



INDEPENDENT VIDEOGAMES: CULTURES, NETWORKS, TECHNIQUES AND POLITICS

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The collective volume *Independent Videogames: Culture, Networks, Techniques and Politics* is the newest addition to the Routledge Advances in Game Studies series. It is edited by Paolo Ruffino, author of *Future Gaming: Creative Interventions in Video Game Culture* (Goldsmiths and MIT Press, 2018), whose research focuses on independent game development, the automation of play, and contemporary practices and technologies of gamification and quantification of the self.

The volume collects research into independent videogames in North and Central America, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia over a period of more than a decade. Case studies and theoretical investigations are divided into five sections – cultures, networks, techniques, politics and local indie game studies.

Independent or ‘indie’ videogames are commonly understood as games produced by individuals or small companies outside of the mainstream AAA studios. Any attempt at the serious investigation of the topic will reveal that this simplistic view is far from problematic. In the introductory chapter “After independence”, P. Ruffino provides an overview of the research on independent videogames and highlights various issues related to the phenomenon. According to P. Ruffino, the notion of independence is rooted in “a struggle to find alternative modalities to make, play, and distribute videogames” (p. 4). These modalities are now an integral part of the global game industry to the point that independence “is now considered the most common type of employment in the videogame industry” (p. 5). It also requires an understanding of other creative contexts (like cinema, music, fashion) where the notion of independence has been debated for much longer and although it is a common thread across game development in different world regions, local specifics cannot be ignored. P. Ruffino summarizes various accounts that problematized the definition of independence, such as Maria B. Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk’s argument that there is independence in terms of creativity, distribution, or financing and these areas do not have to overlap. Therefore, if the meaning of independence depends on geographical and historical specificities, P. Ruffino argues that this volume tries to build a structure for an investigation of various discursive performances and practices around independent videogames by organizing the chapters around specific analytical contexts.

Although such organization is desirable and should provide readers with useful benchmarks in the diverse material, it is questionable if specific chapters are grouped in sections according to completely transparent criteria, given how much their authors’ focus and approaches differ from one chapter to another. For example, the first part “Cultures” couples Aphra Kerr’s empirical study of Irish game jams with Bonnie Ruberg’s article challenging the very notion of independent games via the ‘queer games avant-garde’ and Paweł Grabarczyk’s investigation of characteristics of indie games development for VR. Typically, individual chapters are illuminating. Whether their organization in this volume helps to create “a strategic mapping of the notion of independence” (p. 4), is less conclusive.

When I say typically, I mean that although some contributions may bring valuable content on their own, they rather blur the overall picture than contribute to the legible map. Ruberg's chapter fails to outline her notion of 'queer games avant-garde' succinctly and sometimes reads more like a promotion or invitation to read her upcoming book on the subject (understandably, but also somewhat unsatisfactorily). Patrick Crogan's chapter on "The conditions of videogame production" may be too hard to swallow for readers not familiar with philosopher Bernard Stiegler's theory of technics, the main problem not being the focus of Stiegler's philosophical project, but rather its terminology. Casey O'Donnell's chapter on "Game production studies" or 'studio studies' feels a bit out of place, as it is the only article in the volume focusing on research theory and methodology.

However, most contributions serve the mapping ambition of the volume very well, especially the last section "Local indie game studies" containing accounts of indie scenes in Latin America, Australia, Finland, USA, UK and Canada. Additionally, Celia Pearce's "Strange bedfellows: indie games and academia", three case studies examining "the complex and often invisible entanglements" (p. 106) between academic and indie games environments, should be of particular interest to academic researchers such as my colleagues in the department of digital games and myself.

Overall, the volume supplies a robust and vital body of investigative work to anyone interested in the independent game industry and development. Especially so if we consider that these days, independent games are hardly positioned on the sidelines of the industry (as they perhaps were in the 2000s and early 2010s), but rather being the dominant mode of game production.

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