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## Is Every Indie Game Independent? Towards the Concept of Independent Game

by Maria B. Garda, Paweł Grabarczyk

### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explicate the concept of "independent game" and its relation to the concept of "indie game". We claim that, despite the etymology, the term "indie" is not just an abbreviation of the term "independent". In fact, it should be understood as a distinct historical notion within the wider concept of "independent" video game. Our argument is inspired by the works of Reinhart Koselleck (2002) on conceptual history and applies explication - introduced in analytical philosophy by Rudolf Carnap (1950) - as a methodological tool. We argue that the concept of "independent game" can be explained as a disjunction of three types of independence. These three types of independence can be defined as a relation between the game and a respective external factor. We distinguish between (A) financial independence (constituted by the developer -- investor relation), (B) creative independence (developer -- intended audience) and (C) publishing independence (developer -- publisher). Although the definition we propose is disjunctive, all of its three disjuncts (A, B and C) remain functionally similar (they all represent an independence *from* something). None of these disjuncts taken in isolation presents a necessary condition for game independence but the whole disjunction can be treated as such. Moreover, in a particular time period, the properties described above become highly correlated with a set of contingent properties (e.g. digital distribution, retro style or small team) determined by cultural, social, economic and technological circumstances of the video game culture of the era. As these contingent properties are oftentimes much easier to recognize (e.g.

retro style) then the details of financial, creative and publishing situation of a game, they become heavily associated with independent games produced in a given time and place. We believe that the term "indie game" refers simply to a set of contingent properties - "indie markers" - correlated with a specific kind of independent games that has emerged around the mid-2000s in the Western world.

### **Key words:**

independent game, indie game, conceptual history, explication, video game discourse, video game history

We didn't get invited to the indie parties, we weren't really seen as part of the indie community, because of our relationships with publishers and because we were making games that didn't seem like indie titles [e.g. *Brütal Legend* (Double Fine, 2009)] -- even though we were totally independent (Schafer, 2014, pp. 75-76)

## **1. Introduction**

The term "indie game" - oftentimes used interchangeably with "independent games" - is probably one of the most popular buzzwords in the discussions surrounding video games. At the same time, it seems to be an exceptionally elusive term, as we are constantly having difficulties in explaining its meaning. A review of literature - from early academic discussions on the topic (Zimmerman, 2002) to recent publications in the area of indie game studies (Simon, 2013) - shows there is no theoretical consensus. It is, therefore, not uncommon to draw comparisons to the ongoing problem of defining the term "video game" (Simon, 2013, p. 2), or other umbrella terms such as: "AAA" and "mainstream" (Lipkin, 2013, p. 9), "hardcore" and "casual" (Parker, 2013), etc. Therefore, some academics are advocating further research even without clear categorization of the phenomenon (see Simon, 2013). Constant misinterpretation of the "indie game" label even lead some authors to reject it entirely (Warren, 2014). After all, it may seem a purely scholarly exercise, as gamers allegedly are not interested in the definition of what independent games are (Kemppainen 2008, p. 9). However, if we observe recent discussions regarding borderline cases of "indie" lead by enthusiasts and practitioners on forums (Steam, 2010), websites (Gnade, 2010) or in magazines (Warren, 2014), this claim does not

seem to be entirely valid. What is more, a closer qualitative study of this debate shows how members of gaming community are conceptualizing these borderline cases.

