2017).

Within the indie music culture, and sans the major financial backing of corporate record labels, independent artists often find themselves turning to public performances and social media as means of distribution and intellectual property control (Newman, 2005). The resulting works tend to highlight the struggle of being an independent artist (e.g., the poverty associated with independent music production; Leard & Lashua, 2006), juxtaposed with the ability to make authentic music devoid of censorship or market influence. In other words, independent artists, and the labels they form, create and reflect a culture of elated suffering, as the individuals gain total control over their work at the cost of the financial success enjoyed by the "sellouts" who work for large, corporate labels. This cultural sentiment, morever, is not felt only in the music industry.

Film. Although Hollywood is hardly in danger of losing its clear dominance in the global marketplace, independent films and filmmakers are becoming increasingly prevalent in the industry. From the now-famous Cannes Film Festival, to the exponential growth of movie distribution through subscription services (e.g., Netflix and Hulu), there has been a veritable explosion of independently-produced (i.e., "indie") films in recent years. Yet, as Newman (2011) suggested, we must look to "indie" movies as representative of a culture, not just another locus of economic influence and movie content. Indeed, Newman contended that "indie" movies, just like any other form of independent media (e.g., news, music, books), strive to be identified as tangible pieces of work that are developed outside of the mainstream companies as a form of resistance against the seemingly ubiquitous formulae of popular, commercial cinema.

Since the early-to-mid 1990s, the emergence of indie films in the US has coincided with the earlier trend of cult movie following. Whereas the latter tended to involve a group of dedicated, subcategorized fans who cling to a film for a specific artistic value or common desire, "indie" films span a broader category of creative work that does not originate from a large, corporate studio, and from which one can identify a unified culture that espouses values of opposition in the story, in the production, and in the distribution of the film (Newman, 2011). Much in the way independent record labels and musicians strive to struggle against the larger corporate record labels, and thereby create a culture that bonds and unites these artists in their hardships, "indie" films bring together producers, directors, and actors (sometimes all represented by one or a few people) for the purposes of creating a work that in and of itself is a representation of the hard-fought path toward making a finished piece of art (understood self-consciously, in most cases, in opposition to a "product").

Exploring the culture of "indie" films requires one to move past the description of the artifacts (i.e., the films themselves), and into the experiences of those whose make such films and the common goals set them apart from the Hollywood elite. As Levy (1999) noted, the former view of "independent" filmmaking was characterized by the work of directors who had little funding and who wanted to create works that do not seek commercial success, yet challenge audience members to use their imaginations to fully comprehend the story that unfolds in front of them. Similarly, Ebert (1987) characterized the "indie" film as a project that privileges the director's vision rather than the corporate desire for box-office success. Perhaps looking through the perspective of individuals such as Robert Redford, who is credited with creating the impetus for the Sundance Film

Festival, gives the best view of what the "indie" film culture is all about. As Levy (1999) explained, the work of people like Redford creates the culture of the "indie" film, which is represented by the success garnered from creating and producing movies that do not require studio backing, yet remain interesting to and revered by audience members.

It follows that "indie" films would find a place within the margins of the filmmaking community, but Holmlund and Wyatt (2004) have argued that the "indie" film industry is making a push into the mainstream, with films that are seeing widespread acceptance and success that would mirror that of a movie produced by a large company (e.g., *Chicago*).

In the 1990s, independent cinema began to find itself co-opted into large studios such as Disney, who acquired Miramax to take the helm on smaller "more indie" films. Disney could then use its economic capital to fund films that would have otherwise been severely under-produced, and Disney could also profit from the work produced by Miramax with its appeal to the counterculture. Some liken acquisitions like this as a means to dupe the film-going audience into funding the corporate machine. Others liken it to making sure a business does not fail by diversifying its reach.

Disney is certainly not alone in this effort to create incubator studios for specialty films. The "Big Five" studios all have their own subsidiaries catering to specialty and independent film as of this writing. Note that 21st Century Fox is not included as a named parent company as "the Big Five" shrank from the "Big Six" with Disney absorbing Fox and all its smaller media ventures (The Walt Disney Company, 2018).

Parent Company	Major Film Studio	Specialty/Indie Studio
NBCUniversal	Universal Pictures	○ Focus Features ○ Gramercy Pictures ○ Working Title Films
Walt Disney Studios	Walt Disney Pictures	○ A&E IndieFilms ○ Disneynature ○ ESPN Films ○ Fox Searchlight Pictures ○ Hulu Documentary Films ○ National Geographic Films ○ VICE Films ○ Fox Family ○ Lucasfilm ○ Marvel Studios ○ The Muppets Studio ○ UTV Motion Picture
Sony Pictures	Columbia Pictures	○ Sony Pictures Classic ○ Affirm Films ○ Screen Gems ○ Stage 6 Films ○ Ghost Corps
Warner Media	Warner Bros. Pictures	○ HBO Documentary Films ○ CNN Films ○ DC Films ○ New Line Cinema
Viacom	Paramount Pictures	○ BET Films ○ Comedy Central Films ○ MTV Films ○ Nickelodeon Movies ○ Paramount Players

Figure 1. List of parent studios and the film studios each entity owns as of June 2019. Animation studios were not included in subsidiary studios (Major film studio, 2019).

Although certainly not the norm, the increased presence of "indie" films within the larger field of motion picture production lends to the ostensible perspective that creating an independent film is all about the struggle of making something as good as Hollywood without the $100 million budget. The expressed struggle, however, is not with the comparative lack of funding as much as it is with the desire to create a film that is the

realization of a director's creative thought and design, rather than a studio's desire to see a return on the large investment in a project (Levy, 1999). Much in the way that this struggle is expressed in the areas of film and music, independent videogames find many similarities in creating work for the sake of edification over profit.

Impact of Digital Distribution

Before the advent of digital means of production, the pioneering creators of their craft would be relegated to physical products and means of distribution. These tangible forms of goods are inherently limited as there can only be so much raw materials to produce or replicate the end product for greater consumption. This limited quantity builds in scarcity, rarity and value into the system which some hail as a truer form of creation (Oakes, 2009).

With this shift in digital production is the definition of value itself. Porter (1985) used this concept of value as a system to assign values and discuss the subsequent effects of the use of new technology in the practices of the film industry. This is a set of value-creating activities feeding off and into each other including the creation, development, tangible manufacturing, delivery, marketing and support of the end product. It also falls into the points of connection with those distribution channels with suppliers and customers alike.

It is a useful model when considering the creation of many products available for public consumption. Porter's model of the value chain remains a useful framework for production, especially in entertainment industries. Its primary use now is to describe the stages of production and delivery in a more general form (Crissey, 2010; Finney, 2010; Kung, 2008).

Crissey (2010) used Porter's (1985) value chain in the applied context of film; an area where games have been consistently compared to since their stabilizing years in the 1980s. Crissey claims the film value chain model is the "most prominent commercial analytical concept to emerge in the global motion-picture industry over the last 10 years" (p. 1).

The value chain model also has specific wait times within each sector to ensure there is enough buildup and demand for a scarce product. This supply-oriented market is one tightly controlled by the publishers and owners of intellectual property rights. In the film industry, there are "holdback periods" which have been fairly standard in the industry. There is approximately 17 weeks for the home viewing release to hit the stores, 6 months for a Pay-Per-View, 12 months for a Pay-TV appearance and 24 for the free-to-air television release (Ulin, 2010, p. 36). Independent film has also modeled itself after this practice.

With this model established for commercial production, it would seem film has a clear-cut vision of its processes and how they interlock in the system. Bloore (2009) brings to light some of the technological and revenue-generating opportunities further complicating what seems to be a series of sharp divides. After the distribution of the film to specific theaters and later the personal viewing options on personal screens, Bloore describes the confounding factors of revenue variation for each version of the film's presentation. Ticket sales constitute one mode of revenue, DVD/BluRay discs are another form, and digital downloads have different expectations for revenue and production.

Bloore (2009) further investigated the value chain in the context of independent film production and its nuances aside from the traditional mainstream film chain The

addition of the "long tail," coined by Anderson (2006) to the model's distribution and exhibition categories added a completely new dimension to the value chain. This ability to have a long-standing library of choices aggregated by the consumers' choices and tastes transformed the demand and lifespan of each media artifact involved. Anderson's exploration of the digital means of categorization and storage of each entry then allowed the audience to discover more abstract and niche creations through algorithms generated by services such as Amazon.com, Steam Games and Netflix, to name only a few.

Another point of contention when discussing distribution is the enhanced ability for the audience to instantly receive their content. This is the strongest argument for digital distribution from the side of the audience but one of the most feared aspects for the producers (Kehoe & Mateer, 2015).

When divorced from the physical means of production, the cost of production reduces significantly. There is no more need for the physical reels of film to be filled with copies of the same movie, no need for reams of paper to be used to distribute the printed word, no need for tapes or CDs to hold the data for music. It would follow that the price of these entertainment and information products would be able to have a lower cost to the end user; it would follow but it doesn't in many of these industries. The publishers who manage the distribution of the products are the ones who traditionally set the prices for any form of distribution (Vara, 2014).

Digital distribution can be perceived as a democratization of creative arts, "a good thing, as it opens us up to the widest possible variety of perspectives and expands the talent pool beyond those with the connections, money, geographic proximity, or any other form of privilege that used to dictate whose voices could be heard" (Sinclair, 2015,

para. 8). As a technology becomes more prevalent, those who did not have the access to it become more skilled and able to tell their own stories in various ways (Bogost, 2007; Anthropy, 2012; Ellison, 2016).

In other cases of independent and major studio film distribution, there has been a recent break in tradition. Kevin Smith's film *Red State* had its rights for distribution held for auction, going to the highest bidder. Smith took a huge financial risk after his estranged relationship with Miramax Films became even more tenuous over the aforementioned aspect of authenticity and dedication to the craft. Smith's perceived dedication to the tenants of indie craft drove him to buy the rights to his own film and distribute it himself via a travelling roadshow model (Smith, 2011).

All of the aspects of the value chain are featured in commercial ventures, but it is debatable as to whether or not all of the aspects examined apply to the specific venture of independent industry. Because of its decentralized nature, some of the processes can be collapsed or synthesized into something more streamlined for independent ventures. The model is built to describe the process of commercial success, but looking back to the idea of the "craft" of the product, the measure of success may not be monetary or any kind of popular acceptance. In fact, these products lean back, as it were, into the art, the craft, or the action involved in making something.

Looking at the value system and its application to the indie forms of production, it seems that the addition of technology to simplify and streamline the process of creation would be looked down upon. This thought is rooted in "an antidote to mass production and as a practice in which the very time it takes to produce an object becomes part of its value in a world that moves too fast" (Roux, 2011, para. 11). The counter-argument to

this is what happens when digital technologies are the very foundation on which a manifestation of the craft was built?

When we look at new technologies and new media creation, there has been a historical pattern of curiosity, populating it with the content of an old medium, resistance, then experimentation to understand its role in the technological and media landscape. The resistance of the crafting movement's adoption of digital technologies seems less potent when this pattern is reiterated. Now, especially within the entertainment industries of books, music, film and games, we can see specific ways in which digital technologies are subverting the industry conventions of power and property.

Digital tools have also done much to make the indie more accessible where the message and work of the individual can be seen by more people and be a celebrated part of the available bricolage. Especially in the realm of videogames, the rise of the independent developer has been credited to the increasing availability for easy-to-access digital distribution channels (Irwin, 2008).

There is concern that the use of these cold digital tools will remove the personal touches to the end product and create a more mainstream and polished version of the very thing the artisan wanted to keep personal. For the digital media industry, there is a lessened fear of this because the personality and fine details have already been applied with digital tools; there is no worry about the replication of the product and the loss of personal features. If it were a physical work, replication and distribution through mass means would certainly pose the problem of depersonalization that crafting so passionately upholds. If the artisan is using digital tools to create the work, then it makes logical sense that the digital tools can be used to distribute it without the degradation of

the product. These are the cases in which people assign characteristics to these modes of distribution such as valuing the "aliveness" of vinyl and VHS over the cold digital perfection of MP3 and BluRay (Watts, 2014).

Whether or not the majority of those in the crafting culture embrace digital means of production, it is imperative to understand what this ability to distribute to audiences in a decentralized and non-controlled way is doing for independent production: "indie has historically been a subculture that operates outside of the mainstream, but technology and changing times have made the line of demarcation between mainstream and indie almost unrecognizable" (Oakes, 2009, p. xii). From a more practical perspective for videogame distribution, Chris Swain, who stands as the director of USC's Innovation Lab where developers such as Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago spent time as students, says the only logical move for game developers now is to foster digital distribution.

> Currently a game that you go to Best Buy and purchase--the publisher retains about 17% of the retail price. And then there's the problem of used games. The third problem with retail is you have this shelf-space window--about a month to get your game out and marketed. If [the publishers] can start distributing digitally, all those problems go away. They retain 85% of the retail price. They can get creative and do smaller, more risky games because they don't have to send it to every retail store. And then there's the long-tail effect (Irwin, 2008).

Swain also says more of the AAA studios are seeking out digital distribution specifically because of this trend for the window of scarcity and holding periods set in motion from Porter's (1985) value chain. Swain believes this is a misstep especially when enacting the

long-tail effect, the proposition that niche audiences will seek out niche products and services long after their initial introduction (Anderson, 2008).

While the advent of digital distribution has been hailed as a levelling of the highly-guarded field, there are many forecasters who do not see as bright of a long-term future than others. There is fear that the model with reduce the value of the work as it's ease in replication will create more and more titles in an already oversaturated market: "as more and more people become developers, press, or even players, the importance of your average individual in any of those roles is necessarily lessened. We are by no means worthless, but we are unquestionably worth less" (Sinclair, 2015a. Para. 3).

Independent game creators echo the sentiment of oversaturation of the market with the fear that their games will be left to languish in the databases of Steam, Epic, Itch.io, the game's website itself, or other distribution platforms. This feeling of being lost in the fog of game publishing drives the need for games to attempt to stand out as well as hold each other up in the independent game development "indiestry."

Independent Games

Focusing on independent development and the problematic term "indie," this project narrows the scope of games in general to independent games, exemplified by three specific areas of independent development: the game itself, independent game developers' public communication, and independent publishing of these games. By focusing on the game, the people involved, and the distribution of the completed game, this work should be able to add a significant contribution to the growing field of entertainment and game studies with a focus on independent means of production.

Independent game developers. Developers who are not backed by a major

studio do not have the safety net of resources most commonly needed when creating a game, most of which average anywhere from one to five years from concept to delivery (O'Donnell, 2014). The tradeoff for the stressed resources is the sole control of their own intellectual property, an issue stemming back to when the first art piece was commissioned (Zimmerman, 2005). The perk of being an independent developer in monetary terms is that there is more profit as a result of having fewer people with whom to split revenue. Also, the cultural capital gained by being the one, or one of the few people, who developed the product is increased as the audience directly identifies the creator with the creation.

This model of a direct line from developer to audience also means the audience often feels more connected to the creator of the piece. As there is little interference on creative liberties from mainstream studio heads, developers are able to move from idea to reality without asking for permissions from those who are supplying the tangible resources. The removal of the bureaucratic roadblocks prevalent in traditional models of creation allows developers to make the games they envision, to evolve, and to respond more nimbly to audiences. On occasion, those developers who achieve mainstream popularity and become voices for the independent community make missteps. The common mantra of these individual developers is the sentiment that they are there to make games, not publicity.

More often than not, independent game developers have much in common with the crafting and maker communities who aim for a product – or at least an end result – bearing personal significance and effort from the creator. What delineates the hobby from the craft is the transition from making something exclusively for one's self to the

vulnerable position of allowing others to see, use, or otherwise interact with a creation (Costikayan, 2000; Ellison, 2015; Oakes, 2009). Developers who want to make a game for an audience – niche or mainstream – face the new reality of moving themselves as well as their game into the spotlight for public criticism, for better or worse. Many noted developers, such as Phil Fish of *Fez* and Marcus Persson of *Minecraft,* have moved away from their creations and the public eye because of the constant vitriol or unintended notoriety they both earned. In the same vein, other developers such as Rami Ismail and Jan Willam Nijman of the Vlambeer game studio have embraced their role in the indie game development community. Ismail hosts independent game events for developers and works to connect novice and veteran developers for games.

This public persona for a sometimes quite personal product deserves investigation and analysis to determine what sort of gatekeeping there is among the independent and mainstream community. What public messages exist to influence the rise or demise of a developer's desire to make games? What messages are they creating in general to bolster their own image and value to game creators and the wider audience who may not necessarily make games? This work seeks to analyze the area of independent game developers through their messages and interactions on social media as well as within those of prominent game-related media outlets.

Independent videogames. Independent games have a reputation for being quirky or hearkening back to an earlier era of games history. While there are many reasons for this – such as time and resource constraints, nostalgia, irony, a focus on mechanics rather than graphics, or alternate methods to engage with the game – the "indie game" is often defined by the execution of one specific facet of the game experience.

The term "indie," however, often refers both the aesthetics of the product as well as to the culture from which it springs. Oakes (2011) shared a perspective from one of her music students who compared "true indie" to "mainstream indie," teasing out the characteristics of each subgenre: "I feel like indie is dead. Only a small fraction of bands bring the true indie feel these days" (p. 18). The most problematic feature of this statement is the term "feel," which demonstrates that in many cases that community is overshadowed or even determined by specific aesthetic or generic features of the artifact. For others observing the independent movement and not wholly buying into it, this can mean an opportunity to create media that have the features of an independent artifact for people to adopt, resonate with, and celebrate, without having to fully invest in the independent maker movement. In many cases, people who attempt to remain dedicated to indie media can be co-opted into the mainstream interpretation of the indie "treatment".

"Indie" versus mainstream games and development. In recent years, utilizing the rise of digital publishing through the Internet and more accessible means of creation, videogames published by major corporations are now sharing the spotlight – and the wallet – of video game players with independently created games. The latter are generally much more focused on gameplay and creativity rather than awe-inspiring, reality-blurring graphics (Crossley, 2009). Because of the disparate origins between these two branches of video game production, independent or "indie" game creators have had a tenuous relationship with titles produced by companies like Activision, Electronic Arts (EA), and Ubisoft, each of whom employ hundreds of designers, coders and programmers to create blockbuster games with budgets upwards of $265 million (Smith, 2018).

There is no agreement about what constitutes an "indie game" (Gnade, 2010;

Rosen, 2009; Stern, 2012). The problem is:

> There is a big discrepancy right now in the definition of an indie game. On one hand, you've got those who think that the word "independent" means "independent funding." In other words, the development is financed by the developer. On the other hand, you've got those who think that the word "independent" means "independent thought," which means those games where the design was not dictated by middle managers (Gril, 2008).

Many signs indicate that there is still a general disdain for mainstream games on the part of indie gamers because they are too polished, too impersonal, and may pander to audiences with constant sequels because major studios are unwilling to take risks (Cobbett, 2010).

One definition of an indie game is one that is independent of publishers during the time of development, is independent of licensors with regard to intellectual property, and is developed by a small team. The necessity of the size of the team is further elaborated on by Stern:

> When you command a team with dozens (much less hundreds) of employees, you inevitably limit the amount of creative input each can realistically add to a game. The game becomes less a work of authorship, and more a product that each team member sees only a limited piece of (Stern, 2009).

In the film *Indie Game: The Movie*, which was also funded by personal savings and a Kickstarter campaign, Jonathan Blow, the creator of a breakout hit game *Braid,* suggests that game creation should be a highly involved and personal venture:

> Part of it is about not trying to be professional. Like, a lot of people try to come

> into indie games trying to be like a big company. What those game companies do is create highly polished games that serve as large of an audience as possible. The way that you do that is by filing off all the bumps on something; there's a sharp corner and you make sure that's not going to hurt anybody or whatever. That creation of this highly glossy commercial product is the opposite of making something personal.
>
> (Pajot & Swirsky, 2012)

Martin and Deuze (2009) examine five key points of differences between independent and mainstream games through a framework of cultural production. They isolate the (1) technology, (2) laws and regulations, (3) industrial and organizational structure, (4) occupational careers, and (5) markets involve in the creation and distribution of mainstream and indie games. Through their qualitative analysis of these features, Martin and Deuze use the dominance of digital distribution, the possession or lack of possession of the intellectual property rights, the repetitive nature of major games versus the freeform exploration of game concepts in indie games, the need to break game development into small, task-oriented jobs rather than being an all-encompassing creator in indie games, and the lack of a hard and fast hierarchical structure to distinguish independent games from big budget game studios.

Electronic Arts (EA) stands as a negative role model of why the indie game scene exists. In 2012, EA earned The Consumerist's "Worst Company in America" designation over Bank of America. A few of the affronts mentioned by Morann (2012) included the delay of content release as a downloadable add on (DLC), price gouging, and holding a monopoly. Not only has this company come to represent a negative image to the

consumer, it also embodies everything that independent developers are attempting to move away from. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2006) examine how the mainstream video game companies – EA in particular – work their employees past the point of being a hired wrist. With "crunch" times, it is not uncommon for employees to work upwards of 80 hours a week. These companies have been dubbed "divorce factories," as employees are normally consumed by work leaving little time to maintain and enjoy a family. The International Game Developers Association (Legault & Westar, 2009) sought to expose the plight of the game studio employee and released a white paper highlighting poor employee conditions and a disregard for a balanced lifestyle.

For all the warnings and declining sales of major game titles, it may serve a purpose in jumpstarting a more collaborative and more creative venture with major publishers and small startups. Companies like Microsoft, creators of the Xbox, are encouraging smaller groups within their scope of control to break out on their own and create more innovative and interesting games. In one example cited by Martin and Deuze (2009), Bungie, the company behind the AAA blockbuster game series *Halo*, found approval from the parent company Microsoft when Bungie bought a majority of its stock in an effort to be more independently controlled. This support found its roots in the need to revitalize the creativity and to move away from the "sequel-itis" that is dominating the games industry (Cobbett, 2012). As previously mentioned, the definition of an indie game is in a constant flux. The breaking out of Bungie from Microsoft is only one example of the corporate acceptance and encouragement of the riskier ideas that are needed to move the game industry out of its self-cannibalizing state (Cobbett, 2012; Wilson, 2005).

Who decides what is and isn't validly "indie"? Steve Gaynor, an independent

game developer with Fullbright Studios, proposes the roots of 'indie' may already extend into the mainstream video game arena:

> Independent developers are making the games they want to make because they believe in them, and they're doing it without being beholden to all these corporate structures that so many games are; but even that… it's just so hard to define, because people that are working on big triple-A games, they believe in the projects they're making too, right? And so making almost any game is personal for the people involved. I think it's really just a question of what the motivations are, and what the corporate interests are. But it's a really grey area now, compared to even a few years ago (Irving, 2015, loc. 264).

Tastemakers may not be the best judge of what would count as an indie game, yet within the video game industry there is no single outlet that would be considered the archetype or prototype of indie creation. Indeed, there is no Sundance or Cannes festival of indie videogames, and the prevalence of ostensibly independent creations that are surreptitiously controlled by well-funded, mainstream companies lends further credence to the notion that a pure, modern indie game culture may not exist at all. Yet, there is hope that the resistance tactics utilized by other indie industries (e.g., the indie hip-hop artists) may have found a home within the small, perhaps less-known designers who hold to the culture of struggle and resistance that is the hallmark of true "indie."

Differentiating themselves from the practices of the major studios also involves how independent creators communicate with and treat their audiences. The entire point of utilizing media is to convey a message to a receiver, no matter how well-defined or nebulous that audience may be. Independent creators make a product to be somehow

consumed as King (2009) said, and that product must be first made known to an audience to be consumed. Herein lies the conundrum for independent creators: how can the end product be made known to the intended audience while not falling into practices that may be viewed as "mainstream?"

Public Relations

Departing from the need for independent creators to differentiate themselves from high-powered and well-funded studio fare, the topic of how these creators relate to their audiences must be explored in the context of the study of public relations. It is this relationship and credibility afforded by the audience that makes an independent creator able to continue to ideate, create, and produce a final product that holds true to the original vision of the auteur. In most cases, the end product serves as a revenue-generating device enabling the creator to continue the practice.

Public relations offers a fruitful avenue to situate this dissertation. It offers an explanation as to the use of the communication channels utilized and what the audience consumes in relation to the developers, games, and the games "indiestry." This section covers the use of relationship management as well as social media utilization in public relations communications. The final discussion chapter of this work will explore the implications of how the individual cases selected exhibited characteristics of relationship management and an examination of the impact of their Twitter social media channel usage.

Relationship management theory. Public relations adheres to the practices of analyzing, planning, implementing and evaluating the work done by practitioners in the efforts to convey a message on behalf of a person, organization or company (Ledingham

& Bruning, 1998). In the latter part of the 20th century, public relations shifted from the perspective of being a communication activity to being more concerned with the management of the relationships it fosters. With this paradigm shift, the public relations practitioners came to place greater value on the opinions and attitudes the audience cultivated for the client, with the use of strategic communication to aid in the positive perception of their client. "Moreover, public relations traditionally has been described by what it *does*. The notion of relationship management is an attempt to define the field in terms of what it *is"*(emphasis in original Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 56).

The adage of "advertising is paid for while public relations is prayed for" echoes in this perspective. It is not through paid efforts that the public relations practitioner tells the client's story, rather it is through the cultivation of existing structures and information sources specific to the audience that the practitioner targets. This allows the practitioner to leverage the established credibility of these channels to lend greater veracity to the information the client needs conveyed (Waters & Bortree, 2012).

Another exploration of this relationship management theory stems into interpersonal communication. This avenue purports that the audience is no longer the nebulous receiver it once was, and relevant information is better considered as an individual-to individual communication act. Toth (1995) proposed that public relations exists in the space between an organization/client and the audience as a messenger to both the parties. This is even more relevant in the current use of social media which boast their followers, likes and views for individuals as currency. This connection will be explored within social media in the coming pages. The most fruitful theories of public relations are those that can be measured. These data provide the necessary information to

the final practice of *evaluate* in the chain of the public relations practitioner's activities for the client. Without measurement of some form, the client and practitioner would have no means of determining success, failure, or a need for redirection of efforts.

It follows, then, that relationship management theory adheres to the metrics Ledingham and Bruning (1998) generated from interpersonal communication research as well as social psychology and marketing. The 17 metrics of relationship dynamics were:

- Investment
- Commitment
- Trust
- Comfort with relational dialectics
- Cooperation
- Mutual goals
- Interdependence/power imbalance
- Performance satisfaction
- Comparison level of the alternatives
- Adaptation
- Non-retrievable investment
- Shared technology
- Summate constructs
- Structural bonds
- Social bonds
- Intimacy
- Passion

> The above traits collapsed into five categories for the researchers: trust, commitment, involvement, investment and openness as determining factors for the sample deciding to remain loyal to or abandon a specific organization. This foundational research also foreshadowed the use of transparency in communication as promoting loyalty to a brand or organization (Waters & Bortree, 2012).
>
> This research indicates that an organization-public relationship centered around building trust, demonstrating involvement, investment, and commitment, and maintaining open, frank communication between the organization and its key public does have value in that it impacts the stay-leave decision in a competitive environment. (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 61).

Ledingham and Bruning (2000) followed up with this statement in a later study and further emphasized that the measurements of effective communication are still important factors in public relations measurement, "their importance may eventually rest upon their ability to impact the achievement of relationship objectives" (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. 63)

Within the seminal 1998 study, the researchers discussed the lack of communication by the organizations about their work to build relationships with the publics they were attempting to court. In essence, the public did not know about all the work the organization was doing to benefit and connect with that same public. When this was shared with the study participants, they said they would most likely be more loyal to the organization now that they knew how dedicated the organization was to building and fostering a bond with them (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62).

Building on this, Ledingham (2003) further explicated the need for not only

communication, but also the need for developing the behaviors above to encourage and sustain a relationship with the public rather than just a one-off interaction with the organization-public dynamic. These behaviors of fostering a connection with the public became a primary point to relationship management theory, especially since the development of easily accessible feedback tools through online means.

Additionally, online means are also a primary source of communication about these relationships; organizations are able to behave in a publicly available forum in a manner which attracts and sustains like-minded publics who are receptive to not only the organization's message, but their actions as well. "Communication alone cannot sustain long-term relationships in the absence of supportive organizational behavior" (Ledingham, 2003, p. 195). Interestingly enough, these behaviors include many communication aspects such as transparency and strengthening social bonds. Though it was in its incubation stage when relationship management theory was being explicated, social media and its public performance of relationship dynamics married the communication and behavior aspects of the organization-public connection.

Social media and relationship management. Social media and the interactions housed in it serve as a timeline of relationships and communication bids for attention. These social media platforms also serve as the basis for the construction of a brand persona even if that is not the explicit intention of the user. The moment one piece of information is valued over another in the act of sharing with other users, that is a curation of an image or brand of an organization, public figure, private citizen or any other category of user.

The use of social media and leveraging different audiences based on shared

interests upended what used to be a cleaner execution of public relations. “The brand story is no longer developed exclusively by the advertising company; it can be communicated and changed by every market participant using social media” (Neudecker, Barczewski, & Schuster, 2015, p. 71). This immediately influenced many aspects of relationship management in public relations (Ledingham 1998), including power balance, transparency, structural bonds, social ties, and other iterations of the characteristics of measurement. Moreover, the interpersonal dynamic of the organization-public relationship was moved to the forefront as an interaction with an organization mimicked an interaction between two singular people (Neudecker, Hupp, Stein, & Schuster, 2013).

Before the widespread adoption of social media in the West, if a consumer or audience member became upset with the organization, the person could call or write the organization or tell his, her, or their social acquaintances to distance themselves from the organization. Only extreme cases went further than these actions into the legal realm, but this was the extent of the power the consumer had to influence the practices of an organization. Now, social media have tipped the scales in the perceived favor of the consumer as they are not only able to write their complaints or gratitude, but they are able to publicly post them for all those who are interested to see on their social feeds. More importantly, if the message describes a negative experience, the followers of the organization and the person supposedly wronged will watch to see the response of the called-out organization.

Publics are more apt to create a singular personality around an organization as a monolithic whole thanks in part to social media (Brown, 2006). There, these companies have a singular voice, as well as having equal character limits as their audience members

and are expected to be there and present in the social media performance of conversations. Different social media platforms are more suited to different types of messages and uses and, ideally, organizations use them to communicate with different publics about a singular message or behavior they are engaged in or wish to engage with. If these companies are to build a relationship with their audience, they must meet them where the audience is (Neudecker et al., 2015). Should these organizations recuse themselves from social media, they risk alienating their public. As an adage of public relations states, "Everything you do or don't do is public relations."

Social media also lends themselves to the changing characteristics of the consumer and organizational relationship. Consumers expect the organizations they utilize and associate with will be open with them, not rely on hierarchy when communicating, interact with them, respond quickly, be transparent about practices and intentions, and be globally-minded (Husain, Ghufran, & Chaubey, 2016). These characteristics also map over the traits and values for many independent production cultures.

Independent production culture and social media. A conundrum of independent creation is the active opposition to 'selling out' to make money while still attempting to get the product created into the hands of others and making enough to make your next project. If independent creators wanted to publicize their work, they had to spend hours and funds at the copy machine making 'zines, send messages out on forums or physically seek out those interested, just to name a few methods. Social media offers these creators access to an audience who have already chosen to 'follow' the person and sometimes the work the person creates.

