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The Logic of Distinction of Independent Games

ANDREAS JAHN-SUDMANN

> We will create, through sheer force of will, an independent games revolution, an audience and market and body of work that will ultimately redound to the benefit of the whole field, providing a venue for creative work, as independent cinema does for film, as independent labels do for music. ("Designer X" 2000)

In popular culture, the label 'independent' is commonly associated with music or movies but rarely with computer games. Since the proclamation of the Scratchware Manifesto in 2000 the development of an independent games movement has advanced - e.g. the institutionalisation of the San Francisco Independent Games Festival - however, the question game designer and theorist Eric Zimmermann raised in 2002 is still significant: "Do Independent Games Exist?" (Zimmermann 2002).

In this article, the still substantially unexplored cultural sphere of independent games will be examined from a comparatistic perspective using the concept of the (US) independent film as an example. Starting point for the following reflections is that, with regard to economics and aesthetics, American independent film as an established alternative practice is said to be a role model for the characterisation of the emerging independent games movement. Neverthless, the question remains whether independent film can be a suitable example at all. Embedded in the issue what constitutes the independence of independent film is a relational logic inasmuch as the answer requires to not only analyse what is described as independent or claims to be independent. In fact, the very concept prompts the question from *what* the independent is independent, from *what* does it differ and distinguish itself and by which means. The main reference for the American independent film will, of course, be Hollywood mainstream cinema. It has yet to be sorted out on the basis of which features independent films can be distinguished from mainstream films. Geoff King points out three distinguishing level of criteria that can be transferred to the cultural practice of independent games:

> the position of individual films, or filmmakers, in terms of (1) their industrial location, (2) the kinds of formal/aesthetic strategies they adopt, (3) their relationship to the broader social, cultural, political or ideological landscape. (King 2005, p. 1-2)

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(1)

Only recently, the computer game industry has visibly developed into a popular transnational media industry whose sales figures, with certain qualifications, can be compared to those of Hollywood's movie industry. Accordingly, digital games have emerged as a mainstream phenonemon. At this stage, the game industry is dominated by just a few globally operating publishers (a.o. EA, Sony, Vivendi Universal, Microsoft) who, despite the range of seemingly recurring genre, franchise, and license titles, supply commercial retailers so successfully that independent game developers and publishers can hardly participate in this profitable market.

In contrast, independent film disposes of efficient distribution channels that run parallel to those of Hollywood's mainstream industry. However, many of the films, in the US and worldwide, that are labelled as ‚indies', are not necessarily produced, financed, and distributed outside the studio system. On the contrary, since the beginning of the 1990s, every major studio has founded its own independent and so called *specialty*/ *classics* division respectively or bought in formerly independent film companies. Nevertheless, a number of relatively autonomous independent film companies (producers/ distributors) still exist and, time and again, come up with successful niche movies that occasionally bring in considerable profit (cf. Jahn-Sudmann 2006).

There are no similar commercial accomplishments in the field of digital games. Most independent companies lack the financial means to compete with the major's expensive and elaborate productions. Particularly, the creation of console games is complex and costly. For instance, developing a PlayStation3 game costs between 15 and 30 million US-dollar, not including the marketing costs that can amount to another 10 million Dollars. Because of these great developing costs small game companies are usually dependent on financial support in form of eg. license contracts with bigger publishers that provide the required capital in terms of prepayments for the license fees in exchange for the rights of use. On the basis of such business models, however, independent developers can hope for spectacular profits only on rare occasions.

Due to the limited market chances, many independent game companies (e.g. GameLab) concentrate on the cheaper and, thus, lower-risk production of games that are played online, within a browser and/or can be downloaded from a webserver. A majority of these online/ download games are casual games like *Diner Dash* (2003) or *Gish* (2004). Common feature of these games is their easy, intuitive operability. They primarily address users who for various reasons (e.g. limited time, ressources, etc.) are interested in diverting, easily accessable games while, technically, they make minor demands on hardware and memory capacity. The casual games business still is a troublesome endeavour, though, not least because of the many free offers on the Internet.

Due to the unprofitability of independent games attracting fundings for them is even harder than funding independent films. At best, financiers have invested in independent game companies but not in individual projects. Meanwhile, however, companies like GameLab are increasingly anxious to promote project based funding - like it is common practice in independent film financing. Though basically, one cannot talk of independent funding when the mainstream industry is involved.

(2)

Apart from industrial-economical criteria, product specific citeria are applied to define the independence of independent films. Accordingly, the analogous question reads: In what way do games that are characterised as (industrially) independent distinguish themselves as aesthetically alternative games?

For their very manner of production, casual games visually differ distinctly from current mainstream large-scale productions. With their minimalistic, often comic-like graphics they recall home computer or early PC-era games. Beyond their reduced aesthetics, most casual games are structured conventionally and smoothly fit into marketable (mainstream) game genres: action, strategy, simulation etc. And in many cases they pursue, more consequently than mainstream products, the popular core logic to design cultural artefacts as accessible and mainstream attractive as possible.

But are there, among the (industrially) independent casual games or the more complex, elaborate download or web games, games whose product specific characteristics distinguish them as evidently alternative games; by the artefact showing an articulate will to be distinct, an explicitly tangible anti-conventionality, the momentum of an aesthetic resistance like ideally to be expected from independent films by - say - Harmony Korine, David Lynch, or John Waters?