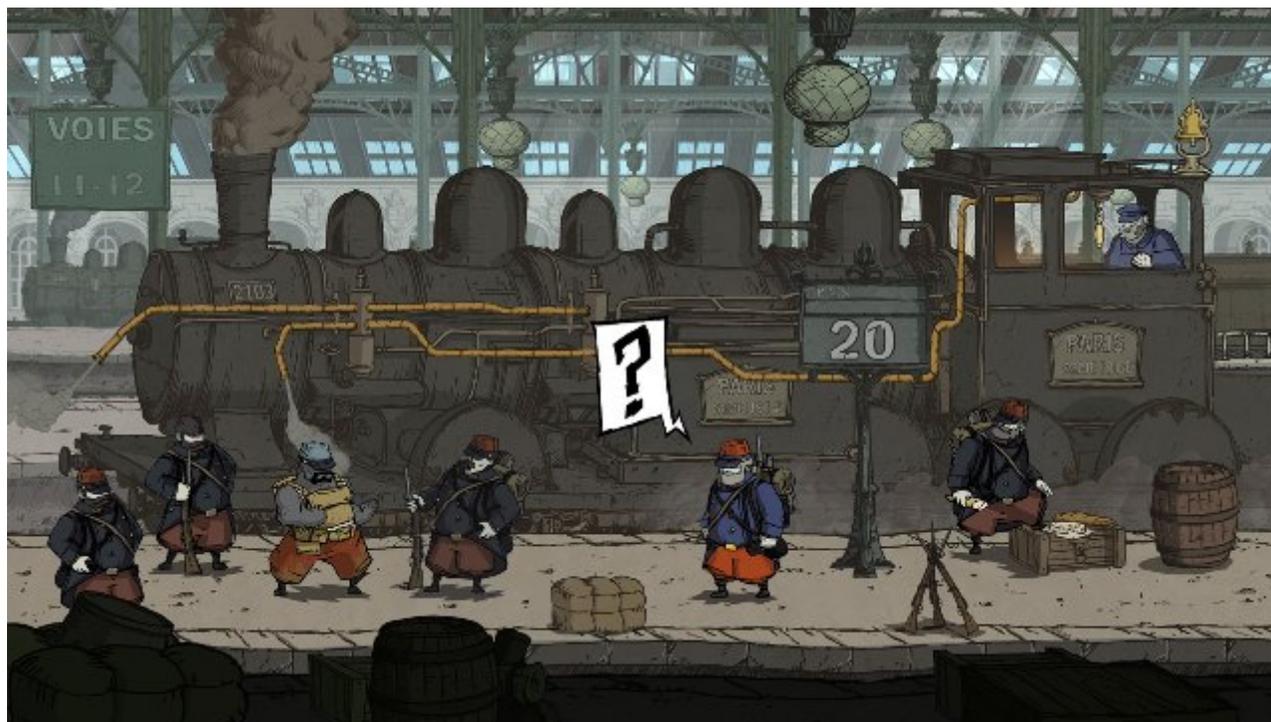


Figure 1. *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* gameplay (Source: Moby Games)

For example, the departure of Yoan Fanise - creative director of *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (Ubisoft Montpellier, 2014) - from Ubisoft, provoked the use of terms such as "indie-like" (Erwin, 2014) or "fake indie" (Wawro, 2015). Other controversial games result in seemingly contradictory terms, like "AAA indie" (Tong, 2011) or "independent AAA" (Matthews, 2014), which were introduced to describe large scale non-mainstream projects or a sort of middle way between mainstream and independent development of games. It shows that the term "indie" functions in the popular discourse as a typical vague term. There are clear-cut cases where identification of its referents is fairly easy and does not lead to controversy, but the

term becomes less and less useful once we move away from its relatively stable core. In this paper we shall argue that a better understanding of the term "indie game" and its complex relation with the concept of "independent game" may prove helpful not only in clearing some of the confusions that permeate game studies and popular discourse but also in investigating video game history.

### 1.1 Goals

We are interested in independent games as a historical phenomenon that changes in time and is determined by the evolution of video game cultures. We believe that independent games historiography could benefit from better understanding of the concept itself and the way it is used in the discourse. Our argument was initially inspired by the works of Reinhart Koselleck (2002) on conceptual history identified as historical semantics of terms. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is an attempt to explicate the notions of: 'independent game' and "indie game". The notion of "explication" we refer to should be understood the way it was originally used by Rudolf Carnap (1950). The procedure we undertake is a specific form of a precisising definition and not a regulative definition. The difference between typical precisising definitions and explication should be easy to grasp: the aim of the former is to create a precise, technical term useful for a given endeavor, whereas the aim of the latter is to repair a vague term in such a way that it retains as much of the original meaning as possible. Because of this, an explicated term can then be used in order to solve some of the problems the original term caused in everyday use. As such, the paper could be understood as applied philosophy - using a procedure known mostly from philosophy of language - in a different domain (game studies) in order to clear conceptual confusion and facilitate future inquiries.

We believe that a good test for a more precise notion of "independent" (respectively "indie") is that it should enable the user to clarify two common controversies (see: Jahn-Sudmann, 2008; Juul, 2014) that can be summarized in two questions:

1. Should "being an indie/independent game" be understood as an intrinsic or extrinsic property of games?
2. Should "indie game" be understood simply as an abbreviation of "independent", or does it convey a distinct meaning of its own?

By asking whether being independent/indie is an intrinsic or extrinsic property we simply ask whether these properties should be understood as a characteristic of a game object (Aarseth 2014) - for example, its theme, visual style or mechanics - or whether they should be understood as a relation between the game object and some other external factors (e.g. the institutions and capital that back it up, the structure of the development studio, its distribution channels, etc).



Figure 2. *Super Meat Boy* gameplay (Source: Moby Games)

To use an illustration, let's say that one day we discover that *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010), a game which we thought to be the epitome of an indie production, was in fact conceptualized by a committee of investors who wanted to capitalize on the rising popularity of 2D platformers and outsourced the project to a group of

contracted developers. Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes -- the men we thought to be responsible for creating the game - are just hired actors starring in a mockumentary *Indie game: The Movie* (2012). The point is that this thought experiment changes only extrinsic properties of the game, while the game itself -- every line of code and every asset to a pixel -- is identical to the one we know. Is *Super Meat Boy* an indie game in the actual world and not an indie game in the counterfactual world we have just described? Or maybe we have simply discovered that there was nothing inherently "indie" about *Super Meat Boy* and thus it was never an indie game in the first place?