Recalling the conundrum of 'selling out' for independent media creators, independent game creators are a unique set of personalities for marketing. Ryan Green, developer of *That Dragon Cancer* bluntly said "Marketing is kind of a term with baggage. I don't like it. I don't wanna do anything that would detract from the beauty of the story that I want to tell, because I think it's beautiful. So, I don't like to call it marketing, because that just feels so...calculated" (Irving, 2015, loc. 1271). This sentiment is one of the most widespread among independent game developers: they do not want to commoditize or cheapen their work by focusing on it as a product.

Thinking in terms of public relations, after a developer has worked so hard on the procedural and artistic aspects of the game, may not be an easy role change for the developer. Some publishers cater specifically to independent games such as the publisher 505 Games and Devolver Digital. By publishing with another, the game's main PR and advertising efforts are directed by the publisher and not the developer. Sometimes, this division of roles is what the game needs as each entity has its own specialty. On commenter on the game development community at StackExchange.com said it may behoove the developer to hire the job of promoting the game to another service. "They don't program games because they suck at it, I don't market games because I suck at it" (brandon, 2012, para. 6).

Independent game developers themselves cite Twitter and other social media forms as their essential tools of the marketing mix The benefit to the consumer, or reason for playing the game, is not often the game itself, but rather the person making the game who is of greater importance to the consumer. One developer, Christine Love, said "I feel like what people really care about is just people. They're not interested in some brand

identity, it's not about some image, it's about people personally. And my games are an extension of that" (Irving, 2015, loc. 1297). This example of personal connection between Love and her audience mirrors the relationship management through social media succinctly.

Many of the developers admire their fellow developers who create the games they love and show to other members of the independent game development community, but few are comfortable or feel competent reaching out to promote themselves. "The marketing stuff, the M-word, it's my least favorite part of this business, for sure" said Richard Hofmeier, an independent game developer at the 2013 Game Developers' Conference. "You have to be tech support, you have to be marketing, public relations, you have to negotiate contracts, potentially" (Irving, 2015, loc. 1189).

In addition to the logistical aspects of marketing and public relations for independent developers, there is also the fear of rejection of the creator's passion, sacrifice and investment. In cases like a large corporation or an outside public relations firm taking the helm of the promotion and buzz building, those involved in the promotion are most likely not emotionally connected to the organization they are serving. In independent media production – namely independent games – the person promoting the game is one who had a hand in creating it. Ryan Green said, "It's scary because I think the thing that's unique about indie games where there's a singular voice is that you're encoding yourself into the game that you're making. And so as soon as you start to market, as soon as you start to tell people about what you're creating, you're putting yourself out there to be criticized" (Irving, 2015, loc. 1190).

The personal relationship development that relationship management theory explicated, and social media highlighted is also a point of connection for the independent game developers. Rami Ismail of the game studio Vlambeer takes the reins for the marketing and public relations for his games, even though he does not endorse a positive image for most public relations practitioners. Ismail focuses on the personal aspects of promotion rather than the more easily measurable metrics of sales data.

> It might sound tacky to say that indie marketing is about 'being yourself', but that personal touch is largely what attracts people to these games. That's the interesting thing for the press: that you are you, and not some trained PR person that has had classes in avoiding questions, and how to dodge and dance around certain inquiries. It's that you can be you, and talk about the things you care about, the things you find interesting (Irving, 2015, loc. 1262).

In the pages that follow, the work Ismail and others do for the public relations end of the games 'indiestry' will be covered in greater depth.

CHAPTER THREE

RATIONALE AND METHOD

Above, I reviewed the work of previous scholars who have explored the emergence of indie cultures across three different areas: music, film, and videogames. This constellation of research and scholarly writing points to the notion that there is an inherent struggle associated with the creation, design, and production of independent electronic media. Indeed, be it the direct retaliation and antagonization strategies used by independent music artists against the mainstream major labels (see Newman, 2005; Vito 2017), the creation of independent film festivals as a home for projects that do not adhere to the desires of production company executives (Newman, 2011), or the development of videogames by creators who wish to tell their own stories in an unpolished fashion (Pajot & Swirsky, 2012), the indie culture represents a rich area of investigation.

As barriers to communication with an audience have progressively weakened, the ability for creators to have a direct and unfiltered line of communication to those they create for has increased tremendously (Veletsianos, 2012). Information that once was the domain of gatekept news outlets is now able to be sent directly from one person or entity to the audience following their online posts. These posts, especially those from media personalities, help drive their popularity and keep them relevant if they can maintain a consistent presence online as well as offline.

The supposition of social media is it is more honest, spontaneous, and immediate than news outlets who have that direct contact with the media figure. The audience desires to have that direct contact and, therefore, follows the entity assuming they are gaining access without others editing the content of the message (Crawford, 2009). The

performative act of sending a message to one entity and knowing the message can be read by anyone following that account, works to construct the perception of the original poster in the purview of that social network. This constructed perception then transfers to other online and offline entities reinforcing the persona created (Lee & Shin, 2014).

Twitter and other social media outlets have strong links to alternative means of information dissemination in previous decades. The use of independently created "zines" on copy machines during the underground, independent and punk movements of the 1980s served to inform and unite like-minded people about shows and events which would not have garnered the recognition from traditional media outlets (Oakes, 2009). Social media, with its ability to speak to a select and niche audience at times, can be thought of as an iterative zine for a specific subgroup. The immediacy of Twitter is of specific interest as it is built for quick bursts of thought rather than lengthy responses. The encouraged speed of the microblogging social site leaves less room for extended response times and reduces the ability for an entity to talk with others to make a pleasing response rather than a personal response. Crawford (2009) defines the interaction of the response not by the person but by a public relations arm to be that of "delegated listening" rather than a genuine response.

Social media is arguably more in line with the concept of being independent or at least closer to the creator. This is only the case when it is the human or humans writing original tweets or responding to others in a genuine fashion. If the audience suspects they are being duped into thinking their interactions are genuine, they will begin to ignore the account holder, lash out in anger at the account holder, or remove themselves from the feed of information posted. Again, it is the original creation of the account holder that is

held in esteem, not the product of a polished response after three people collaborate on messaging tactics.

In part, I examine below the way independent entities in the gaming industry (i.e., the games, the developers, and the publishers) position themselves via social media content. While research has explored the positioning of indie creators within the contexts of music (Newman, 2005) and film (Newman, 2011), there is little known about the manner in which the entities involved in indie videogames are attracting attention and displaying their sub-cultural *bona fides*. Thus, to examine how these artists create public portrayals via social media, I pose the following research question:

> RQ 1: How are the terms "indie" and "independent" deployed by independent game developers within social media, particularly in terms of content featuring the games, the game development process, and the videogame industry as a whole.

Independent culture is often represented rhetorically in such a way as to locate a given product or company within the overall space occupied by independent creators. In the case of music, the literature suggests that producers and artists focus on themes of financial struggle and their ensuing battles against the large, faceless music labels that create competing products (Rose, 2008; Watkins, 2005). Independent film directors and producers likewise highlight their autonomy in making indie films, rather than the need to appease the money-driven appetites of large Hollywood studios (Levy, 2009; Newman, 2011). Although it is likely that similar themes of struggle or expressions of desire for creative freedom will be expressed by indie video game creators, there is a need to better understand how these individuals and small companies reflect the indie culture in their

public messages. Thus:

RQ 2: What themes of "indie" characteristics will emerge in the public-facing messages produced by independent video game entities?

Part of claiming an indie game, developer, or publisher identity, often, is contending with entities or individuals who may challenge that claim's authenticity. Indeed, videogames represent a unique element of the indie culture, given there is no metaphorical home for them, much unlike independent films, which enjoy the legitimacy offered by Sundance (see Levy, 1999) and other powerful festivals. It follows, then, that some individuals and/or groups may publicly challenge the legitimacy of indie video game entities or make attacks on their skill in creating the game. To explore the rhetorical choices developers make when dealing with critics in the public setting of social media, I ask:

RQ 3: How are detractors, or those who belittle or challenge the indie entity, addressed?

The Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative projects stem from the desire of the researcher to explore the unique elements within one or a few pieces of text that can be interrogated, explored, and ultimately used as evidence to make conclusions that, while necessarily limited in terms of generalizability, may provide a fuller understanding of a given topic.

This project utilized a grounded theory approach, in which the scraped Twitter data were compiled and coded for instances of emergent themes. Based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2015), the data was collected and interrogated to find the unique elements that combined to form these emergent

themes. The grounded theory approach allows for themes and results to emerge from the data, rather than seeking to fit the data to a specific pre-existing theory. This approach calls for an open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) for recurrent themes, recording multiple categories until reaching theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Overall, this element of the inquiry will focus on the major idea of how the precept of indie is being deployed on Twitter and in the games themselves. It is possible that the word is being deployed as a cultural artifact or merely as an attempt to situate the game and the developer in that "brand." That is, there remains the potential that the games and developers are insinuating they are part of the culture of independent game development or are simply taking advantage of a popular buzzword that does not have a true impact beyond presenting themselves as the tireless and original auteur to the public. This interrogation of social media communication through Twitter with these select cases will ultimately reveal whether these specific developers adhere to the "indie" ethos as it is individually understood by the developers, or if these developers represent themselves in a manner not reflecting the independent nature of indie game development.

Method of Examination

Though the use of interviews and participant observation would be a useful tool, I consider here instead the publicly accessible social media, blogs, and journalism outlets available to all members of the audience. Analyzing these messages rather than interactions which may happen behind the scenes engages the public conversation around indie games, thereby exploring developer and audience perceptions as material culture.

A primary feature of this work was to examine the systems of distinction and methods of determining authenticity in the deployment of the term "independent." This

lens of examination emanates from the self-reflexive practice of social science outlined by Bourdieu in his examination of taste and habitus (Allen & Anderson, 1994; Bourdieu, 1984, 1992; Sweetman, 2009). I also relied on grounded theory and Kenneth Burke's pentad to analyze my data set and determine the messaging strategies and ways in which commentators in the independent game community either embrace, reject, or use the culturally loaded term of "independent."

Through grounded theory, the data coalesced into common themes among the developers. Foremost was the tone and language used by the developers in their written Twitter posts as well as their written communication on their own website or blogs. Tone was examined looking at how the developers wrote to the audience. For example, a developer may use their Twitter account to engage in speech written akin to the style their audience would communicate in, or they may use their words to sound more like a predetermined announcement about the game rather than soliciting the input of their Twitter audience. Language, by contrast, was defined by the grammar, spelling and punctuation used by the developers. This could mirror or contrast the style of communication used by their audience. Tone and language comprised an important part of the analysis as some audience members may have looked for a level of similarity to themselves in the developers.

Other themes identified in the data included collaboration, contribution to the indie game development community, ownership of ideas, rejection of formal training, personal involvement in the development and creative aspects, transparency, vulnerability and humility. These themes were explored and discussed based on the presence of the characteristics.

Cases for Examination

Three games – *Dys4ia, Nuclear Throne* and *Cuphead* – along with their developers and publishers, were selected to reflect a representative diversity of independent game creation processes and platforms. *Dys4ia* is a Flash game with limited interactivity that can be played within 10 minutes. Anna Anthropy, a trans woman game developer, wanted to show through a game experience how difficult her social and physical transition from male to female was. Some of the controls are difficult to use and the challenges in the game, such as finding a women's bathroom without being spotted, are frustrating to the players. This game was launched in 2012 on Newgrounds, a host site for Flash-generated games.

Nuclear Throne is a run-and-gun, 16-bit styled project created by Vlambeer, a studio whose core developers, J.W. Nijman and Rami Ismail, have inserted themselves prominently in the indie gaming community. Collaborating with other developers for various projects helped them earn the respect of many other indie creators. *Nuclear Throne* launched in 2015 with early access on Steam, a gaming distribution platform. This allowed the audience to watch as it was being coded and developed, and Vlambeer also allowed some audience involvement in character creation. The roguelike game involves players selecting one of a multitude of characters similar to *Mortal Kombat* in the range of diversity and number available. Players then venture through a procedurally generated level, destroying mutated creatures with their own heavily armed mutated avatar in order to keep progressing to the goal of becoming the king of the wasteland by ascending the Nuclear Throne. Once the goal is reached, the player then begins the game again with a severely increased difficulty level.

Lastly, *Cuphead* is a stylized game launched in 2018 by the Moldenhauer brothers and their studio MDHR. Originally slated for all gaming platforms, MDHR earned the ire of the indie community early in its emergence when it signed exclusively with Microsoft and PC platforms for the distribution of *Cuphead*. The side-scrolling game features the "rubber hose" animation style of the 1940s Merri Melodies cartoons but boasts an extreme level of difficulty for the player. It has become notorious for its difficulty and unforgiving playstyle in juxtaposition to its friendly and docile animation style.

I choose these games in an effort to represent indie games across a range of style, budget, and theme, but they also represent a useful continuum in terms of their development teams and processes. Anthropy works more or less alone, while Vlambeer is a two-person studio who collaborate with other independent game developers with different skill sets for various games. They've been instrumental in organizing developer meetups and game jams where developers are asked to create a game in a day or two based on a theme and promoting the value of independent games as a whole. MDHR, finally, is a small family business of sorts, but one that has cultivated close ties with one of the largest tech companies on the planet.

The artifacts representing the developers included their Twitter archive from the most recent 3,200 tweets from each entity. Only the responses and original tweets were analyzed in the pentadic analysis, but retweets, or the posting of another's original tweet, were included in the case background as issues and sentiments the developer endorsed. Interviews with games journalists that were retweeted by the developer were added to the cases, but only the direct quotes given by the developers were considered. Lastly, blog posts or means of informing the audience directly were included in the case background,

but not in the pentadic analysis.

Considering the distinctions that are likely to be found in the reception of indie games, as an artifact of the indie culture, it is important to explore a specific arena in which one might find thematic representations of the level of indie a designer/publisher might claim to be. Again, Twitter is positioned as one of the more independent-conducive means of communication with an audience. For this project, Twitter will serve as the public arena from which these messages will be collected and analyzed for the purpose of extracting these themes. Thus, the project will rely on a qualitative approach in the examination of these Twitter messages.

Data Collection

To collect relevant data, I used ExportTweet.com to harvest the 3,200 most recent posts and replies on Twitter. This microblogging platform allows users to post short "tweets" that can be viewed, shared, and/or replied to by other users. One purpose of using Twitter is to allow the democratization of information and sources, thereby encouraging independent research and verification through crowdsourcing information. The social use of Twitter, however, is the primary draw to the platform. Specifically, Twitter users can send a single message to a vast, undifferentiated audience, and experience the responses of several users who may agree or disagree with what is being posted.

I narrowed my specific Twitter searches to the games, developers and publishers of *Dys4ia* by Anna Anthropy, *Nuclear Throne* by the two-person team of Vlambeer, and *Cuphead* by Studio MDHR. The archive of tweets for Studio MDHR reached all the way back to its inception in 2013, encompassing its entire history of Twitter posts.

Vlambeer's Twitter archive ended in September 2013 as well, but its Twitter account was created in 2010, leaving three years of tweets accessibly only to the account owners through a personal archive download.

The limitation of 3,200 tweets is not a function of ExportTweet.com, but that of Twitter itself. Archives of the posts past this number are archived and not accessible by anyone except the user in a personal data download. The exact number of tweets collected were 1,747 from Studio MDHR, 3,209 tweets from Vlambeer and 3,228 from Anna Anthropy. As this study was focused on easily accessible public messages, I did not request access to the personal archive of Vlambeer or Anna Antrhopy. Anna Anthropy's Twitter data resulted in the maximum number of tweets collected but only reached back to June 6, 2019 through December 6, 2018. Though this timeline does not coincide with the development of *Dys4ia*, it did map over the development and launch of another game, *All My Exes are in Mechsuits*. The focus of this study used the former game as its point of reference as it is one of the more well-known and easily recalled games representing the more radically indie spectrum of game development. The latter game is less well-known but the use of Twitter for Anthropy in regard to the discussion of herself as a developer and the games she develops were more relevant to the central questions of the study.

As the data and analysis following this will show, Anthropy is a prolific user of the microblogging platform and averages about 10 to 12 tweets per day. Once the tweets were scraped from Twitter, I placed the text of the entry into a spreadsheet program. At this point, each tweet became an independent unit of analysis, with reply tweets being designated by "yes/no" categories and visual links to the original tweet that began the

string of replies. Retweeted posts from other accounts were also taken into consideration as a retweet is a deliberate call to attention from the account holder. These retweets were also signified by "yes/no" categorization in the spreadsheet.

Once entered, each tweet was numbered to allow for an accurate count of datapoints during the analysis. With all raw data entered into the spreadsheet, I began the process of open coding to discover the themes that emerged from the tweets; this was also instrumental in discovering how each developer talked to their audience and how Twitter was deployed in their performance of identity and branding. How each developer used the functions of Twitter as well as the originally generated content proved to be unique in each case. I then read through data set once to determine a range of themes present, and again twice more in a process open coding, which evolved into a series of thematic categories based on Burke's pentad.

The open coding process requires an investigator to read and continuously reread the data, for the purposes of finding the emergent themes that will be used in later rounds of coding. The emergent themes also allowed for an organic approach to the research, without being constrained by a specific theoretical lens (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Having completed the coding of the data, I examined the rhetorical elements of the scraped tweets.

Pentad Analysis

Among Kenneth Burke's many contributions to rhetoric, his introduction of the dramatistic or pentadic analysis serves as a unique tool to criticize dramatic texts, including films. Originally presented in Burke's (1945) *A Grammar of Motives*, pentadic analysis focuses on five key terms: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Act refers to

the events that take place. Scene refers to the background that encompasses the act, both in terms of the physical location and dominant political or cultural location. The agent is the individual who performs the act in the scene. Agency describes the means by which the agent accomplishes the act. Finally, purpose refers to the reason for the act. Furthermore, Burke's (1945) method revolves around the formation of 10 matched pairs or ratios (i.e., act-scene, act-agent, act-agency, act-purpose, scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, agent-agency, agent-purpose, and agency-purpose) that are used by scholars to uncover the dominant primary and secondary terms in a given text. For example, a movie segment may feature a dominant agent and act, which would include an individual and the things that he or she does. According to Fox (2002), "Burke's pragmatic intent [of the pentad is] to offer a logical method for understanding human motives" (p. 369). In essence, the pentad allows a critic to explore the motives behind a dramatic presentation.

Scholars have used pentad analysis to explore the choices a rhetor makes in the presentation or highlighting of some elements over others. These investigations have examined several types of texts, including speeches (Birdsell, 1987), professional communication (Fox, 2002), videogames (Bourgonjon, Rutten, Soetaert, & Valcke, 2011), and films (Griffin, 1995). Furthermore, Dickinson (2009) investigated the utility of the pentad in persuasive campaigns, noting that the primary element of the ratio becomes necessary for the second to exist, and, "[i]f a particular ratio reappears across texts in an ad campaign, [then] the dominant term is said to be central, or controlling, and points to a rhetor's motive" (p. 127). Much in the way that Burke (1945) first approached the utility of the pentadic analysis, Dickinson echoed the end result of a rhetorical

criticism guided by this tool: motive. Griffin's (1995) piece explored the use of the pentad as a teaching tool, applying it to five scenes from the film *Thelma and Louise*.

Here, I use Burke's pentad to interrogate the rhetorical purpose of social media posts made and press releases produced by the game developers and/or publishers, who are popularizing, advertising, or commenting on the products they make and market. The pentad analysis will begin by uncovering the dominant ratio among the five elements (e.g., scene-act, agent-agency, or scene-agent). After finding the dominant ratio, I provide rhetorical critique of the underlying motives for tweeting a given message from the game developer, resulting in three case studies that show how independent game developers inhabiting various positions in the culture, possessing different levels of seniority, and motivated in various ways negotiate their identities and boundaries according to the limits of the online communication platform of Twitter. The tensions between industrial success and indie clout are prevalent within these examples, beginning with the fledgling studio, Studio MDHR, who was immediately signed to the Microsoft independent developer program. Vlambeer rose in prominence largely through their service to the independent community, while Anna Anthropy sought only a platform upon which her social commentary could be shared.

CHAPTER FOUR

CUPHEAD: DON'T DEAL WITH THE DEVIL BY STUDIO MDHR

This game and developer were chosen for their notoriety and relatively new appearance in the independent game development area. As a new face in game development, Studio MDHR could have a lot to contribute to this study through their communication with their publics through the interactive, seemingly open medium of Twitter.

In the examination that follows, the family-run Studio MDHR uses Twitter to network with others, announce developments, share behind-the-scenes work, promote others' fan art of the game, publicize achievements, and calm those who are frustrated at the game and developers.

The Twitter feed and studio blog posts follow the path of Studio MDHR from being an unfunded passion project, to garnering Microsoft's attention and backing, to creating a port of their game to be played on the dashboard of a Tesla (Studio MDHR, 2019a). Through this timeline, the style the developers communicate with their audience changes dramatically beginning in mid-2018, after the game launched. Their rate of posts and replies plummeted as well as the tone of the interactions shifted to a more distant and impersonal verbiage.

Studio MDHR is a prime example of an independent game development studio seeking backing by a first-party studio with their original game. Their relationship with Microsoft is widely publicized in the collection of tweets and rates among the most often mentioned aspect in the sample, aside from the speed of their development of the game, the awards won by the game and the behind-the-scenes look at the game.

A more complete analysis and comparison to other games in the independent games "indiestry" spectrum follows in the discussion chapter. This chapter examines the background of the game itself, the developers, their Twitter activity, how they talk to their audience, their attitude toward first-party partnerships in games, their inclusion and interaction with the audience and their somewhat-guarded invitation for the Twitter audience to see the process of their work.

Game Description

Cuphead: Don't Deal with the Devil is a 2D game featuring boss battles and run-and-gun levels. Its visual aesthetics are based on the animations of 1930's cartoons lending to the "rubber hose" style of limb articulation popular in early Walt Disney, Fleisher Studios cartoons, and Ub Iwerks (McGowan, 2019). The Unity game engine is utilized for *Cuphead* as it is an accessible and free-to-use engine. Unity is also used to create half of the existing videogames at the time of this writing, be they independent or AAA games (Unity, 2019).

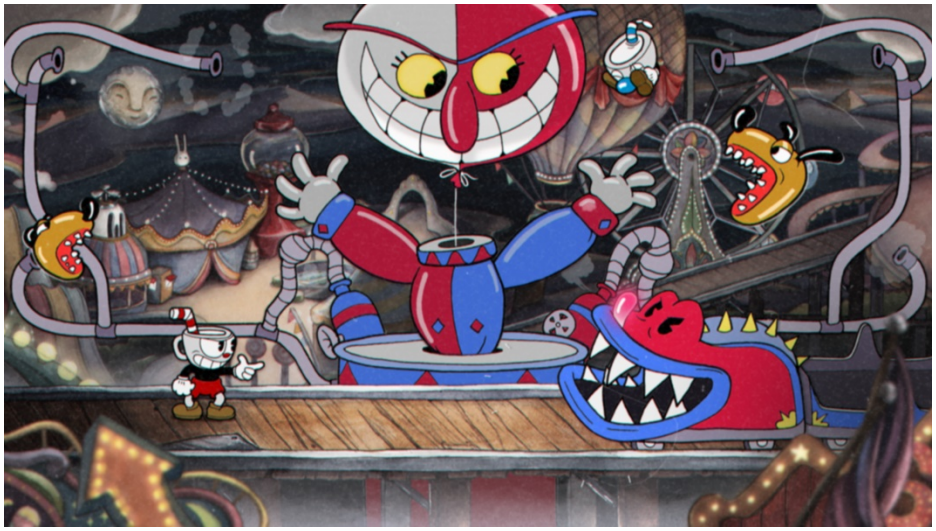


Figure 2. Screenshot of *Cuphead* gameplay from the Studio MDHR presskit() page (Studio MDHR, 2019).

The game design is primarily a retro homage to the run-and-gun style of games like *Contra III, Gunstar Heroes,* and *Mega Man X* series, while leaning heavily on boss fights. *Cuphead* houses 19 bosses with more available in upcoming expansions. Its extreme difficulty is one of the hallmarks the developers set out to replicate from the games of years past. The most discussed point about *Cuphead* in social media, aside from the animation, is the game's unforgiving nature (McGowan, 2019); the player is only allowed three mistakes, or hearts, before losing the game and starting over from the beginning of the level.

Cuphead's plot is intentionally a very thin one. The games upon which the developers based *Cuphead* had little to no plot, and MDHR wanted to honor that legacy. Cuphead and his friend, Mugman, are playing craps with the Devil, wagering their souls against all the money in the Devil's casino. Cuphead rolls the dice and, as misfortune would have it, loses their souls. The Devil will allow them to keep their souls if they can defeat the other debtors and bring their "soul contracts" back to him. Thus, begins the "boss rush" game.

Development

The family-fueled operation of Studio MDHR, a nod to the last name of the brothers who founded the company, began work in earnest of the concept that would become *Cuphead* in the early 2010s, when other independent game developers were becoming more notable in mainstream game media. At this time, games such as *Castle Crashers*, *Binding of Isaac*, and *Braid* were earning a spot in the public eye and the audience's game libraries, thus encouraging Chad and Jared Moldenhauer to begin work on a game despite having no training whatsoever in how to go about it (IGN, 2017).

The brothers gathered friends and family members with whom they grew up playing games and watching cartoons and began imagining what would happen if 2D, 1930s "rubber hose" animation was to make its way to a game. The team began prototyping the characters and the bosses the player would have to defeat using traditional paper-and-pen methods, with only the coloring being done digitally (GameSpot, 2017). Many of the updates and media buzz generated came because of the painstakingly long process to create the animations at 24 frames per second, while the gameplay sits at 60 frames per second. It was no surprise the game took more than five years to finish development and be fully available for the public.

Jared Moldenhauer retained his full-time job in construction for the first half of the game's development, and Chad Moldenhauer worked in graphic design during the development time as well. Maja Moldenhauer, Chad's wife, took on the responsibility of "98% of the inking you see," according to Chad (IGN, 2017), when her maternity leave led to curiosity about the project her husband and brother-in-law were doing. When her maternity leave of a few months ended, she decided to leave her job in banking and work with Studio MDHR. Only when Studio MDHR brought a trailer to independent games expos did the gaming community – independent or otherwise – take notice, and the team felt confident enough in the audience response to sink more time and resources into the game development (Purdom, 2014). "The truth is that we started Cuphead as a three-person team, just working on the weekends," said Chad about the initial capabilities of the project and team (Gilyadov, 2017). The final size of the credited team totaled 17 people, including two cousins and a handful of neighbors with whom the Moldenhauers grew up (Studio MDHR, 2019).

At the annual Independent Game Festival (IGF) in 2013, the trailer and the subsequent audience interest caught the attention of the independent development branch of Microsoft, ID@Xbox. The agreement they reached after a few months stipulated that Studio MDHR would not be allowed to release the game on any platform not owned by Microsoft. In exchange, Microsoft would promote the game and feature the progress at gaming press events Microsoft either hosted or to which they were a party. Also, the issue of funding was a question for the homegrown and inexperienced developers; Microsoft contributed an undisclosed amount.

Exclusivity is nothing new for independent game funding agreements, and it allowed the creators of the new intellectual property (IP) to retain their rights. This agreement meant Studio MDHR could do as they pleased with the characters and other game elements, such as licensing a company to make plush characters of Cuphead and his friend, Mugman. It also meant after the first game launched, Studio MDHR could then make another game featuring the same concepts. They could even opt to have someone work with them on an animated feature, merchandise, or a *Cuphead* spin-off.

Interest in the game began to wither when people learned it was exclusively boss fights (Gilyadov, 2017). *Cuphead's* stage time at the 2015 E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) brought the Moldenhauers a renewed passion for their original vision for the game (which went well beyond the boss fights). The crowd and the online response were overwhelmingly positive, and they felt more confident about taking substantial risks in what they were seeing could be a monetarily successful game. In a financially precarious decision, the three Moldenhauers decided to remortgage their houses to increase the scope of the game and delay its release for over a year. Though ID@Xbox did help fund

the project, Studio MDHR decided to take the cost on themselves. The legacy of independent creators in any medium also places special recognition on those who actively suffer for their creation (Schreier, 2012); this is the skin in the game and an outward demonstration for the creator's dedication to the product. This move was equally lauded and lamented by members of the gaming community, who wanted to see the game finished and in their possession (Walker, 2017).

Studio MDHR consistently credited Microsoft for their help in developing and promoting the game itself but made it clear this expansion was actually a return to the original concept of *Cuphead*. In an interview, Chad said, "Our original idea was much smaller scope, eight to 10 bosses, nothing really crazy, and it would have just been a small indie game. But the current scope, thanks to Microsoft, is exactly what we dreamed of" (Peckham, 2016, para. 33).

The expanded scope for the game did mean a delay for those impatiently waiting, but the team credits this decision and the hands-off approach the ID@Xbox team took with them as key factors for the game's success (Takahashi, 2018b). The positive portrayal of working with Microsoft is one Maja held to when she discussed being in close contact with them, especially when MDHR missed deadlines and needed more time to refine the game mechanics, art, programming, and other facets. "Microsoft told them to take their time, as you only get one chance to make a game good and a 'bad game stays bad forever'" (2018b, para. 13).

Studio MDHR also took a risk in its gameplay: there were no mass playtesters. The Moldenhauers asked a few of their friends, who grew up playing unforgiving retro games, to come and play portions of *Cuphead* at staged intervals. The only time *Cuphead*

was available for anyone outside of their self-mandated bubble of development was at trade shows or press events with ID@Xbox. Their dedication to the original idea of putting the art first remained steadfast; MDHR team members have said more than once that *Cuphead* is a game they made because they'd want to play it, not because they wanted monetary success and notoriety:

> The old Disney was art for art's sake, you know, and let's push art. And then the corporate mentality comes along and establishes that this is the only way to keep growing and earning more money. But you do that while stepping on everything else.
>
> So the only hope is that there's a bunch of people who are crazy or stupid enough, that get into projects hoping to earn enough just to live. Nothing crazy, just like anyone working a job earning enough to pay the rent and buy food, but no focus on starting a project hoping and wondering how much money can be made and focus testing the s*** out of something so a million people can like it instead of the hundred-thousand that might have loved it (Peckham, 2016, paras. 43 & 44).

Finally, after delays, expansions and two children for Maja and Chad, *Cuphead* launched on Xbox and PC on September 29, 2017 to critical acclaim and platinum status after two weeks. The final tally of hand-drawn animations for the game at launch was over 60,000 individual frames, and the soundtrack rounded out at over three hours of jazz ensemble music directed by Kris Maddigan, the Moldenhauer's childhood neighbor (Takahashi, 2018b).

One year after launch, the title had sold more than three million copies (Creelman, 2019). The game's price tag of $19.99 was a number to which Jared was steadfastly dedicated. To him and the rest of Studio MDHR, it was the going rate for an indie game. Even though the methods used to make the game should have increased the price of the final product, they actively chose to not pass the cost on to the consumer. It is also telling that the team decided the price point should fit with other independently created games. "We were 100% committed to the price…and I just feel like $19.99 has a lot of strong suits: It's a good 'indie price' and a fair 'indie price'" (Jared Moldenhauer in IGN, 2017).

After fielding negative comments and feedback from the audience for limiting the platforms *Cuphead* upon which would be playable, Microsoft and the ID@Xbox team asked Studio MDHR to build a port of the game playable on the Nintendo Switch. In the first-party gaming industry, sharing assets is not commonplace. Microsoft, who had ongoing negotiations and partnerships building with Nintendo, decided to use *Cuphead* as their olive branch offering to Nintendo to see how the cross-platform play would work. *Cuphead* was chosen based on the relative success of the Microsoft exclusive and the presumed ease with which the studio would be able to adjust the game to fit the Nintendo Switch's variation in operating hardware and software.

The team worked in secret to create this port, even while they continued to field complaints about the exclusivity contract from the audience. In addition, the team was already developing a downloadable content expansion (DLC) including a completely new playable character, Ms. Chalice, for the game. The expansion, Delicious Last Course – whose initials are also DLC – was launched alongside the Nintendo Switch version of the

game April 18, 2019. Since then, Studio MDHR has been silent about any upcoming games, as it is still providing support and further development for *Cuphead.*

Public Twitter Profile for Studio MDHR

After harvesting the entirety of the official Studio MDHR Twitter page, including all replies made to others from the account, my analysis found a variety of themes regarding legal issues, letting audiences look behind the scenes at development, game sales, updates, and responding to critics. Of the 1756 tweets sent, 308 were retweets from other accounts about *Cuphead* and 1032 were replies to other accounts who were talking to the @StudioMDHR Twitter handle. It is necessary to note there is no credited singular person behind the account. There is only one mention of a person behind the screen, Chad Moldenhauer, in one post in early 2014: "Been M.I.A because I (Chad) have received the best late Xmas gift you can ever get in life: a baby daughter, Doutzen (Studio MDHR, 2014a)." This predates the major push for *Cuphead's* full-scale development and partnering with Microsoft. The remaining 415 tweets were originally composed tweets by those running the account. The focus of every originally composed tweet is exclusively *Cuphead*-related with no discussion of any other personal or non-*Cuphead* topic, save for the tweet as mentioned earlier about the birth of Chad's daughter.

Lastly, other members of Studio MDHR, including Maja Moldenhauer, have their own Twitter account, but Chad and Jared are conspicuously absent. It is assumed that both Chad and Jared use the Studio MDHR account as their own, but again, there is no mention of anything personal or not related to the development of *Cuphead.* It is as if the

brothers lost their voice and ability to participate in Twitter conversations, save for the development and promotion of the game.

Language and tone used in Twitter. The language choices and personality of the *Cuphead* brand shift over time from 2013 to 2019. In many ways, the tweets in the later years start to resemble a consistent but less personal language style. In her article about independent game marketing, Kate Mann (2012) encouraged a consistent branded tone for an independently created game while still working with a AAA publisher (SEGA, in this case). She outlined three specific strategies to maintain the original voice of the creators and their personalities: work with a partner who respects the creative efforts, keep it consistent for all the forms the marketing entails, and, most notably, create a voice before you partner: "Remember that you cannot keep your indie voice when working with a publisher if your voice is undefined" (2012, para. 4). Though Mann advised independent developers to already have the tone in place, it was evident that Studio MDHR created or collaborated with their partner to create the tone in later years and closer to the launch of the game.

Many of these original tweets are written with words and phrases popular in the 1930s and repeated in the cartoons of that era. Words like "neat," "wowsers," and phrases like "boy, oh boy," and "take a gander" populate the announcements made on Twitter after the game's release on September 29, 2017. Posts before this time have a more contemporary and casual tone to them and share glimpses into the process, progress, and other behind-the-scenes information, keeping *Cuphead* present in the timelines of those who follow the profile.

The original tweets and replies to others are very informal and relaxed, lending to the appearance of availability and accessibility to Studio MDHR on the social media platform. In one tweet, Studio MDHR received criticism for choosing a 1930's art style and replied, "@PSN_Mikewarrior Our dad is a cartoon with that art style, I suppose you hate him too? lulz [sic]" (Studio MDHR, 2014c). The use of the term "lulz" not only showed the level of dismissal the critical tweet earned, but it also showed to the rest of those who viewed the publicly-available tweet that Studio MDHR was well-versed in Internet banter, including the "lulz" of the schadenfreude-producing practice of trolling ("I Did It for the Lulz," n.d.).

With this flippant use of the term "lulz" and the sarcasm of the tweet itself, Studio MDHR showed to the public that it was part of the community, adopting the language and manners of the internet-savvy and, by extension, the gaming populations they were hoping to talk to. This strategy reinforces the social distinction and privileged knowledge used in the specific field of the online spectacle. Bourdieu (1986) may have viewed this exchange as a means to establish cultural capital in the performative field of Twitter; getting the best of someone publicly and having one's dominance of wit shared with others is the highest form of notoriety.

As time progressed, however, Studio MDHR became more scripted in their originally composed tweets – not replies or retweets – with the use of a 1930s-era idiom when promoting the game, giving updates, or sharing details about new merchandise. Not only did the original tweets become more streamlined, but the replies in the most recent past dwindled to almost nothing. While posts about the Nintendo Switch port had over 100 replies and comments from excited potential players, Studio MDHR answered a

tweet about localization for Japanese language users on March 20, 2019. As of April 28, 2019, this was the most recent reply the account posted. Looking at a full year of Twitter posts – from April 28, 2019, to April 28, 2018 – only seven are replies to the players of the game and *Cuphead* enthusiasts. While it is most likely the studio was busy with creating the DLC and the Nintendo Switch port, it is telling that the level of interaction for the original full game launch was significantly higher than that of the Nintendo Switch port. The developers had more people on staff by the time the port launched, and there were significantly more press appearances for the initial launch taking their time.

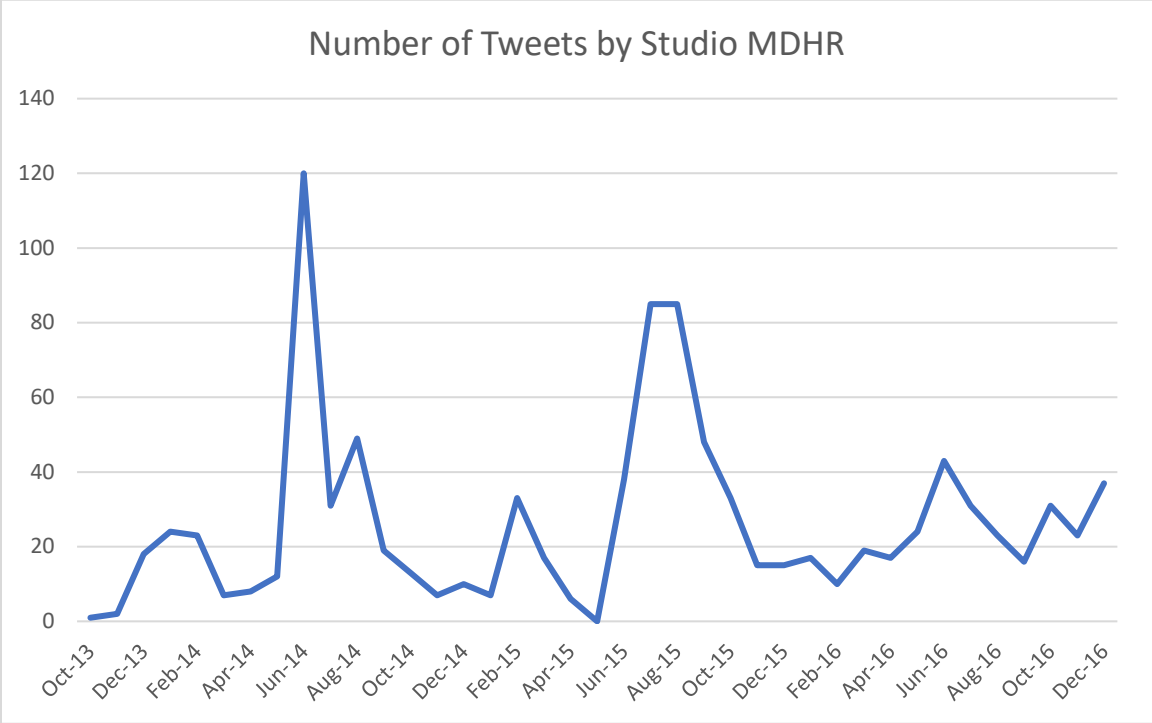


Figure 3. Number of tweets sent by Studio MDHR from October 2013 to December 2016.

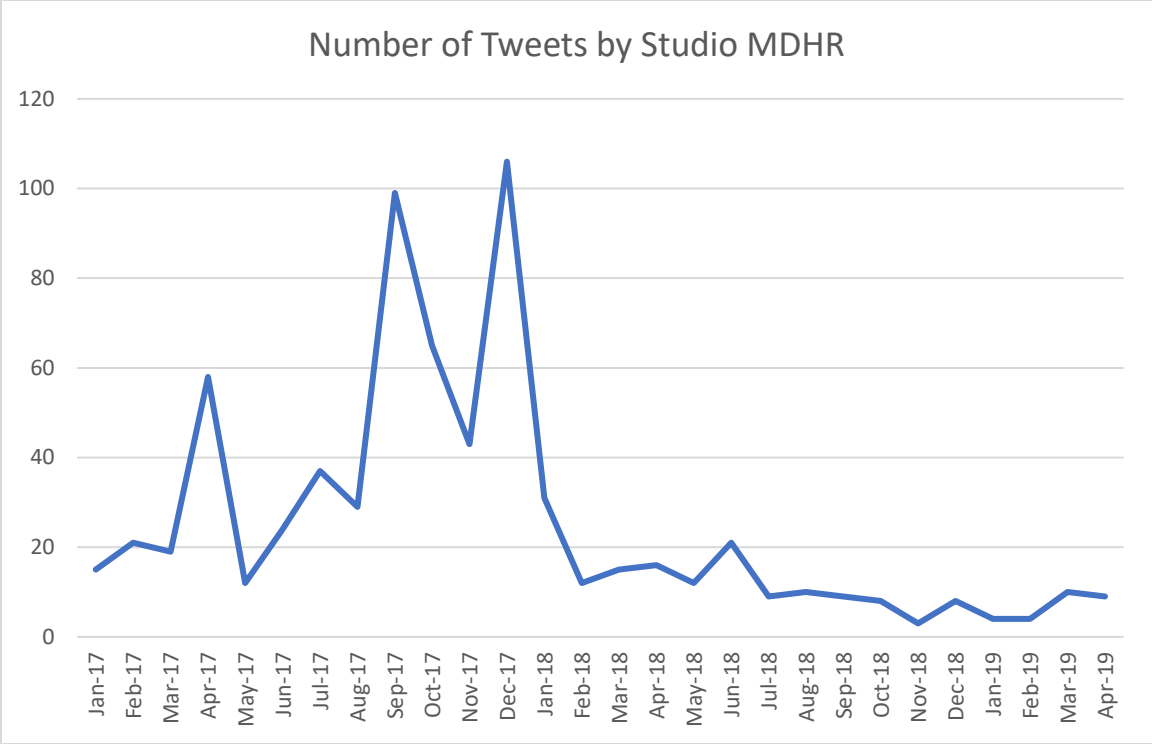


Figure 4. Number of tweets sent by Studio MDHR from January 2016 to April 2019.

This is only speculation, but by the time the Switch port launched, Studio MDHR could have realized they already achieved the notoriety they needed to make a buzz in the gaming industry. Another scenario could be they became exhausted in their efforts to not only make a game from scratch, but also to constantly talk about it, answer questions about it, and field the negative feedback from naysayers with a casual brush off. There could have also been behind-the-scenes changes that contributed to the silence.

Overall, the rate and tone of the individual tweets exude a persistently sunny attitude and an openness to the players of the game. Only in 2019 did Studio MDHR begin to back away from interacting with players on Twitter.

Use of the term "indie" or "independent" in Studio MDHR Twitter. In all of the 1,756 tweets, there exist two instances where the Studio MDHR feed actively

describes themselves as an independent game studio entity. One was a contest offering monetary support to indie game studios; Studio MDHR asked the community's help in winning the contest. The second instance was when they showed their excitement for the Indie Megabooth showcase and shared their attempt to secure a spot for the showcase. These were fleeting mentions and both of these occur very early in their Twitter lifespan in 2013 and 2014. Every other time the term "indie" is invoked, however, it is through a retweet from another entity. Even then, the game is associated with "indie" only 26 times, and that includes an independent journalist attempting to contact them for an interview.

In terms of what seems to be primary tenet in indie game development – ownership of the original idea and product – the team was quick to clear up questions about who owns the IP of *Cuphead*. One of the rumors circulating at the time was the scrapping of *Cuphead* by Microsoft. The exclusivity agreement in exchange for monetary help was well known, but some of the audience misunderstood it to mean that Studio MDHR signed over the intellectual property to Microsoft. In this specific tweet, they were asked if *Cuphead* was scrapped, thus prompting this reply, complete with the smiling emoticon: "We own Cuphead. There is no such thing as 'Cuphead being cancelled' :)" (Studio MDHR, 2017). This was a very pointed statement that MDHR are the masters of *Cuphead* and that no outside influence would have the power over them to deem the game unfit to publish. Studio MDHR was the creator and publisher of the game. Microsoft only contracted with them to give them a quick entry on the digital distribution hub of the Xbox store and could only remove the game from that one distribution platform if Microsoft did not deem it wise to distribute the game.

Other tweets Studio MDHR fielded were requests for interviews and review copies by well-known (and less-well-known) video game critics, streamers, bloggers and game journalism outlets. Their "indie" and small-time status was reinforced by one reply they sent to someone asking how to connect with their public relations team: "Our massive PR company that we use is: us. :) Feel free to reach out to chad[at]http://studiomdhr.com" (Studio MDHR, 2015b). The next year, a request for a media contact directed them to Ryan Mouldenhauer, their dedicated public relations employee.

Kate Mann (2012) acknowledged the problematic relationship of remaining independent and representing yourself as such while partnering with a first-party publisher: "When people see the name and logo of a AAA publisher alongside your indie title, it can be hard to retroactively convince them that the game was developed solely within the walls of an indie studio and not in a mansion filled with robot butlers" (2012, para. 2). The independently created and funded project may find itself written off by those in the community who would have rather seen the product succeed or fail based on its own merits and not by what some would consider to be artificially "buying a name for yourself" (2012).

It stands to reason that announcing yourself as independent at every turn does little to bolster credibility; the title must be used by others when referencing a project rather than being self-proclaimed. This reinforces the fluctuating definitions of "independent" and the need to showcase the characteristics of "independence" to earn that status (Brightman, 2014; Cossidente, 2018; Newman, 2009).

First-party partnerships. As *Cuphead* began to draw more of an audience at independent gaming events, Microsoft took notice. While other titles like *Journey,* made by thatgamecompany, were published completely by Sony, a first-party studio, Microsoft worked with the Mouldenhauers to let Studio MDHR self-publish the title (Yin-Poole, 2013). This meant the rights of all the work created for *Cuphead* would not be shared by anyone except Studio MDHR.

By retaining the right to self-publish, Studio MDHR held another feather in their independent development cap as more of their work would be completed under their watchful eyes and not outsourced to those who did not see the game from its fledgling beginnings to its finished state. Though there is distrust among the independent game community about working with AAA game companies (Kelly, 2009), the sentiment seems to have softened in the recent years. The Twitter feed of Studio MDHR echos this very clearly as they mention Xbox and others who work for the ID@Xbox team.

Early in their feed, Studio MDHR retweeted a picture of Alexis of the ID@Xbox team with a life-sized *Cuphead* posing for the photo. The image was accompanied by compliments about Alexis, who connected the Mouldenhauers with the ID@Xbox division, and joking about how the background at the event did not look realistic (Studio MDHR, 2015d). The tweet reflected a camaraderie among the people representing both companies and made the two entities more human. In other images from other events, it is clear that Microsoft or the ID@Xbox team are working to show the personal side of the media giant. Under signs reading “ID@Xbox,” the people at an independent gaming event huddled together and smiled. These images consisted of the developers, representatives of ID@Xbox and the attendees of these events documenting and showing

to whoever is looking that they are rubbing elbows with either gaming powerhouses or the wide-eyed observers taking in the sights.

Figure 5. Many of the retweets selected and rebroadcast by Studio MDHR carry the sentiment there was an ideal partnership between them and Microsoft.

One reply was specifically to redirect the ire of an impatient audience member about the delay for *Cuphead*. The user complained about the delayed release of *God of War III* on XboxOne and added "WHERE THE FUCK IS CUPHEAD?" to which Studio MDHR replied, "YELL at the studio making Cuphead. They are going too slow! Har har" (Studio MDHR, 2016b). The studio was not tagged in the tweet so one could assume

there was an active mention search on Twitter the team was monitoring. They were also very quick to come to the defense of Microsoft and put themselves out there, albeit in a sarcastic and self-deprecating sense, to be the subject of the frustrated Twitter user rather than their investor. It may not be a written directive, but it is clear Studio MDHR knows who they are indebted to even if there is not an actual expectation of monetary debt.

Studio MDHR celebrated Microsoft even more clearly in a retweeted interview from What's Your Tag online blog. Even the title of the completed interview read "ID@Xbox Spotlight: We talk with Studio MDHR about Cuphead, influences, animation" (Keene, 2015). The studio tweeted the caption "This was a fun Q&A – finally get to give some props to our Microsoft friends and more..." (Studio MDHR, 2015a) alongside the original tweet. Though the aim of this study remained focused on the Twitter activity, it did allow for further investigation into the content they chose to endorse on their feed. This particular interview was conducted through written response that Chad Mouldenhauer was credited for. Chad stated there was an active friendship with the team they worked with at Microsoft and made it sound extremely appealing to collaborate with people he referred to as "genius." (Keene, 2015, para. 24).

> We (Chad and Jared) are both hugely grateful for having Microsoft as a partner. From giving us amazing opportunities to allowing complete creative freedom and everything in between, it's been a blessing. I said before that working with Microsoft "was like" we were working with great friends – but I have to change that sentence: Working with Microsoft "IS" working with great friends – all of the people there are amazing.

> We need to give props to Alexis from the ID@Xbox team; he is the guy who originally found us and believed in everything that we were doing. Without him, I don't think we'd be in the same position today (of course, we can't forget Chris, Nate, Dave, Blake, Katie, Glenn, James and the many other talented and genius people who are making our dreams come true!) (Keene, 2015, paras. 23–24).

Microsoft would have a lot to gain from having a widely-known game and studio like this case touting the ease of collaboration, supportive work environment and use of resources to complete the highly-anticipated game. In cases like the independent game development scene, having someone be vocal and defend their choice to work with a first-party studio as well as claim no interference with their work would have more clout than the ID@Xbox representatives, like Alexis above, claiming the same information.

One model can be attributed to these instances and why Microsoft would want this information publicized. The two-step flow model which Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz (1955) identified and refined when examining the habits of small groups and advertising. The original thesis of media having a direct effect on the behavior of the audience was upended as the researchers discovered that such effects were mediated by the recommendations and conversations had with those whom subjects trusted in various sectors of their lives. More current research shows that people will turn to more than one source of expertise through two-step flow in physical space when making a decision. The same behaviors are also exhibited when gathering information and expertise in opinion formation and decision making in virtual spaces – namely Twitter – repeating the pattern

of the original studies (Choi, 2015; Hilbert, Vásquez, Halpern, Valenzuela, & Arriagada, 2017).

This early investigation into the human influence of messages saw other iterations of its use, but the most prominent type of messaging presently on the ubiquitous social media platforms are broadcast to the aptly and cringeworthy named "influencers" (Lahuerta-Otero & Cordero-Gutiérrez, 2016; Liu et al., 2015). These accounts post messages to their following about a product, service or event and, by doing so, endorse the message. They are often paid, earn perks or in-kind discounts, or they receive free products to showcase on their social media channel of their choosing.

To earn the trust of the independent gaming community, it would mean more coming from a member of that in-group and one who that group sees as a reliable resource of information. Studio MDHR as the early adopter of the Microsoft partnership with its modified and more developer-friendly policies were adamant the partnership was nothing but positive in any of the Twitter postings and retweeted interviews. Microsoft earned some ire in the years past with restrictive clauses and requirements of the developers to lose some autonomy over the game itself (Conditt, 2017; Takahashi, 2018c; Vlambeer, 2014). With the renewed efforts of Microsoft to adopt a more hands-off approach, they needed more examples of a successful partnership and the role of Microsoft would change with independent game investment.

Cuphead was not the first to work with the ID@Xbox team to secure more funding and build a partnership, but they were one of the most notable and unique examples. Even Rami Ismail of Vlambeer commented on Studio MDHR's ability to find

the resources and connect with the right people even though they were so inexperienced in game development:

> *Cuphead* is one of those strange fairy tale journeys that really shouldn't exist but it does. It was interesting because so much has been said about the art and the design, and I was really just curious about the people. How do you, as a studio without any contacts, weather all of the challenges that making a game like that, with those expectations, throws at you? (Takahashi, 2018c, para. 16).

Studio MDHR made it abundantly clear in their Twitter postings that Microsoft and their networking helped them create the game they dreamed of making for years but exerted no creative control over it.

Betting the farm. The year 2012 was also the era of the "year of the game" on platforms like Indiegogo and Kickstarter according to Strickler and Beneson (2012). Developers found these platforms and asked potential players to pay for the game before it was finished in exchange for earning privileges or merchandise regarding the finished product. Oddly enough, Studio MDHR opted to be self-funded to maintain their own timeline and vision for the project. The creative control was vital to the project and the extended timeline was one decided by Studio MDHR. Microsoft was informed of the extension rather than asked for it. The details of this modified timeline were not discussed in full as to Microsoft's expectations or reactions, only that Studio MDHR needed to increase the scope of the game and were willing to take on the cost of another year of development themselves.

Many independent game developers take on the cost of development themselves or, as previously mentioned, invoke the crowdsourced funds of online platforms. The

independent characteristic of retaining full custody of the idea and execution of the final product still rings true in the digital realm as well as it does in the physical (Martin & Deuze, 2009; Oakes, 2009). Studio MDHR aligned itself with "the starving artist" adage when they either did not ask or did not secure an extra year's development cost from Microsoft. Though the specifics of Microsoft's contribution remained unclear, the Mouldenhauers decided to remortgage both their homes to own the monetary costs of their dream game.

Though there were posts about how dedicated they were to the game's release, Studio MDHR redoubled their efforts and posted tweets like "It it our very lives, man! Everything is on the line for this game, it's not just a tease. We double scout [sic] promise" (Studio MDHR, 2016). This came after the remortgage of the houses as well as both of the brothers and Maja Mouldenhauer, who had recently given birth to her second child, quit their jobs at the same time, raising the stakes again for the game. Though there were only two mentions of it on Twitter, the journalists in the gaming sector took notice of the financial decisions and went so far as to use the remortgage as the title of a feature article (Gilyadov, 2017).

The article published and retweeted by Studio MDHR only a month before the launch of the game also touched on their confidence of the game as well as knowing a gamble like the one they took could mean financial ruin. The brothers cited *No Man's Sky* as an example of failure from the previous year. "*No Man's Sky* is a prime example of a studio throwing everything they have at the game and, for the most part, failing to meet expectations. Tellingly, Hello Games has been incredibly quiet ever since, kept firmly out of the spotlight by Sony" (Gilyadov, 2017). It is important to note that *No Man's Sky* was

a game from HelloGames which Sony promoted and partnered with in the same way Microsoft did with *Cuphead.*

There is a status associated with taking on extreme personal burden when creating any product; this is doubly true in game development. In its infancy with *Doom*, Id Software made it a point to create bragging rights around the time and energy spent in the development of the game. John Romero, one of the founders of Id Software, would congratulate and encourage employees who stayed so late they slept at their desk for days and weeks at a time (Kushner, 2004). Romero coined the "crunch" as dedication from the employees and only the ones who truly loved the work would make the sacrifices needed to get the game out. This "crunch time" has become a staple of the game development industry as a whole. So much so, quality of life whitepapers about the industry practice and the damage it does to employees mentally, physically and relationally are a common publication (International Game Developers Association (IGDA), 2015).

Including the audience. *Cuphead* made its initial splash with the visuals hearkening back to the time when cartoon cows had udders and no joints of rubber-like limbs. The teaser trailer from 2013 racked up over 500,000 views and the updated teaser trailer in 2015 earned 1.4 million views with excited potential gamers populating the comments section. The grassroots interest in the game was strong for many of the years of development, but there is only so much a studio can do with keeping people excited about a game that will take at least two years to develop; *Cuphead* took four.

This was where the interaction of the audience and self-publishing information on progress through Twitter came into play for Studio MDHR. At first, the account was reposting the original blog posts on www.studiomdhr.com. While there were retweets of

pieces created by other outlets, like the interviews the brothers participated in, it was the interaction between Studio MDHR and the public that established them as relatable developers. Pictures of the concept art and sketches populated the original posts and showed the followers where the game came from artistically but there was no mention of any other facet of development.

In typical game development, it is common to have one person be the artist and one person program the game to make the art active. A lot of the attention for *Cuphead* centered around the art style, which truly was notable and easy to showcase through images on Twitter. The part of the development hidden from view was that of the actual programming of the game. There were only a few entries in 2014 about the coding work and updating the audience.

The tools Studio MDHR used were well represented in the tweets including Photoshop scripts. "@darkwark Best #Photoshop script ever! Rename all selected layers with ease. I wish I had this 10 years ago. http://blog.kam88.com/en/group-layer-renaming-script.html …" (Studio MDHR, 2013). This kind of promotion to the followers of Studio MDHR likely did little for the script writer, but what it did to was broadcast to followers that there was movement on the game with the utilization of these tools.

Another example of progression broadcasted was that of the utilization of the Unity engine (Studio MDHR, 2014b) and the subsequent question about the best way to utilize the engine.

Asking for help through crowdsourcing. The following for Studio MDHR was well informed of their progress and the expected time they could have the game for themselves. To speed the process along, the developers were not shy about asking for

help where they needed it. There were advertisements for artists, coders and people to coordinate artwork for trade shows included in the typical Twitter postings. Less formally was one exchange in which two coders well-versed in the Unity engine gave professional advice without any expectation of monetary compensation.

Figure 6. Conversation about solving a problem in the Unity game engine.

It is also telling that the conversation began not as an original post but as a reply to a question about the engine being used. The information was not a secret, but it also wasn't

readily discussed with the Twitter following. Though the question about colliders wasn't the original topic, it was an opportunity to crowdsource the solution to a problem. In addition, it showed that they needed help and did not know everything necessary to make the game in a development sense. This would not be something a larger studio would engage in as it may cast doubt on their ability to ship the game. Studio MDHR actively chose to have the conversation with @willgoldstone and @JuhaKiili in the public forum of Twitter rather than take the conversation to the private direct messages and hide their lack of knowledge.

Vulnerability. was evident in the exchanges of messages and announcements on the platform. In many ways, the team did not have any training for the job of game development. With no formal experience in any part of what would become *Cuphead,* Studio MDHR taught themselves all the techniques necessary through online tutorials and also employed others as time went on. One of the common themes for something independently created is the room for unique flaws to occur in the product making it unable to be replicated (Oakes, 2009). With a digital product, it is built to be replicated, but the rejection of formal training leaves room for a wider availability of ideas and means of creation. By telling someone the accepted way of creating something, they will most likely then be limited to that scope (Oakes, 2009). Studio MDHR's willingness to learn from their mistakes was noted many times in the progress of the game.

Messages from impatient audience members flooded the replies to many of the original announcements. Some were polite excitement and others were significantly less so. Some of the more negative messages were swear-laden complaints about the slow process of the game and the modification of the release dates along and along. In

response to these sharper exchanges, Studio MDHR consistently replied with some sarcasm, deflected the barb or ended the message in either an exclamation point or smiling emoticon.

In line with vulnerability, the Mouldenhauers made only three references to their family lives in their entire Twitter history. For a studio promoting familial collaboration and accessibility to the developers, this was an odd occurrence. A question about the Mouldenhauer name and ancestry from one user (Studio MDHR, 2014d), holiday greetings with an image of the young Mouldenhauer brothers (Studio MDHR, 2014e), an image of Chad holding his daughter (Studio MDHR, 2014a), and Maja Mouldenhauer working on inking with an occupied baby bassinet retweeted from her Instagram account (Moldenhauer, 2016).

Figure 7. Maja Moldenhauer's post to Instagram with the caption "'Take-your-newborn-to-work-day'! #Newborn #Hans #tinyfeet #cuphead #cupheadgame #handinked #cupheadartist #neverbeforeseenart #topsecret #nopeeking #lovemyjob(s) #sleepisoverrated @studiomdhr"

As shown in Maja's image above, the artwork for the game was still under wraps as she covered the light table with the current task she took on. In other instances, the sketch book or a series of animations were shown to keep audiences interested, but in every post about the work Maja was inking, the images would not show the artwork. A stack of paper and used pens showed how much work she did in a week, but the audience was never able to see her original art until it was in action in the game or adapted into a series of stills (Studio MDHR, 2015c).

Figure 8. Inverted hand-drawn animation to show amount of work, but not completed art, by Maja Moldenhauer (Studio MDHR, 2015c).

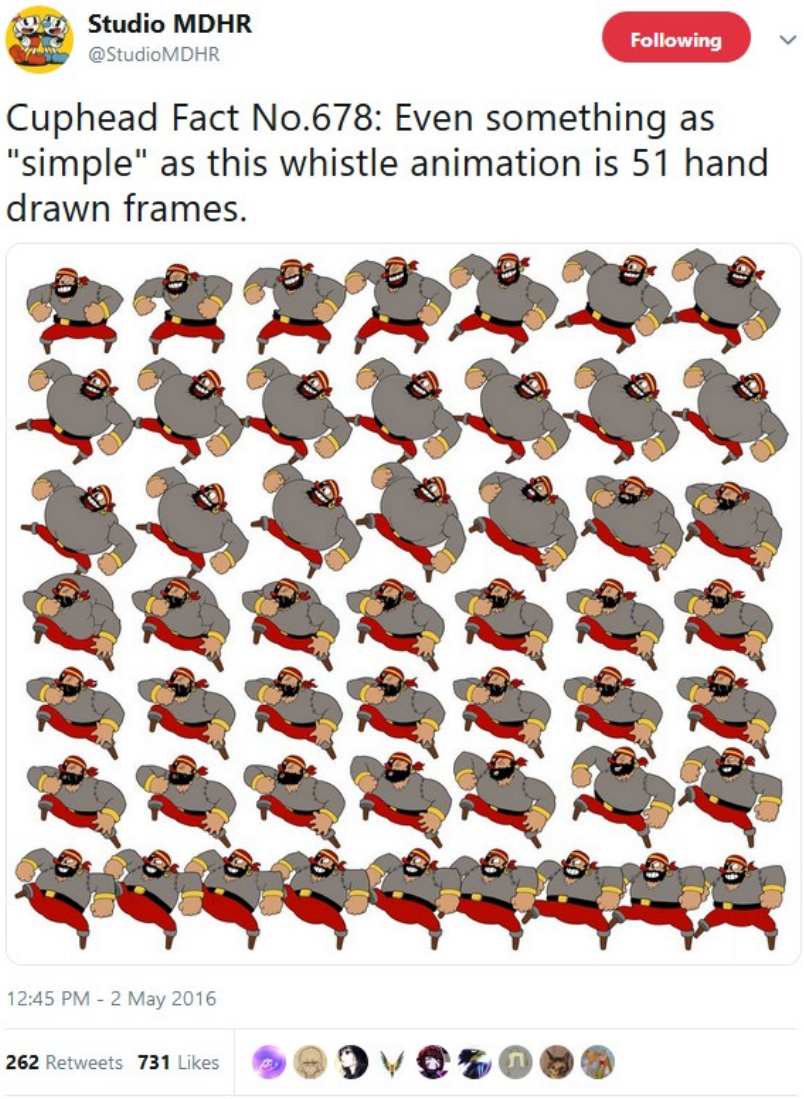


Figure 9. Inked and completed frames showing one motion taking 51 frames (Studio MDHR, 2016).

