Indie Game Developers in Germany: Between Creativity and Making Money

Tom Novy
University of Augsburg
Universitätsstr. 10
86135 Augsburg
0049 821 598-5576
tom.novy@phil.uni-augsburg.de

Jeffrey Wimmer
University of Augsburg
Universitätsstr. 10
86135 Augsburg
0049 821 598-5576
jeffrey.wimmer@phil.uni-augsburg.de

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To date, there has been almost no research on how German indie game developers deal with the challenge of balancing artistic and economic demands in their everyday work, what working relationship they have with each other and how they define indie games for them (Strobbe/Weigang 2016). Nowadays, the field of indie developers is "no longer extraordinary but typical in the industry" (Ruffino/Woodcock 2021: 324). Game developers have to meet the challenge of balancing profit and creativity, which was already identified by Wimmer and Sitnikova (2012) for the whole field of game production. We assume that with the "explosion of 'indie' developers" there are significant differences in the sub-field of professional indie developers compared to hobby developers and game developers fully employed in the games industry (Consalvo/Paul 2018: 53). Therefore, the implications of increasing professionalization in the sub-field of indie developers is an area that should be examined in more detail. Moreover, as Sotamaa (2021: 5) argues, more detailed situated studies are urgently needed.

Video game players associate indie games with "a special kind of game that differs not only in terms of content and visual appearance, but also in terms of production conditions" (Birke/Hahn 2020: 240). According to Koegh (2021: 34), video game production forms a field of its own. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu 1993, Becker 2010: 112, Parker 2014: 41), we see the field of indie games as a sub-field of game production in the whole field of "cultural entrepreneurs" (Scott 2012: 238). Thus, it can be assumed that different rules and "field's internal logic" have developed in this specific sub-field (Bourdieu 1993: 7; 10th. footer). Bourdieu (8) writes in this context: "The autonomy of a field of restricted production can be measured by its power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products. This implies translation of all external determinations [e.g.: economic

demand] in conformity with its own principles of functioning." The small-scale

production "tends to obey its own logic, that of the continual outbidding inherent to the dialectic of cultural distinction" (5). However, the "dialectic of cultural distinction" (5) is not about seeking differences in all circumstances: It is about developing "original modes of expression" (8-9). This "aesthetic creation" can be seen "as something fundamentally social" (Becker 2010: 111). Regarding this social struggle, Felan Parker (2013: 42) stated that "digital games are now in the midst of a process of cultural and artistic legitimation". Thus, indie game development can be analyzed as a social struggle in a cultural field that is visible through development positions and rules.

To do so, we interviewed 16 German indie developers from different indie sectors (indie studios, freelancers, hobby developers) using semi structured in-depth interviews. The selection of interviewees is based on the theoretical sampling. In order better to identify the field's internal logic, we divided the questions into four thematic areas: working processes, self-perception, motives of game production, characteristics of indie games. Building on our qualitative data analysis, we can summarize following conclusions:

In everyday work, strategies were developed to combine creativity and economic necessity. Professional independence is of immense importance for indie developers, which goes hand in hand with the greatest possible influence on game development (creativity) and freedom of choice. The hypothetical possibility of being able to turn down an order strengthens the subjective sense of self-perception, in contrast to employees in an AAA studio. The conflict between making money and high creativity may be influenced by the type of contract work. This allows the indie developers more freedom in the production process. A pragmatic attitude prevails, which is perceived as a realistic acceptance of economic necessities within the work process. Responsibility towards employees in their own indie studio is another important aspect for indie developers. The greater the degree of professionalization, the greater the division of labour into game developing, back office, customer care and customer acquisition. While the game developers are working on the game order, the office is trying to get more orders or apply for government funding. Some indie studios have also started to offer workshops during times when order books are empty. Thus, paradoxically, indie studios have to grow in order to ensure economic stability.

Within the field there is a wide network and exchange, even if different indie developer positions are perceived. Despite the competition within the sub-field, relationships between indie developers are common (Browne 2015: 55, Parker/Jenson 2017: 873). This is also supported by the fact that a strong network brings advantages for all those involved. They all technical knowledge, marketing advice and business skills to be shared as a community (Consalvo/Paul 2018: 57-58). However, the community idea is more pronounced among hobby developers (Scott 2012: 241). They look at how knowledge can be shared as *open knowledge*. Following Bourdieu, Huang and Liu (2022: 39) named it "Gaming Capital". Professional indie developers, on the contrary, share their knowledge and advice in inner circles among themselves to manage the specific social and economic requirements (Ruffino/Woodcock 2021: 324). Sotamaa (2021: 5) explains this by saying that developers operate in a global market, and do not perceive themselves as local competitors. We can acknowledge stronger subjective distinctions within the field than outside it, which is similar to Banks' and Cunningham's (2016: 136) findings, which noted: "the narratives and meanings [of Australian game workers] they shared are less just about articulating a distinction from Triple-A development and more about differences among different forms of independent development." Hobby developers are free from the pressure to deliver to a specific deadline. As a result, they are able to place greater emphasis on creativity. They are therefore able to approach ideologically what Anna Anthropy (2012: 10) calls for: "I want open access to the creative act for everyone. I want games as zines." Indie

developers see indie games in general as something special, which also distinguishes them from other game productions. The innovative content of indie games plays a particularly vital role: "For an indie title, however, I would expect this additional stand out component. (...) So something special, some particularly creative approach or a special gimmick or just special attention to detail that wouldn't even be possible in a big studio for reasons of time" (Indie developer Janine). Most AAA games are seen as little more than an update to past releases.