## 1.2 Claim

Our claim is threefold:

1. We argue that the term "independent game" can be explained as a disjunction [1] of three types of independence which, although related, are autonomous. All of these types are extrinsic. The scope of this disjunctive notion is broad, as it can be meaningfully applied to different games across the history of video games.
2. We argue that once you examine a shorter time period, each sense of independence described in (1) becomes highly correlated with contingent [2] properties that depend on an unspecified number of external circumstances specific to the period under discussion (e.g. economic, cultural, sociological, and technological). The important point is that these correlations change constantly (according to external circumstances) and as such cannot be used to define the broader notion of independent game.
3. We argue that the notion of "indie game" differs from the notion of "independent game", as it refers only to a narrow understanding of the phenomenon (namely a specific kind of independent games that has emerged around mid-2000s [3]) and comprises mostly of an unspecified combination of the aforementioned contingent properties. Some of these properties can be intrinsic.

## 2. Three Types of Game Independence

The notion of independence is, at its core, a relational concept. There is no independence as such, you have to be independent from something. The reason why we sometimes omit this parameter and talk simply about "being independent" is that in most cases the context is fixed and there is no need to specify it. For example, when we talk of a country being independent, we do not have to add that what we really mean is its independence from other countries. The meaning of a relational concept changes whenever one of its parameters is changed. For example, if we want to talk about financial or cultural independence of a country, we have to directly specify this to avoid confusion. We believe that in order to capture the meaning of the notion of game independence it is useful to differentiate between three types of entities that can function as its parameters. These are: investors, intended audience of the game and publishers. The choice of these three entities - in our opinion - reflects best the central tendencies within the discourse surrounding independent games (see also Graebisch, 2012). These three factors constitute three separate types of independence. We propose to label them:

1. A) Financial independence (constituted by the developer -- investor relation);
2. B) Creative independence (constituted by the developer -- intended audience relation);
3. C) Publishing independence (constituted by the developer -- publisher relation).

We believe that the first reason for the confusion surrounding the concept of an independent game is that all of these three types of independence are not properly differentiated. In result, the term "independent game" (without further specification) refers only to an unspecified disjunction of these three types of independence, which leads to many pointless discussions. In order to avoid this kind of misunderstandings, we would like to offer functional and clear-cut distinctions. At the same time, we do not claim that our proposal is addressing all of the possible meanings of independence in video game production or that it offers a theoretical framework for their interpretation. As we have already stressed out, for the sake of this paper we are only interested in the explication - as defined by Carnap - of the terms under discussion in a historical perspective. What is more, we are focusing only on the first publication (i.e. release) of a given game, as it represents the original institutional context.

### **2.1. Financial Independence**

We agree with Ruffino (2013) that "the phenomenon of independent games cannot be explained solely in terms of a business model" (p. 107). As stressed above, it is only one type of independence in video games. It is, nonetheless, the most obvious and as such the least controversial one, as Martin and Deuze (2009) point out, "(...) the foremost issue in what means to be considered 'indie' has to do with a studio's financing structure" (p. 291). Our explanation of financial independence is based on the relation between the developer and investor. It is important to point out that the notion of investor we use is rather broad, as it refers not only to private companies and individuals who give developers money in order to gain profit (e.g. banks, venture capital or start-up incubators) but also government organizations (i.e. national funding bodies) and other institutions which finance non-commercial projects. The difference is negligible as any transfer of means of production creates a dependency - sustainability of the developer depends on a third party no matter whether the party in question is a private investor or a government. Because presence of an investor is a clear-cut requirement, there is no need to ask if she has a real influence on game design. The only thing that we are interested in is whether the game has been financed from the developers' or third-party means. In our understanding a financially independent developer is self-funding her production. Note that this criterion applies also to situations where the actual money transfer isn't involved. It makes no difference whether your investor gives you a check, lends you an office, gives you hardware or software or backs you with legal expertise. This resonates with the ideal of "true independence", impersonated by an amateur game designer and advocated, among others, by Anna Anthropy (Parker, 2013, p. 2). One important form of financial dependency which oftentimes gets unnoticed concerns companies listed on the stock exchange. These (oftentimes big) corporations depend on the stakeholders who constitute a form of a "collective investor".

Last but not least, an important caveat that has to be mentioned is that whenever we speak of financial independence we mean the independence of the developer (and not of the whole company the developer is a part of). Thus, even games produced by big companies which have no external investors of any sort can be financially dependent as the team producing the game depends on financial and marketing teams which coexist with them. Although this difference may sound to be a bit elusive, it is in fact very easy to point out as most of the big companies use different labels to refer to actual development studios and the main body of the corporation (e.g. Ubisoft and Ubisoft Montreal).

