# Analyzing Indie Aesthetics

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

During the past decade, videogame scholars have increasingly begun to explore the production, aesthetics, and reception of so-called indie games (see, e.g., Harvey and Fisher 2012; Jahn-Sudmann 2008; Lipkin 2013; Martin and Deuze 2009; Westecott 2012; Zimmerman 2002). As Garda and Grabarczyk have recently reconstructed in more detail, videogames can generally be financed more or less independently, published more or less independently, and developed with a higher or lower degree of creative control, but by the mid-2000s, "indie games became so prominent and so distinct that they started to be easily identifiable via a set of contingent properties—what users have identified as a certain 'indie look' or 'indie feel'" (2016, n.pag.). Thus, the term "indie game" tends to give rise to additional expectations such as being developed by a small team, primarily being disseminated via digital distribution, and also employing what Garda and Grabarcyzk as well as others describe as a readily recognizable "retro style" (see also, e.g., Garda 2013; Schmidt 2014; Thibault 2016).

As helpful as Garda and Grabarczyk's reconstruction of the discourse surrounding the term "indie game" certainly is, though, this focus on nostalgic "retro style" as a core element of indie aesthetics seems quite narrow. Hence, it may be more productive to draw on Jesper Juul's concept of "independent style," which he defines as "a *representation of a representation*" that "uses contemporary technology to emulate styles from earlier times" (Juul 2019, 31). Evidently, there are indie games that do not employ this kind of "independent style," but Juul's concept still allows for a more precise analysis of how some indie games remediate the materiality and mediality not only of older videogames but also of primarily analogue media forms such as novels, comics, films, television series, or board games. Yet while Juul refers to discourses of authenticity that surround much of current indie game production here, it is worth noting that the remediation in what he calls "independent style" tends to adhere to the logic of hypermediacy (as opposed to the logic of immediacy), which "multiplies the signs of mediation" and thus "makes us aware of the medium or media" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 34) used (see also, e.g., Ivănescu 2019; Kirkland 2011; Sloan 2015).

No less importantly, it seems that Garda and Grabarczyk as well as Juul primarily foreground the visual design of indie games when discussing the latters' "retro style" and "independent style," which risks glossing over other, no less important aspects of their aesthetics.[1] Against this background, I propose a theoretical framework that more systematically distinguishes between the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of indie games. Audiovisual aesthetics here refers to the audiovisual design of an indie game, including not just the spatial perspectives, visual styles, and pictorial materials used but also its sound design, music, and/or voice acting (see, e.g., Beil 2012; Collins

2013; Jørgensen 2013; Kirkpatrick 2011; Sharp 2015; Tavinor 2009). Ludic aesthetics refers to the possibilities of interaction that an indie game affords its players, its game mechanics, and its game goals as well as the resulting experiential quality or "feel" of the gameplay (see, e.g., Bogost 2006; Calleja 2011; Eskelinen 2012; Juul 2005; Keogh 2018; Sicart 2014). Narrative aesthetics entails not only the story or stories an indie game tells but also the narrative strategies it employs to tell them, which may include various forms of nonlinearity as well as the use of narrators-as-narrating-characters or mediated "direct access" to characters' subjectivity (see, e.g., Aarseth 2012; Backe 2012; Domsch 2013; Fernández-Vara 2011; Jenkins 2004; Neitzel 2014; Thon 2016).

Evidently, this is an analytical distinction of aspects of indie aesthetics that are in actual practice often quite closely interrelated. It is, for example, commonly the case that visual and auditive signals allow players to orient themselves within the game spaces; that narrative elements such as cut-scenes or scripted events are used to frame the ludic interaction and to communicate pertinent information about game rules or game goals; and that the audiovisually represented, rule-governed gameplay also contributes to the unfolding story of an indie game at least to some extent. Yet it is precisely the drawing of a distinction between the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of indie games that allows for the analysis of such interrelations. While it will often be productive to analyze the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of an indie game as part of its overall design, then, it is also worth noting that videogames not just "are" indie games but rather are positioned and perceived as "indie," which means that indie aesthetics are best conceptualized as a discursive construct and that an analysis of an indie game as an aesthetic artifact will thus need to take into account the production and reception discourses surrounding the game in question (see figure 1).[2]
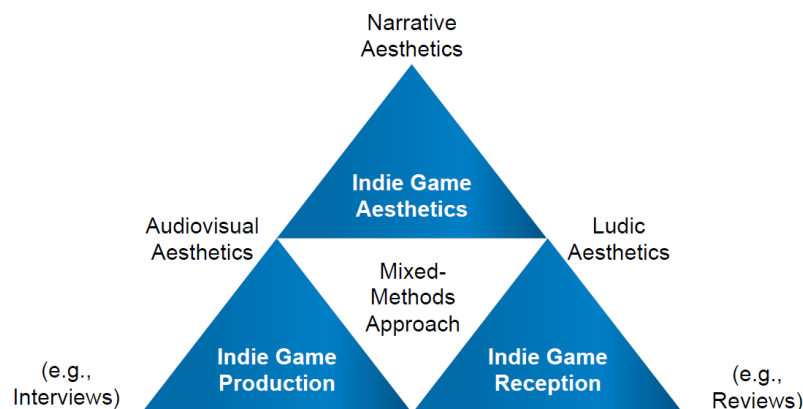


**Figure 1:** A mixed-methods approach to the analysis of indie aesthetics as a discursive construct.

Finally, it is worth stressing again the importance of acknowledging the diversity of indie aesthetics beyond stereotypical notions of nostalgic pixelated graphics and 8-bit sounds. Indeed, the theoretical framework presented here provides the foundation for a larger project that aims at a comprehensive reconstruction of the broad range of styles, stories, genres, and aesthetic choices that indie games have to offer. Put in a nutshell, the proposed theoretical framework does not make any particularly specific claims about indie games or indie aesthetics, instead limiting itself to suggesting that these games and their aesthetics (as well as, indeed, *other* video games and *their* aesthetics) can be productively analyzed along these three dimensions. Again, this does not yet say anything about the results of such an analysis (which may turn out to be more or less productive in one, two, or all three of the dimensions), nor does it suggest that there are no other questions worth asking about indie games (which is particularly true in the case of multiplayer games adding aesthetic complexity around social interaction).

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**ENDNOTES**

1 This is obviously not to say that either Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) or Juul (2019) are not aware of the fact that the aesthetics of video games in general and indie games in particular entail more than just their visual design, but their focus is still on the latter. See also Niedenthal (2009) for an early reconstruction and discussion of a range of different and at least partially incompatible conceptualizations of videogame aesthetics.

2 There are of course different ways in which one can reconstruct an indie game's production and reception discourses, but while the methodological distinction between quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis may be worth considering, my main point here is that any analysis of indie aesthetics will do well to take production and reception discourses into account one way or another.