Indie-viduals: Videogames' Hegemonic (Re-)Production Culture

Lars de Wildt

KU Leuven, Institute for Media Studies
Parkstraat 45 – box 3603
3000 Leuven, Belgium
+32 16 37 92 98
lars.dewildt@kuleuven.be

Stef Aupers

KU Leuven, Institute for Media Studies
Parkstraat 45 – box 3603
3000 Leuven, Belgium
+32 16 37 23 07
stef.aupers@kuleuven.be

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ABSTRACT

By now it is abundantly clear that game development represents one of the biggest cultural industries on the planet (e.g., ESA, 2017, Brand, et al., 2017). Games are subject to gigantic budgets and development cycles of various years, often involving development-teams hundreds or thousands strong. Investing in a game is risky, and companies are risk-averse. The result is a sometimes homogenous AAA market of historical shooters, fantasy RPGs and jewel-matching phone games, owned by a handful of companies (Nieborg, 2011), with the same white male protagonists (Williams, et al., 2009; O'Donnell, 2014; Shaw, 2015).

Indeed, among the pantheon of great cultural industries – film, music, television – the game industry plays its part in reproducing what Adorno & Horkheimer called "Mass Deception:" a cultural industry that "is infecting everything with sameness" in a way that reproduces capitalist power structures under the illusion of luxury, freedom and individualism (1947, p. 94; cf. Benjamin 1936, Hesmondhalgh, 2012). As has been further noted, however, the 21st century saw the independently developed or 'indie' game rise from the behemoth of games' AAA industry, due in no small part to improved game development software and more accessible distribution platforms such as Steam, itch.io and the App Store. Whether as a production setting – small, underfunded teams (Martin & Deuze, 2009) – or as a specific genre of games (Simon, 2012), the promise of indie games has always been their capacity for variation, diversity and innovation. Thus, in public, professional *and* academic discourses, indie games have been positioned as punk, as countercultural, even as "countergames" (Anthropy, 2012; Galloway, 2006; Ruffino, 2012), thus paving the way for more diverse ways of thinking and playing.

Does independent development grant game designers the freedom of designing in new ways, outside of the logics of market capitalism, conformism and consumerism?

This article will present research based on in-depth qualitative interviews with N=27 international developers, based on the role of religious practices and convictions in game design. Religion was chosen as a fundamental source of both videogame conventions throughout the past decennia (e.g., Bosman, 2015; Campbell, 2014; Krzywinska, 2006), as well as for people's deepest convictions and identifications. Surely, if the discourse around indie is one of individualism, diversity and countercultural innovation, indie designers will be able to show their own convictions through their design – whether as agnostics, Hindus, Christians or Pastafarians. At the very least, these indie games will no doubt depart from such thoroughly established conventions as Priest and Paladins, gods and quests, or holy creeds.

Has indie development allowed for this kind of diversity of religious influences, practices and worldviews – beyond the Christian-/eurocentric conventions of the 20th century? In other words, what cultural and religious practices drive the representation of religion in games, and how has the increased independence of indie games changed the conventional representation thereof?

Having selected developers from various religious backgrounds (agnostic, atheist, Protestant, Catholic, Sunni Muslim, Germanic Pagan, and so on), and/or those dealing with religious content in their games in various ways, our data show that the opposite is often true. Rather, non-religious developers reproduce the religious clichés of videogames as "shortcuts," "tools" and for "narrative effect." Religious developers, on the other hand, find themselves steered away from designing from their convictions – admitting that while their religion pervades their entire life, it is difficult to find a place for it in their games.

Analysis of the data shows that firstly, the 'language' of game design has developed into a universal language of conventions and tropes that has become divorced from its localized, culturally specific origins in North-American and Japanese, often male-dominated development culture. Whether designing in Delhi, Melbourne, Montréal or Johannesburg, game designers everywhere inherit a universal set of conventions that includes, among other things, a commodified and fetishized variant of (European Christian) religion.

Secondly, based on designers' stories, the analysis articulates five mechanisms that make it difficult and unappealing to deviate from the reproduction of these conventions. That is,

- game design is rooted in a *cultural* logic that was universalized from a once specific intersectional, local culture of either Japanese Christianity-fascinated Occidentalism; or white, male, North-American agnostic with a Christian background.

- This logic is consequently (but analytically discernably) reproduced *traditionally* as a eurocentric, institutitutionalized, conspiratorial and fantasy (e.g., Tolkien-)inspired view of religion.

- It is *pragmatically* a design shortcut that conveys much information and narrative gravitas without explanation – a world where Priests heal 'because they do'.

- It is furthermore, even in the inclusive discourse of independent designers, *socially* taboo to deviate, to express religiosity among designers, and to be outed as such toward the gamer audience in the public sphere (e.g., Twitter).

- Finally, and as a result of these, it is *economically* advantageous to reproduce these conventions; more so to a perceived militantly atheist 'gamer' audience that is to be conformed to in what is a risk-averse industry.

In conclusion, indie development is paradoxically conservative in reproducing some of videogames' oldest conventions: a fascination with religion. As such, the conclusions of this paper give a cultural sociological insight into, and empirical grounds for neo-marxist theories on the inevitability of the reproduction of hegemony in cultural industries subject to the rationality of capitalism. Particularly the precarious economic position of independent designers in the 21st century precludes them from practically engaging in what indie has been theorized to represent. That is, in spite of the discourse on indie individuality, indies are necessarily made to conform to a universally standardized design language which reproduces religion as commodity, as conspiracy or otherwise as monolithic and magical.

OPTIONAL BIO

Lars de Wildt is a lecturer and PhD-candidate working with Stef Aupers at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. He is interested in how cultural backgrounds affect play. His research currently focuses on the ways in which videogame players and developers play with religion in a supposedly secular age. Side projects involve games and cultural capital, leadership and quantum physics. Lars has been a Visiting Scholar at Deakin University with Tom Apperley in Melbourne, is a board member for Press Start Journal and chairman of DiGRA Flanders. Lars has published with *Brill*, *Routledge*, *ACM* and others.

Stef Aupers is a Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. He published widely on religion, spirituality and conspiracy theories in modern society and, particularly, on the popularization and mediatization of these cultures through information and communications technology (ICT). Aupers has published in journals like *New Media & Society*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion, Information, Communication & Society*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *American Behavioral Scientist* , *Public Understanding of Science*, *Cultural Sociology*, and *European Journal of Communication* .

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