## 2.2 Creative Independence

In contrast to the financial independence, creative independence can prove to be quite divisive. It is designed to capture the idea of influence on the game design that we deliberately left out in the other types. The simplest way to express this sense is to say that the game is independent whenever the developer is the intended audience. In other words, we can talk of creative control when the implied player (Aarseth, 2007) is synonymous to the author itself. Fortunately, to distinguish if that's the case, it's not necessary to investigate developer's intentions and psychological motivations. As we said before, the aim of this paper is the explication of the common usage of the terms "independent" and "indie". People manage to call games "independent" without any access to the developer's intentions. What they do instead is that they assume these intentions on the basis of developer's statements. Methodologically, there is no need to go beyond these statements. Thus, the only thing that has to be examined when we ask about creative independence is direct developer's quotes describing the game in promotional materials, interviews, product description and other paratexts. More often than not, this type of overt messaging is quite easy to find, as it is a popular tactic in game advertising. It is especially evident whenever a contrary attitude is employed, that is, whenever the developer explicitly advertises her game as not being independent in this sense. It is often said that the game is made to please the userbase or fandom. Sometimes certain features of the game are changed because of the reaction of fans -- as in the case of *infamous* series (Pigna, 2010), or the specifics of the game are decided using polls - as in the case of *Assassin's Creed* series (see Sarkar, 2013).

Note that although both described types of independence are autonomous, it is easy to miss this because creative independence is oftentimes determined by financial independence. It is so whenever a given target audience is specified by the investor. But of course games can just as easily lose their independence due to autonomic decision of the developer whenever she wants to conform to existing market demand. A good example of this is the popular practice of creating clones of existing successful games (Mark and Deuze, 2009, pp. 288-290), which is nowadays especially common on mobile platforms. These clones are oftentimes created by self-funding developers, as it was the case during the time of *Flappy Bird* (Dong

Nguyen, 2013) inspired "gold rush" (Tassi, 2014). On the other hand, even if the game has an institutional backup but originated from autonomous decisions of the developer, it can still be called independent. A good example of this is another IGF finalist -- *Fez* (Polytron, 2011), which was initially supported by government institution Telefilm Canada [4] and later by a local company Trapdoor (Parkin, 2011). The dependence on these institutions did not prevent the game from being the expression of fascinations and idiosyncrasies of its author.

Needless to say -- nothing prevents both aspects from going in conjunction -- many self-funded games are simply expressions of the developer's tastes. To use an example we mentioned to before -- *Super Meat Boy* is an independent game of both types because it was financed by the developers and, as evidenced by their own statements recorded in *Indie Game: The Movie*, they created the game they wanted to play themselves. Finally, as is evident in the case of popular crowdfunding campaigns, the game investor can at the same time be its intended audience. In this case the game is neither financially nor creatively independent. But, as we will see below, it still can retain independence of a third type.

### 2.3 Publishing Independence

In this case, the game is independent whenever the publisher is also the developer (i.e. it is the same entity - studio, see: Table 1). As we have already mentioned, we are interested only in the context of the first publication of a given game. Note that oftentimes if the game is successful after its initial release, it obtains an external publisher (e.g. to port the product to another platform or introduce it to the traditional retail process). In many cases financial and publishing dependence overlap (as frequently the external investor is also the publisher). However, throughout the history of independent games we often encountered a situation when a game was self-published, as it was a common practice in the shareware era. This third type of independence is especially important as the recent growth in the numbers of released independent games can be attributed to the rise of multiple self-publishing channels. First of all, the popularity of broadband Internet connections created easy ways of distributing and advertising games [5] without the help of established companies. Second, the costly task of game testing has been successfully

offloaded onto the customers (i.e. through Steam's Early Access and other similar programs) [6]. This is a trend that is specific not only to video game production but since 2000s it became clearly visible across every other media platform - from literature and music to cinema. The rise of digital distribution is also connected to the emergence of the Long Tail economy (Anderson, 2006), which involves a retailing strategy focused on a very large number of products targeted to niche markets. On the one hand this gives the developer an opportunity to engage with even very small intended audiences, on the other this model can have negative economic consequences (i.e. problems with sustainability of small companies due to extended in time sales).

Thus, to sum it up, our claim is that the notion of an "independent game" can be explicated by a disjunction of three distinct types of independence. A given game can belong to any one of these types, all of them or any subset of two. But, in order to be classified as independent it has to belong to at least one of them (Table 1).