It may be the decision of Studio MDHR to only release small portions of the animation work, but it is also a common practice in AAA gaming to keep some of the main facets of the game in-house and not allow anyone working on it to disclose information. Again, in all the tweets, the drawings in their original form were never released.

Independent inclusion

Tools and resources used by independent game developers include the do-it-yourself website code called “presskit()” by Rami Ismail. Later he developed “distribute()” for the same goal of helping game creators get their game publicity and in the hands of the audience. For Studio MDHR, their press kit consists of the web code supplied by Rami Ismail with the needed information about the game itself, YouTube videos and high-resolution images for use. For a studio who partnered with Microsoft and found their game front and center in games journalism, it seemed an odd choice to opt for a bare bones press kit for *Cuphead*.

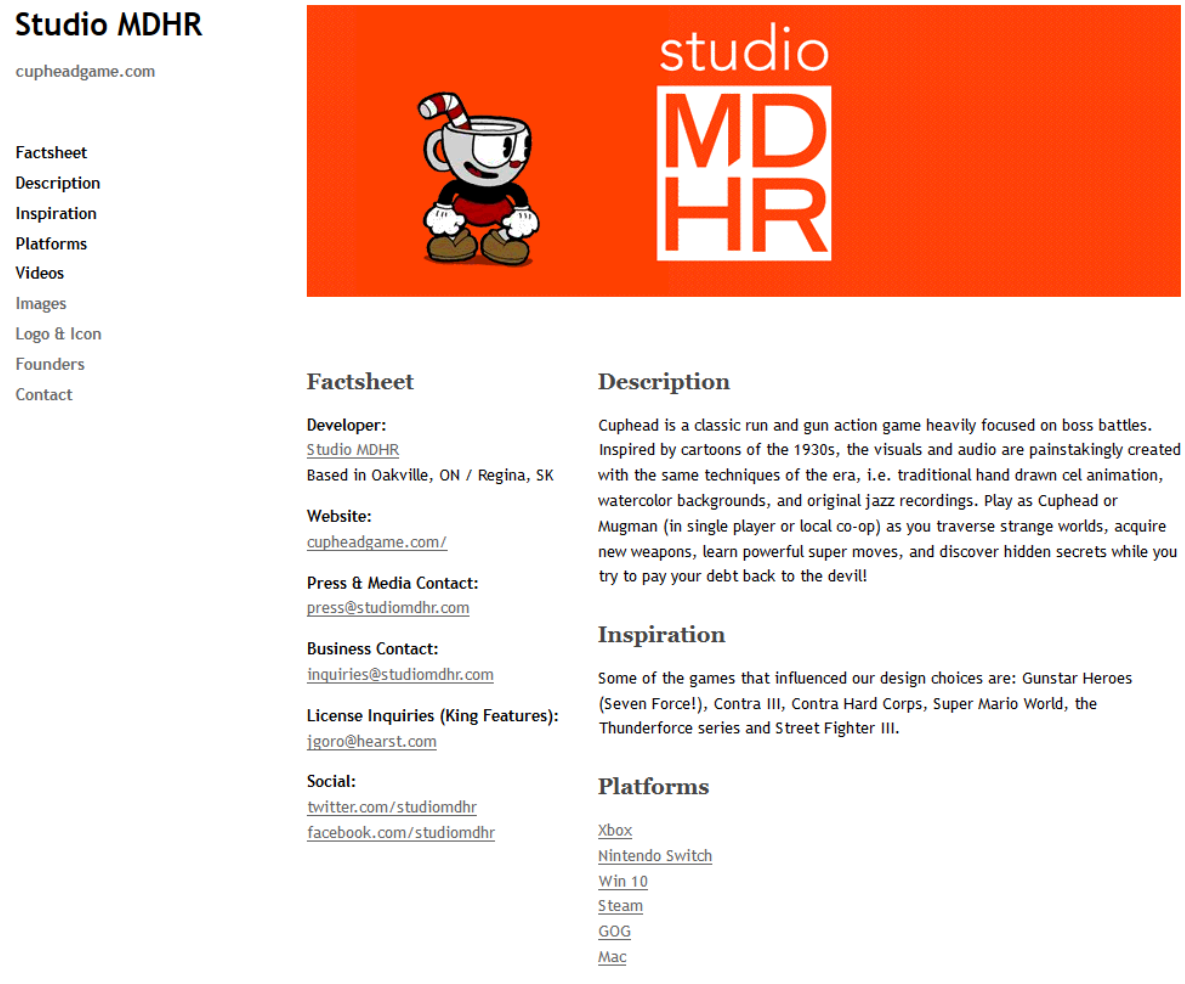


Figure 9. Presskit for *Cuphead* (Studio MDHR, 2019).

The use of presskit() instead of a sleek and polished collection they may have been able to create with their partnership also indicated that they want to promote and reinforce the gift economy of sharing the resources with those who need the exposure. Studio MDHR also then becomes one of the "indie games" listed on Ismail's press kit site as utilizing the code, thereby ensuring the classification as "independent" on one of independent gaming's primary representatives (Takahashi, 2018a).

In the gaming press articles retweeted by Studio MDHR, there were none calling any attention to the idea that their "indieness" should be questioned. The awards the title earned almost all came from the independent categories or from wholly independent competitions for every category. There was little to indicate that *Cuphead* did not belong in the independent category aside from funding, and, even then, proponents of independent game development rushed to the defense of Studio MDHR. As an independently published and created game from a small studio with meager beginnings, the case of *Cuphead* belongs to the ranks of the indies.

Finally, this case may be one of the few times that involvement from an outside and well-funded studio made an indie game become *closer* to its original vision. Without the support from Microsoft, the original *Cuphead* would have been a quick boss rush game with 10 to 13 events. The added support and promotion afforded by Microsoft and its gaming connections allowed Studio MDHR to expand the scope to its original vision. In essence, making the jump to partner with a first-party studio made an indie game more "indie."

Summary

Studio MDHR used their prowess in communication to attract a following excited to see something reminiscent of their childhood while still being challenged to overcome the extreme difficulty of the game. While the learning curve of the game itself was frustrating to some, Studio MDHR created the game for their own optimal "flow" in play, rather than for that of a generalized audience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). They retained their focus and creative control – the most fundamental dimension of anything purporting to be independent – with the backing of Microsoft as well as their own funds. Though there is no crystal ball to see the alternate outcomes, it is safe to say that their partnership with Microsoft brought the game and developers much more popular games press coverage than they would have ever come close to without ID@Xbox. The following they cultivated is significantly larger than most independent studios launching their first game, and that may be an alienating factor to some in the independent game development community.

After earning the distinction of the fairy tale indie experience, Studio MDHR positioned themselves as the poster child of independent and first-party studio collaboration. They have made it clear they want to make another game after *Cuphead* but at this point they are not sure what that game is. What the game community can be sure of is Studio MDHR will most likely partner with ID@Xbox again to create that game. If they choose not to, Microsoft will have to explain to the rest of the independent game developers they are courting why Studio MDHR declined the partnership. The other way their game and partnership could dissolve is through the curse of success. The requirements for becoming an ID@Xbox partner are not concrete and if there is any

constant in the games industry, it is flux. It is entirely possible that the team of 17 at Studio MDHR has worked their first and last partnership with Microsoft. If Studio MDHR remains independent, Microsoft – and maybe the independent game development community – will deem them "not indie enough."

CHAPTER FIVE:

NUCLEAR THRONE BY VLAMBEER

The case of "performative game development" is embodied in the creation and transparency of Vlambeer's eighth official title, *Nuclear Throne.* What would have been an entertaining game, given the team's successes in game development, turned into a constant work-in-progress between the developers and the 12,000 observers who logged into the Twitch.tv streaming platform. Funded, developed and published exclusively by Vlambeer, *Nuclear Throne* has achieved monetary success and a strong presence in the independent gaming community; thus, it made for a logical choice as the second case study. Vlambeer is a studio who earned notoriety in the independent game community because of their struggles rather than their successes.

They earned the middle position in the three cases examined for the independent games "indiestry" because they have published – or made available – 12 games since 2010, they have forged relationships with first-party publishers as well as staunch independent game developers, and they maintain an accessible, open persona online and onground (Cool, 2010). They have also had enough experience and knowledge in marketing their games to have developed their own voice for Vlambeer as a studio that has remained consistent even past the sample of tweets beginning at the end of 2013.

Analysis and comparison of the themes explored throughout the "indiestry" are applied to Vlambeer's case in the final discussion chapter. This chapter covers the game itself, a light history of Vlambeer and its contributions to the indie game developer community, the Twitter feed itself, the tone and language, promoting others in the indie game community, advocating careful collaboration with first-party partners, publicly

quelling dissatisfied players of the game, the habitus of the community and gift economy, as well as their open rejection of legal constraints they do not agree with.

Game Description

Nuclear Throne is a 16-bit styled top-down shooter game set in a post-apocalyptic terrain filled with mutant enemies and mutant protagonists – according to their Steam Store page, "Not 'the final hope of humanity' post-apocalyptic, but 'humanity is extinct and mutants and monsters now roam the world' post-apocalyptic. Fight your way through the wastelands with powerful weaponry, collecting radiation to mutate some new limbs and abilities" (Steam Database, 2013). There is no story to speak of aside from attaining the dominant position astride the Nuclear Throne.

The primary draw to the title is its hyper-kinetic and fast-paced gameplay. There is only a one-minute tutorial to explain the controls to the player, which is a staple of such rogue-like games (Cicala, 2017). After this brief training, a message reading, "Cool, we're done here!" appears, and the player is warped to the first live level of the game to begin defeating enemies with the more than 100 available weapons.

Figure 11. The character "Eyes" uses the shotgun to defeat the enemies scattered around the level and navigates the randomized terrain (Cicala, 2017).

Each level is different and completely randomized in terms of enemies, weapons, terrain and supplies available. After defeating all the enemies in the level, a warp opens and sucks the player into the next randomized level. This continues until meeting the final boss at 7-3 (world 7, level 3) and defeating it to either claim the throne and end the game or reset the game with increased difficulty.

Figure 12. As the stages progress, the player works closer to the throne level as is depicted here. The player can see how much more progress is needed to complete the goal as well as how many enemies they defeated and which enemy specifically killed them (Cicala, 2017).

The use of permadeath in this case is less jarring than in other games of the same genre. While one death means the removal of all weapons, abilities, and supplies collected along the way, it does not mean a lot of time is lost. Players can progress in the game for maybe an hour at most before failing and losing all the powerups and equipment collected (Cicala, 2017).

The characters available to the audience are varied in terms of design and the abilities which affect play style. Fifteen playable protagonists can be selected depending

on the preferences of the player after they have been unlocked and are sitting around the start screen's campfire. These characters are not lost after encountering the specific conditions in the game while playing and unlocking their availability. Permadeath removes only the progress made in the levels rather than the options the player has overall.

During the constantly looping levels and the quick loading screens, tips will appear depending on the level environment, weapons, character or these tips will appear at random. Vlambeer and their collaborators created either logical and helpful tips for the player, or ones that have no bearing on mastery of the game. Tips like, "Fear is the mind killer," from Frank Herbert's *Dune*, "Not today" (Arya Stark's reply to "What do we say to the god of death?" in *Game of Thrones*), and "HP will only drop when damaged" populate the loading screens for the one to three seconds they appear ("Loading Screen Tips," n.d.).

Local cooperative play, weekly challenges, and daily challenges kept players returning to the game despite its difficulty and steep learning curve. Vlambeer created a local co-op after launch but also saw community members creating modification scripts to make the features even better; they promoted the modifications and integrated them into the game itself with fewer issues and bugs (Vlambeer, 2016a).

The game launched December 5, 2015 after two and a half years of development, which was open to their Twitch subscribers. Vlambeer also showcased the game at various events such as PAX Prime, Fantastic Arcade, Indiecade, and other gaming expos in order to draw attention and receive feedback. The concept of "open development" is

one that Vlambeer utilized to not only promote the game but also to refine the game and its mechanics in an effort to please both developer and audience.

History of the Studio

Vlambeer, the Dutch game developer, established their two-person microstudio in 2010 after Rami Ismail and Jan Willem Nijman (J.W.) met each other in a game development course. While enrolled in the course at Utrecht School of Arts, the two began creating a game other than the one assigned. When the school demanded they turn over the rights to the game, Ismail and Nijman refused and dropped out (Sarkar, 2014). The game they made from that prototype, *Super Crate Box*, earned them recognition in design and in the independent game development community.

In the space of two years, Vlambeer became one of the more well-known developers in the independent category, as they continued to be a constant presence at game conferences and expos, networking and talking to other developers about their work. They also released six games in that time with a focus on clean, quick, arcade-style gameplay. They currently have 12 games listed as released on their website, Vlambeer.com.

War of the clones. Vlambeer became the subject of a controversy dealing with the cloning of games. Their game *Radical Fishing*, originally made for a computer browser, was stolen and reskinned. *Ridiculous Fishing* became the iOS version of the game *Radical Fishing.* They released *Radical Fishing* as a free game online and decided to go back to it, refine it, add some different mechanics and release it on mobile platforms, beginning with iOS.

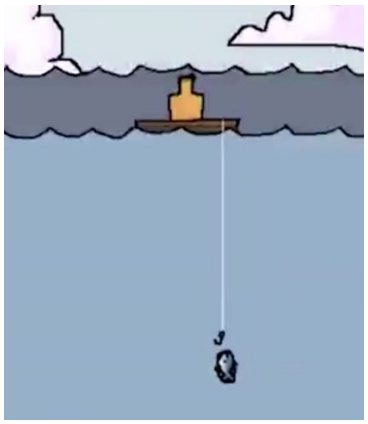


Figure 13. *Radical Fishing* as a Flash game and available to play on a browser. *Ridiculous Fishing* soon followed this iteration.

Vlambeer was already working on a port of the game to the iOS platform, but the company Gamenauts found *Radical Fishing* and built on the basics of Vlambeer's code and made an iOS version of the exact same game (this time entitled *Ninja Fishing*). Variations in the art design, or "reskinning," provided the main distinguishing factor between the two. What was worse for Vlambeer is that Gamenauts employed a team of developers to work on the port and were able to release it a full year ahead of the port Vlambeer was toiling to create.

Figure 14. A side-by-side comparison shows *Ninja Fishing* (left) and *Ridiculous Fishing* (right). The goals of the game concept of reeling in fish only to throw them in the air and tap/swipe over them to earn money to unlock features (Ledford, 2014).

Valmbeer contacted Gamenauts and asked them to at least give them credit. Gamenauts assured them it would share credit as well as some of the profits. In a move that added fuel to the anti-cloned-game fire, Gamenauts not only did not share any of the profits with Vlambeer, they did not provide any statement of credit among their public communications on the App Store, Twitter, or their own website. Legally, there was nothing Vlambeer could do; the self-funded duo realized they did not have a case with their game not coming to iOS first. Vlambeer's plight became public knowledge in the independent gaming community soon after.

Their friends, collaborators, and co-developers shouted down Gamenauts in the best way they knew how: review bombing. Social media posts about the debacle began to circulate and rallied those willing to take a stand –albeit electronically – against the overall practice of game cloning. The store page of *Ninja Fishing* was flooded with

derogatory remarks about the game and the developers, featuring one-star reviews and forcing the rating of the game to plummet. After this incident, Gamenauts actively policed the page. In fact, the current state of the App Store page does not allow comments that mention *Radical Fishing* or make accusations of cloning the game.

Almost a year after the cloned game released, Ismail took the stage at the Game Developers Conference in 2012 to talk his first-hand knowledge of game cloning. He challenged some of the beliefs about cloned games: progress is spurred on by clones; simple games are just asking to be cloned; clones are free marketing. Ismail had multiple refutations but the most pointed one was, "Fuck that" (Pitts, 2013, para. 48). Elaborating further, Ismail described the year that he and Nijman struggled to create even one game after feeling as if there was nothing meaningful they could make. The partners had a total of $2,000 to their name and almost dissolved the studio. According to Pitts (2013), "The bottom line is, clones hurt the industry. They stifle innovation, damage reputations, and force original, creative developers out of business" (para. 52).

After connecting with two independent game freelancers, Vlambeer finished *Ridiculous Fishing* and launched it to extreme critical acclaim from players and reviewers across the globe. The game debuted at #40 on the App Store, while most games rank in the 120s, at best, in the list of paid games. Within a day of stellar reviews, the game reached the top featured spot on the App Store and became the most successful game of 2013. Though this wasn't the only cloning incident they would have to endure (Narcisse, 2013), Vlambeer used their energy to reach out and make games in the process.

Pushing publicity for indies. By the time they decided to work on what would become *Nuclear Throne*, Ismail and Nijman had become the bannermen of a cause in

independent gaming against cloning. Their notoriety not only stemmed from their well-discussed positions on the topic, but Nijman's creativity in game design and Ismail's ability to cut through jargon and build relationships with many independent and corporate game development figures. Embracing what he terms the "necessary evil" of marketing, Ismail uses his tact to turn Nijman's blunt and quick answers into something more relatable and accessible to their multiple audiences (Pitts, 2013).

Using what Ismail learned from many game developers with whom he came in contact, he created three tools: presskit(), promote() and distribute(). He saw many games during his time at gaming festivals and in independent gaming forums whose developers had no experience in talking about their games in a way that would be accessible to their audience. They did not know where to begin when promoting the game. Ismail took this opportunity to lend his marketing knowledge to the indie game community and created presskit() – which is pronounced "do presskit" using game coding languages – in 2012. His intent was to help other people enjoy the games they would have otherwise not known existed. Ismail was no stranger to the sometimes no-nonsense and sharp language used by many developers who have used their language skills to truncate and simplify code on a screen rather than think about how to promote the features and content of the game to an audience of people who could become loyal players.

Presskit() is a fill-in-the-blank, do-it-yourself presskit for any game with an accompanying website. The press kit is embedded as a separate page of the game's website and is easy to find by media outlets. Ismail created the HTML code to embed in the site with the comments walking developers through the mind of public communication. After consulting with a few members of the gaming press, Ismail spoke

to members of the games press and determined which categories and collateral needed to be included for a well-rounded game press kit (Ismail, 2014). These included a boilerplate statement about the game, a quick "about" section on the studio or developer who made it, high-resolution screenshots, logos, promotional videos, and gameplay videos. Having these readily available online instead of emailing each member of the gaming press, including streamers and bloggers, made the process of discussing and promoting the game much more streamlined. He also included a manual for people who were not familiar with website coding and gave writing tips (Ismail, 2012).

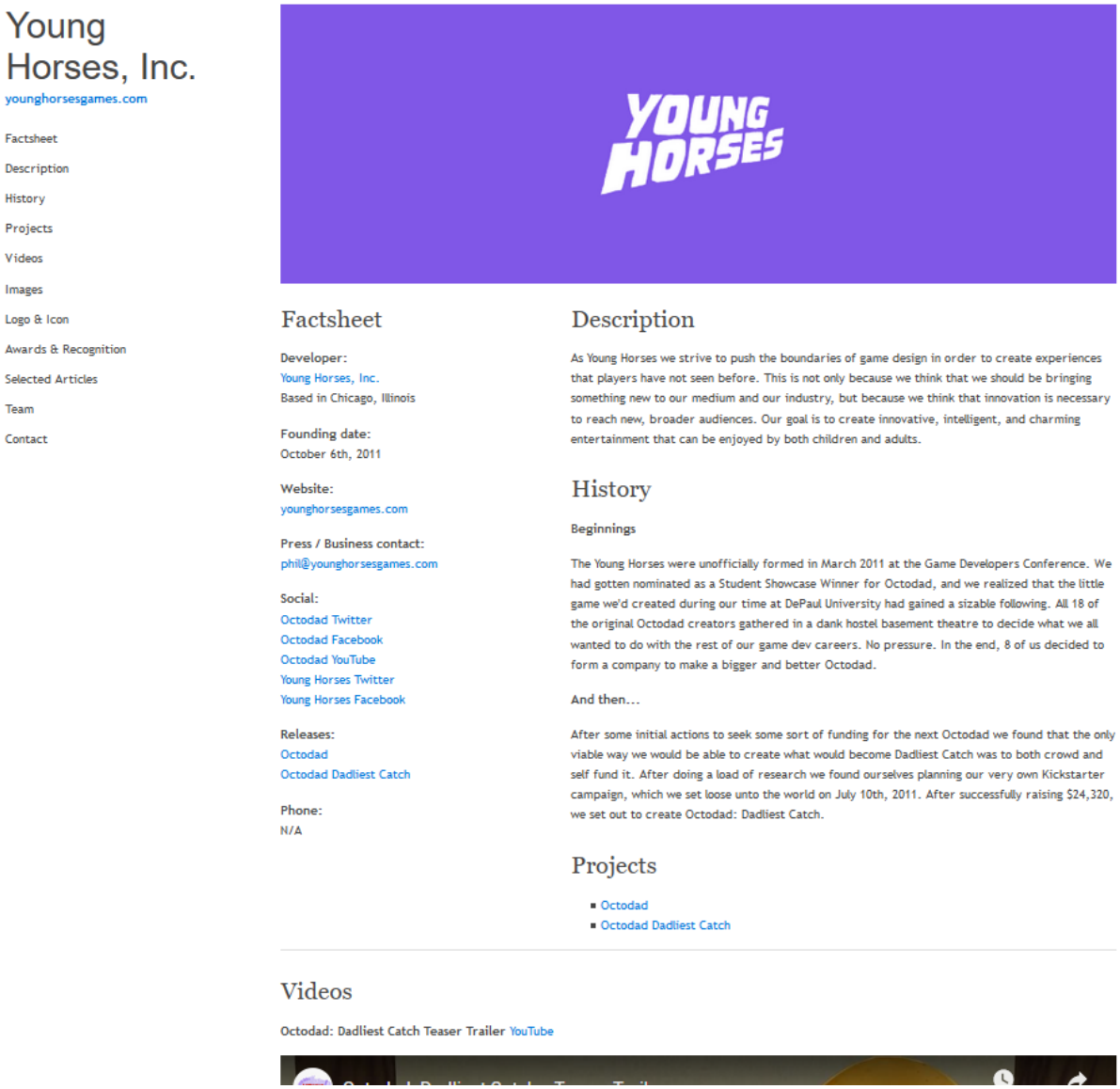


Figure 15. An example of the presskit() code in action for the independent game developer Young Horses, Inc. at www.octodadgame.com/press. Unless the core CSS or HTML code is changed, the above demonstrates the uniform and organized display of information for media creators.

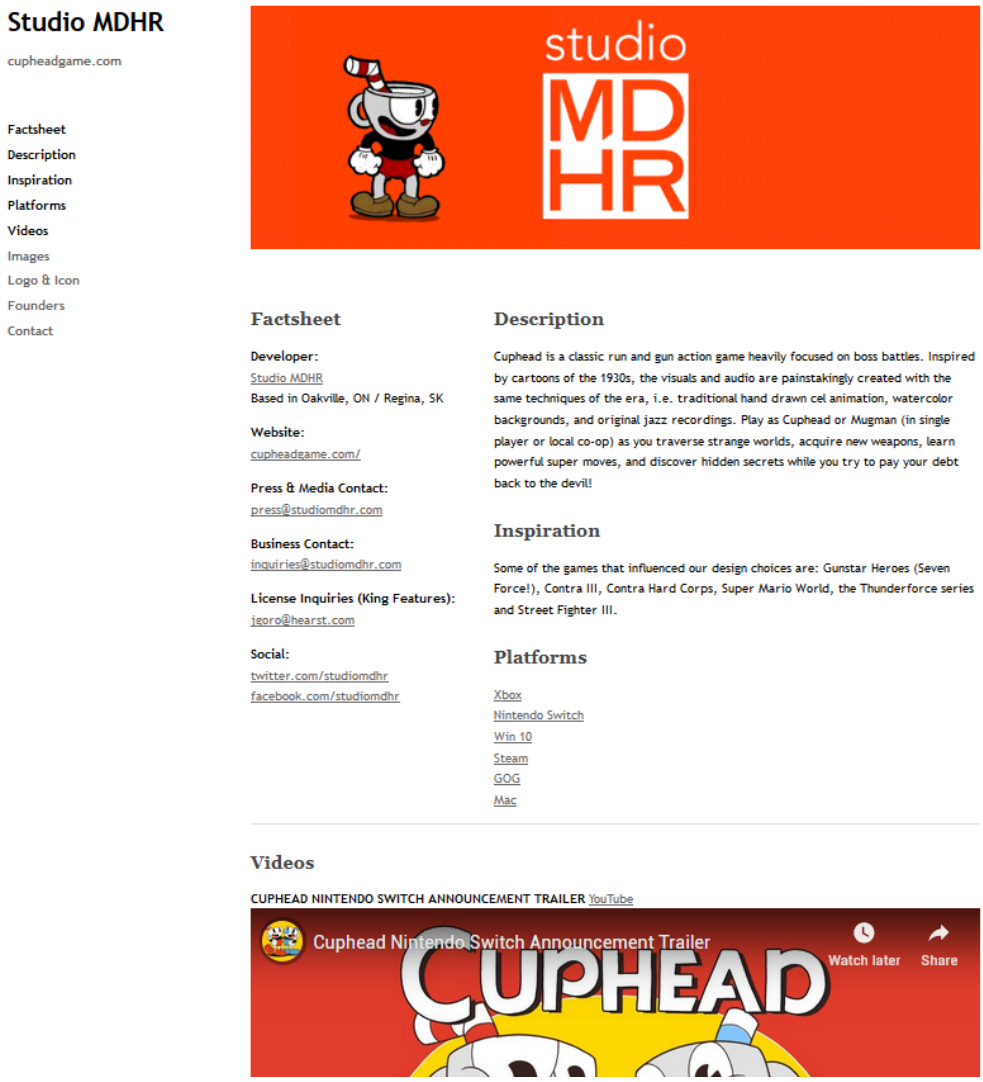


Figure 16. Studio MDHR used the presskit() design as well for their title, *Cuphead*, while modifying some of the categories from the original code. No other elements of the overall layout and design were changed. www.studiomdhr.com/press

Other additions he created were the promote() and distribute() function, intended to help developers manage media communications. The distribute() program created lists for distributing news to specific media creators about the game as well as verifying the requests coming from media sources. In many cases, developers will be inundated with requests from people who have no intent of promoting the game and instead want a free

review copy before anyone in the general public is able to play it. The promote() program monitored activity online about the game in an adapted form of Google Analytics.

Ismail used the Game Developer's Conference stage to give a five-minute microtalk about marketing, which, according to Ismail (2013) is about all game developers like Nijman can take when it comes to marketing:

> You owe it to your game to try and reach as many people that would like to play it. Not only will more people get to interact with your game, but those people are also more likely to be interested in your next big thing. The more people that play your game, the more likely you are to be able to support yourself financially while making new games. (Ismail as quoted in Pitts, 2013, para. 136)

Ismail also emphatically advocated for the perspective that game development and publishing is not a meritocracy. He explained that just having a good game will not propel it to the top (Sinclair, 2019). Discoverability on game platforms and in media has always mediated the success or failure of games, and Vlambeer remain dedicated to increasing visibility to games that may be passed over otherwise.

Endorsing AAA partnerships. After 2011 and 2012 when Vlambeer became figureheads of independent gaming, they began working with larger publishers like Sony to help them release their games on as many platforms as possible. To that point, they were focused on computer-driven or mobile game development. In 2012 they signed on with Sony to bring *Super Crate Box* to the PlayStation Vita after warily examining the terms. What these developers did not want to do was make a legal blunder that would cost them the autonomy of their game and their idea (Anonymous Game Publisher, 2013; Kelly, 2009; Sinclair, 2015). When Vlambeer made a statement by actively rejecting

Microsoft and choosing Sony based on fairness of terms, then, other independent developers took note.

Though games launching at the time, like *Braid,* were originally signed to Microsoft and distributed through the Xbox Live Arcade platform, it was well-known that the developers were at the mercy of the terms imposed by Microsoft, and this soured the sentiment for independent developers looking to sign on for console releases. Jonathan Blow, developer of *Braid*, wrote, "Microsoft treats independent developers very badly… [they] put you through as much pain as you will endure in order to extract whatever [they] feel like this week" (Groen, 2013, para. 6).

Sony capitalized on the shift in attitude and began looking for independent developers at game festivals and recruiting them to launch their games with Sony. With more games coming to PlayStation 3, Vita, and Playstation 4, Sony could sway more customers to buy their consoles rather than their competitors'. Sony's terms included a statement that developers retained all intellectual property rights of the game and could release the game on any other platform if they chose to not be exclusively Sony (Nutt, 2012).

A clause that earned another black mark for Microsoft was a parity clause that restricted the developer from launching a game with any other console before they launched it on Xbox One. This meant that developers – no matter the size of the studio – would have to develop their game specifically for Xbox One as well as any other platform at the same time. Phil Spencer, Head of Xbox, said rationale for this policy was to make the owners of Xbox Ones feel as if they were "first-class citizens," because they

didn't have to watch someone else play a new game on another platform while they waited for the Xbox One port (Phil Spencer quoted in Pereira, 2014, para. 2).

Ismail took to Twitter and emphatically opposed Microsoft parity clause and promised that Vlambeer would not be making games for Xbox until the policy was removed. Much to the chagrin of Xbox One-owning fans, their port of *LUFTRAUSERS* "…doesn't exist because Microsoft wasn't supporting indies all that well back when we started the project" (Vlambeer, 2014a).

For small studios, making a port for their game for yet another platform is too much to ask (Conditt, 2013). Small developers need to have the game generating revenue so they can take the time to create the port for the other platforms instead of waiting with no income to sustain progress. Vlambeer was one of the many developers who balked at the parity clause. Even studios with over 40 people still had hardship while creating the ports (Gaston, 2014).

Vlambeer made it clear they needed the clause gone for the good for everyone: "…Well, then @ID_Xbox dropped that clause for us, so now we're arguing to see if they can get rid of that for everybody" (Vlambeer, 2013a). Vlambeer was able to circumvent the parity requirement, but they still did not make the game *LUFTRAUSERS* available on Xbox One in solidarity with the other independent game developers who did not have Ismail's negotiating skills.

Adam Boyes, an executive for Playstation at the time, learned of the clause and jumped at the opportunity to promote Sony's open and small-developer-friendly policies. He immediately published a Tweet that listed all the platforms developers would have to forego if they wanted to publish their game with Sony. The list was empty (Boyes, 2014).

Sony would not require developers to launch with them first if they didn't have the means nor inclination to.

Figure 17: Tweet by Adam Boyes, mocking the Xbox platform release clause.

With many developers following the Vlambeer's advice, based on their positive partnership with Sony at developer conferences and online, Microsoft found their sources dwindling for independent games, much to Sony's advantage. After only a year of the launch of the parity clause, it was fully removed, and Microsoft began rebuilding their relationship with the independent gaming community (Newhouse, 2015).

Performative game development. During a game jam for Mojang in February 2013, Vlambeer livestreamed the development of a quick 72-hour game with mutant sprites shooting up a barren landscape. It was barren precisely because of the limited timeframe, but what did see more development was the idea of having people watch a game being built. After the game jam, Vlambeer discovered they were having a lot of fun

developing the game while others watched them perform and commented on their decisions (Game Developers Conference, 2016). Thus, began *Wasteland Kings* / *Nuclear Throne* and their performative development of the title.