Regarding distinctions, even if there are some in the field itself, they are not as pronounced as in other fields of independent cultural production (Becker 2017). These results, which seem clear at first glance must be questioned and make further research necessary. The expressed differences between indie developers and the AAA market are not very pronounced, but they change depending on the developer's position. Thus, there was the strongest distinction among hobby developers. Likewise, there is an ongoing discourse in the field itself, which on the one hand reacts to normalization tendencies of the market (Becker 2011:18), and on the other hand further develops the significance of indie games. The first signs were already evident in the motto "Occupy the Mainstream" of the German indie festival A.Maze in 2018. Paradoxically, the 2021 A.Maze festival no longer used the term 'indie games', referring instead to "arthouse games" . It can therefore be assumed that the indie games sub-field is in a constant state of finding itself.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anthropy, A., (2012): *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Banks, J., Cunningham, S. (2016): Creative Destruction in the Australian Videogames Industry. *Media International Australia* 160(1), 127–139.

Becker, T., (2010): Fieldwork in Aesthetics. On Comics' Social Legitimacy, in *Comics World & the World of Comics,* Kyoto Seika University, 110–122.

Becker, T.(ed.), (2011): Einleitung. In Becker, T. (ed.), *Ästhetische Erfahrung der Intermedialität. Zum Transfer künstlerischer Avantgarden und 'illegitimer' Kunst im Zeitalter von Massenkommunikation und Internet*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 7–32. [Second-Hand Music: Contributions to Compositional Authorship]

Becker, T., (2017): DJs und der Mythos vom autorlosen Sampling. Eine Feldstudie zur Soundproduktion von DJs in Berlin. In: F. Döhl, A. Riethmüller (eds.), *Musik aus zweiter Hand: Beiträge zur kompositorischen Autorenschaft*. Laaber, Laaber Verlag, 137–176. [Aesthetic Experience of Intermediality. On the Transfer of Artistic Avant-Gardes and 'Illegitimate' Art in the Age of Mass Communication and the Internet]

Birke, V., Hahn, T., (2020): Independent Games. O. In Zimmermann, P.Falk (eds.), *Handbuch Games Kultur*, Deutscher Kulturrat Berlin, 240–243. [Handbook Games Culture]

Bourdieu, P., (1993): "The Market of Symbolic Goods." *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 112–141 [1–34]. http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/bourdieu2.pdf

Bourdieu, P., (1995): *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Stanford University Press.

Browne, P., (2015): *Jumping the Gap: Indie Labour and the Imagined Indie Community.* Montreal, Canada: Master Thesis.

Consalvo, M., Paul C.A., (2018): 'If you are feeling bold, ask for $3'. Value Crafting and Indie Game Developers. *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4(2), 51–75.

Huang, V. G., Tingting, L., (2022): Gamifying Contentious Politics: Gaming Capital and Playful Resistance. *Games and Culture* 17(1), 26–46.

Keogh, B., (2021): Hobbyist Game Making Between Self-Exploitation and Self Emancipation. O. Sotamaa, J.Švelch (eds.), *Game Production Studies*. Amsterdam University Press, 29–46.

Parker, F., (2013): An Art World for Artgames. *Loading…* 7(11), 41–60. https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/119/160

Parker, F., (2014): *Playing Games with Art. The Cultural and Aesthetic Legitimation of Digital Games.* Toronto, Ontario: Dissertation.

Parker, F., Jenson, J., (2017): Canadian Indie Games Between the Global and the Local. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 42(5), 867-891. http://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2017v42n5a3229

Scott, M., (2012): Cultural Entrepreneurs, cultural entrepreneurship: Music producers mobilising and converting. *Poetics* 40, 237–255. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2012.03.002

Sotamaa, O., (2021): Studying Game Development Cultures. *Games and Culture* 0(0), 1-20. DOI: 10.1177/15554120211005242

Wimmer, J., Sitnikova T., (2012): The Professional Identity of Gameworkers Revisited. A Qualitative Inquiry on the Case Example of German Professionals. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 6(1), 155–171.

Strobbe, M.; Weigang, T., (2016): Relativ Indie: Skizzen zu einer Kultursoziologie des Computerspiels. In: Hennig, M, Krah, H. (ed.): *Spielzeichen: Theorien, Analysen und Kontexte des zeitgenössischen Computerspiels*. Glückstadt: Verlag Werner Hülsbusch, 94–116 [Game characters: Theories, Analyses and Contexts of Contemporary Computer Games]

Klastrup, L. (2008): "What Makes World of Warcraft a World? A Note on Death and Dying." In G. Corneliussen and J.W. Rettberg (eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft® Reader* edited by, 143–166. Cambridge MA, USA: The MIT Press.

Nyhm and Summergale (2008): *In Memory*. Video. YouTube, 5 April. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWJ3qzk5kHo.

Ruberg, B. and Shaw, A., (eds.) 2017: *Queer Game Studies*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: Minnesota University Press.

Webber, N. (2017): The Britishness of 'British Games'. Paper present at the *Digital Games Research Association Conference (DIGRA 2017)*, Melbourne, Australia, 2-6 July. Digital Games Research Association (DIGRA).

http://digra2017.com/static/Extended%20Abstracts/52_DIGRA2017_EA_Webber
_British_Games.pdf.