Table 1. Possible combinations of game's independence

<b>Financial independence</b>	<b>Creative independence</b>	<b>Publisher independence</b>	<b>Example</b>
No	No	No	<i>Assassin's Creed: Unity</i> (Ubisoft Montréal, 2014) [7]
No	No	Yes	<i>Broken Age: Act 1</i> (Double Fine, 2014)
No	Yes	No	<i>Metal Gear Solid</i> series
No	Yes	Yes	<i>Antichamber</i> (Demruth, 2013)
Yes	No	No	<i>Robbo</i> (Pelc, 1989)
Yes	No	Yes	<i>Angry Birds Rio</i> (Rovio, 2011)

Yes	Yes	No	<i>Braid</i> (Number None, 2008)
Yes	Yes	Yes	<i>Super Meat Boy</i> (Team Meat, 2010)

Even though our model results in a clear-cut distinction (a game has to belong to at least one of the types to be independent), it also enables us to paint a more nuanced picture. A given game can be considered to be more or less independent (as it can belong to one, two or three types of independence). Note that when it comes to the notion of “independent game” our model proposes a rather straightforward answer to the second question we asked in Section 1.1. All three types of game independence are relational (and as such extrinsic) properties. Since any combination of extrinsic properties leads to a complex extrinsic property, the combinatorial notion of “independent game” refers to an extrinsic property. But what about the first question -- is the term “indie” only an abbreviation of our combinatorial notion of “independent”? Or maybe it is associated only with a certain combination of our three types?

### “3. Indie” Games

We claim that it is best to understand the term “indie” not as an abbreviation of the notion “independent game” (in any of its combinatorial meanings) but rather as a label for a specific phase of the phenomenon of independent games. Whereas the notion of an “independent game” is broad (it refers to any game which is independent in at least one of the presented senses), the notion of an ‘indie game’ should be understood as a narrow notion that refers only to a set of games produced in a specific time and place. We believe that the period of the mid-2000s was a formative historical moment, when many practices and tendencies (e.g. new platforms of digital distribution and Juul’s independent style) started to consolidate in order to create what we today identify as indie games. What is more, this consolidation took place mostly around the North American independent game scenes (e.g. institution of the Independent Game Festival). It does not mean that the phenomenon of indie games has a simple genealogy because it has roots in many other regions, but most of the model examples of the phenomenon have emerged in the North American context. Even though indie games have formed around the mid-2000s, the term gained popularity only quite recently

and it already seems to have fallen out of favor (Google, 2016) -- as some commentators have predicted (Warren, 2014). This observation supports our assumption that what we are facing here is a narrow, temporal understanding of independent games.

### 3.1 The Difference Between Broad and Narrow Understanding of Independent Games

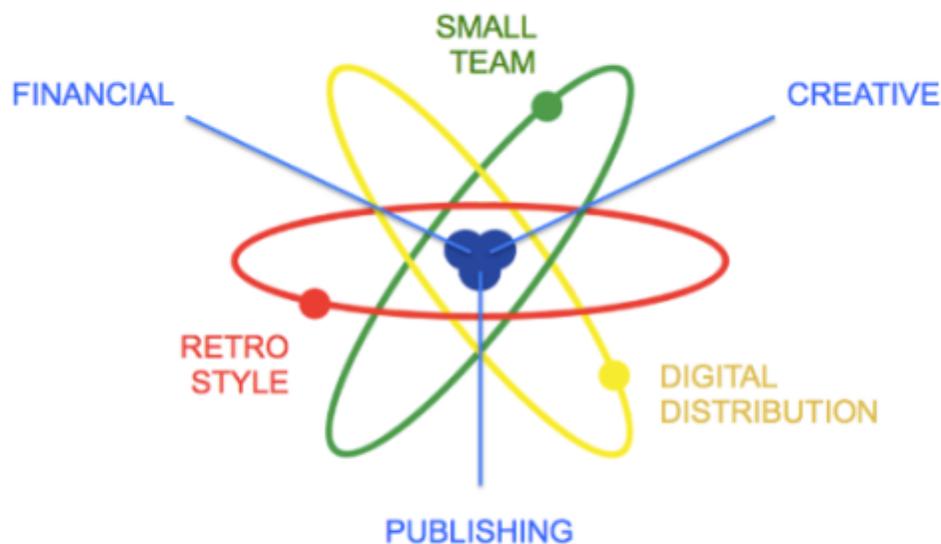


Figure 3. The "Independent" vs. "Indie" dynamics - represented as a relation between three types of independence and selected contingent properties

Although neither term ("independent" nor "indie") contains a temporal parameter *per se*, they are obviously both used to refer to a phenomenon which changes in time. This temporality is one of the main reasons for the confusion both terms produce. For example, can

we call early Activision titles or even hobbyist games such as *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther, 1976) - "independent" or "indie"? We believe that the term "independent", as applied to games, refers to a disjunction of the three properties we analyzed in Section 2. Thus, if a given game is independent at least in one of the senses, it can safely be called "independent" without creating conceptual confusion. Activision is an interesting case because it explicitly claims to be the "first independent video game software developer and distributor" (Activision, 2015). First of all, Activision wasn't financially independent as it was reliant on venture capital (Montfort and Bogost, 2009, p. 100). It had, however, publishing independence as the first third-party publisher for the Atari VCS platform. As well as the design philosophy at the studio encouraged creative independence (ibidem, p. 104-117), as in the case of the well-documented development of David Crane's *Pitfall!* (Activision, 1983). Note, that the existence of video game mainstream identified at that time with Atari (left by the founders of Activision in order to create their own studio) was not a factor here. From our perspective even the earliest examples of video games can be called independent, regardless of the (non)existence of mainstream video game production. Therefore, not only Crowther's game can be called independent - and in fact in all three senses [8] - but also productions such as early Polish mainframe games - *Marienbad* (Podgórski, 1962). However, calling any of the above examples "indie" would be an anachronism.

The phenomenon of independence spans across the history of video games and, if you simply looked at all existing games, you would find that the only thing that unifies independent games is that they fall under the disjunction we analyzed in Section 2 [9]. But, once you narrow down your conceptual scope and look at a given shorter time period, you could see more and more patterns that apply to independent games from this particular period. The reason is that the economic, social and technological circumstances of a given period co-determine the ways independent games are being created. Our claim is that the term "indie" functions as a label for a specific kind of independent games that emerged around the mid-2000s. We believe that at this point 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". Below we identify and analyze some of the contingent properties we believe to be the most prominent. The list is not exhaustive and is based on our comparative study of model examples.

### 3.2 Digital Distribution

The role digital distribution played in the popularization of independent games cannot be overstated, as they were often “defined by the reliance on alternative (...) distribution structures compared to mainstream game companies” (Lipkin, 2013, p. 11). It is easy to see why being distributed digitally has been heavily correlated with publishing independence as the cost of distribution was traditionally covered by the publisher. However, the usefulness of digital distribution as a classification marker has become less and less apparent. Most of the games released today (independent or not) are also distributed digitally and many of the most successful independent games have been released physically. But in the past decade of the 2000s, digital distribution made mobile, PC and browser platforms - “bastion for independent development” (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 284), even though it limited the creativeness of authors because of small file size (see Small size) and other institutional restrictions.

### 3.3. Experimental Nature

Although many independent games tend to replicate the structure and aesthetics of mainstream titles or other successful productions within the indie sector (Ruffino 2013, p. 107), indie games are often recognized for their potential for experimentation that can transform the industry. This expectation seems to be inherent in every independent sector of media creation, from cinema to music. Creative independence in game design is clearly related to being “progressive” or simply taking risks (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 288) and embracing the creative freedom to fail (Ruffino, 2013, p. 116). This expectation is mostly fulfilled by prototypes created during multiple game jams, while in more commercial projects experimentation often means being anti-conventional in a very broad sense. One of the most obvious ways of achieving this aim is the exploration of ignored or unpopular themes, oftentimes in the form of a social commentary, as in the case of *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2011), *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013) or *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014). Another strategy is reviving a forgotten or currently unpopular genre or game mechanic. For example, a significant number of contemporary independent games are 2D platformers -- a genre that has been fairly unpopular after the industry shifted to 3D game engines. However, those specific design choices are just contingent properties that rely on the current popularity of genres (and change accordingly). For example, 3D platformers are currently just as underrepresented as 2D platformers once were (see Retro style). It is thus quite possible that in the foreseeable future 3D platformers may become heavily associated

with independent games. This property is especially correlated with creative independence because experimentation is oftentimes simply the expression of the creative needs of the developer.

### **3.4 Small Budget and Low Price**

This marker is strongly correlated with digital distribution, which is a business model that offers a better revenue to the developer than any other available option (Lipkin, 2013, p. 12). Indie games are usually not as expensive in production as mainstream titles, which is an effect of development process involving fewer people but also low production values. Because of this, low budget (and the resulting low price) is highly correlated with financial independence. Creating shorter or very hard games also helps to keep the budget - and because of it the price - in check. The former reflects the change in reception strategies of games over the years as the Casual Revolution (Juil, 2010) made us more accustomed to spending less time with one title. The latter enables the developer to create games that require many hours to finish even though the actual number of used assets is relatively low.

Once again, although initially small budget and price could definitely be considered to be one of the most reliable indie markers, its contingent nature started to be more and more visible as the niche of cheap games has been recently filled by products which do not conform to any of the three types of independence described in Section 2 (it is especially visible in the case of mobile markets). On the other hand, many successful Kickstarter campaigns that can be said to be independent from the publisher are currently being sold for prices typically reserved for non-independent games [10].