With independent films, aesthetic anti-conventionality is often associated with their deviating from „familiar conventions of the classical Hollywood variety“ (King 2005, p. 59). Since a comparable, empirically founded analysis of computer games does not exist as yet, the foremost task would be to find out which dominant genre-spanning conventions as quasi negative references of an alternative aesthetics of digital games come into consideration and to what extent such a concept is comparable to the classical Hollywood paradigm at all.

Subject of a quasi pre-theoretical critique of mainstream games, not least from independent game developers, in most cases is the imitation and reproduction of successful games (with the multiple application of game engines) and the fixation on visual-graphical spectacles. Obviously, this critique resembles the one that blames Hollywood mainstream films for their standardised, schematic narrative patterns as well as, particularly in the digital age, for privileging superficial effects at the cost of narrative complexity and other story values. But feature films and digital games are only comparable to some degree. It would hardly be appropriate to expect that the sowly emerging independent games movement has to take the aesthetics of independent films as a role model in order to constitute and distinguish itself as an alternative practice. Digital games, indeed, aesthetically and narratively link to films, including elements from cinematic narration and aesthetics, just as films integrate digital game elements. Bolter and Grusin (1999) regard this as a quasi-natural process in the relation of ‚new’ and ‚previous’ media and call this remediation. At the same time, digital games feature ‚configurational structures’ that prompt users to actively manipulate their components. This formal characteristic has undoubtedly to be considered when reflecting on aesthetic strategies of distinction in digital games. Consequentially, it is not enough to analyse games with regard to their mimetic, representational elements (plot/story, characters, etc.) which are most likely fit to demonstrate similarities and equivalents between independent films and games. Besides, for a number of independent game designers this is a matter of course:

They pointedly work on alternative concepts on the configurational level. One example is the independent casual game *FlOw* (2006) developed on Flash Basis by Jenova Chen, a USC School of Cinematic Arts graduate, as his complentary work. Since its release *FlOw* has been downloaded more than two million times.

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

Due to its stringent focussing on the game practical execution and fathoming of such a psychological phenomenon *FlOw* is an innovative alternative to many mainstream games that for their part aim at generating a flow-effect but often trigger a converse effect since the player is overchallenged with a too demanding or to easy game play or the inevitable interruption of the game flow by so called cut scenes.

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

(3)

That such an aesthetic in which the oppositional logic is embedded visibly does not exist yet or only marginally may have various reasons – and that is beyond the doubtlessly basic problem that the aesthetic conventions of popular games still are too vague and on the part of producers and game users have been internalised only insignificantly to enfold directed dynamics of distinction in the sense of a much-cited ‚indie spirit'. Perhaps digital games are primarily understood to be an aesthetic practice that should be or is decidedly accessible (popular) and not resistant or difficile. Perhaps the discomfort with cultural mainstream forms is not that much pronounced that it presses developers of independent games forward to create explicitly visible or tangible counter culture aesthetics. Perhaps it is because popular computer games are not regarded as mainstream.

While independent films have distinguished themselves from the cultural mainstream by constantly displaying controversial, provocative images and topics, in computer games there already are numerous blockbuster products that represent these very attributes of an alternative practice. Not least due to the lasting controversial image of commercial computer games in general independent games find decidedly less starting points to individuate as an alternative culture via provocative ‚subversive'

forms of games. At any rate, excessive violence as an articulation of distinction drops out.

Not coincidentally, a form of independent games has developed that tries to distinguish itself from mainstream games by doing without (or remodelling) violence: Christian games like *Timothy and Titus* (2006). Instead of fighting against virtual enemies or waging wars, etc. players earn points for love, faith, and hope[1], and work along the lines of: „Pray don't pop! Mission not massacre!" While these christian games, no doubt, are a distinction-conscious form of game culture, it is difficult to accredit them with a kind of deconstructivist aesthetics solely on the basis of an ‚anti-violence philosophy'.

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

Other ‚serious' games are explicitly arranged as a critical, interceding practice in order to call attention to social problems in the ‚real world'. Among these *Escape from Woomera* (2004) is an example. It is a game that was developed with the purpose to spotlight the precarious situation in Australian refugee camps and challenges the player to flee - legally or illegally - from such a camp.

While interceding-oppositional practices in US independent cinema, particularly since the 1960s, have been identified with the effort to combine a cinematic critique of social conditions etc. with aesthetic radicality, games with an agenda are content with using the game as a popular tool instead of designing a critical aesthetic practice as a critique of aesthetics.

Additionally, *Escape from Woomera* is not a new or autonomous games in the strict sense of the word but a modification of the popular first person shooter *Half Life 2*. Such visibly artistical and/ or political misappropriations of shooter games are no new phenomenon - quite the reverse. They have long constituted their own and very heterogenous subgenre (Engeli 2008). And they are undeniably a particular form of articulation of independent games that claim to maintain an oppositional attitude. Nonetheless, ‚mod games' present a special case in alternative game culture insofar as their oppositional/ deconstructive gesture is substantially displayed in the act of the modifying appropriation of existing cultural products rather than in the inscription of oppositional/ deconstructive concepts into genuine self-produced games.

Conclusion

Accordingly, independent games, in general, are – compared to independent films – even less to be understood as the ‚radical other' in the face of an (imagined) mainstream culture – despite the heterogeneity and the hybridity of practices that the label independent incorporates in both cultural fields. (Ambitious) independent games may from time to time bear up against products of the dominant game industry when

it comes to being innovative or creative and they may sometimes differ distinctly from the outward appearance of mainstream games – but this difference does not include an oppositional logic that is *explicitly* recognisable as negation or challenge of mainstream game forms.

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Notes

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