Vlambeer learned from their experience with game cloning. One of the motivating factors of trying this kind of radical openness of development was to have a legal fallback if questions about who cloned who were ever levied against Vlambeer. One such case happened only a few months before the announcement of development-in-earnest of *Wasteland Kings* with their game *LUFTRAUSERS* (Ledford, 2014; Narcisse, 2013).

Another motivating factor for Vlambeer to propose this open development was the monetary need to get the game developed. Instead of creating a Kickstarter crowdfund, Vlambeer and the other collaborators made themselves into the product for a livestream on Twitch.tv for approximately four hours every Tuesday and Thursday from October 2013 to December 5, 2015. A copy of the game, a subscription to the stream, and an update to the game published weekly ran the audience $12.99.

According to Ismail, the game was greatly improved thanks to streaming the development and watching others play the weekly updates.

> [*Nuclear Throne*] would not have been nearly as good without the streams … You know what's a horrifying way to playtest your game? Watching a stream where thousands of other people are watching [the game being played] and you don't want to say 'hi' because you're embarrassed for what is happening on the screen. Like, you will fix that shit, no question about it. (Ismail quoted in Game Developers Conference, 2016)

The streams also forced the team to be accountable and work on the game because other people expected them to do it at a certain time on a certain day. Two people had to be present for each stream and interact with the viewers as they worked on their assigned portions of the game. The team of six – Ismail, Nijman, Jukio Kailio, Paul Veer, Justin Chan and Joonas Turner – learned quickly that they not only had to perform the creation of the game, but they had to perform *for* the audience watching the creation to keep their interest. This added a layer of complexity to development for *Wasteland Kings* / *Nuclear Throne.*

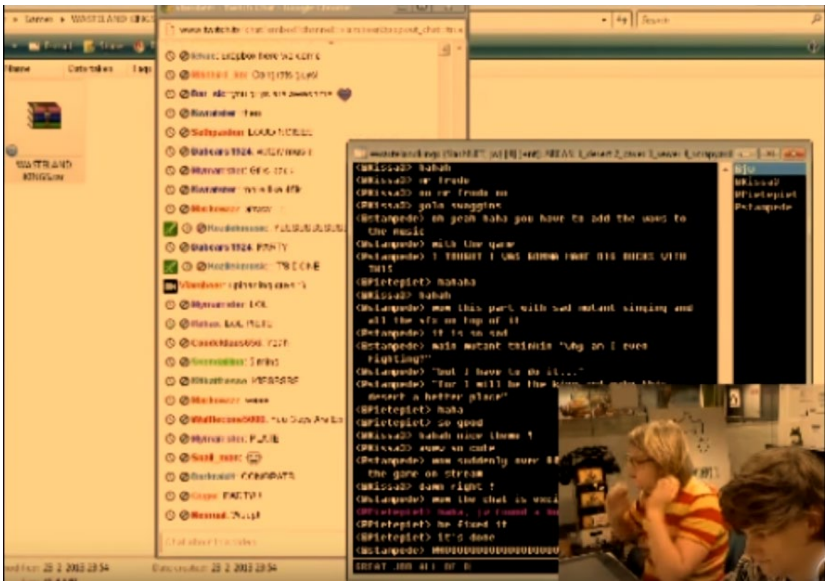


Figure 18. Vlambeer's livestream with Game Maker studio and the game's code available for all to see.

Though they wanted to include the audience in the creation of the game by allowing them to make suggestions and changes to the development, the team did not let the community have everything they wanted. At a Game Developer's Conference appearance in 2016, Ismail made it clear, "We will take your feedback into account and if we don't like it; sorry, this is our game" (Game Developers Conference, 2016).

Vlambeer also wanted to show players who have never created a game before exactly the amount of time and effort that goes into creating what some consider to be a simple game. When they added a new weapon on the stream, the bullet passed through the solid walls of the level. The observers of the incident asked why that happened and the team said they had to program in colliders so the objects would see the other object and stop. According to Ismail, there was a moment of stunned silence and recognition that games are not quick to create.

When development was over, their Twitch channel had 15,000 followers who would be alerted when they went live, 1,200 people who paid $12.99 to subscribe to the channel and got a copy of the game, and over 250 episodes created. They also ended development with a robust community for the game and had the largest launch of a game for Vlambeer in their five-year history.

Public Twitter Profile

A total of 3,209 tweets were collected from Vlambeer's official account, beginning September 10, 2013 and ending April 29, 2019. Though it is mostly managed by Ismail for community relations, Nijman also has access to the account, and those who interact with the Vlambeer Twitter are aware they are behind the posts.

Of these tweets, 1,190 were retweets from other sources such as Ismail or Nijman's personal account, users submitting fan art, other developers or gaming contacts, or were from a game's Twitter account promoting a release. An additional 926 tweets are replies to posts made by other Twitter users, leaving 1,093 originally composed tweets by Vlambeer. Overall, the distribution of the three main functions of Twitter posting is surprisingly even. One note about retweeting from their personal accounts is every tweet

from either @jwaaaap (Nijman) or @tharami (Ismail) directly relates to Vlambeer's games or events in which they are participating. Ismail's personal account's posts number 23 and Nijman's number four posts in a five-year Twitter history.

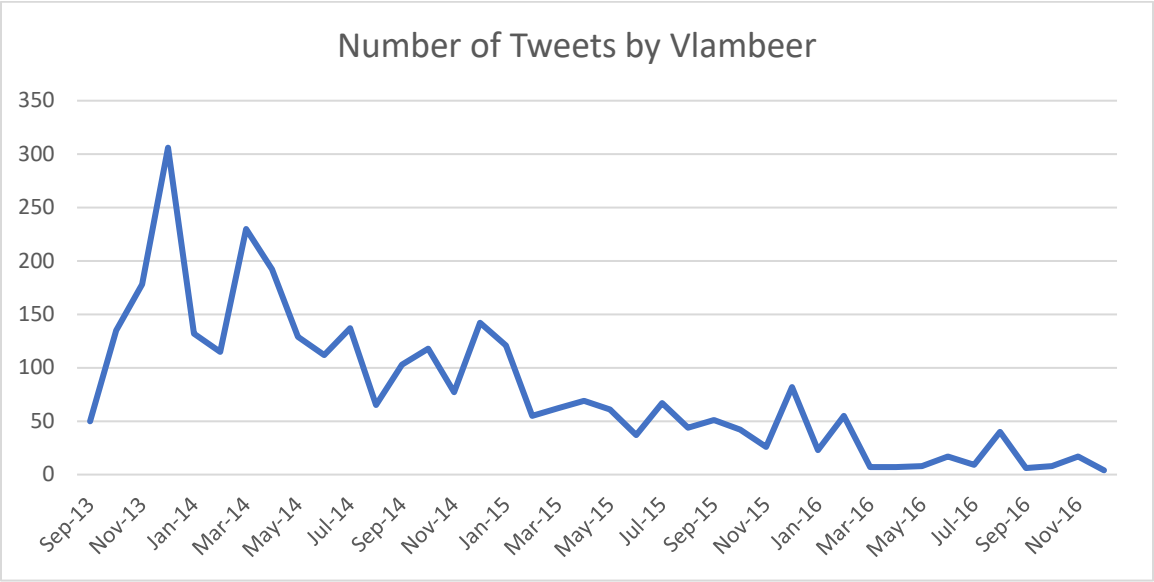


Figure 19. Vlambeer's Twitter feed from September 2013 to November 2016.

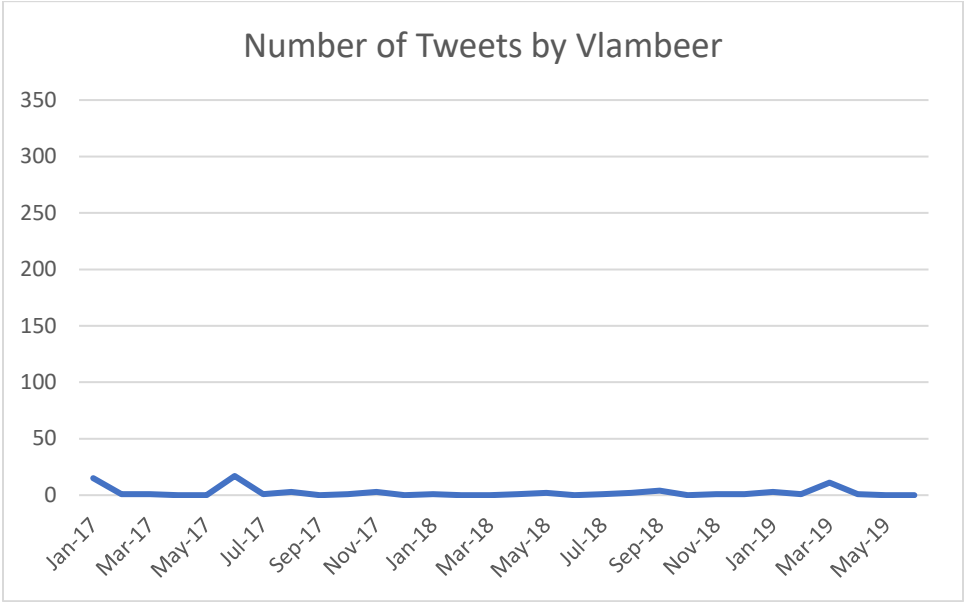


Figure 20. Vlambeer's Twitter feed from January 2017 to May 2019.

Although there were many interviews in which Vlambeer talked about their relationship with Sony, the legal issues that occurred, and their games, Twitter was one of the few places they could speak to people without someone else gatekeeping their words through a published article or blog post. They were able to talk to people who looked at them as a leader – their "followers" – and share directly with them their experience to cement themselves as seasoned members of the independent game development community.

Language and tone. For a studio known for producing off-the-wall games, Vlambeer's tone and language on Twitter remained professional with a smattering of tongue-in-cheek jokes about updates. One post in particular with an animation for new ability to throw weapons – which meant a huge change in playstyle for the audience – was captioned, "No important Nuclear Throne changes we're experimenting with you could infer from this whatsoever" (Vlambeer, 2015). Granted, the low-grade sarcasm was not lost, and the Twitter followers replied with extreme excitement and disbelief, mostly conveyed in all capital letters.

Although their personal accounts leaned heavily on the topic of *Nuclear Throne* and related events, the tone of their personal accounts were significantly more causal, contemporary, and reflected their own personalities rather than having a professional tone at all times. In one instance, the Vlambeer account retweeted an exchange Ismail had with another Twitter user and game developer, Dan Marshall, who was joking about non-violent independent games.

Figure 21. Rami Ismail engaging another independent game developer over the availability and variety of weapons in *Nuclear Throne* (Marshall, 2014).

This exchange also happened before the increase to 280 characters for a Twitter post in 2017, meaning users had precious little space to convey their message. Each of Ismail's replies to Marshall end before the name of the last weapon is completed, which left the audience hanging on his last word before the next reply posted approximately a minute later. It was the online written equivalent of talking so much the speaker ran out of breath before they could finish the thought. This is only one example of the kind of personality Ismail conveys for himself online.

In contrast, the posts on the Vlambeer Twitter feed and replies sampled were succinct and professional without being sterile or scripted. One example occurred after *Ridiculous Fishing* launched and won the Apple award for best iOS game of 2013, earning a spot in a *WIRED Magazine* review. The Twitter user, Joshua Dudley, was a contributing journalist for *Forbes* and composed a quick tweet to Vlambeer asking them to tell him why he should play the game. It can be assumed that Dudley could have been writing an article for the publication and needed a quick quote from Vlambeer, or he could have been a genuinely curious iOS user who wanted to know more about the game. In Figure 5, the punctuation and capitalization used by Dudley, a paid writer, is error-filled, while the responses by Vlambeer adhere to the conventions of written communication in American English.

Additionally, the professionalism of a well-written response is doubled by the promptness of it. Dudley asked the question at 5:57 a.m. December 22, 2013. Vlambeer responded with three tweets less than a minute apart at 8:06 – 8:07 a.m. the same day. Dudley thanked them for the response four days later.

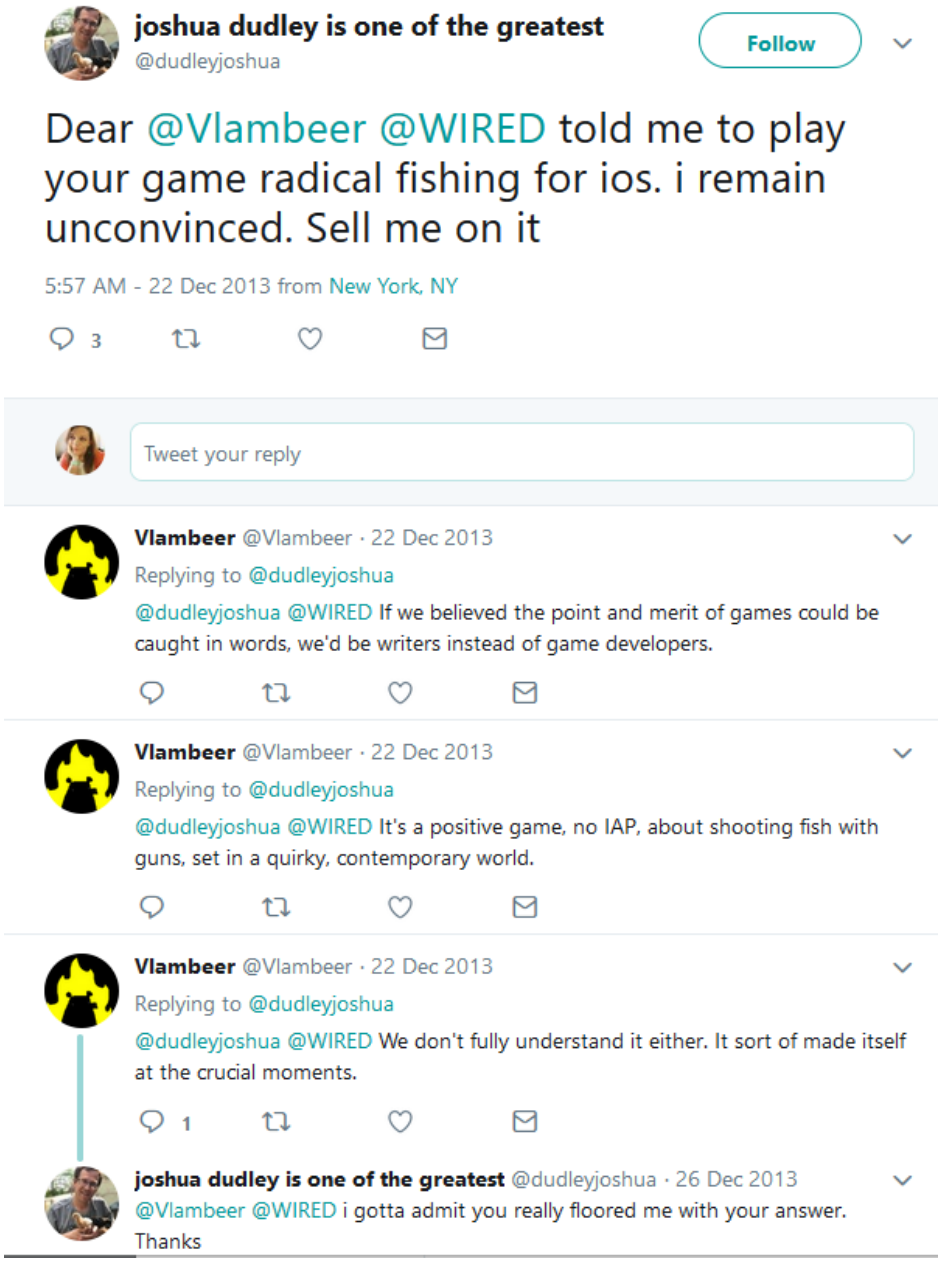


Figure 22. Vlambeer answering a question about the merits of *Ridiculous Fishing* while making commentary about the merits of games in general.

While professionalism remained a key point in the Twitter posts, there were some instances of less-than-composed communication from Vlambeer. One tweet invited users to watch a livestream Jukio Kallio, freelance game composer, and Paul Veer, freelance pixel artist, commentate the Fantastic Arcade *Nuclear Throne* tournament while drunk

(Vlambeer, 2014e). It is important to understand that the two members of Vlambeer were not the subject of what may have been unprofessional behavior, but they called attention to the relaxed behavior of their collaborators. The one response they received on Twitter about the stream tagged the two collaborators, Vlambeer and the official Fantastic Arcade Twitter and said "i'm [sic] crying……,,,,," (kimchi, 2014).

Explicit language use is generally considered a faux pas in a professional setting, but Vlambeer did engage in such behavior on three occasions in December 2013. The three instances in their 1,093 originally composed tweets were in reference to the breakout success of the game that almost ruined them, *Ridiculous Fishing.* All Vlambeer tweets were completely devoid of expletives except for "holy shit" in those three posts when they won the iOS award for 2013 and earned the #22 spot on the App Store (Vlambeer, 2013n). Retweets from other accounts containing expletives numbered 13 in the dataset and usually referenced either frustration, anticipation or celebration about their own achievements in *Nuclear Throne*.

Contributing to the independent game development community. It is argued in philosophy and sociology that true altruism does not exist. There is still a benefit for the person carrying out the act in that it improves their environment, enhances their interactions with the people affected by the good deed, or it can even be the feeling the person gets knowing they have done some good in their world (Steinberg, 2010). Vlambeer made a name for themselves, in part, by advocating for the needs of their comrades in the game industry.

The words "publicly leveraged" are important to this next section as Twitter's primary function is a public, online forum for exchanging information, easily visible to

anyone with an Internet connection and device. Vlambeer established themselves as advocates for game developers and making game development something more people would feel confident pursuing whether they had formal training. After the unexpected notoriety gained from fighting the *Radical Fishing* battle in public, they began to have greater sway in the independent gaming community. They leveraged this status to make improvements to the relationships and needs within the independent gaming scene and those related to it, including hosting panels to talk about industry issues, making games more transparent, arranging game jams to connect developers, and advocating for diversity in gaming.

As such, Ismail and Vlambeer – Nijman supported the expense to Vlambeer in holding events and redirecting sales of their games to different causes – have been hailed as independent gaming heroes. The sentiment of much of the independent gaming community, figures in the commercial AAA arena, and games journalists became codified when Ismail earned the GDC Ambassador Award in 2018 (Takahashi, 2018). Oddly, this information was not included, even as a retweet, on Vlambeer's Twitter feed.

Relationships with first-party developers. Vlambeer sought to demystify game creation, but they also sought to educate the audience and other game developers alike about navigating the work of publishing games for others to play. They were among the first to work with Sony and their independent game division in 2012 and were willing to test the waters alongside other developers to build rapport. Much as Studio MDHR did for Microsoft, Vlambeer became advocates for Sony.

When met with criticism for their choice to not publish their games for Microsoft, Vlambeer explained the rationale quickly to all who were reading their feed. They

publicly stated they were taking up the banner to remove the parity clause for Microsoft to benefit other independent developers: "…If there's some way we can get the clause removed, we'll try and see what we can do" (Vlambeer, 2013m). Vlambeer declared open opposition in this tweet and others like it. In this tweet, they also became advocates for the unknown developer as they clearly stated, "we'll try and see what we can do." Whether or not they were the ones likely to convince Microsoft to drop the clause, the implication that they were close to the inner workings of the company is well represented here. The favorable terms Sony afforded them turned Vlambeer into advocates for Sony while Microsoft's missteps left them guarded. Even when they endorsed Sony, they took shots at Microsoft. "Well, at Sony we got the Gamescom stage, and we get to develop the game properly instead of worrying about multiplatform" (Vlambeer, 2013l).

One exchange turned into a monologue about what Vlambeer wanted people to know about signing with Microsoft. The following section was written in chronological order and replied to one user, @Masakari666, whose original tweet was not available.

> "Basically, Sony does not force you to launch with them first. Microsoft does. Thus, we felt we'd release on Sony first" (Vlambeer, 2013c).
>
> "Sony doesn't force anything in terms of when we can launch on other platforms" (Vlambeer, 2013j).
>
> "In other words, essentially we're talking about one platform telling us how to do business with another. We didn't like that" (Vlambeer, 2013e).
>
> "So, we could choose between not launching on Xbox One or being allowed to launch on XB1 later by signing to Sony" (Vlambeer, 2013h)

> "It's not. We tried that with LUFTRAUSERS and the game has been done for almost a year without launching because of that" (Vlambeer, 2013f).
>
> "A lot of indies, us included, simply can't develop for all platforms at once. We just can't" (Vlambeer, 2013b).
>
> "If you think that made us look crummy, we're sad about that. We want to make the best game for as many people as we could" (Vlambeer, 2013d).
>
> "So this was the best option we had, and that's what we went for" (Vlambeer, 2013g).
>
> "Sony did give us a gamescom audience for that, while Microsoft wouldn't have given us anything, though" (Vlambeer, 2013i).
>
> "We also think Sony not having any limitations should earn them thankfulness & support. That's what we felt anyway" (Vlambeer, 2013k).

From this series of tweets, Vlambeer explained their decision-making process including their loyalty to Sony because of their open policies and willingness to court independent developers.

Transparent game development. The developers of *Nuclear Throne* already dedicated themselves to having a publicly available development period, but they also extended that development to the asynchronous communication Twitter offered. The project they promised and level of work they took on was severely underestimated by the team which contributed to their struggles in developing and releasing weekly updates to a game.

Ismail recounted the efforts in a Game Developer's Conference talk he gave in 2016 and shared how "performative development" added another layer of complexity to

the development process. Technical difficulties in connecting the feed were well documented in the Vlambeer Twitter with over 10 incidents of late connections or poor feed quality. Along with managing the chat, making sure the team had something interesting to say instead of coding or arranging music, and trying to increase their subscriber count, they asked people to report the errors of the game directly to Twitter. This meant all their mistakes were out in the open for all of Twitter and the Internet to search and see.

By creating this unfiltered error log, Vlambeer exposed what happens when an application crashes on a computer or smartphone. Twitter became the dialog box crash report, asking the user to describe what happened to the program when it failed. Each bug in the game was looked over and addressed in the subsequent weekly patches, as well as responded to on Twitter. Vlambeer made it a point to exhibit their attention to the problems and the individual players reporting bugs.

Nuclear Throne was only one of the games they talked about in their Twitter feed. Even if they did not engage in performative development for their previous titles, the invitation for players to express their opinions, frustrations or praise was open season. Vlambeer fielded complaints about the slow publishing of updates to *LUFTRAUSERS* and explained as well as they could the process of submitting updates to Sony for testing, certification, and release to their audience in 160 characters.

Figure 23. Vlambeer explained some of the development and certification process, which took much longer than expected (Vlambeer, 2016c).

One feature linked all the responses to complaints: apologies. Vlambeer apologized to the user who posted the tweet each time. Sometimes, a timeline or plan was given to assuage the audience, but there was always some form of apology included in the thread of posts no matter how vicious the wording was.

Figure 24. Vlambeer talked to one user about the lack of updates for the PS4 version of *Nuclear Throne* after being the subject of more profanity-filled attacks not pictured above. The responses by Vlambeer cooled the user's frustrations, leaving an accounting of professionalism and addressed concerns, strengthening Vlambeer's reputation.

One user at a small studio, Ilija Melentijevic, asked, "how long did it take to port / certify? Asking cause [sic] we're about to do the same at @smgstudio and not really sure what to expect" (Melentijevic, 2016). Vlambeer replied with the information needed for the developer to have the expectation Vlambeer experienced.

Habitus of indie game development. Bourdieu's (1984) *habitus* of the structures, behaviors and attitudes of this community were well represented in the dataset The apparent habitus of independent game development's community, as shown through the tweets and background information, featured instances of rejecting the boundaries and legal restrictions of distribution, promoting others as well as the self, and making tools available to other members of the community without expecting a return. The use of inside jokes in games established and maintained the camaraderie among the more prominent names in independent game development while it reinforced the social norms in place for that community.

A lot of independent game developers Vlambeer knew would hide "Easter eggs" and hidden references to the Vlambeer team and their games. One game, *Guacamelee,* featured the boat from *Ridiculous Fishing* (Nunez, 2014), while a card game hosted its own version of the Vlambeer "flaming bear" logo, naming it "Vlambeer – Legendary Creature – Dutch Pixel Bear" (McMillen, 2015). Vlambeer has also created small features in their games as homages to other developer friends.

While there is a sense that all the independent game developers hold each other in similar regard no matter how many or what kinds of games they make, it is clear that teams like Vlambeer hold a greater cultural capital in the community. As of this writing, they have given 48 listed public speeches, mostly by Ismail (Ismail, n.d.). They are active contributors to other developers through sharing their information, aggregating over 30 tools they use for ease of access, and creating tools for anyone in any game development role to use (Vlambeer, n.d.). Their stature in the community is echoed by their consistent

invitations to speak at gaming events and their online interaction with their followers and constituents.

Gift economy and fan production. Vlambeer embrace a hacker and maker ethic. If information exists, it should be shared instead of scuttled away unless the demands of the people who keep it or made it are met (Levy, 2010). Fiske (1992) explained the idea of production and the cultural economy of fandom as one in which an original work needed to be "producerly" (p. 30), meaning it needed to be open enough for the consumer to engage with it and produce other fandom objects from it. Vlambeer made it a point to encourage modifications and left the product open to many changes and even endorsed or promoted the fan-created works. It should be noted that no economic benefit was earned by either Vlambeer or the people who developed programming modifications to *Nuclear Throne.*

The "Nuclear Throne Together" modification was a non-Vlambeer created code that allowed players to have a multi-player option to the completed game. It then became part of a library of fan-made modifications available to the computer-based editions and was heartily endorsed by Vlambeer (Vlambeer, 2016b). One specific example of the encouragement Vlambeer gave to modify *Nuclear Throne* entailed a programming code that "piggybacked" on the code for "Nuclear Throne Together." This code created even more weapons players could use in the game inspired by Gearbox's *Borderlands 2* title; an absurd first-person-shooter title with outlandish combinations of Franken-weapons. Vlambeer received the announcement from Tomato Tavern Games through Twitter and retweeted it to their following. Ismail, posting through his personal account, congratulated them and tagged Randy Pitchford, an executive at Gearbox, and brought

his attention to it and a previous conversation they had about a *Nuclear Throne* and *Borderlands 2* crossover (Ismail, 2017).

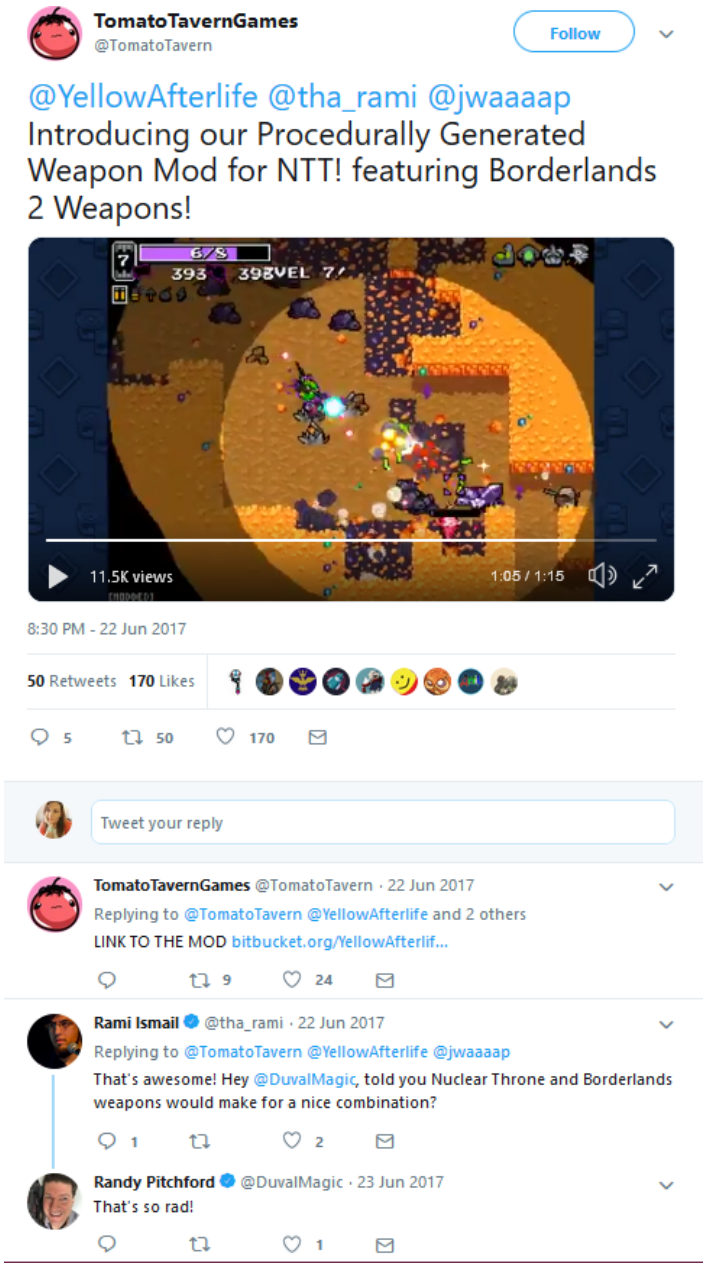


Figure 25. One retweeted announcement of the modification script for *Nuclear Throne* reached the eyes of both games' studios and earned praise from both (Tomato Tavern Games, 2017).

Modifications are a highly specialized form of creativity for games as are more traditional, physical forms of fan creation. As with many popular culture artifacts, the fan

culture created and shared multiple iterations of their creativity and interpretations of *Nuclear Throne* and its characters. As Twitter is a visual-based medium, it was more conducive for users to share their drawings, necklaces, pins and paintings relating to *Nuclear Throne.* There were two examples of users sharing remixes of Jukio Kallio's songs for the official soundtrack, but the image-based art was more prominently shared and retweeted by Vlambeer.

Figures 26 and 27. Fan-created art for characters in *Nuclear Throne* using various media to replicate and show to the creators. Note, Figure 26 is a mashup with *Ridiculous Fishing.* These were retweeted and shared by the Vlambeer Twitter.

Fiske suggested these kinds of creations served a greater purpose than something to do in a fan's spare time. "Fandom offers ways of filling cultural lack and provides the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital" (1992, p. 33). To earn the recognition of the original creator of the pop culture object and to also be endorsed throughout their following can be assumed to be a fulfilling experience. Every retweet of fan work contained multiple encouraging statements and most received praise from at least one of the six people who worked on the game.

Figure 28. Example of fulfilling cultural capital as one will "make all the cool kids jealous" of their expertise and attention to the pop culture artifact (Duffmacy, 2015).

Another medium used to celebrate someone's prowess to the masses is online video. Billions of hours of online videos exist as well as live streaming the act of creation or engaging with a pop culture object or figure. What both members of Vlambeer claimed to value is when someone becomes a part of the creation and reaches out to show them.

> The best feeling about doing this is when ... you've released a game and you read some response on the internet, or you see a video of somebody playing the game, and they get it. That moment: it's sort of an appreciation thing, I suppose. When people appreciate what you do and they let you know — they take the time to let you know — for me that's the best feeling ever (Ismail as quoted in Pitts, 2013, para. 49).

Making stuff has always been my thing. I never played with Legos. I just built stuff and my friends played with it. That's a feeling that I love. It's not a game until someone is playing it. You need that player in the system to finish it (Nijman as quoted in Pitts, 2013, para. 51).