### **3.5 Retro Style**

Retro 2D pixel art greatly helps to retain small budget and because of this it became almost synonymous with independent style (Juil, 2014). As such, it is correlated with financial independence. It also remains in stark contrast to traditional narration of technological progress as it can mimic earlier eras of computing or graphical style and does not simply replicate the original progress cycle [11]. On the one hand, it shows disregard for the mainstream photorealistic aesthetics and embraces anti-conventional game design (see Experimental). On the other hand it capitalizes on the generational nostalgia shared by many indie developers (Garda, 2014), that is, the reason why it is correlated with creative independence. However, the contingent nature of this creative choice is becoming more and more apparent with the recent comeback of simple polygonal models --

strongly related to the popularity of Unity engine (see Middleware). It is thus highly probable that simple polygonal untextured shapes will soon replace the pixel art style as the dominant "indie aesthetics". Finally, it is important to remember that retro style can easily be copied and used by someone who does not fulfill any of the criteria of the definition of an independent game.

### 3.6 Small Size

In many ways the smaller size of independent games could be considered a model example of an indie marker. Although initially specific to all downloadable games and -- by extension -- to most independent games, it probably would never be conceived as a necessary or sufficient condition of being independent. There is no denying, though, that because of the strong correlation with digital distribution it became strongly associated with independent games. The imposed size of the game has also influenced the chosen aesthetics and genres (see Retro style; Juul, 2014). Nowadays the file size requirement isn't as important as consumers are accustomed to downloading large mainstream games through the same channel of distribution, which lessens its reliability as an indie marker.

### 3.7 Small Team

It should be rather obvious that there exists a negative correlation between the size of the team and financial independence. First of all, the size of the team directly impacts the development cost. It is much safer to finance the game from the team's own funds if the group is relatively small. The notion of a small team also reflects the topos of a staunch individualist expressing herself through her work (creative independence), especially potent in Western culture since the Romantic era. It is easier to identify that tradition with a small team than a grand corporation. However, it is worth noticing that indie developers are rarely "outsiders" [12], as they usually operate within large *community of production* (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011) - taking advantage of shared resources and collective intelligence of game development middleware user base. As strong as these correlations between the size of the team and game independence are, they rely on the historical fact of an increase of an average team development size. In the earlier days of the industry this difference wasn't as prominent because every game was created by a small company or just by an individual (and yet not every game was considered to be independent).

### 3.8 Indie Mindset

There is no single understanding of what the distinguishing values of being "indie" are. What can be identified, however, are certain narratives (Ruffino, 2013) or tendencies (Lipkin, 2013) of describing the movement that are present in the video game culture discourses. Naturally, some narratives are more prominent than others. Probably one of the most recognized is *The Scratchware Manifesto* (Costikyan, 2000) advocating independence from practices and ideology of the game industry "corporate machine". However, as it was already discussed (see Jahn-Sudmann, 2008; Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 290-92), the indie mindset is not based on simple oppositional logic and criticism of the established mainstream. As in the case of cinema or music, "indie credibility can be maintained in the eyes of the indie community even when the alternative artist achieves success through the channels of corporate mass-media" (Newman, 2009, p. 20). For example, the protagonists of *Indie Game: The Movie* have gained this kind of success and yet their shared narratives of "indie spirit" seem to be presently the most influential within the scene. McMillen and Refenes are undeniably anti-authoritarian (Lipkin, 2013, pp. 12-13) and also defined by being personal and authentic. This do-it-yourself movement inspired honesty (Juul, 2014) which implies that indie games are designed by a community of gamers -- as opposed to a think tank of marketing specialists. In that sense, indie mindset is not only about creating better games and, by doing so, making games a better medium, but also about being a better developer because of producing indie games. It is thus important to point out that this kind of mindset or attitude has gained popularity only recently and differs greatly from the attitude of earlier independent creators who oftentimes tried to create an impression of a "professional", corporate product.

### 3.9 Indie Scene

Researchers widely agree (Parker, 2013; Ruffino, 2013) that indie games (especially in the North American context) can be identified with a game development scene that was born around Independent Game Festival (founded in 1998), whose finalists usually end up as popular indie game designers and faces of the community. But "indie" is no longer only an Anglo-American phenomenon, as a variety of local scenes grew around the world with their own popular figures and events [13]. However, those local indie game scenes are interconnected on the global level as the abovementioned community of production joins together developers who label themselves as "indie". Creation in a joint effort of a bigger community tends to be

correlated with financial independence as the help the community provides (in terms of tools, assets, testing and know-how) lowers the game budget. It is important to notice that being a member of the scene doesn't necessarily require them to embrace the indie mindset.

### 3.10 Middleware

Game engine can be a significant production cost and this is why the introduction of multiplatform middleware such as Unity 3D (released in 2005) was a significant change in the independent game development [14]. Although certainly helpful in terms of financial and publishing independence, ready-for-use tools of this type can sometimes limit creative independence [15]. As platform studies show (Bogost, 2006, p. 73), some of these tools and game engine specifics can determine intrinsic properties of the game -- their aesthetics, parts of the mechanics, control schemes, etc. It is quite possible for one or more of these properties to become "indie markers" -- that is, become the properties which are commonly used in identification of independent games. As pointed out above, it may even be argued that the dominance of Unity among amateur programmers may lead to the emergence of this new type of new "indie look". The availability of professional or semi-professional middleware correlates with financial and publishing independence, but the sole fact that a given piece of software has become the informal standard is a contingent property.

