Anti-inspiration in Independent Games

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The full presentation is available at http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/anti-inspiration/

ABSTRACT
Research on video game design innovation has identified a number of sources for game innovation, particularly inspiration from other games or other media. Through the analysis of game design and video game reviews, the paper argues that inspiration for independent game design often has an inverted character, where innovation is not based on emulating sources of inspiration, but on rejecting design principles from mainstream video games.

Keywords
Independent games, innovation, authenticity

INTRODUCTION
Keir Keightley (2001) writes how the history of Rock music can be seen as series of assertions of authenticity, where any kind of inauthenticity is then projected onto Pop music. Similarly, (Ruffino 2013) argues that for independent game culture, mainstream video games play the part of the compromised other, against which independent games react.

Existing research on video game innovation (Hagen 2009) (Ho, Tomitsch, and Bednarz 2015), distinguishes between different sources of inspiration (such as from other games or from other media). However, I will demonstrate how independent game design involves a particular type of anti-inspiration, where rhetoric against mainstream video games is accompanied by design innovations spurred by the deliberate exclusion of mainstream video game conventions.

A common trope in reviews of independent games has the reviewer emphasizing deviations from conventions as indicators of quality: “Dear Esther is a terrible video game. Which would be a problem if Dear Esther was a video game.” (Plunkett 2012). In addition, several game developers and critics explicitly point to mainstream game design elements that they see as compromised. For example, developer Tale of Tales specifically criticizes the typical goal-oriented structure of video games for forcing players to super-optimize, which in turns means that players become uninterested in story and other aspects of a game (Harvey and Samyn 2010). Correspondingly, the popular concept of flow is seen as limiting the expressive range of video games (Polansky 2015).

Through examples, the presentation identifies three main areas in which independent games function as rejections of the presumed ills of mainstream video games, either in terms of their 1) design, 2) development practices, or 3) business practices.

Design: The first type of criticism against the mainstream concerns the design conventions of mainstream video games, where independent games then deviate from these conventions in ways that are argued to represent an improvement over the mainstream. Strategies includes goal-less games (The Chinese Room 2012), player-adjudicated games, games with art aspiration, obfuscation of game rules, and lack-of-power fantasies (Foddy 2008).
Development: Another type of criticism concerns game development, where the provenance of the game artefact becomes important in its evaluation. Strategies include the idea of independent games as better craft (Juul 2014), personal games (Anthropy 2012), diverse games, and local games (Die Gute Fabrik 2014).

Business models: Finally, some economically independent developers make games that do not contain any of the criticisms of mainstream video game design outlined above. For example, Grey Goo (Petroglyph Software 2015) is an attempt at making a real time strategy game with high production values, without rejecting mainstream design values.

Independent games have previously been compared to various other “independent” forms such as cinema (Lipkin 2013) and punk music (Parsons AMT 2013) in their focus on rejecting a compromised status quo and in the assumed democratization of video games through DIY tools. I will expand on the analysis of this rhetoric as a kind of strategy that asserts itself against an assumed inauthentic other (Ruffino 2013) (Juul 2014). In the presentation, I will analyze a number of examples of the interaction between review rhetoric and particular game design ideas, demonstrating the way in which independent game developers and critics continue to, through acts of anti-inspiration, make claims for independent games as an authentic alternative to the mainstream.

BIBLIOGRAPHY