Gift economy and money. Part of the gift economy is earning capital that cannot be bought. Bourdieu (1984) likened this to taste and earning prestige based on the discernment of certain classes of media consumption. For those with what he dubbed "sophisticated tastes" and monetary means, they would be able to acquire objects – which varied in quantity and quality based on monetary means – that echoed their status. Fiske (1992) argued that Bourdieu placed too much emphasis on monetary economy and the proletariat culture deserved to be dissected rather than remaining a homogeneous category. For those with accessible or "popular" tastes, they would be able to echo their status with either objects or some form of public demonstration of their expertise and devotion to the pop culture artifact.

Fiske and Bourdieu did not write in the time of social media, but they would likely find a rich landscape of people identifying themselves through interests, tastes and fandoms publicly without knowing who was categorizing them. For Vlambeer, their ethics were clearly spelled out for anyone investigating their work: "As long as our newest game is always better than the previous one, we're happy… They don't need to be successful" (Ismail quoted in Pitts, 2013, para. 59).

Keeping with the hacker ethic and the thought that information should be free (Doctorow, 2015; Levy, 2010), Vlambeer never made money their primary focus; at least, they never espoused it as anything more than the "necessary evil" of resource

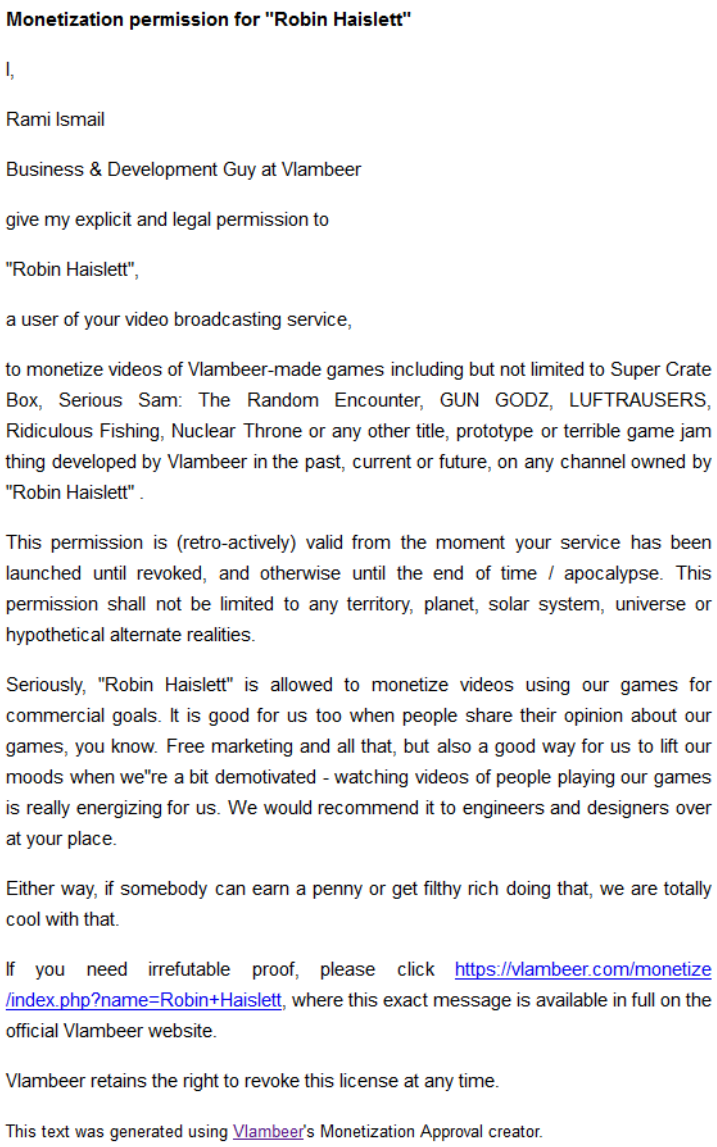
generation to make more games (Pitts, 2013). Many of their earlier games are available as free-to-play on browsers. The prototypes are usually made in a rudimentary Flash format or GameMaker program (GameMaker to game programming is what Dreamweaver by Adobe is to HTML for the web). In addition to being quick, GameMaker is a very low-cost tool at $100 for the full program. Vlambeer makes their games with the same tools as other garage developers and does their best to keep their budget in line with what other developers may be spending.

Taking this ethic one step farther, Vlambeer used the engagement of the players of their games as their ultimate measure of success, not the overall profit of the game. In fact, Vlambeer used Twitter to emphasize their point that they love making things other than money. Though crackdowns on pirating as well as restrictive digital rights management (DRM) has been touted as reducing the number of stolen digital games and other media files, Vlambeer outright encouraged people to steal their game if someone wanted to play it. “We’ve said – more than once – that anyone who can’t afford our games is more than welcome to pirate it & save their money for other stuff” (Vlambeer, 2017). The team has also participated in efforts to donate some proceeds to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), who take on legal cases in defense of the media consumer, not the media owner (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2019).

Removing barriers to promotion. One of the major outlets for people to view Vlambeer’s games in action is YouTube. In 2007, the Content ID feature launched and underwent subsequent modifications to scan the identifying markers of the uploaded content. If the video was a copy of an existing one, or embedded music was from copyrighted material, YouTube would either reject it or notify the original copyright

holder of the infraction (Popper, 2016). This caused a devastating problem for people who monetized their "Let's Play" content on a YouTube channel. The videos uploaded with the soundtrack of the game would flag the Content ID system and reject the video as stolen. The only way these streamers, who were essentially promoting the game, could work around this was to replace the soundtrack after recording. This also removed all sound effects and other game features. Contacting the original copyright holders for many of the games streamed for Let's Plays was a long process for AAA studios. Vlambeer saw they were losing free promotion, as well as seeing the Let's Play streamers lose what they enjoyed doing.

After the deluge of requests from streamers to release the copyright hold from YouTube, Ismail and Nijman both agreed they could streamline the process. They created www.vlambeer.com/monetize in response. This gave the streamers full rights to stream Vlambeer games if YouTube flagged the content. The streamer gave their YouTube username and it automatically generated the document needed.



Monetization permission for "Robin Haislett"

I,

Rami Ismail

Business & Development Guy at Vlambeer

give my explicit and legal permission to

"Robin Haislett",

a user of your video broadcasting service,

to monetize videos of Vlambeer-made games including but not limited to Super Crate Box, Serious Sam: The Random Encounter, GUN GODZ, LUFTRAUSERS, Ridiculous Fishing, Nuclear Throne or any other title, prototype or terrible game jam thing developed by Vlambeer in the past, current or future, on any channel owned by "Robin Haislett" .

This permission is (retro-actively) valid from the moment your service has been launched until revoked, and otherwise until the end of time / apocalypse. This permission shall not be limited to any territory, planet, solar system, universe or hypothetical alternate realities.

Seriously, "Robin Haislett" is allowed to monetize videos using our games for commercial goals. It is good for us too when people share their opinion about our games, you know. Free marketing and all that, but also a good way for us to lift our moods when we"re a bit demotivated - watching videos of people playing our games is really energizing for us. We would recommend it to engineers and designers over at your place.

Either way, if somebody can earn a penny or get filthy rich doing that, we are totally cool with that.

If you need irrefutable proof, please click https://vlambeer.com/monetize/index.php?name=Robin+Haislett, where this exact message is available in full on the official Vlambeer website.

Vlambeer retains the right to revoke this license at any time.

This text was generated using Vlambeer's Monetization Approval creator.

Figure 29. The monetization permission form YouTube required from Vlambeer generated all the verbiage needed to make streaming Vlambeer games legal and profitable for professional Let's Play streamers ("Vlambeer Video Monetization permission," n.d.).

Many other game developers share the hacker and maker ethics, so Vlambeer also made the code for the form adaptable and shareable for other developers to use. The entry screen called for the developer's legal name, the studio, their position in the studio, and a list of games to give permissions to. After those four fields filled, the text was automatically generated for the developer (Vlambeer, 2014c). It is important to note that

Vlambeer consulted with legal counsel to create this at their own expense and provided it to the game development community (Vlambeer, 2014b).

Figure 30. A sample of the PHP file to embed in a game developer's website. Other game developers, no matter their size, would be able to make the generated form Vlambeer created for their Let's Play streamers (Vlambeer, 2014c).

Promoting others in the independent game community is one of the hallmarks of participating in it. In the collected dataset, Vlambeer was no different and promoted over 25 games and freelancers in specific areas of game development through retweets and endorsements via positive comments accompanying the game or person. They also talked about conferences and festivals they were going to and included the deadlines for submission to remind other developers to participate (Vlambeer, 2014d).

Part of this experience and exposure they gave to the community also benefitted them as well. With their rapport established and their Twitter following expanding, Vlambeer was able to utilize the networks of those they promoted previously to share Vlambeer content as well. In one experiment Ismail conducted, he watched the spread of a promotional *Nuclear Throne* tweet he created. In it, he asked the Twitter community to retweet the post so he could measure the impressions and reach of a retweet-based message. He then created a formal Twitter ad and launched it with the same content. He announced to the Vlambeer following that "…Twitter ads don't seem all that effective at affordable rates for indie developers" (Vlambeer, 2014f).

Summary

Vlambeer had a long history in a comparatively young subset of game development. Independent games were the first games, but the wave of well-known and respected independent developers as media figures may have been a surprise to the "old guard" like Id Software and Rockstar Games. Their clout in the game development community stems from that "necessary evil" of marketing that Ismail remains passionate about. Without a means to communicate with, appreciate and otherwise engage with their audience and peers, Vlambeer most likely would not have risen to the status they now hold. It is more likely they would have stopped working together on games altogether.

The contributions Vlambeer have made over their eight years together – they celebrated with a cake at the PAX 2018 booth – gave the independent gaming community another figurehead as they endorsed many of the words, actions and, of course, games Vlambeer created. As more fledgling independent game developers join that community, they will have more tools, possibly a better chance of creating a game of which they are

proud, and may be able, as a result, to watch someone else play it at a games festival booth.

CHAPTER SIX

DYS4IA BY ANNA ANTHROPY

Dys4ia (2012) launched quietly in late 2012 on Newgrounds.com, a repository of quick, do-it-yourself games usually created by imaginative youth who learned how to make Flash animations and responsive input to accompany it. *Dys4ia* did not become any kind of overnight sensation, but it became a statement about what games were capable of, as well as resisting expectations of what a game should entail.

Anna Anthropy, a trans, queer woman, crafted the game to express her frustration with hormone replacement therapy and its consequences. Only lasting ten minutes on the long end of gameplay, *Dys4ia* covered some of the physical, emotional, and social effects Anthropy experienced from her transition. The game is now one of the more prominent examples of games made to express the perspective of a non-heteronormative experience. Until recently, the game never existed to make any kind of profit. Anthropy made it and other games in her repertoire specifically to represent her perspective and engagement with her environment, giving others who have never thought of using games as self-expression an example of entry into the medium (Anthropy, 2012a).

This case was selected for analysis because it represents the more radically independent ethos and practice on the game "indiestry" scale. Anthropy's entry offered a robust amount of information on an extremely niche and personal game, communication about it, and communication about the developer on Twitter. Other similar games in this end of the scale may be just as relevant and poignant, but they do not have the communication channels, nor the games, as easily accessible to a game-playing public. It was vital to this dissertation that the games examined be of some notoriety, even the one

representing the most independent and narrowed end of the games "indiestry" spectrum. Without a significant amount of interaction or posting about the game itself, game-related topics or personal interests, the analysis of the sample would not have yielded rich results. In short, there are other radically independent games in existence, but, for this examination to be fruitful, the game and developer chosen needed to be at least mildly well-known.

The following chapter discusses Anna Anthropy's history as it is formative in her interests in game development, a description of the game itself, her Twitter activity, the tone and language used, promoting others in her area of the independent game development scene, her commentary on the games industry, online activism, her use of "independent," and her unapologetic expression of herself and ideas.

Brief Developer Biography

Choosing the pronouns she/her, Anna Anthropy is a transgender queer female game developer and artist in residence at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. She dropped out of college in her fourth year after she made one of her first games, *Jaywalker*, in Game Maker. Her years in college did not give her a love of academia and formal training: "I hated school, and I thought (and still think) that 'higher education' is bullshit" (Anthropy, 2012a, loc. 1687). After becoming restless in her home of New York, Anthropy decided to attend a game development school, The Guildhall, at Southern Methodist University in Plano, Texas.

In her time at the Guildhall, Anthropy watched as the lecturers molded her cohort according to the rigors of the commercial game publishing industry. Acutely aware of the model in game creation of exploiting workers and burning them out with the use of

"crunch time" (EA Spouse, 2004), Anthropy vocally resisted the instruction given by her professors. The program removed her by the beginning of her third two-month-long semester.

It may have been more financially fulfilling, but Anthropy turned away from the commercial, AAA studio model in favor of the smaller, personal games that meant something to the creators and players. Health and wellbeing also factored into her decision:

> As long as the industry is allowed to continue acting as the gatekeeper to game creation, people will continue to accept the ways in which the industry tramples the lives and well-being of the creative people who make games, rather than challenging the insane level of control that publishers ask over developers' lives. (Anthropy, 2012a, loc. 1718)

Anthropy continued to highlight the ills of industry-driven AAA games and likened workers therein to the cogs in a machine rather than artists able to create their own pieces of personal expression.

After her experience with Guildhall, Anthropy sought to call out their model of game development as unsustainable and unfulfilling. In part to prove a point and in part to keep her mind busy, Anthropy began making games like *Calamity Jane* (2008), which tapped into her own frustration with being an outsider in a Texas town and having a long-distance girlfriend with whom she wanted to ride off into the sunset (2012a). According to Anthropy, the egregious costs of game development were all of $15 to buy Game Maker and the cost of food while she was making it over the course of a few months: "I was making a game, and I was doing it my way: I built every piece of the game myself. I

drew all the pictures; I wrote all the music; I scripted all the events in Game Maker" (Anthropy, 2012a, loc. 1751). Since then, Anthropy has created 16 digital games, 16 role-playing, non-digital games, five interactive fiction stories, seven zines, three education-centered lectures and materials for game development and literacy, one idea generator and a collection of fonts to use in games (Anthropy, n.d.).

While the creation of games is one way to measure productivity or contribution, education about game creation accessibility was one goal Anthropy always had. She pursued it in the realm of higher education, which she earlier deemed "bullshit." Anthropy teaches students who want to develop games to look critically at the industry and dissect the practices of the larger studios. She became a not only a vocal critic of the game industry generally, but a champion for the rights of game industry workers and systematically marginalized groups as well.

Her games, books, and online posts reflect that criticism and highlight ways to empower all people to use games as self-expression:

> What I want from videogames is a plurality of voices. I want games to come from a wider set of experiences and present a wider range of perspectives… I like the idea of games as zines: as transmissions of ideas and culture from person to person, as personal artifacts instead of impersonal creations by teams of forty-five artists and fifteen programmers (Anthropy, 2012a, loc. 175).

Using the readily available digital creation and distribution tools, Anthropy likens the shift in game creation to that of television: "There's far more value in the collective content of YouTube – even given that there are more piles of trash than treasure – than in

the collective content of a television network, simply as a function of the number of people contributing" (Anthropy, 2012a, loc. 227).

She continues to use her games as commentary and remains adamant and vocal about these and other social issues affecting her, the people around her, and global society.

Dys4ia **Game Description**

Created as a quick Flash game, *Dys4ia* featured four sections depicting the various struggles and triumphs of Anna Anthropy's experience with hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in her transition from male to female in a more physically representative manner. She also made the statement in the first screen of the game that it represented her experience and was not meant to represent every trans person:

> dys4ia is the story of the last six months of my life: when I made the decision to start hormone replacement therapy and began taking estrogen. I wanted to catalog all the frustrations of the experience and maybe create an "it gets better" for other trans women. when I started working on the game, though, I didn't know whether it did get better. I was in the middle of detail[s] in level 3 of the game, and at the time I had no idea what the ending would be; it was hard to envision a happy ending. (Anthropy, 2013, para. 1).

The four stages of the game were divided into four levels – "Level 1: Gender Bullshit," "Level 2: Medical Bullshit," "Level 3: Hormonal Bullshit," "Level 4: It Gets Better?" – and consisted of three to four mini games per level.

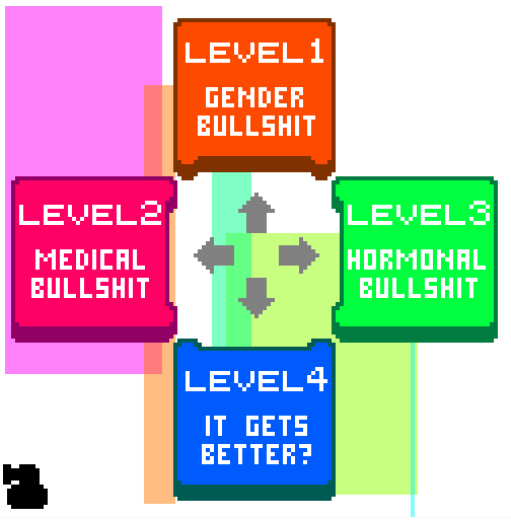


Figure 31. Level listing for *Dys4ia.*

One mini game in "Gender Bullshit" asks the player to pull a shirt over the character's head using the "Down" arrow, only to find there is no way to complete the task, thus frustrating the player and moving to the next screen with the hope of cultivating a feeling of failure and incompleteness.

Figure 32. After several presses of the "down" arrow, the player is moved away from this screen as the clothing meant to fit over the character will never fit in its current form (Anthropy, 2012).

Another mini game in the level asks the player to walk right across the screen to the character's home, but this can only be completed by passing three figures who

misgendered the player as “Sir.” In reply the character responds in a small, non-contrasting text bubble visible for only one second reading “ma’am.” The consistent occurrence of misgendering is meant to frustrate the player just as Anthropy herself was frustrated.

Figure 33. Anthropy’s character (in pink) walks from left to right to the home goal as three figures misgender the character as “sir” rather than her chosen pronoun of “ma’am” (Anthropy, 2012).

By the end of the mini games section, the game asks the player to move a sun to dissolve a cloud over the thought “Maybe I should go on hormones,” highlighting the thought was always present for Anthropy, but pushed aside.

In “Medical Bullshit” the player actively moves the nervous, erratically moving, character around the waiting room, which, no matter what the player does, lasts five seconds. The character then moves to a scale and a blood pressure cuff. The doctor then refuses to give estrogen to the character unless the blood pressure of 140 is reduced. The next mini game held a prescription bottle at the top of the screen and an open mouth at the bottom that the player controls with the right and left arrows. The goal is to consume the pill dropped from various positions and watch the blood pressure reduce to 120.

Figure 34. Small white pills drop from the open bottle down the screen. The player's task is to move the receiving mouth left and right to catch the pills and reduce the blood pressure reading (Anthropy, 2012).

The next section, "Hormonal Bullshit," covers the experiences she had with adjusting to the increased estrogen and the effects of the blood pressure medicine. One mini game uses spinning brown chocolate bars and a chomping green mouth in the style of *PacMan* to complete. Another adaptation to a previous mini game uses a shield to defend against the words from a disembodied mouth, representing Anthropy's girlfriend and how her words made Anthropy cry, no matter the content. When the words would hit the shield, a tear falls from the shield. Lastly, the character moves across a screen to another house, but, halfway there, the character stops moving and slows as the medicine made Anthropy weak and lack energy.

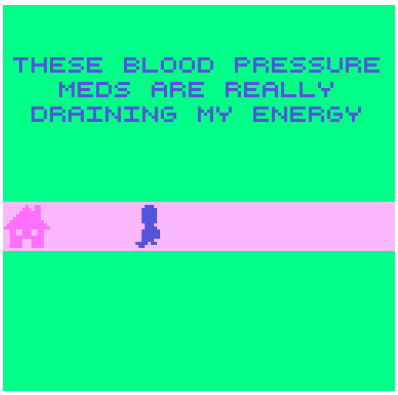


Figure 35. The character only reaches 75% across the screen to the goal before the game stops accepting the input of the player to go farther (Anthropy, 2012).

In the final level of the game "It Gets Better?" Anthropy paints a bit of a brighter picture for the player; the hair the player had to shave off the pixelated chest is not there any longer and mirrors begin to reflect a female shape instead of the almost non-human shape of the character.

Figure 36. Various mirrors show different reflections of the character as the player approaches.

Figure 37. One last modification to the shield minigame turned it into mouths sending the "♂" symbol and the shield bouncing it back as a "♀" symbol.

The game begins to close with a brick wall like *Breakout* (1976) breaking thanks to the effort of the player. Soon after, an ever-changing shape approaches it to try and fit through the player-created opening. The game ends before the piece can come close to the opening. The final screen reads "It's the end" then changes to "just the beginning."

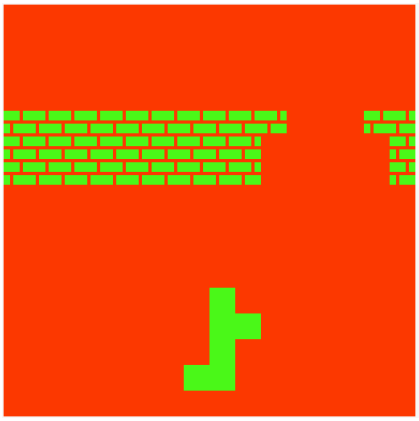


Figure 38. A constantly changing shape is used to depict the constantly changing body Anthropy inhabits. The gap in the wall changes every time so there is no way to predict if the piece will fit through, and that was Anthropy's point (Anthropy, 2012).

The game itself lasts only 10 minutes at maximum and continues to advance whether the player completed the task given to them successfully or not. It was decried as not being a game if it was not a challenge, but some portions of the game were created with the intent of the player failing: "A lot of games, I think, force the player to repeat

scenes because they're afraid of being seen as skill-less, even when the repetition doesn't serve the story the game is telling" (Anthropy quoted in Kuchera, 2012, para. 5).

Dys4ia was released on Newgrounds, a site which commonly hosted the Flash games with simple mechanics and straightforward goals; most often one found rudimentary "shoot bad thing" games here. Anthropy released the game on Newgrounds with the intent of taking people out of their comfort zones. She began seeing comments from people who connected with the game and, to her, that meant success (Kuchera, 2012). Though the game brought her attention, invitations to speaking events and art installations, however, Anthropy became concerned that people were playing the game and thinking they knew everything about what a trans person on HRT goes through. She did not create the game to be an "empathy game" in which a player goes through a lived experience: "if you are a cis person & you think you've 'learned empathy for trans women' by playing dys4ia, you are wrong. Flush yrself [sic] down the toilet" (Anthropy, 2014).

For "Trans Awareness Day" in 2017, Anthropy removed the game from her site – she took it off Newgrounds years before – and tweeted "in honor of the trans day of visibility I've removed dys4ia from w.itch.io [website]. Visibility doesn't make trans women safer" (Anthropy, 2017). She now charges $5 for people to download *Dys4ia,* but she does not escape the criticism of those who would like to see it free and available: "i get emails from ppl concerned i'm making dys4ia inaccessible by charging for it but no emails concerned about how i'm gonna afford rent" (Anthropy, 2016).

Public Twitter Feed

Of the 3,327 tweets from June 6, 2019 to December 6, 2018, the majority of the posts were replies to other posts or to other Twitter accounts. 1,470 tweets written by Anthropy were these responses to another post composed by another or threaded in a series for one topic she wrote, 921 were retweets to help promote the cause and tie Anthropy to the message, and 837 tweets were originally composed by Anthropy and not in a linked response thread.

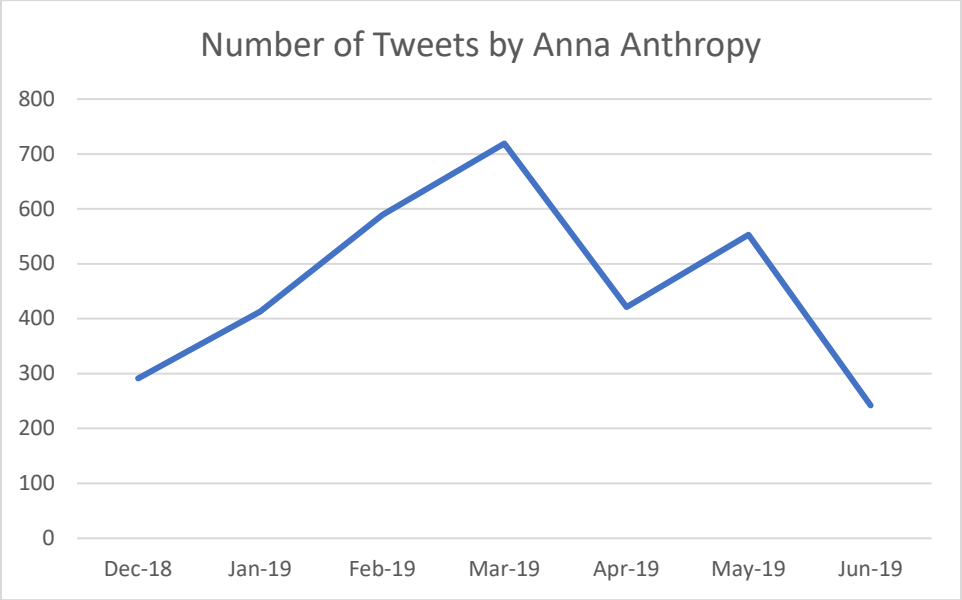


Figure 39. The six-month trend of Anna Anthropy's Twitter activity.

She originally posted on Twitter as @auntie_pixelante, a name she used as a pseudonym when making games but changed it in 2016 to @adult_witch. "I mostly changed it because i[sic] felt like my practice had changed" (Anthropy, personal communication, June 10, 2019).

Her Twitter bio did not contain any mention of indie games but did contain her job title at DePaul: game designer in residence. Other featured items were her preferred pronouns, credit given to the person who created her profile picture, and three causes she

promoted: sex work is work, abolish prisons, and Black Lives Matter. The header image was a quote she gave to encourage LGBTQIA+ persons to unionize to protect themselves in the games industry.

Language and tone. Anthropy began by listing her location as "chicago[sic], ill, annoyed" as a play on words for The Windy City. This set the expectation, as did her bio, that her Twitter feed would include wry humor and commentary on social issues. The first pinned tweet was promoting her latest role-playing game – not a video game – called *All My Exes are in Mechsuits* in which the players encounter an ex-partner at an event. As Twitter is an announcement-based platform, it followed that the first post seen would be a game for which she charges $5.

It is necessary to highlight that this was her personal and professional Twitter feed and there was no delineation in the topics posted. Within the space of 10 tweets, Anthropy talked with one person about Herzog Zwei, a predecessor to real-time strategy games, her struggle with admitting she needed care from other people when she drifted into her methods for dealing with her suicidal ideation, then retweeting a post about youth in jails.

Her ability to flit between topics was impressive, but there was an unfiltered look to the tweets. Many were composed with no capitalization and did not end with any punctuation. In many ways, her Twitter timeline suggested there was always something more she needed to say, as many of the tweets did not have a hard ending to them. Much of the content was about her personal life and her passions including the causes she signal boosts by retweeting.

She also discussed her job both as a game designer and teaching courses as an academic. She talked in depth about her course and the readings for it, as well as outlining the topics she covers. Slides she created for her course were also available on her site and she also retweeted two other games professors who made their content available online. There were instances of her talking about the awkwardness of tweeting about sex then asking if any of her students were following her to ignore all the references to her sex life. She joked, "there's a clause about it in the student handbook"(Anthropy, 2019a).

Signal boosting. Anna Anthropy has earned followers since 2009 and used that platform to raise awareness, funds, or sometimes signatures for the causes she felt needed to be featured. While the content of the retweet is not originally composed by the owner of the account retweeting, the act of sharing it to their following makes the retweeter appear as if they endorse or feel the post is important enough to spend their social capital (Putnam, 2000) on Twitter by attaching their name to it. This is the state of retweeting in Twitter: the user promotes another's tweet but is affected either positively or negatively because the user deemed that post important enough to appear among the curated presentation of the self or the collective identity of a company or organization (Fitton, 2017; Nations, 2019).

Whether it was a choice or a technological limitation, Anthropy's timeline did not show many of her original posts; they were categorized as "replies" to one original post and continued for multiple tweets after it. This may have been done in an effort to keep her thoughts on a topic grouped together as well as in chronological order. If she made original tweets for each 280-character post it would run the risk of being read out of order

and misunderstood. For Anthropy, it was extremely important to her that her thoughts were conveyed accurately, even if she was not liked by some in the audience.

The "replies" category took one topic post and threaded her thoughts, and the replies of others, into a collapsed thread. Though she remains an extremely prolific poster on Twitter, her initial feed of "Tweets," not "Tweets and Replies," looked to be composed of more retweets than original tweets. This does not suggest that Anthropy is unwilling to post her thoughts to the online Twitter community; it does, however, suggest that her thoughts suit the length of a traditional blog and she is willing to feature other voices than her own for her followers to read and explore.

Utilizing the common practice of promoting other indie creators, Anthropy retweeted the work of other independent game developers 78 times in the 3,200 tweets sampled. These retweets often did not have a comment attached, but the original content of the tweet was featured. Comments about the game industry or game events were not included in this category, which makes the count of 78 individual games featured from December 6, 2018 to June 6, 2019 all the more impressive. Many of the games Anthropy talked about were ones she played or thought merited her audience's time because of the content or mechanics.

Commentary on games and games industry. Interspersed among the topics were quick mentions about what she was feeling when played the game *Outer Wilds*. Her commentary on the game ranged widely from a short notification to her following that she was playing it with, "outer wilds is neat" (Anthropy, 2019z), to an account of her physical reaction and the use of singular pronouns for the genderless aliens. After the five

tweets delving into the game, she ended the thread with, “anyway this is a tangent, i’m enjoying outer wilds” (Anthropy, 2019aa).

