

Breaking New Ground: Indie Community, Flash, and Newgrounds.com

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ABSTRACT

When game developer Evan¹ first sat down to take in a premier screening of *Indie Game: The Movie* (Pajot and Swirsky 2012), he was utterly unprepared for the prominent role his art would play in the documentary's narrative. As embedded ethnographer at indie development accelerator Execution Labs, I had been chatting with Evan about what had inspired him to join a start-up indie game studio: our conversation prompted him to recount a parable about a vignette of the *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat 2010) characters he had sketched and tweeted to Edmund McMillen, the game's developer. Evan asserted that his career path had been decisively altered after witnessing McMillen's exuberantly emotional response to receiving Evan's *Super Meat Boy* fan art. This auspicious interaction showed Evan that the freedom to speak, collaborate, and share with fans and other indie developers alike was far more important than the higher salary a mainstream game development studio would offer. Using discourse analysis and grounded theory, this abstract traces Evan's story back to *Super Meat Boy's* origins as a Newgrounds.com submission. In so doing, it reintroduces historical online collaborative-creative communities to an academic discourse which has largely neglected to consider their role in inspiring and informing contemporary indie development. At the close of *Developer's Dilemma*, Casey O'Donnell (2014, 274) laments how the culture of secrecy which pervades mainstream game development largely prevents developers from conversing, sharing, and collaborating with one another. Since the mid-1980s, this 'secret society syndrome' (O'Donnell 2014, 14) – enforced by major publishers and console manufacturers using technological and legal means (O'Donnell 2014, 187–188) – created an environment which put smaller developers at a comprehensive disadvantage (Kerr 2006, 82–91). In the context of the closed, secretive mainstream game industry, developers felt separated from those who played their games; similarly, audiences were not permitted access to the languages, tools, and networks necessary to create their own games on an equal footing (O'Donnell 2014, 171). Benedict Anderson posits that common discourses – and, hence, imagined communities – emerge as a result of accessible languages supplanting the primacy of exclusive, restricted languages (2006, 38–39). I argue that during the height of mainstream game industry control, Macromedia Flash functioned as a vernacular language; Newgrounds.com, as a dedicated portal for community-made Flash games and movies, served as an open-access alternative to restrictive mainstream networks of inaccess. Flash's power, accessibility, and

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communicability led Lev Manovich to proclaim that “more than just a result of a particular software/hardware situation (low bandwidth leading to the use of vector graphics), Flash aesthetics exemplifies cultural sensibility of a new generation” (2005, 1). Flash’s accessibility and the learning resources Newgrounds.com made available were key in helping hobbyists and first-time developers make creative contributions. The forces which conspired to bring *Super Meat Boy* into being can be traced back to Team Meat’s relationship with the developers of a game called *Alien Hominid* (The Behemoth 2004). The console versions of *Alien Hominid* and *Super Meat Boy* would later go on to become critically-acclaimed commercial hits, *but both started out as free Flash games developed exclusively for Newgrounds.com* (Bluebaby et al. 2008, Fulp et al. 2002). Games uploaded to Newgrounds.com contributed to a larger conversation – this much is evident in Team Meat’s decision to take up shared community symbols by directly including *Alien Hominid* references in *Super Meat Boy*. As creative Flash communities grew in popularity and power, fans of the form became increasingly willing to follow developers from the realm of free online games into the untested waters of premium releases (Urameshi21 2003). It was precisely the power of these collaborative communities, drawn together by a widely-available vernacular language, which allowed independently-produced games to populate alternative for-profit distribution channels and rapidly rise to prominence in the late 2000’s (O’Donnell 2014, 242–245). The more robust this common creative discourse was, the more valuable Newgrounds.com became – not only economically, but also as a hub for coordinating various forms of expertise (Banks 2013, 123), as a repository for accrued knowledge, for facilitating collaboration (Luther, Fiesler, and Bruckman 2013), and – as Evan’s story shows – inspiring future generations of indie developers to articulate their own artistic and creative passions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ All of the participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms.