

Defining Indie

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Genre and Theory

Research Question: How is indie defined in the games industry?

Introduction

The definition of “indie” has been a topic of debate in media studies for decades, both inside and outside of games (Newman, 2009). It is a common belief that “indie” and “independent” are synonymous, as indie originated as a shortened form of independent, but this stance is arguable (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016).

Academics propose a variety of methods to categorize what constitutes indie, from identifying core aesthetic values in art and mechanics (Juul, 2014), to creating a framework of indie “markers” to identify indie games (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016), to discussing indie as a “taste culture” (Hoogendoorn, 2014; Newman, 2009) defined by its distinction from the “mainstream” (Smith, 2016).

Many of these definitions share a recognition of indie culture’s heavy ties to media nostalgia (Bowman and Wulf, 2023; Wulf, Rieger and Schmitt, 2018) and romanticization (Bosman, 2023).

This paper serves as a review of relevant literature on the definitions of indie and independent games, and the connections between the indie subculture and the ideas of romanticization and nostalgia.

Findings

“Indie,” not “Independent”

To define indie, one should first define what it is not. Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) argue that the terms “indie” and “independent,” commonly seen as synonymous, are *not* in fact interchangeable. They create a framework for evaluating the independence of a game, based on three core criteria, each criterion defined by a relation between the developer and an outside influence.

1. Financial Independence (developer – investor relation)
2. Creative Independence (developer – audience relation)
3. Publishing Independence (developer – publisher relation)

Meanwhile, indie refers to a set of “indie markers” informed by a specific set of early 2000s games released in Western markets (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016):

- Retro Style
- Experimental Nature
- Small Team/Budget/Price-to-play

- Middleware
- Small Size/Digital Distribution
 - Reliability as indie marker lessening in recent years.
- Indie Mindset
 - Certain sets of narratives/tendencies seen across indie games.
 - Advocating for independence from the “corporate machine” - established mainstream.
 - Being anti-authoritarian, personal, or authentic.
 - Impression of indie games designed by a “community of gamers.”
- Indie Scene
 - Identified around the Independent Game Festival.
 - Self-appointed label, member created/curated community.

The indie marker referring to “retro style” is closely related to the discussion of an “Independent Style,” defined by Juul (2014). This is a style associated with the visual and mechanical aesthetics commonly seen in classic indie games, such as those released around the time of the first Independent Game Festival (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016), denoted by their use of modern technology to recreate “simplistic” or “low-tech” visuals and/or mechanics (Juul, 2014).

The idea of an “indie scene” or mindset refers to indie games being viewed as more “authentic,” honest, or real than the perceived mainstream, (Hoogendoorn, 2014; Juul, 2014; Lipkin, 2013); this creates a subculture reminiscent of the Romantic movement of the late 1700s (Bosman, 2023).

Indie as Contextual Definition

The definition of indie is based on the context and purpose (Parker, 2014). Hoogendoorn (2014) defined three “forces” existent in the games industry that use indie in separate ways: Audience, Developer, and Publisher. These draw on the ideas of a “market circuit,” which contains three sub-circuits: Culture, Technology, and Marketing (Kline, Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, 2003).

Each of Hoogendoorn’s forces occupy one of the circuits described in *Digital Play* (Hoogendoorn, 2014; Kline, Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter, 2003), and each classifies indie differently and for different uses.

The Force of Developers/Circuit of Technology

Before digital distribution, the games industry did not clearly differentiate between indie and mainstream – most games were produced independently of publishers (Parker, 2014;

Martin and Deuze, 2009). As middleware became common and digital distribution became viable, the early indie developers were hobbyists or “professional developers” creating in their free time (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011; Lipkin, 2013).

Over time, distinctions between indie and mainstream grew, especially in reference to Western games released around the time of the first Independent Games Festival (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016). However, those distinctions have blurred – some factors identified with the indie scene, such as a small team, no longer apply (Hoogendoorn, 2014).

Instead of labelling companies according to finances or organizational structure, Hoogendoorn (2014) argues developers can be identified through their *goal* – the mainstream *games-for-profit* vs traditional indie *games-for-culture*.

A significant percentage of the industry is controlled by multinational corporations seeking high-reward, low-risk investments (Martin and Deuze, 2009 pp. 277–278). An issue faced by games investors is known as the “90/10 problem” – 90% of profits are earned by 10% of games (Hoogendoorn, 2014). This creates a hit-driven market, where publishers only invest in guaranteed hits.