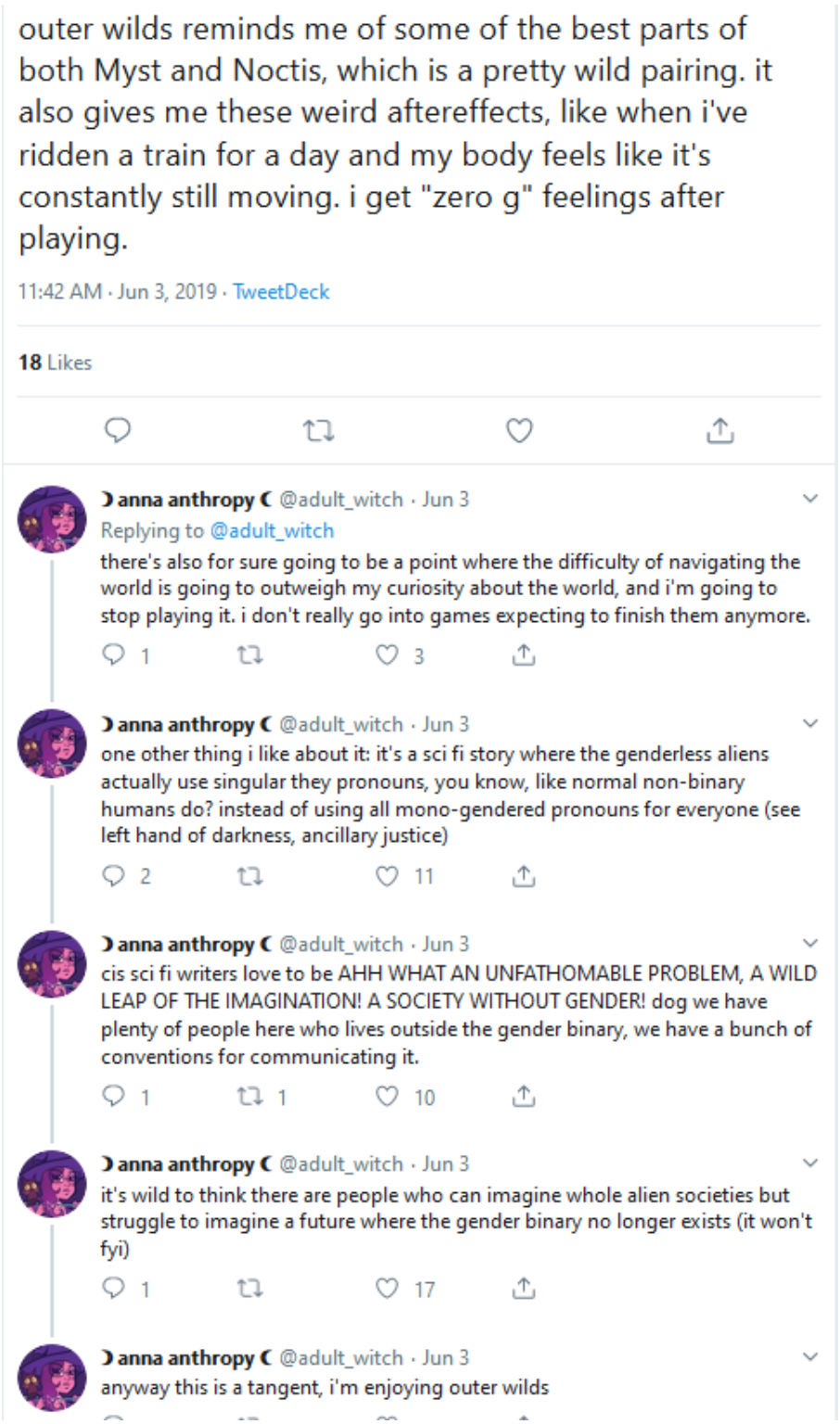


Figure 40. Example of the game critiques Anthropy gives in her Twitter feed (Anthropy, 2019aa).

Anthropy focused her published recommendations to extremely small-scale and almost totally obscure games. The titles she chose to retweet or mention at length ranged from a digital replica of a 1990's LCD style game, to a game about house hunting, and a tabletop game, *Flipsiders*, that folded out from a board game enclosure modeled after an audio cassette tape

Figure 41. One image of the *Flipsiders* board games from the 1987.

It was evident that Anthropy wanted to share with her followers her love of retro and hard-to-find games. They represented a quality of scarcity she valued in contrast with the infinitely-available games in the mainstream videogames industry. She valued that scarcity, but in posts before this, she called a limited release of a series of games a perpetuation of "the worst kind of indie boutique item" (Anthropy, 2019b). It may be the case that Anthropy understood the circumstances for a physical game to be limited in its resources but could not rationalize exclusivity for a digital game release, as digital resources are not as prohibitive as physical ones. Regardless, the excitement conveyed by Anthropy in her string of tweets about acquiring one was palatable and felt as genuine as text can allow.

Figure 42. Anthropy talking about the *Flipsiders* series of board games (Anthropy, 2019y).

Games made by others were also prominently featured as retweets or a retweet with a comment by Anthropy. The LCD style game mentioned previously also spurred a conversation between Anthropy and the designer asking if Anthropy wanted to

collaborate on a LCD style game together in the future (Anthropy, 2019w). Anthropy replied saying she had an idea for a LCD game in mind already. Whether or not this was the case, the two developers showcased their admiration for each other's work in the thread and hinted there could be a new game coming from that collaboration in the future. Again, the same conversation could have happened in direct messages but they both chose to engage the other in public, thus boosting their presence to the other's following.

Figure 43. Anthropy talking to @castpixel about collaborating on a game together.

One method game developers use to create games is by placing new rules around already existing frames of play. Anthropy had a public brainstorm session in which some followers contributed in real time and some commented their ideas afterward. Some followers only left a "favorite" or a non-written vote of recognition and acceptance, depending on the context of the tweet.

A Kickstarter for the aptly named Lovesync, two wirelessly-connected buttons for couples to signal to each other over long distances when they were in the mood to have sex, (Cmich, 2019) was added to Anthropy's timeline. The concept behind the invention is to highlight that one's partner is more apt to have sex with them than they assume because both parties are not more expressive about their desires. When one party pushes their wireless button, the other's lights up halfway. The hope is that the second party pushes their half-lit button to communication the reciprocation.

After this invention with its rule-based function appeared on Anthropy's timeline, she dismissed it as "technological bandaid for straight couples' inability to communicate" and gave it a new purpose as a hypothetical "exciting new long distance one button game platform" (Anthropy, 2019g). With that, she began to brainstorm different games which could use the one-button function:

> "One player presses the button and then immediately begins the four second hold to Cancel Desire. The other player attempts to press their button as quickly as possible after their button light turns off" (Anthropy, 2019e).

> "You and your opponent simultaneously try and press your buttons using only your mind. Whoever lights up their opponent's button first wins" (Anthropy,

2019f).

> "Try to push your button at a time when you think your opponent will not notice / respond. If they do not hit their[sic] in time, you win. Otherwise, they win" (Anthropy, 2019d).
>
> "Prayers to an Unseen God. You may press your button at any time. The other player, whether or not they see their button light up, should not press it" (Anthropy, 2019c).

> "Game for Lovesync: Magic Eight Ball. Envision your question, then press the button. Based on the response time:
> < 1 minute: My sources say no.
> 1-2: Most likely.
> 2-3: Outlook not so good.
> 3-4: It is certain.
> 4-5: Very doubtful.
> 5+: Reply hazy, try again (Anthropy, 2019b)"

Two of Anthropy's followers replied with other game ideas for the hypothetical platform before the topic was abandoned but still left as a record of the creativity of Anthropy and some of her audience.

If a game made by a AAA studio was mentioned, it was rarely in a positive context. *Overwatch* (2017) made an appearance as a retweet, but as a commentary on the

design of Mei for one of the optional costumes available for her. Anthropy did not add any comment to the tweet but still chose to draw attention to it by posting it on her Twitter feed.

Figure 44. Commentary on the design of Mei of *Overwatch*, which was a design glitch by Blizzard (@stairfax, 2019).

Oddly enough, after looking at the threaded responses below the original tweet, more than one Twitter user said this was a consistent problem with the Mei skins and it was due to creating her original character with a big winter coat as her default look. The mesh for the character design was flawed and only visible if the skin featured thinner clothing.

"Basically Blizzard lazy and didn't want to fix it once they made mei skins that use normal clothing" (@lain4lyffe, 2019). It was up to the Twitter user to seek that information out after the original post in Figure 44, which Anthropy could have used to expand on her point about AAA industry games being so devoid of personal attachment to the work they created that the designers do not care about the design flaw.

Anthropy's choice to feature a disproportionate female game character may have been spurred on by her dedication to finding equality for underrepresented groups in games, or it may have been as simple as calling attention to the provocative image it featured. She may have already seen the comment about the lack of pride in Blizzard's work and decided representation of women in games was more important. No matter the reason, Anthropy sought this image out and retweeted it, endorsing the sentiment that women in games are woefully underrepresented and that, when they are featured, they are contorted to fulfill the male ideal.

Along with critiques on design choices came engagements with the structure of the games industry. A retweet from Brandon Sheffield (2019) surfaced with the topic of AAA game studios and how few are left in the industry. Interestingly enough, Sheffield's post was a retweet itself. The matryoshka doll look of stacking topics inside of retweets sends the message that more and more people are seeing and engaging with the content. Anthropy signal boosted this topic and many other tweets decrying the state of the video game industry as a machine meant to trample the developers and create sub-standard, vanilla products that have little to no redeeming value in engaging with them.

Figure 45. Sheffield highlights the issue of the games industry becoming increasingly streamlined (2019).

One retweet originating from Vice Games covered ethics in the games industry, namely Epic Games' *Fortnite.* The free-to-play Battle Royale game took dance moves from black artists and turned them into moves the players could purchase in-game without crediting the original artists (Walker & Cole, 2019).

She also told students to read the article as it would be covered in the class. Tellingly, the students in her class were not tagged nor was there a hashtag included for them to follow. Most likely, the students in her class did not even know that she sent out a Tweet. The use of that instruction and posting it on a public forum was most likely her way of broadcasting that she thought it was important enough to show to her students and she wanted her followers to know it. She also posted excerpts from her class materials

online and this could have been one of the more recent additions for her to catalog into the curriculum.

Online activism. The personal struggles and specific perspective Anthropy tried to convey in *Dys4ia* and her subsequent games were not the only means of communicating a less-visible narrative. Anthropy utilized her Twitter feed, which more than 12.3 thousand accounts follow, as a means of signal boosting or rebroadcasting to a wider audience. Many of her posts were retweets about current events calling attention to the marginalized voices involved. She also composed many original tweets covering the injustices and abuses trans women face, sexual harassment at Riot Games, calls for funding for Chelsea Manning's legal fees, the rights of sex workers, raising minimum wage and commentary on race in animated shows.

Her experiences with her own mental health struggles are also featured in her posts. She discussed the cost of her therapy sessions to discussing her anxiety, depression and panic attacks in the open forum. Keeping with her motivation to make the taboo normalized and acceptable to talk about, Anthropy went into full description on three occasions depicting what her thought processes were when she was dealing with a depressive episode. "teaching is full of challenges, like 'how do you tell your students you're not coming in today because something triggered your depression really strongly and you're unable to get out of bed?'" (Anthropy, 2019h).

Coupling her position on minority abuses by dominant, oppressive structures and her personal understanding of mental health education and the benefits of care not just for the body, but the mind as well, Anthropy chose to tie her name to the cause of stopping a police training center establishing itself in Chicago and to the need of increased mental

health professionals available to minority populations in Chicago and – one can assume – across the United States.

Figure 46. Black Lives Matter in Chicago sends out the message that there does not need to be an increase in policing, but an increase in care given to minority populations (2019).

She also uses her public forum to highlight some of the more positive events and brighter spots of society. She featured an application by Black Game Developers to encourage people to apply for a grant by Xbox for Black developers to attend the Game Developer's Conference (Black Game Developers, 2018). A pitch for a show for Netflix "When Do We Level Up?"(Coleman, 2019) with a diverse animated cast of characters and a tabletop gaming theme also found its way to Anthropy's followers.

Use of "indie" and "independent." Anthropy is one of the more notable names in the indie games community for better or worse. Her games and perspectives on industry and social issues are polarizing at times and alienate other developers; they also alienate her, at times. Her relationship with the independent game development community may not be the smoothest, but it is clear that she is a thoughtful game developer and qualifies as indie. She retains all creative control of her games, except for *Lesbian Spider Queens of Mars* (2018) in its official release from Adult Swim Games. (On her personal games site, w.itch.io, she has the full uncensored version available, which "is not recommended for people who are uncomfortable with the thought of a half-human half-arachnid space dominatrix eschewing a bra" [Anthropy, 2018].) Her funding comes from Kickstarters and the proceeds of other games, and the games she creates push against the industry trends for larger and more elaborate games. In all senses, she has claim to the title of "indie" but she does not use it once in her tweets to describe her games nor herself.

The instances in which Anthropy uses the term "indie" are only through retweets of others' original tweets or when she is actively promoting the "indiedev" hashtag; the hallmark of organizing the content of topically related posts across Twitter. The word "independent" is not used once in her available tweets. The single occurrence of "indie" is in a tweet targeting the creator of Playdate, a handheld console with a crank control, limited release and exclusive games by indie developers, and publicly scolds him for repeating exclusivity by making scarcity a selling point: "…as much as i love...a crank i guess... i've been skeptical of the thing as it kind of positions itself as the worst kind of

exclusive indie boutique item. ‘have you played the new bennett foddy game? oh ho of course you haven't, it's only available on a yellow poker chip’”(Anthropy, 2019x).

Jonathan Blow of *Braid* and *The Witness* fame commented that indie games were stagnant and there was not much original thought to them: “Everybody else is trying to be like a cheap AAA game” (Blow quoted in Whitehead, 2019, para. 6). Anthropy brought the conversation to her feed a few days after the article published and sharply defended independent game creativity. “everyone's already Had Thoughts on the jon[sic] blow thing but it's wild to say indie games are stagnant when i can look at the front page of itch.io at any given time and discover twenty new genres i've never heard of” (Anthropy, 2019ab).

For Anthropy, there is little need to remind her followers at this point that she is steeped in the indie game development culture. The critical nature of her online presence and promoting others and their truly unique games does more than writing that word to cement her position and credibility as an indie developer.

It is vital to remember that the sample of 3,200 tweets only ranged from June 6, 2019 to December 6, 2018. Anthropy tweets so prolifically that there may be some relevant recent topics archived after six months of her original posts, threaded replies and retweets. She may have invoked “indie” before this instance or retweeted a post about her being an indie game creator, but her multipurpose Twitter account can only maintain 3,200 tweets before beginning to move them to the archive.

No filter. Anthropy’s polarizing online persona is blunt and unapologetic. She positioned herself as a steadfast figure in the midst of GamerGate, the online crusade against minority voices in the games industry masquerading as journalistic integrity. It

may have been through experiences like GamerGate and living her life as a trans queer woman that forged her personality in the fires of opposition.

She made it exceedingly clear in multiple posts that her experiences were hers alone and there was little anyone seeing the posts about them could change. Some posts were part inflammatory and part promotion for other games. *Wonder Boy and the Dragon's Trap* was released with an animated style akin to *Castle Crashers* and Anthropy chose to express her thoughts on it in comparison to the indie-but-first-party-funded game *Cuphead*. "a take no one asked for: the Wonder Boy and the Dragon's Trap remake is prettier than cuphead" (Anthropy, 2019v). In one tweet, she tore at the very heart of the popular independent darling and promoted the lesser-known work of a developer who did not operate with the funding from "the industry," which she sees as the embodiment of gaming's ills.

Lastly, it sometimes was not about what she said, but how fast she said it. One thread of 12 tweets on April 6, 2019 spanned 12 minutes total. Each tweet came close to the 280-character limit and each tweet was followed by the next with usually one minute between each post. It can be assumed that this series was composed with great fervor and passion as the posts were submitted quickly, but not quickly enough to indicate it was copied and pasted from a previously composed document. What follows is the series of tweets Anthropy composed in the threaded replies of the first post. All capitalization and punctuation reflect her writing verbatim:

> one of the hallmarks of fascism is its insistence on a monolithic narrative. trump regularly condemns journalists as deceiving the american people. fascists want

there to be one perspective, one truth - no room for varied perspectives. now let's talk about game difficulty (Anthropy, 2019m).

the links between games "activists" and the alt-right are pretty well-established. g#mergate, a movement that harassed and threatened marginalized people out of games, did so under the guide of "ethics in journalism," a trumpian phrase to be sure (Anthropy, 2019p).

part of that discourse is based around the fallacy that there is only one correct, objective perspective. (it just happens to be Our perspective.) there is only one way to understand a game, and anyone who tries to widen the conversation has an ulterior ("political") motive (Anthropy, 2019n).

that carries into conversations about game difficulty. gamers insisted dean takahashi wasn't fit to cover games because he wasn't "good enough" at them. he could never provide the Correct perspective on cuphead - that of a skilled player (Anthropy, 2019o).

this argument points to the idea that there is one correct way to experience a game. why would we be interested in the perspective of someone who grew frustrated with cuphead, or gave up, or who might approach the game differently, or who might be playing with extra lives (Anthropy, 2019r)?

what people who are asking for more mealleable difficulty is asking for is not a dillution of the existing, Correct way to play, but for _more_ ways to play. more player ability to adjust the game to better suit their own needs (Anthropy, 2019u).

as a game designer, my Vision for this game might be that it be hard, that the player have to Work. if i only provide one version of that experience, it's assuming that what is hard for one person is equally hard for everyone - that everyone's starting from the same place (Anthropy, 2019j).

late, beloved play theorist bernie dekoven was big on the idea of the "slanted bar principle." a non-adaptive gym class expects everyone to jump the same bar. a slanted bar means that people can choose the height they're trying to clear (Anthropy, 2019l).

this stems from the truth that different people have different backgrounds, experiences, and levels of skill. to insist everyone try to clear the same bars is to erase those whose experiences (and often, bodies) are non-normative (Anthropy, 2019s).

think for a minute about what game skill ultimately tests for: the ability to follow instructions to maximum efficiency ("save the frames, kill the animals") and to mold yourself to fit a normative standard of ability (Anthropy, 2019q).

> ultimately, insistence that there be only one possible way to experience and understand a game is, at worst, a fascist impulse, and for designers to cater exclusively to it sends the same message as thq nordic visiting 8chan: we don't need diversity (Anthropy, 2019t).
>
> and games academics, let's not legitimize the push to stifle diversity by being the Well-Dressed Fascist On The Cover Of The New Yorker who provides a rational-seeming face to the homogenization of games (Anthropy, 2019i).
>
> (folks may insist i'm catastrophizing by conflating Videogames and fascism, to which my response is: it's 2019) (Anthropy, 2019k).

This series of tweets resulted in only one person replying to the second post regarding Gamergate, though there were "likes" on every post ranging from 55 on the first post (most likely for those Twitter users to keep track of the topic) to 4, with the average number of likes in the teens. The one reply Anthropy received was from a Trevor Tomesh whose bio read "Lecturer, PhD Student, Gamer, Hardware Hacker, Pessimist and Voider of Warranties. 09 F9 11 02 9D 74 E3 5B D8 41 56 C5 63 56 88 C0," with a reply only an academic or statistician would appreciate. He quoted her statement of "the links between games 'activists' and the alt-right are pretty well-established" and then added, after a hard return key, "What's the p-value?" (Tomesh, 2019).

Low interaction. There were other such threads on her Twitter feed and many mirrored the same level of interaction. For all that was posted and written, there was little engagement from the audience aside from the non-written "like" count. It was not clear

why there was so little interaction, but it behooves this study to examine possible relationships to that phenomenon.

The lack of interaction with the other Twitter users could be influenced by the speed she posted her threaded microblogs. If there was the expectation Anthropy was in the middle of creating the next post, maybe the audience would not want to comment until she finished her thought. Also, if there was a contesting viewpoint or comment, like the one about significance from Tomesh, Anthropy would outright ignore it and not engage it. It is also not clear if she deletes the public posts on her Twitter that challenge her outright. Again, after Gamergate, it would not be a rarity to curate and monitor one's Twitter feed for oppositional accounts.

Another contributing factor to the of the lack of interaction could be the topic itself. Anthropy is deeply passionate about various – sometimes volatile – issues and the audience may not feel comfortable making a statement about it, even to support it. Making a misstep with language especially in an online forum could turn into embarrassment for the user rather than contributing to the conversation. Though it was not a comment about social and game issues, Anthropy made a very clear statement to another "indie game developer. feminist, trans woman, lesbian" (according to her bio) (Neofotistou, 2014) about the use of terms of endearment directed at Anthropy. After talking about a tough day, Christina Neofotistou sent the public reply, "Aww my sweet, think nothing of it, I'd understand completely. You have value even when you're taking care of yourself" (2019). Anthropy did not appreciate the message and publicly replied to not call her "sweet" as they were not well acquainted. Anthropy may have felt belittled or

uncomfortable to have someone use a term of endearment with her and wasted no time in making sure she, and anyone who read the exchange, would not do so again.

Figure 47. Anthropy and Neofotistou exchanging words about the unsolicited and unwelcomed term of endearment toward Anthropy.

Another possible factor regarding the lack of interaction could be that the followers of Anthropy know her expertise in game culture, game creation, obscure and independent games, activism for unionization, promoting universal healthcare, LGBTQIA+ issues, hegemonic systems creating and perpetuating a downtrodden minority along with a myriad of other social issues she attaches herself to. This understanding of Anthropy's drive to signal boost these issues may be enough for her followers to treat her account as an announcement-based account. There's no need to interact with a post that makes a simple statement if one agrees with it. Of course, the whole model for Twitter and other social media platforms is built on the desire to hear the

thoughts of the people who have similar views of the user (Garimella, Morales, Gionis, & Mathioudakis, 2018; Lorenz, 2018). It then makes sense that the followers could find little redeeming value in interacting with the posts.

Finally, there was not a single tweet (aside from ones regarding her hosting a playtest and game demo for her role-playing game) that asked followers to comment and talk about the content of a tweet. Anthropy did not ask people to interact with her impassioned or directly personal tweets. To borrow from Fiske's (1992) cultural economy, Anthropy's interactions were mostly one-way statements and did not give the Twitter users room to have their own commentary on the post. There was nothing "producerly" (p.30) about the body of tweets. The major difference for Anthropy versus other game creators and studios was the blending of her personal Twitter with one exclusively for game development. There is no room for people to engage with the personal unless the user makes an active effort to turn their personal posts into something others can take and generate more meaning for themselves.

Summary

The order of Anthropy's Twitter is long and scattered. With no division between professional and personal, there is only the glaringly personal; and that is exactly the intention. Anthropy gave everything she had to the games she created to this point. They may be abstracted, but they are highly personal and representative of issues she cares about or questions she wants to pose to players. It then follows that her Twitter should be constructed in the same manner with her experiences and opinions totally exposed.

With her position at DePaul University, many would think her tweets would be private or she would operate a separate account for professional or game development

use. This would replicate what other studios do when communicating with various publics, but one of the hallmarks of Anthropy and her games is the ownership of identity. Just like the constantly shifting shape at the end of *Dys4ia*, she is constantly shifting through different roles and thought streams.

The sharp opinions and commentary can be off-putting to some, but that is one of the ways in which independent or "indie" creations define themselves. Indie products and producers are not smoothed or watered down to reach as many people as possible; they are distinct and function to appeal to limited, passionate audiences.

CHAPTER SEVEN
A COMPARATIVE PENTAD ANALYSIS OF THREE CASE STUDIES

To this point, this dissertation has explored the social media presence of three independent game developers, whose level of independence may be considered a question, and perhaps a challenge, within the context of identity. Yet, each of these three developers, in engaging in publishing messages via Twitter, is creating a text that can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives. One of these perspectives is Burke's (1945) pentad.

Burke originally proposed the pentad in his best-known publication, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), as a tool for rhetorical criticism that operated from a dramatist perspective (i.e., the world is a performance, and so is every text created therein). The pentad, as implied by its name, utilizes four elements to lead to a fuller understanding of the fifth point on the metaphorical pentagon-shaped tool. That is, the pentad relies on the scene (where something takes place), the act (the event that takes place), the agent (the person or persons committing the act), and the agency (the means by which the agent can act), to allow a critic to understand the purpose, or intent, of the text (both supraliminal and subliminal).

To apply the pentad to a text, the critic must first determine what elements of the work fall under each of the five categories. After doing so, the critic must examine the ratios of importance for each of the five points of the pentad, in relation to the other four. For example, one might find in a critique of a given text that the dominant ratio is scene-agent, such that the scene and the agent are the two dominant pieces that allow a critique of the purpose for creating the text. When exploring purpose, it is important to note that there are two purposes that one might find from an application of the pentad. The

immediate purpose may refer to what a surface-level examination of the text might reveal. The deeper, perhaps hidden purpose, however, is what a critic may hope to uncover from the examination of the text.

Applying Burke's Pentad requires a great deal of background work, as the set-up is key to performing a proper analysis. Indeed, one must go as far as to take the perspective of the rhetor, rather than the perspective of a critic. As Foss (2018) noted, the end result is to identify the dominant term that the rhetor considers to be most important. Hence, Burke's Pentad offers a critic the opportunity to engage the text from a perspective that is not one's own, but rather that of another, while simultaneously attempting to find the motive behind the creator's choices. Thus, the application of this style of analysis begins with a labeling of the five elements that are to become the points of the pentad.

For each of the three constellations of tweets that are critiqued in this section, the five elements of Burke's pentad are key to understanding the motive the rhetors had in creating the body of social media posts to begin with. These three rhetors – Studio MDHR, Vlambeer, and Anna Anthropy – each have a unique perspective that becomes apparent in their social media presence, and which is inherent in their approaches to engaging with the public via Twitter. Approaching each of texts produced by the three creators from a different point-of-view, which is not influenced by the work of any of the other two studios, is paramount to performing the pentadic analysis, as the only perspective of importance when doing so is that of the rhetor.

A pentadic analysis of these three indie game developers is important to having a better understanding of what each one privileges in its public image created through

Twitter presence, and the crafted image that each one desires to have supported and cultivated in the online context. Furthermore, because each of these studios is making an attempt to live up to the indie standard, and therefore cannot label itself as a member of the indie community, it is necessary to interrogate the messages produced to find how these developers are convincing the constituency to accept them as truly "indie." Finally, the idiosyncratic issues of importance to each of the three developers become woven into the body of tweets that each produce, influencing the motive for producing and publishing the content. The pentadic analysis allows the critic to tease out the various behind-the-scenes issues that are represented and reflected within the texts produced by each of the developers. The analysis, then, begins with a labeling of the five elements of the pentad for each of the creators.

In the current study, the three Twitter accounts (those of MDHR, Vlambeer, and Anthropy) can be considered the locus of the dramatic text, which, when explored through the lens of Burke's pentad, may present concurring evidence of the intent, or purpose, for the game developers' use of social media to communicate with their audience. The goal of such an analysis is to fully understand the motives behind the tweets that the three developers have for their communicated messages, especially in terms of the hidden, or subliminal, meanings. It is expected that an application of Burke's pentad will yield a meaningful conclusion regarding these developers' creation of texts for public consumption.

Applying the Pentad

In this study, Burke's pentad was used to examine the sum of the tweets tweeted by each of the independent developers, rather than focusing on a single tweet. Thus, the

text in each of the three cases is the entirety of the messages sent. This strategic choice allowed me to offer a more thorough critique of developers' purposes, without pointing to a single Tweet as sufficing for a general rule.

Each of the three developers produce texts that encompass the five parts of the pentad. For Studio MDHR, the five elements of Burke's Pentad are: 1) the act is the posting of tweets on Twitter; 2) the agent is Studio MDHR; 3) the agency is the social networking ability granted by Twitter; 4) the scene is Twitter; and 5) the purpose is to promote *Cuphead*. For Vlambeer, the elements are as follows: 1) the act is the posting of tweets on Twitter; 2) the agent is Vlambeer (often with Rami operating behind the feed); 3) the agency is Vlambeer's position of esteem within the "indie" game developer community; 4) the scene is Twitter; and 5) the purpose is to promote *Nuclear Throne,* demystify game development and encourage involvement within the independent game community. For Anna Anthropy: 1) the act is microblogging through Twitter; 2) the agent is Anna Anthropy (the person and the developer); 3) the agency is the ability to treat tweeting as a form of one-way communication and signal boosting causes about which she is passionate; 4) the scene is Twitter; and 5) the purpose is to bring attention to herself and to her desired causes.

Studio MDHR

Having examined the collection of Tweets produced by Studio MDHR, there is a need to determine the motive for connecting with the public via social media. As a new small developer, Studio MDHR had to use Twitter as a means of bolstering itself in its mission to promote the game *Cuphead* for users to access and play. In so doing, it turned to Twitter as a means of garnering support for *Cuphead* (the only game it has yet to

produce), and to solicit help in polishing and improving the game after its launch. Twitter provided Studio MDHR the space to make itself visible among other developers and the people who play its game. Thus, the motive for engaging with the public via Twitter was to secure a space in which the company could make an argument for why it was "indie," and to encourage others to view it as such. In doing so, the developer made itself accessible to the people who support it and its product, while also maintaining social relevance by continuing to post and reply in one- and two-way communication instances with others.

Nonetheless, the agency-agent ratio emerged as the dominant element within the texts for understanding the motive (i.e., purpose) of sending the tweets. In the case of Studio MDHR, "agency" refers to the means by which the authors of the tweets were able to establish their legitimacy as an indie game developer, whereas the agent was the company itself. The tweets sent from Studio MDHR's account, on the whole, were geared toward the use of vulnerability as a means of establishing legitimacy. The tweets made clear that the developer was an imperfect entity, regularly admitting flaws and shortcomings with regard to their use of language that intimated apologies for errors, and also allowing their followers to see the development of their games (e.g., *Cuphead*). The agent, then, benefited from the strategic use of vulnerability to convince their audience of their status as an indie developer.

Looking into these tweets more critically allows for a deeper understanding of the motives for making such a text. To begin, of the three developers explored in this study, Studio MDHR is the only one to have made a single game. Their presence on Twitter suggests that their small-time operation is hampered by the inherent struggles of

independent production. Their openness with the virtual audience on these struggles served to position Studio MDHR as a prototypical indie developer, with the added credibility gleaned from small-time, family-run business status. Thus, in the case of Studio MDHR, there are two areas of purpose that must be explored.

The first area of purpose is the ostensible, surface-level purpose for making these tweets: in short, Studio MDHR appeared to want to communicate with its audience about the progress of the game development and to receive feedback from users once *Cuphead* was released. At first glance, it would appear that Studio MDHR was simply doing what any developer would do to keep future users of its product interested in the production process and informed of important updates regarding release and playability. Yet, when one looks deeper, it becomes clear that there is much more to these tweets than the developer wants to let on.

The second, more fruitful area of exploration within the area of purpose allows for a more complete understanding of the true motives behind Studio MDHR's tweets. The ostensible openness and honesty of the company in its tweets, and the portrayal of vulnerability with the audience, served to underscore and validate the developer as truly "indie." Considering the common threads that link independent producers of media (e.g., the struggle to survive, the harsh times, or the need for capital) which were explored in the literature review, there is little doubt that a motive behind the open and honest display of vulnerability was to convince followers that Studio MDHR was really making their game as an indie developer and was not pretending to espouse values that would make it seem like it was independent while being supported by a large, corporate developer. For Studio MDHR, then, the tweets allowed the developer (i.e., the agent) to show its agency

as "indie" not just in words, but in the overall use of the text to tell their audience a convincing story about the work they were doing, the progress they were making, and the potholes they were hitting along the way to publication and distribution.

Vlambeer

Unlike Studio MDHR, Vlambeer did not have to prove itself as an up-and-coming game developer. Although Vlambeer did not rest on its laurels, utilized Twitter to maintain its following of users by offering an ostensible insider's look at the development process it employs to create its videogames. The word *ostensible* is key to this understanding, as Vlambeer only wanted to make followers believe it was sharing the entire picture with them, in regard to the development process, where, in reality, it was offering a calculated peek into the behind-the-scenes elements of its work. In short, Vlambeer stood to gain continued notoriety and goodwill from its followers by offering a look into what is usually a process shrouded in secrecy, thereby positioning itself strategically in making an understated argument that it is still "indie." Thus, the true motive is just that: Vlambeer wanted to continue offering evidence that it is still active in the independent game development scene.

The pentadic analysis offered similar outcomes in terms of dominant ratios, but with a distinct message and attempt to legitimize themselves within the community of independent game makers. For Vlambeer, Twitter offered a similar outlet for the authoring of messages geared toward reminding the audience of their legitimacy as an indie game developer. Here the pentadic analysis indicated a dominant ratio of agent-agency; thus, the exploration of this dominant ratio yielded a similar finding to that of the Studio MDHR tweets, but with a distinct method of enacting and portraying legitimacy.

Vlambeer's tweets placed the agent (that is, the developer itself) as the most important element, because the studio had already produced games (unlike Studio MDHR, which was tweeting about its first game). Thus, the name Vlambeer, which was already known and accepted within the indie game developer community, was an asset used rhetorically to remind the audience of who it was and how it was going to continue working to produce games. The name Vlambeer carried with it a history of successful game development and publication, yet it still needed to convince its audience that it was a legitimate indie developer and not a well-funded, corporate entity doing business as an impostor.

