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Independent Game Development as Craft

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Abstract

This paper celebrates the rise of game making as craft in order to explicate the ways in which this activity is both empowering for those involved as well as at risk of reproducing less desirable aspects of the contemporary cultural landscape. One only has to look at independent game festivals to see how few women and other traditionally excluded groups are visible center stage in this rapidly developing sector – if we are not careful then the very same exclusionary practices that are evident in the mainstream sector will become embedded here. Craft has historically been seen as 'women's work' and the specific positioning of game making as craft in this paper is an intentional feminist act to claim this space and its potential to both play with and against 'for-profit' game development. This paper blends feminist approaches, new craft theory and indie game culture with the intent of identifying opportunities and strategies for inclusivity for the independent games sector. It will elucidate some *processes in action* but also, importantly, *identify routes forward* for building a diverse community of independent game developers.

Author Keywords

Feminism; independent games; games as craft; indie game design; women in games; feminist game studies

Introduction

“Contemporary craft is about making things. It is an intellectual and physical activity where the maker explores the infinite possibilities of materials and processes to produce unique objects. To see craft is to enter a world of wonderful things which can be challenging, beautiful, sometimes useful, tactile, extraordinary; and to understand and enjoy the energy and care which has gone into their making.”

Rosy Greenlees, Director of UK Craft Council (2012)

Historically, the digital game industry has focused on the mass market and globalized product, yet the rise of indie game culture points to the expansion of the development community in a range of ways (Bowen Martin and Deuze, 2009; Guevara-Villalobos, 2011). Broadly speaking this can be traced to wider access to the means of distribution provided by digital networks – whether free-to-play game content aggregators on the Internet (e.g. <http://www.newgrounds.com/>), the social game sector, smartphone and tablet gaming, or, the opening up of game distribution (e.g. via Steam and the indie channels on the major consoles).

Indeed achieving visibility amidst an increasingly saturated sector has become the larger challenge.

Game making spreads beyond the 'for-profit' space altogether, whether in research labs, as educational strategies, as personal expression, or as community-building activity. Research contexts for games are diverse; in game studies these range from more traditional work on player response in existent games, to experimental use of game design methods to play with form¹, to the theoretical framing and development of the field from various disciplinary perspectives. In the wider research, community games are used as both object and method of study: for example, the games for education initiative that have gained significant traction in North America that explore how game playing and creation can enhance learning (the work of Jen Jenson and Suzanne de Castell in Canada (2010) and Katie Salen's Institute of Play² are key exemplars). There is less recent game studies work addressing the function of games as community builders, as political activism³ or as tools for personal expression. This special edition of *Loading...* addresses some of these gaps in the context of independent game practice.

Feminist Game Studies

Feminists have long been concerned with access to technology, and have worked specifically with game form since the eighties (Skirrow, 1986), pre-dating any formalization of games studies. Yet it remains a challenge to find visible traces of widespread participation of women in the creation of technology. In fact, even as digital engagement becomes normalized in day-to-day life fewer women and girls than ever enter the technological sector at all (AAUW, 2010).

To date, the themes addressed by feminist game studies can be broadly seen as: gendered activity in digital games both in game playing and in game content; feminine preference in play style; feminine game-making and access to gaming. There has been a tendency in many gender and games studies to generalize, which is problematic as the category of 'women' consists of a multiplicity of individuals from all stages and walks of life. More recent work has looked at how feminist game studies could move beyond these somewhat simplistic statements to a more nuanced and productive approach to the study of gender and games. The work of T. L. Taylor and Jenson and de Castell stands out in their call for rigor and a consideration of the wider cultural and historical context and broader media frameworks within which games function:

“Until both theory and research explicitly and actively take prior differences and current contextual factors seriously into account, we cannot expect to find much deviation from gender stereotyping that has thus far dominated theory and research concerning gender and gaming.”

Jenson and de Castell, p. 60 (2010)

Taylor (2008) points to the “assemblage of play” that any study of gender and games needs to take into account. Jenson and de Castell (2010) critique much work on gender in games as refusing to consider gender at all by conflating gender with sex, persistently attempting to identify sex-specific patterns of play and dismissing gender's significance to the study of games.

