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# HANDMADE PIXELS: INDEPENDENT VIDEO GAMES AND THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY

Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity

Jesper Juul

The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2019

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**Reviewed by:**

James Sweeting

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Jesper Juul begins the preface of this book claiming that “independent games give me the refreshing feeling of starting over, of once again *not knowing what video games are* [emphasis in original] and having to discover them from the beginning” (p. ix). Whilst this comment encourages a look backwards at the videogames medium, the extent to which this is nostalgic varies and serves as a tool to help understand the wider quest for authenticity.

Juul is clear from the beginning that this is a book about examining how independent videogames became a movement within the industry, resulting in a particular form. Authenticity is therefore seen as not just something that can be used to describe these videogames but also something that the developers often strive to achieve. It is also notable that, as stated in the subtitle, the focus is on independent videogames, with only occasional references to the mainstream videogames that continue to dominate the medium. This distinction further highlights the otherness found with independent videogames that contribute to their perceived uniqueness. Juul has also stuck with the term “independent” to refer to these videogames and its developers rather than the term “indie.” It can be argued that the terms are interchangeable, and Juul does add that there still is not a clear distinction between those terms, that if anything they are labels with no formally agreed-upon definitions. It is perhaps because of this that Juul has gone with the less common label to refer to videogames outside of the mainstream, whilst also not wanting to get involved with the semantics behind it. Rather he identifies the evolution of what has been considered distinct enough from the mainstream and the different ways in which this has been achieved.

Independent games (he also drops the *video*) come across as a response to the continued existence and trajectory of mainstream videogames, with Juul in part comparing this to a sense of antimodernism (not in reference to modern art) in that there is a feeling that something has gone wrong, been lost, and that some things have gone too far. To try and rectify this is to look back and locate authentic elements to utilise once again. To be clear though – and this is where the role of nostalgia becomes a bit clearer – this is not (for the most part) about replicating the past as was. Rather, it is to help contribute to creating something *different*, even if it is not truly new or original, just as long as it is distinct *enough* from the contemporary norm. This has already begun to have an effect as there is no longer a universal form that could be commonly considered and accepted as a videogame representative of the whole medium. Juul argues that ‘there was a period from roughly 1980 to 2005 *when we knew what video games were* [emphasis in original]’ (p. 10); when they were sold in physical boxes, targeted males aged 10-35, and were promoted based on technically better graphics. This links back to Juul delighting in no longer knowing what a videogame is, seemingly he does not want there to be a typical videogame form, which likely explains his criticisms of mainstream videogames and the conservative/risk-averse approach.

One of the most interesting concepts to emerge from this book (although it had been previously introduced in an earlier paper) is what Juul has coined “independent style.” This term is used to highlight the visual styles as *well* as the creative process behind it. This approach begins to help explain why many independent games began to adopt similar visual styles, which also utilised similar visual aesthetics as videogames from the 1980s and later the 1990s. In part this was the result of how these videogames were being created, matching the smaller development teams, or individuals, that were creating videogames during those periods. The limitations imposed by having fewer resources (people, equipment, money) unsurprisingly meant that the majority of independent developers are unable to create a videogame that matches contemporary AAA (blockbuster) videogames, but they can create something resembling popular videogames from previous decades. Hence, the revival of 2D pixel-based graphics (and later low-poly 3D), something that modern mainstream videogames had for a long time abandoned in the pursuit of better graphics. For others, there is also the attempt of reviving the *feeling* of past videogames, such as the simplicity and/or difficulty that many provided, compared with either the complex systems or the range of assists found in contemporary videogames.

