

Playing the Industry: Exploring the Margins of the Videogame Industry through *Game Dev Tycoon*

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INTRODUCTION

Game studies scholarship has extensively mapped the struggles of ‘independent’ (‘indie’) game developers to be financially sustainable in the videogame industry (Banks and Keogh 2021; Lipkin 2021; Simon 2021). Upon their emergence, indie games were viewed optimistically, both as aesthetically unorthodox artifacts – often labeled as *artgames* (Parker 2013a; Sharp 2015) – and as signifying a countercultural movement that was capable of resisting the dominance of the neoliberal politics permeating the mainstream games industry (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Galloway 2006). The documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* (dir. Swirsky and Pajot 2012) extended this perspective to popular understanding by highlighting the stories of successful indie developers. However, in the following decade or so, many scholars have emphasized the conformation of indie developers to standardized production practices and the inability of indies to present alternatives to the conventions of triple-A (AAA) development (De Wildt and Aupers 2018; Lipkin 2013; Parker 2013b; Pérez Latorre 2016; Ruffino 2013; 2021; Simon 2013; Vanderhoef 2016). Indie games are therefore as much part of, as resistant to, the standardized culture of the games industry.

This research adds onto existing scholarship by reviewing its themes through a textual analysis of a case study representing the topic – *Game Dev Tycoon* (Greenheart Games 2012). This business management game simulates the games industry by making the player journey through the industry’s history at the helm of a game development company – thus it invites the player to consider the challenging considerations behind game development (O’Donnell 2019). Notably, the game is developed by Greenheart Games, consisting of “a small indie team working remotely from all over the world” (Greenheart Games n.d.). A textual analysis of the game will therefore scrutinize how the games industry’s development practices are envisioned by a force clearly on the margins of its system. As such, *Game Dev Tycoon* provides a vantage point from which to consider the normative conventions of the games industry, and how they may be oppressive to truly anti-mainstream initiatives, from the relevant object of study itself – the videogame.

METHODOLOGY: RULES OF PLAY, RULES OF INDUSTRY?

In textual game analysis, reading is synchronized with playing. Thus, textual interpretation surfaces through play (Carr 2009), more specifically *gameplay*, i.e. the experience of a game system through play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 303). Games

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create meaning through the *procedurality* of gameplay, which Ian Bogost called *procedural rhetoric*, the videogame's medium-specific capability to convey ideas through its dynamic processes (Bogost 2007; 2008). Taken at its most extreme, as identified by Miguel Sicart (2011; 2014), a game's meaning may be reduced to the formal system of the game's rules, rather than how it is actualized in the play activity. Procedural rhetoric, Sicart argues, may thus call for *instrumental play*, a strict adherence of the player to the rulesets of a particular game – an act of conformity.

In *Game Dev Tycoon*, instrumental play means conforming not to just any ruleset, but to the one at the core of the industry itself: the conformity of a grassroots indie game company to standardized development practices. Thus, *the rules of the industry are reflected in the rules of play*. Resisting those rules in *Game Dev Tycoon* would require the player to elide this obedience to standardization, the achievement of which was labeled by Espen Aarseth as *transgressive play*, a “gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game” (Aarseth 2007, 132). As such, this study follows the methodological advice to position textual analyses on a spectrum between instrumental and transgressive gameplay modes (Van Vught and Glas 2018). Here, this methodological positioning is explicitly related to the player's critical positioning toward the industry. Following Stuart Hall's (2006 [1980]) three hypothetical positions of decoding media texts as *hegemonic*, *negotiated* or *oppositional*, and how Adrienne Shaw (2017) adapted this model to interactive, affordance-based media, it is possible to contemplate three significantly different analyses of *Game Dev Tycoon*: one from an instrumental/hegemonic perspective, carefully conforming to the game's consideration of successful game development, one from a transgressive/oppositional perspective, which attempts to emphatically reject conventionally successful game production, and a final analysis which negotiates aspects of both sides by conforming to cultural production standards (such as game genre conventions) while refusing expansion of the development studio, thus remaining an (albeit mainstream-oriented) indie ('mindie'), an emerging phenomenon according to recent scholarship (Crogan 2018; Parker 2021).

FINDINGS

The analysis finds that *Game Dev Tycoon* portrays an industry in which commercial sustainability is highly dependent on cultural standardization, as profits are intricately connected to review scores, which are in turn linked to the degree to which development matches cultural conventions of game topics, genres, design values, and technological proficiency. As such, the transgressive/oppositional playthrough quickly resulted in bankruptcy. The instrumental/hegemonic position gave rise to a game studio ever-increasing in scale: from producing many tiny games per in-game year in a garage office to developing fewer, but bigger titles in a highly proficient company employing its own hardware and research labs – i.e. the typical structure of AAA development (Nieborg 2011a; Nieborg 2011b). Finally, the mindie playthrough featured a game company remaining at the margins of the industry – failing to make any significant impact on the industry, and hanging onto existence by a thread, but sacrificing unconventional development. Arguably, this in-betweenness is also the position of Greenheart Games as they developed a game confirmative of the industry's own vision.

Having established that *Game Dev Tycoon* draws a parallel between the rules of the industry and the rules of play, the conducted analysis demonstrates that economically sustainable videogame development is only envisioned as possible for developers willing to conform to standardized industry practices. While this by itself is an exemplification of established scholarship, *Game Dev Tycoon* additionally allows us to consider these dynamics in action through the very object of study itself. Further research and design initiatives can therefore be undertaken to imagine futurities which transcend this status quo of the industry *textually*, e.g. by means of modifications of the game or similarly themed industry sims, thus cultivating new industry imaginaries.

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