## 4. Conclusion

We believe that there are several advantages to our approach. First of all, the explication of the concept of independent game that we advocate helps to understand some of the peculiarities of the common usage of the terms under discussion. It clarifies why the label "indie" has gained popularity only recently. We suggest that in the mid-2000s a new set of contingent properties has become apparent and independent games started to be identified through them. Second of all, it helps us to understand some of the emotional reactions whenever a game is not independent but contains enough corresponding contingent properties to be automatically associated with indie games (it is, so to speak, "independent only on the surface"). It creates controversies because such games seem to be "indie" without being "independent". Similar tensions result in the

hesitation over the usage of the term indie (Double Fine case) or lead to creation of new expressions (*Valiant Hearts...* case) that may even sound paradoxical (i.e. "indie-AAA"). It happens whenever a given game is independent but it cannot be characterized by any of the typical "indie markers".

The temporal narrowness and contingency of the notion of "indie" is the reason why some of the properties which are commonly associated with indie games do not contribute to functional academic classifications or definitions (their scope may be simply too narrow). These properties may be good for identification of independent games because they are often more conspicuous than the properties referred to in the three types of independence we present in Section 2, but we shouldn't be too attached to them. They work as indie markers and function well only in a specific narrow context. This is why all the definitions of indie games based on conjunctions or disjunctions of these properties are prone to counterexamples (imaginary or real). This is also the reason why a narrow notion, such as the notion of an indie game, starts to be less and less useful as the time goes by -- it simply isn't designed to be used in longer time-spans. Its meaning starts to shift just as the properties correlated with game independence change. Thus, the term "indie" shouldn't be treated as a simple abbreviation of the broad notion of an "independent game", as they can be used interchangeably only in a very specific timeframe.

We believe that our proposal can also be useful to researchers interested in history of games in general and in conceptual history specifically, as this area of game studies seems to be recently developing more intensively - i.e. *Debugging Game History Lexicon* (Lowood, Guins, 2016). In this paper we have focused on "indie games" but there are many other temporal variations - distinct narrow meanings of the concept of independent game - that we haven't discussed (e.g. shareware scene of the 1990s). Another related context that we haven't explored in length is local game histories. Nevertheless, it is clear to us that independent games are not a homogenous phenomenon and various local variations are determined by multiple regional factors - a good example of that is the Australian scene (see Swalwell, 2007). But the investigation of independent game scenes and their (local) histories seems much more challenging without better understanding of the concept of independent game itself and its complexity.

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## Endnotes

[1] A disjunction of properties is true if the object has at least one of these properties (and nothing prevents it from having more than one).

[2] We use the term "contingent" as it is standardly understood in philosophy. A property is contingent if it is not essential for a given object. In other words -- it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition. In modal terms -- the property belongs to the object in the actual world but it does not belong to it in every possible world.

[3] The observation that "indie games" as a movement within game development are a contemporary phenomenon has been made before (for example, see Lipkin, 2013, p. 9).

[4] More information: <http://www.telefilm.ca/en/telefilm/investment-reports>.

[5] Especially through the modern forms of game advertising (i.e. materials on YouTube channels).

[6] There are also smaller but equally important changes that make self-publishing easy. For example ESRB offers fast and free rating services for smaller digital games.

[7] This example may surprise some readers but it is important to remember that big companies like Ubisoft distribute the tasks of development and publishing among its various divisions - studios which are even oftentimes based in different parts of the world.

[8] *Colossal Cave Adventure* was financially (created in spare time with no investor), creatively (for personal use) and publishing-wise (uploaded to an academic mainframe network) independent. However, one might argue that the intended audience was not the developer himself but rather his daughters (see Jerz, 2007).

[9] One thing that has to be pointed out is that we don't want to suggest that the term "independent" is timeless - just that it spans across a bigger time period - one that is big enough to cover current history of video games. If economic circumstances changed dramatically, it is possible that the disjunction would have to be

abandoned or modified (for example, there is no point in talking about financial independence in a world without private property).

[10] *Elite Dangerous* (Frontier Developments, 2014) is a good example of this.

[11] For example, sequels to successful 8-bit style games aren't typically 16-bit style games.

[12] Even though it happens as in the case of Richard Hofmeier -- the creator of *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2011).

[13] Tour Bueno project offers a good panorama of this diversity, at least in the European context. More information:  
[www.tourbueno.com](http://www.tourbueno.com).

[14] For example, Unity developed games practically dominated current game jams.

[15] Because of the multiplatform nature of Unity.

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