Independent style is not just about the form of the videogames themselves. As Juul states that for many independent developers it is about creating in a way that is more akin to the smaller studios of the past or even the broader arts & crafts movements, where creators are free to make what they want without the behest of a publisher telling them what to do, and in certain instances without concern for making a profit, or even much money at all (although the issue of money has become more ambiguous as the independent movement has grown). By moving in this direction, there is a quest for authenticity, not just in the form of the videogames themselves, but the creative process behind them, and this is where the “independent style” helps to distinguish independent games from the mainstream (including past mainstream videogames). Authenticity can still come from past videogame form, and there are independent developers who do engage in nostalgic attempts of reviving past videogame aesthetics. Not only do these developers want to create something that resembles what they might have played as a child, but there is also a market for players who would like to play videogames that look like those from their childhoods, too.

Yet, looking to the past is not the sole exercise for many creators of independent games, for many of them there exists a desire to create and provide content that is different to the vast majority of mainstream videogames. This results in a product that is not

necessarily authentic in content style but will likely manage to be authentic in how it is *created*; based on the approach previously mentioned. The freedom that is afforded to independent developers (although often at personal financial risk) is that they can experiment with new and/or different types of gameplay experiences that do not fit with the previously held assumption of what a videogame can/should be. A videogame can be a short narrative experience with minimal gameplay and no way to win or lose. This stretches the understanding of what would have traditionally fallen under the term *videogame*, but a form of interactive digital media is still produced and resembles a similar overarching form – and uses similar control inputs – one that can still be sold alongside the latest mainstream videogames in the same digital storefronts.

Whilst these *alternative* independent videogames can increase accessibility to what could be considered a narrow-minded medium in terms of experiences previously provided, independent games can still fall foul of the limitations that arise from providing different experiences. In short, Juul highlights the presence of the derogatory term “artsy hipster crap” as criticism used against some of these independent games. The result is something that alienates not only *traditional* videogame players but also fails to accommodate those who are unfamiliar with videogames, instead, appealing to a niche audience.

Despite this criticism, the existence of videogames that attempt to provide something different to the mainstream – without focusing on reusing nostalgic elements – can to an extent influence wider mainstream videogames. Independent games have become the new testbed for the industry, taking the risk to see what works and what does not. This links with Juul’s wider criticism of mainstream videogames being too conservative, except now the industry as a whole has an outlet that is willing and able to take risks. Whilst this insinuates laziness on the part of the mainstream industry to experiment, given the large scale development that goes on behind the scenes, there is, unfortunately, valid economic reasons for not doing so; instead, *sitting back and seeing what sticks and what does not* becomes a sound commercial approach.

This wider approach could be what contributed to the continued relevance of mainstream videogames, and particularly the home videogame console space, which Juul admits he was incorrect about prophesising its death (console sales continue to remain healthy). Independent games, for the most part, are not big sellers, when compared to mainstream videogames (this is perhaps not surprising), but they are increasingly providing a sizable portion of the expanded library of content for these systems, whilst also propping it up in lieu of extended development times of the larger mainstream videogames. It is ironic considering independent games are seen as a harbinger of change in the videogames that should bring about a demise in the style of mainstream videogames (and along with it the closed systems reinforced by consoles), yet after a protracted console generation (Xbox 360, PS3, Wii) which saw a new generation struggle to initially find its identity, it was the independent games propping up the powerful new systems at a time when many industry analysts (and some academics) predicted that this would be the final act of dedicated consoles.

*Handmade Pixels* is an insightful exploration, detailing Juul’s own quest to determine what it is about independent games that have helped to change his once held certainty of understanding the expected form of videogames. Juul relishes the thought that videogame form is no longer a guarantee, that experimentation can indeed take place. Yet, seemingly, to do so, the medium has needed to look back to its past, both in content style and creative style, with the authenticity that either style provides helping to unlock the way forward, not only for independent videogames but potentially for the industry as a whole. Juul is consistent in his investigation of the independent side of the videogames industry unveiling astute observations. Independent games might be an alternative to the

mainstream, but they could provide an important insight into not only the past of videogames but also its potential future. This future might not be the one Juul would prefer – in which videogame form is amorphous – but it might result in a less rigid mainstream industry, which would seem like the real victory.

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