The Vlambeer tweets, therefore, also emphasized the company's agency, explaining to followers how it was using funds to maintain its development of games, albeit as a small, two-person operation. In fact, the Tweets highlighted the status of the company's finances and the use of capital in production to prove the point that it was still facing the struggles common among indie companies, despite having a history of success and a well-known name among the community.

The agent-agency ratio, then, lead to the uncovering of the supraliminal and hidden purpose for producing the text. Specifically, the company was attempting to keep its customers informed of the development process, to explain how it was using its funding, and to share the struggles it was facing with the process. The hidden purpose, and true motive for these tweets, however, was very similar to that of Studio MDHR. Specifically, Vlambeer also was attempting to convince its followers that the company was still a real indie developer, despite having had success with a previous game and being a better-known name than other developers.

Anna Anthropy

So far, this application of the pentad has examined two indie companies' tweets, which are sent from Twitter handles that specifically identify themselves as being the developer. In the case of Anna Anthropy, however, the developer is the individual, and vice-versa. Anthropy unlike Studio MDHR and Vlambeer, tweeted as a person who also happens to be a game developer. Thus, applying the lens of the pentad to her tweets yielded a somewhat different dominant ratio, specifically act-agent.

Anthropy, whose tweets were very different from the other two developers in terms of style and content, portrayed herself as an individual through the act of tweeting, and made the content of the tweets the center of focus. Essentially, Anthropy was able to tweet as a person and as a developer; as a result, the *act* of tweeting became the most important part of her purpose, as evidenced by the constant flux of topics, ranging from political activism to game-centered commentary. The tweets also focused on the person making them, or the agent.

As the agent, Anthropy is unique among the three developers, because she does not represent herself as a company, but rather as a person and a developer. In doing so, the agent (i.e., the person making the tweets) takes center stage as an element of paramount importance to the experience of the readers, who are faced with Tweets that appear to be closer to the style of an individual than a company. In doing so, Anthropy makes clear the fact that she cares about gaming, as well as the social justice causes which she publicly supports. She does not filter her tweets for language or grammar, and she appears to not have concern for coming off as less professional than other developers' Twitter handles.

Specifically, Anthropy acts as developer and as person in her Tweets, which she considers (and creates) to be a microblog, more than a one-off topic or conversation. To uncover Anthropy's motive is to understand her use of Twitter to highlight the causes she believes to be socially relevant and meriting her commentary or advocacy. Thus, she turns away from the typical form of communication expected of an indie game developer on Twitter, which in and of itself ends up making the argument that Anthropy is extremely "indie" as a result. Put simply, Anthropy does the most "indie" thing by making Twitter about her, and by injecting her personal commentary and topics of interest into a collection of texts that are not treated as tweets, but as the continued expansion of a microblog, a personal and professional journey.

Conclusion of Burke's Pentad

The end result of this exploration of the three "indie" game studios via Burke's pentad is exactly what he proposed: the motive behind each of the rhetor's creation of texts. Whereas all three developers are (arguably) loosely connected through their status as "indie" within the shared community, the three operate very differently, being guided by unconnected, in some cases even potentially disparate, goals and motives. Twitter serves as a scene from which rich texts may be placed for the public to consume and to create perspectives and judgments of those who operate as creators. For the indie game developers featured in this project, Twitter gave them the space to make the arguments that ultimately allowed them to be (or remain) accepted in the community created around independent game development.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISCUSSION OF THE SELECTED INDEPENDENT GAME DEVELOPERS' ONLINE COMMUNICATION

Grounded theory (Glaser & Holton, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and Burke's pentad (Burke, 1945) guided this analysis of independent game developers' discourse online. These specific developers were chosen because they are all categorized as independent, but they are in different sectors of that definition in a myriad of ways. The range of independent game developers is only overshadowed by the range of the games these developers create. It was assumed their differing characteristics would also help shape how they presented themselves online to their audiences. This work sought to uncover the defining factors delineating independent developers from one another based on how they were situated in the arena of game development, both independent and mainstream. The following table breaks down the characteristics of each of the developers based on the Twitter data and readily available information in games journalism or their individual websites.

Characteristic	Studio MDHR	Vlambeer	Anna Anthropy
Number of games developed	Low	Middle	High
Number of people working on the game examined	High	Middle	Low
Number of years spent developing games	Low	Middle	High
Criticism of games industry	Low	Middle	High
Monetary success	High	Middle	Low
Involvement with first-party publishing (Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo, etc.)	High	Middle	Low
Rate of online participation on Twitter	Low after 1st year of game's release	Middle	High
Amount of popular games journalism coverage	High	Middle	Low
Role in growing independent game development community	Low	High	Middle
Linguistic distance (professional or "canned" tone) given from developers' personality on Twitter	High after Feb, 2018	Middle	Low
Promotion/attachment of their social capital for another's studio or game	Low	Middle	High

Figure 48. Table outlining the characteristics of each developer based on the Twitter data harvested.

How the term "indie" is utilized

Newman (2009) and King (2005, 2009) described an ever-malleable definition of "indie" in their work. Situated in film, King (2005) declared that the industrial factors such as money, publishing, and distribution were not the only measure for "independence" to define itself. For him, the medium of film was not a cohesive whole in the independent or commercial arena. Utilizing "independent" to describe the swath of

films not funded by a major studio would be impossible as the films he examined were not a "single, unified entity" (p. 9). The other forms of expressive media still do not cohesively bind under a singular set of characteristics defining a genre. As noted by King (2005), *Pulp Fiction* blends the explicit violence of an action film with absurd humor blurring the boundaries of each genre. "Indie" has been a consistent misnomer for games, music, film and other art forms, because it is far too reductionistic to account for the nuances of the genres embedded within them. Wiley Wiggins, independent game developer and curator of Fantastic Arcade in Austin, Texas, says "I hate the term 'gamer.' It doesn't even get at the things that people play. It's like asking someone if they are a 'movier' because they watch movies" (Wiley Wiggins, personal correspondence with the author, 2012). Wiggins' point was meant to underscore the need to afford games more consideration in terms of genre and scale. Games have a myriad of ever-expanding genres, as Anthropy mentioned in her rebuke to Jon Blow and the "stagnant indie" comment (Anthropy, 2019ab). To those deeply involved in independent games, there is no "independent" game, but rather the subgenres created by fusing "indie" to the genre in which the game is created. A game like *Queers in Love at the End of the World* by Anna Anthropy – which asks players to think about what they would do if they only had 10 seconds left with their loved one – is a wholly different experience and engagement than a game like *Ridiculous Fishing* by Vlambeer. It follows that "independent" or "indie" is so broad a term when applied to games that it is ineffective to accurately describe them.

My first research question asked, "How are the terms 'indie' and 'independent' deployed by independent game developers within social media, particularly in terms of content featuring the games, the game development process and the videogame industry

as a whole?" In all the cases examined, only Studio MDHR referred to themselves as "indie" in the context of asking their followers to vote for them in a contest for independent game studios. Vlambeer identified as "indie" only in passing when they talked about how difficult it is for small studios to make a multi-platform game: "A lot of indies, us included, simply can't develop for all platforms at once. We just can't" (Vlambeer, 2013b). Anthropy never used the term to describe herself, though she did talk about the independent gaming community and other games as indies. Accordingly, I find that the terms "independent" and "indie" simply were not used by the developers to describe themselves. Highlighting other independent game developers and calling them "indie" was a common practice, especially for Anthropy, but no developer examined proclaimed themselves to be "indie" or "independent" explicitly. What emerged from the data was that the title of "indie" appears to be *earned* from others who talk about the game or developer.

As many have contested the definition of "indie" itself (Brightman, 2015; Cobbett, 2012; Lipkin, 2012; New York Film Academy, 2014; Scimeca, 2014), some developers may feel hesitant to claim the title. A studio which existed from 2004 until 2018 as 100% independently funded[1], Ninja Theory, gave a presentation to the Game Developer's Conference Europe to highlight the space between the niche independent games and the massive dominance of the AAA games. In it, Tameem Antoniades, co-

[1] Ninja Theory was bought by Microsoft in 2018 and announced the sale at the 2018 E3 conference. As of this writing, there was no indication that Microsoft was exerting creative control of Ninja Theory's production. Microsoft continued the trend of buying independent studios with the acquisition of DoubleFine Productions at the 2019 E3, an independent game development icon of almost 19 years. Again, DoubleFine released a video stating they were still the same studio making the same games with the same ideas, the only difference is they no longer worry about pitching the games to publishers.

founder of Ninja Theory, was careful in choosing the words to describe their independent studio and the games they produce. He brought the term "Indie AAA" to the forefront of the discussion, described what it meant to him and his colleagues, and then suggested an alternative term to describe the high production quality and unique facets of Ninja Theory: "I am using the more neutral 'Independent AAA' because there is a particular ethos, culture, and energy that surrounds the word 'Indie' that I admire but don't feel like I've earned" (Antoniades, 2014, para. 20).

This supposition of "earning" the title of "indie," loaded as it is with cultural connotations, is also echoed in the work of King (2009). In *Indiewoood*, he identifies the combination of the tenets of independent film and the funding of a major studio as two sets of characteristics to be considered, but neither immediately deem the film as "indie" or not. He suggests this hybrid to identify "certain types of cinema deemed too close to the activities of the studios to be deserving of the label of 'independent' (p. 4). This concept of a media artifact "deserving" to be among the 'independent' category also loads the term with being elevated in the eyes of those who are entrenched in the study of the media artifact or the thoughtful consumption of it. It is also assumed that those who consume the media artifact are also elevated because they seek out titles "deserving" of the label of 'independent.' In this somewhat circular fashion, those who consume these works are the ones who deem it within or without the spectrum of the independent designation. For example, *The Passion of the Christ* (2003) with its $30 million budget is not widely accepted as an independent film although it was solely funded by the film's apparent auteur, Mel Gibson.

Therefore, as the data showed in all of the above cases, independent game developers do not announce their "indieness," as one blogger wrote (Mann, 2012), in their public online communications. To do so would be to cheapen the designation. It is a title that is earned and bestowed upon the game developer by the independent game development community. Much like an award, the game developer must first be a game developer before becoming an independent game developer. The question thus becomes not, "How do they use the term 'indie' in their communications?" but, "How do their online communications help model and reflect the values of an independent game developer?"

Themes of "Indie" Characteristics

The analysis showed specific themes related to what independent game developers as a whole give value to. These behaviors appeared in some form throughout all the cases. This expands RQ 2: What themes of "indie" characteristics will emerge in the public-facing messages produced by independent video game entities?

Contributing to others. Independent game development benefits each developer by building a strong freelance and promotional network to keep the talents in music, art, programming, design and the many other divisions of game creation informed, while hopefully earning enough to pay rent. Retweets by every independent game developer included those promoting other developer's games as well as their own.

There are also causes that concern the independent game community when someone needs help. Brandon Boyer, chairman of the Independent Games Festival and a notable figure in the community, had a major medical insurance issue that left him with over $110,000 in hospital bills. The independent games community caught wind of it and

had it funded within five days. Other indie game devs created a HumbleBundle (a selection of games the buyer can choose the price for) and diverted all the proceeds to Boyer. Ismail and other developers also changed their website to redirect to Boyer's GoFundMe site.

Anna Anthropy also engaged in signal boosting games in her field of interest to her Twitter following – 78 games in six months, to be precise. She also retweeted five independent artists and coders looking for work, one of whom was laid off from Blizzard and needed another position within 60 days to avoid immigration laws working against him (Garcia, 2019). Looking at the contrast between Anthropy and Studio MDHR, Studio MDHR did not make more than three retweets signal boosting someone else or their game.

Humility. The focus of the independent culture in games is to be an individual. It sounds trite, but the act of owning your own idea and seeing it through to fruition is one of the primary goals of the indie culture. This represents a shift away from the homogenized studio worker who often earns their name buried in the credits for working on mundane tasks in AAA titles.

It is tempting to have this kind of individual celebration go to the head of the independent developer. Therefore, the focus in the independent game development community is on being humble and unassuming. The developers who became so sure of themselves and self-serving soon left the indie game scene. Phil Fish, for example, was heralded for *Fez* before becoming a cautionary tale on professional hubris and dropping away from social media and games to escape taunting and criticism.

Vlambeer learned from Fish's example. They approach their games and present them with a sense of humility and excitement rather than superiority over others. At public appearances at games festivals or conferences, Ismail and Nijman conform to the dress code of the other developers: t-shirt with your game or a friend's game, comfortable jeans, and possibly Chuck Taylor shoes. Neither one of them puts on airs while giving a talk or patronizes the audience. By making themselves humble in front of their cohort and audience, they are able to be more accessible and participate in conversations about games and other topics in independent game development.

Vulnerability. Related to the value of humility is vulnerability. Each developer exhibited this the moment they decided to join a public forum in which other people could interact with them and see the content the developers posted. The act of opening one's self to change, though it may be uncomfortable, is something uniquely independent as monolithic studios cannot be so nimble.

Anthropy allowed herself to be vulnerable by posting her various topics for all to see, but she was not receptive to criticism or critique. She did, however, interact positively with those who wanted to collaborate with her or with whom she shared the same perspective. It is the perspective of this researcher that vulnerability also means allowing yourself and your practices to be affected by the interactions shaping your experience. Anthropy did not engage with anyone questioning her opinions or commentary on any issue in the dataset.

Studio MDHR showed vulnerability in their showcase of their early sketches as well as posting about their family in the earlier tweets. They also admitted very clearly that they were new at the process and needed help getting some features added to the

code. They asked for help with the game engine as well as taking criticism from some followers and responding to it. They also received criticism, but the responses usually turned to sarcasm and brushed off the barb.

Lastly, Vlambeer was the prime example of vulnerability among these cases. The amount of posts to them criticizing their development and update speed were sizable and not friendly. They worked on the game in front of their audience, who were asked to make suggestions to the gameplay and characters within reason. Each criticism was met with a professional apology and response to the tweet letting the user know they were heard. This differed from Studio MDHR as there was an actual apology for the frustration from Vlambeer.

Resist authority. These game developers are skilled creators and have made names for themselves with their contributions to the indie game community. Most of these developers are also not formally trained. Each one either dropped out of a video game design program or never attended. All are self-taught through either crowdsourcing, looking up online videos, or asking someone to teach them.

It stands to reason that when someone is formally taught the rules of game development that they will design within those parameters. For these developers, there were no formal parameters aside from the ones they imposed on themselves. When there are no boundaries, game developers do not know where they are supposed to stop; sometimes, that makes all the difference between a good game and a great game.

Anthropy vehemently opposed the game design school she attended because they were not teaching game design; they were teaching conformity to industry practices. Ismail and Nijman left their courses after they were told to hand over a game they made

outside of class. The Mouldenhauers approached their game with curiosity and let the technical aspects work themselves out.

Though Anthropy works as the game designer in residence at Depaul, her subversive curriculum does little to prepare the next generation of EA quality assurance testers. She found another means to resist the oppression of industry and societal constraints; fittingly enough, it is inside "the bullshit system" (Anthropy, 2012a, p.18).

Taste Culture

Bourdieu (1984) brought attention to the *habitus*, a system for navigating social structures, and described the exclusive tastes and discourses about certain artifacts that would define someone as a high or low status member of the group. Within indie culture, negative reviews from the authorities of film, music or other media is not attributed to the fault of the objects themselves; rather, it is the fault of the traditional reviewer for not cultivating a more robust appreciation for the independently produced artifact. From the perspective of independent culture, the artifacts produced are made for those who are steeped in the subversive and nuanced qualities "indie" is supposed to foster. Having this exclusivity of taste creates borders which traditional media artifacts and those who evaluate them are not knowledgeable enough to cross. For example, King gives a response written by "Mark" after reading a critic's review: "some 'reviewers' here should really stick to the blockbusters and not risk overloading their frail mental capacities with complex storylines and stylish filmmaking" (King, 2009, p. 61).

The link of taste and status was clearest in Anthropy's feed. There were inside references of obscure game titles and comparative microblogs written about them, showing not only the audience her opinion, but also showing that she knew about the

games in the first place. This exclusionary behavior appeared most often in Anthropy's feed as she would discuss her opinions on a game, game event, social issues, her teaching style, or her personal life with her very specific use of language and engagement with the topic. In some cases where another user tried to voice support for the cause, Anthropy would point out a heteronormative assumption or the misuse of a pronoun. This performance of knowledge and verbiage in the causes and subcultures she champions showed her followers that she knew what she was talking about and how to "appropriately" talk about it. Even though the user tried to affirm or agree with Anthropy, the user did not voice the support in the "correct" way.

Studio MDHR modeled *Cuphead* after retro "classic" games with which younger audiences may not be familiar. In some of the tweets, they asked users to answer questions about obscure 1980's games to earn a free game key for their Steam game account. This exhibition was of a means for the developers to flex their "nerd credentials" and legitimize themselves to anyone reading the trivia they asked.

Vlambeer also engaged in this taste culture distinction by adding their own inside jokes to their games and others' games as well. Easter eggs (hidden features or secrets inside the game) have been in practice since William Robinett hid his name in the game *Adventure* because he would not be formally credited for making it (Porges, 2017). Vlambeer even made characters to represent their contemporaries in the independent game development arena. The inspiration for "Fish" in *Nuclear Throne* is Jukio Kallio, the composer of the soundtrack.

The taste culture of the independent games community mirrors some of the characteristics of the greater independent creation community, but if independent games

are going to continue to exist in a consumer-driven economy, they will need to find their own identity in a constantly evolving and volatile industry**.**

Detractors

When criticism arose in the Tweets, it never once referred to a features developer's indie authenticity. The only challenges by other users were confined to weak ad-hominin attacks and complaints about the game needing updates or patches. Overall, the third research question asking how detractors are handled is null from this dataset.

This phenomenon could have been due in part to the ease of accessibility to Twitter by the players of the specific games. Twitter may not be the proper place to discuss the validity of a developer's identification as "indie" as it can be seen as trolling behavior by some and those entrenched in Internet culture already know to not feed the trolls (Condis, 2018). A more appropriate place could be at a game developers conference, festival, or a more intimate and personal gathering of developers where these issues can be discussed face-to-face. Also, blogs from the detracting personality may yield more longform rationale as to the validity of the indie credentials of the other developer.

In future work, other sources of communication should be examined to determine if there are instances of criticism of a developer's status as "indie" in their production and practices. It is also possible that those who are entrenched in independent culture and have the credentials to critique others are more interested in highlighting the productive aspects of independent game development rather than bringing the negative facets greater notoriety.

Games "Indiestry"

King (2009) coined the term "indiewood" in reference to the blurring distinction between the mainstream and independent film of the 2000's. It is my aim to bring the term "indiestry" to the independent game development community as a means of acknowledging the intermingling of large, AAA studios co-opting the work and talent of the independent game development scene.

This work looked at the games and the manner in which the developers of these games communicated their actions, opinions and values through one of the more personal means of social media in Twitter. As noted, the developers who wanted to collaborate with a first-party developer and forego a major investment of social capital in the indie game community began to act and interact like a large studio would with their audience. The extremely personal and avant-garde work remained blunt and unwavering in the depictions of an uncomfortable transition as well as the direct and opinionated communication with the audience. Much like the categorization of "indiewood" as an assemblage of the mainstream and independent film, the games "indiestry" is arising from the funding – but loudly-proclaimed non-involvement – of first-party publishers and independent game developers.

Every medium begins as an independent medium; eventually, it most often evolves into something more people can be a part of and consume, morphing into a corporate venture that finally generates the defining mainstream characteristics against which subsequent splinter "indie" creators establish themselves as the alternative. Games are no different. "Games do not start as an industry, but have moved into that space" (O'Donnell, 2014, loc. 960). The convergence of first-party publishers and indie game

developers muddies the definition of both, but it may benefit both the studios suffering from "sequilitis" and the independent developer unable to afford the overhead to create a unique and engaging game.

As noted before, film has already moved in this direction since the early 1990s. The key to a successful indie film in collaboration with a studio is a "hands off" policy for the studio. King (2009) highlighted the success of *American Beauty* versus *Three Kings* which was fraught with studio-imposed problems. The autonomy afforded *American Beauty* allowed for one cohesive creation to be a success in monetary terms, while stipulations from the studio for casting and other facets of the film stifled *Three Kings*.

The games industry took note of the formula for diversifying the reach of the major studios and the "hands off" policy that spelled success for some of the indiewood films. Xbox was the first to court indie game developers with the Xbox Live Arcade, but their restrictions on the game and the developers soured the sentiment. Sony began wooing developers with the promise that the developer's work is the developer's alone, and Xbox followed suit. Now, Nintendo has joined the fray of winning the trust of independent game developers or #Nindies (Nintendo of America, 2019).

Studio MDHR is the poster child of the indie game success story. The Mouldenhauers had not even taken their game to pitch to other sources of funding when they were approached by ID@Xbox about a partnership. All throughout their Twitter feed, Studio MDHR credits Microsoft, Xbox, and ID@Xbox as great partners and outright friends to them. There are multiple pictures peppered throughout of the ID@Xbox signage and other affiliated developers socializing like long-lost friends, along

with retweets from ID@Xbox. Xbox had a reputation to rebuild, but they were not the ones who could conduct the damage control. They had to utilize Studio MDHR's public face to show the rest of the independent game development community that they were willing to play nice if the developers would just come investigate a partnership.

Vlambeer did something similar with Sony's independent developer program. They discuss in many interviews how well Sony treated them and how they want to remain with them because of their dedication to independent games. What they did not do was use images featuring the developers with Sony in their Twitter feed as Studio MDHR did. Vlambeer's mention of Sony within the context of conversations on Twitter felt more genuine and not like a plug of a service.

Anthropy was not in favor of indie game developers working with larger studios. The *habitus* of independent game development already has structures and a hierarchy defining those with more capital in the field. The formal events like GDC and the Independent Games Festival are thoroughly criticized by Anthropy because of prohibitive costs to many indie developers and the "bro culture" that perpetuates the scene (especially after many diverse indie game developers were driven out after the faceless mob of GamerGate targeted them). With more industry involvement in indie games, smaller developers may be pushed even farther into obscurity, and Anthropy surmises that once major game studios have their hands-on independent game developers, they will eventually become cogs in the game industry machine (Anthropy, 2012a).

Continuing this exploration into the proposed term of the "indiestry" of independent games, it is proposed that the use of the existing structures outlined by the mainstream games and their practices will become more and more integrated into the

independent games scene. Indie is a contrarian notion, but there are those who practice "indie" in their personal interpretation of it. While I propose that the behavior on Twitter of the latter part of 2018 by Studio MDHR replicated the kinds of statements by traditional AAA game companies, it is also just as likely that Studio MDHR still sees themselves as wholly indie and are just creating their independent game in their own manner. There are few things as "indie" as just doing as you want with what you want when you want it.

Limitations

This examination was never designed for generalizability. Case study research seeks to find representatives of either the unique characteristics of an area of inquiry, or it seeks to find representatives of what is typical and widely practiced in an area of inquiry (Stake, 1995). To say that the communication from Studio MDHR is indicative of every independent game developer working with a first party-developer – not just Microsoft – would be foolish and brutally reductionistic. Each of these cases were representative of a notable developer creating games in his, her, or their own manner. The communication and messages shared across the context of a public social media site are also exclusive to each developer. Using these examples of independent game developers and their Twitter usage provided a concrete reference for the researcher and reader to refer to for the sensitizing concepts and behavior exhibited by all three.

These cases shared a common characteristic: they were and are well known. This does not pose a problem to the information the more "indiestry" games and developers provided, but it does pose a problem to representing the radically indie and avant-garde independent game developers. Part of the more underground independent scene is having

a scarcity of information and access; only those in the know will know.

I do not pretend to be one of the independent developers or claim to be a member of the independent game development scene, thus leaving me out of the cycle of information about exciting games no one has ever heard about. This disadvantage leaves the research with an even more mainstream edge as Anna Anthropy is not a new player in the independent game community.

Taking the idea of the radical indie end of the spectrum one step further, Anna Anthropy may represent a more accessible and mainstream developer when placed in the context of the radical indie game development category. It can be argued that this study lacked a 'true indie,' but the aim of this work was to examine their public performance of communication to their publics; it was not to determine the definition of a 'true indie.'

Attempting to define 'indie' is a constant conundrum for those engaged inside and outside of indie culture. This is another limitation to this study as the developers selected to represent the various levels of involvement with the 'indiestry' were selected based on the definitions of "indie" by other scholars and media authorities. As there is still no consensus of a common definition of that type of media production, it is entirely possible that each of the developers were enacting their own definition of 'indie' and engaging in the social media public performance according to their own set of rules. The indie ethos exists to resist. If the "indie spirit" as some are wont to say (Joubert, 2009; Irving, 2015; Tzioumakis, 2014; Ong, 2019) is pinned down by words as walls, it is likely to use that definition as an impetus to generate a new iteration of independent media production.

Future Research

Themes regarding a close homophilic relation from the developer to the audience

were prevalent. The accessibility and the constant encouragement from the developers that game creation was within the capabilities of anyone with a computer and an Internet connection could be read in various ways. One perspective is they truly want more videogames to be created. A second perspective is they are already established in their game development notoriety – wherever they are content – and do not feel threatened by another developer taking eyes and hands away from their future games. Third, the developers wanted to be seen as someone to whom the audience could relate and with whom they might connect as a person.

Appealing to the audience in a more personal than professional manner may give the audience the impression the developer is like the audience. After all, everyone's background began with them being interested in game development but not knowing how to express their points of view in that medium. If the developer has a more personal tone and is willing to be vulnerable, as is indicated by the previous analysis, it stands to reason a homophilic comparison of the audience to the developer may link certain characteristics of both (McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2006). By appealing to the personal side of the developer, they may be able to gain more followers and possibly increase sales of their games (Huang, Shen, Williams, & Contractor, 2009). If independent developers need to be vulnerable, they may be able to use that as an appeal to their audiences; the players may be more inclined to seek out their own perspective represented in a game made by someone they perceive to be similar to themselves.

Another future direction this research could take is a content analysis of the games industry press regarding a redefinition of independent games from 2010 to present day. The year 2012 was dubbed the "indie explosion," with the launch of digitally

distributed titles with wider appeal and accessibility on consoles (New York Film Academy, 2014). After that, the market became flooded with titles. By 2014, many critics were writing about "the year that 'indie' died" (Scimeca, 2014). Scimeca suggests the term "indie" should be reserved for those developers willing to combine "innovation, artistic relevance, and risk taking which the mainstream industry generally cannot afford" (para. 12). In exchange, the indies who have become well-known and well-funded need to move into the tier of "small studio" instead of "indie." In Scimeca's summation, they aren't living up to the risk-taking ideal of the independent community. A content analysis could determine what studios and what games are earning feature stories and positive sentiment from the most popular games journalism outlets. Having such a wide disparity among the term "indie" could indicate the need for a new term for these developers – possibly as a game "indiestry" developer as I have proposed – and it will be better received and less pejorative than "dependies" (Newman, 2009, p. 17).

Conclusion

Through the online Twitter feeds of these three independent game developers, it became clear that those situated at different positions in the overall independent game development scene treat their online personas with as much variation as there is within the games they publish. The one feature they all share is their love of the medium of games. In an exchange I had with Ismail in 2012, I asked what one should to do to be accepted into the "inner circle of indie games." Ismail said, "You just have to make games" (Ismail, 2012, personal communication).

A paradoxical feature of independent media production is that if the product is too specific and personal, no one else will be able to relate to it. If the indie artist creates

something no one else consumes, that artist is not seen by the intended audience. Though many independent artists claim to make their art, games, films, or music for themselves, they would not make it available for others to consume if it was truly for the artist only. In this way, independent culture and creation is not an artist striking out to defy the conventions of a medium and build a defense against assimilation; it is rather a beacon trying to attract others of the same taste and perhaps the same outlook on the world around them. The games these developers create exist to bring more people together and give the developers and audience the opportunity to find common ground where they did not know common ground existed.

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Anthropy, A. (2019e, February 11). Game for Lovesync. One player presses the button and then immediately begins the four second hold to Cancel Desire. The other player attempts to press their button as quickly as possible after their button light turns off. Retrieved June 15, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1095115824170455040

Anthropy, A. (2019f, February 11). Game for Lovesync. You and your opponent simultaneously try and press your buttons using only your mind. Whoever lights up their opponent’s button first wins. Retrieved June 15, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1095115218944958464

Anthropy, A. (2019g, February 11). I want us to consider the Lovesync not as a technological bandaid for straight couples’ inability to communicate but as an exciting new long distance one button game platform. Retrieved June 15, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1095116278573027328

Anthropy, A. (2019h, February 11). teaching is full of challenges, like "how do you tell your students you’re not coming in today because something triggered your depression really strongly and you’re unable to get out of bed? Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1095006615177228289

Anthropy, A. (2019i, April 6). and games academics, let’s not legitimize the push to stifle diversity by being the Well-Dressed Fascist On The Cover Of The New Yorker who provides a rational-seeming face to the homogenization of games. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114630998963249153

Anthropy, A. (2019j, April 6). as a game designer, my Vision for this game might be that it be hard, that the player have to Work. if i only provide one version of that experience, it’s

assuming that what is hard for one person is equally hard for everyone - that everyone's starting from the same place. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114630044574539777

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Anthropy, A. (2019m, April 6). one of the hallmarks of fascism is its insistence on a monolithic narrative. trump regularly condemns journalists as deceiving the american people. fascists want there to be one perspective, one truth - no room for varied perspectives. now let's talk about game difficulty. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114629113376063488

Anthropy, A. (2019n, April 6). part of that discourse is based around the fallacy that there is only one correct, objective perspective. (it just happens to be Our perspective.) there is only one way to understand a game, and anyone who tries to widen the conversation has an ulterior ("political") motive. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114629373909524480

Anthropy, A. (2019o, April 6). that carries into conversations about game difficulty. gamers insisted dean takahashi wasn't fit to cover games because he wasn't "good enough" at them. he could never provide the Correct perspective on cuphead - that of a skilled player. https://t.co/U6DF0UVoSz. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114629579358994433

Anthropy, A. (2019p, April 6). the links between games "activists" and the alt-right are pretty well-established. g#mergate, a movement that harassed and threatened marginalized people out of games, did so under the guide of "ethics in journalism," a trumpian phrase to be sure. https://t.co/jfShBXl96j. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114629231143792640

Anthropy, A. (2019q, April 6). think for a minute about what game skill ultimately tests for: the ability to follow instructions to maximum efficiency ("save the frames, kill the animals") and to mold yourself to fit a normative standard of ability. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114630446254571520

Anthropy, A. (2019r, April 6). this argument points to the idea that there is one correct way to experience a game. why would we be interested in the perspective of someone who grew

frustrated with cuphead, or gave up, or who might approach the game differently, or who might be playing with extra lives? Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114629735932411904

Anthropy, A. (2019s, April 6). this stems from the truth that different people have different backgrounds, experiences, and levels of skill. to insist everyone try to clear the same bars is to erase those whose experiences (and often, bodies) are non-normative. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114630289714810881

Anthropy, A. (2019t, April 6). ultimately, insistence that there be only one possible way to experience and understand a game is, at worst, a fascist impulse, and for designers to cater exclusively to it sends the same message as thq nordic visiting 8chan: we don't need diversity. Retrieved June 16, 2019, from Twitter website: https://twitter.com/adult_witch/status/1114630597945831424

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