Indie developers, being culture-oriented, can take creative risks (Hoogendoorn, 2014) and more frequently design “experimental” games (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016). However, indie developers may struggle to compete financially with mainstream companies. This is seen in mobile markets where games have lower expected standards of quality, but also lower expected price-to-play. Many mobile games have turned to free-to-play models, with in-app purchases built into the game’s design (Hoogendoorn, 2014).

“Traditional indie developers” have difficulties abandoning design elements for monetization (Hoogendoorn, 2014). This leaves a market gap which is filled by independent developers who prioritize financial gain but sacrifice their indie identity (Lipkin, 2013).

The Force of Audience/Circuit of Culture

While developers can be categorised by their *goal* (either cultural impact or profits), audiences tend to define indie based on perceived *authenticity* (Hoogendoorn, 2014). Games or developers seen as “authentic” are labelled indie, those that are not authentic are mainstream.

Audiences identify themselves with “better culture” while “differentiating from others who identify themselves with lesser culture” – i.e., the mainstream (Hoogendoorn, 2014). This ties into the ideas of romanticization as discussed by Bosman (2023), where indie communities romanticize geopolitical, psychological, or historical “others:” children,

animals, the exotic, monsters, lunatics, primitives, peasants, and the naïve (Bosman, 2023).

Indie audiences have a “self-perception of themselves as an opposition to the ‘lower’ mainstream texts... reinforcing their status as a rarified and privileged consumer” (Smith, 2016). They use the indie label to categorise authentic games, which are seen as “highbrow,” or more sophisticated than the “lowbrow,” mainstream media (Hoogendoorn, 2014).

However, the definition of authenticity is highly subjective – members of different social-cultural backgrounds have specific cultural memories or experiences, which lead to unique definitions of authenticity among social-cultural groups (Newman, 2009). These groups form “classes” of “taste culture,” which can be used by producers as reliable market demographics (Hoogendoorn, 2014).

The Force of Publishers/Circuit of Marketing

While certain sectors of the games industry were traditionally the domain of indie developers (like mobile markets) (Hoogendoorn, 2014), Martin and Deuze (2009) argue that at the time of their writing publishers were beginning to invade these indie spaces.

These indie spaces are used by publishers as testing grounds for new tech or IP (Smith, 2016), or as a marketing tool (Hoogendoorn, 2014 p. 6). Additionally, publishers can utilise taste cultures (Hoogendoorn, 2014; Newman, 2009) created by different socioeconomic classes as reliable market demographics; by understanding how specific socioeconomic classes define indie, publishers can better market to those classes (Smith, 2016), or even create games that specifically cater to a given definition of indie (Hoogendoorn, 2014 p. 46).

According to Jones, Alvarez and Alvarez (2005), media can have two different forms of authenticity: *Manufactured Authenticity* (where games seek to copy the style of previous games deemed authentic), or *Creative Voice* (where games achieve authenticity through creative innovation) (Jones, Alvarez and Alvarez, 2005 p. 893).

Thus, mainstream publishers use audience-created definitions of authenticity, which are grouped by the audiences’ socio-cultural backgrounds into taste cultures, to outline market demographics and create media with “manufactured authenticity” to cater to the indie audience.

Conclusion

The debate around the definition of indie has existed longer than the games industry itself (Newman, 2009). Early games match modern definitions (Martin and Deuze, 2009; Parker, 2014), with clearer distinctions between indie and mainstream only appearing with the rise of digital distribution and shareware in the 1990s and early 2000s (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016).

The belief that a game's indie status is purely defined by the developer's independence is outdated and inaccurate (Garda and Grabarczyk, 2016), while determinants such as organizational structure and team size (Martin and Deuze, 2009) are becoming less applicable as metrics (Guevara-Villalobos, 2013).

What is considered indie depends on context and purpose (Parker, 2014). By comparing the theories of the games industry as "market circuits" (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2003) and "forces" (Hoogendoorn, 2014), we can begin to identify how, why, and by whom indie is defined.

Audiences are grouped into "classes" by their "taste culture," informed by shared social-cultural backgrounds (Newman, 2009; Hoogendoorn, 2014). These classes define what is personally "authentic," and thus indie, through common experiences, memory, and nostalgia (Smith, 2016; Bosman, 2023).

Publishers create media that either has authenticity according to an audience - "Creative Voice," or is designed to follow trends and conventions established by previous authentic material - "Manufactured Authenticity" (Jones, Alvarez and Alvarez, 2005).

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of indie, many academics agree on a few key points: "indie" does not directly equate to "independent;" the definition of "indie" depends on the context, person or organisation in question, and intentions of the defining party; and that definitions of "indie" used by indie communities and audiences are based on audience-perceived "authenticity" of a game or developer, informed by that community's "taste culture."

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