What is perhaps also hidden in many discussions of gender and games is an activist agenda. The identification of an activity as feminist – and not all work on gender and games identifies this way – explicitly expresses an interest in challenging and affecting the status quo. Any inquiry needs to proceed in full awareness of its history and perhaps it is time to mobilize older approaches as, maybe, a partial model for action. Cyberfeminism was one feminist response to the explosion of personal computing and Internet technology temporarily unifying a mixed group of academics, artists, and activists in response to themes of technological encounter in the nineties. One parallel with current activity in DIY game making is the engagement between different groups in specific interventions via an increasingly vocal community of developers, journalists, and academics interested in addressing diversity in the games sector. Cyberfeminism was directly concerned with the connections between women and technology and called “...attention to the impact of new technologies on the lives of women and the insidious gendering of technoculture in everyday life” (Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble, 1998, p. 50). Rallying around Haraway’s famous metaphor of the cyborg as strategy for engagement with technology, the movement made use of techniques like irony to claim a voice in meaning-making practices. Cyberfeminists identified programming as a craft activity closely connected to weaving and excavated a history of female programmers in Sadie Plant’s *Zeroes and Ones* (1998). In the contemporary context of a more pragmatic experience of day-to-day engagement with technology, the discussion is less one of access to the building of a cyberspace than of working towards equitable access to digital tools mindful of the opportunities they hold for both empowerment and expression. As Paasonen (2011) speculates in her investigation of cyberfeminism, any revisioning needs to move forward via “...not a question of utopianism as figurations of ideal alternative societies, but one of strategies and tactics for living in the societies that we do” (p. 349). However briefly, cyberfeminism succeeded in capturing the imagination of a generation and existed alongside the U.S. led ‘riot grrrl’ movement to share feminist manifestos, engaging others in a subculture led by artists, activists, and musicians like Bikini Kill. A key tool was the use of independently published ‘zines to allow people to “...assert their independence whilst at the same time calling for others to join them” (Spencer, 2005, p. 57). Spencer’s exploration of DIY prioritizes the role of the ‘zine as a productive format to communicate individual experience and ideas in a subculture wary of mainstream media interest. Over time, some ‘zines made the move online whilst others transitioned into new forms of DIY endeavor, including a “new craft movement” that centered around the notion that “...the pleasure of producing something yourself on your own terms can also be a conscious rejection of oppressive cultural and political values” (Spencer, 2005, p. 83).

“Here women redefined feminism for the ‘90s and recognized each other as manufacturers of culture, as opposed to participants in a culture that they were encouraged to accept. They were encouraged to reclaim the media and produce their own cultural forms.”

Spencer, p. 57 (2005)

The work of game developer Anna Anthropy connects to the ‘riot grrrl’ tradition outlined above; her 2008 Escapist piece *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*⁴ and subsequent book of the same title celebrates the potential of what she calls “non-professionals involved in the craft of game creation.” She refers to her own games as personal and points to the expressive richness of this

type of game design over group design and the more anonymous practices of folk design. “Folk games tell us about the culture that created them; authored games tell us about the author that created them” (Anthropy, 2012, p. 51). In a rant at the annual Game Developers Conference⁵ she critiqued the term “indie” itself as an emerging clique that risks exclusionary practices⁶. Many of her games deal with themes of personal interest and a recent release *Dys4ia* (2012) can be seen as autobiographical. In this move to autobiographical games, Anthropy adopts an approach widely used in feminist art practices and actualizes the feminist insistence that the personal is political for DIY games.

The Indie Context

A wide range of game development practices are bundled as indie: from boutique studios signed to major publishers, to the self-financed individual chasing breakout success (whether financial or critical), to artists using the tools of game development for artistic expression, to the DIY game making practices explored here. Whilst the growing success of the indie game community is relatively recent there have always been digital games made outside of the mainstream publisher-led industry framework. Whether it be the bedroom coders of the eighties that created the UK games industry, or the gamer-created mods released on Steam, or the annual Global Game Jams that build games over a weekend, increasingly, game making is a widespread creative practice.

Games are made in diverse contexts, as educational practice, for non-entertainment purposes and as research tools as outlined above. A detailed discussion of the communities engaged in making games is beyond the scope of this paper, but the point here is that this type of game making is less about sales of a final product than what is gained through the process of making.

Individuals make and release independent games for a range of reasons, some of which may usefully be summarized as: to secure work in or attention from the industry, to self-publish in order to make a living, or, as a form of self-expression. It is this final group of game makers and their practices – from now on referred to as “DIY game making” – that are the focus of the rest of this paper.

The presentation of DIY game making as craft explores the approach in one fairly well resourced context⁷, which although closely connected to the international indie scene via the involvement of local indies in game festivals and conferences, remains one specific setting for this activity. It is the ongoing success of the more commercially oriented indie game developers that has helped build a fertile environment for the DIY practices that are explored here. It is hoped that an explication of this activity could be useful for other settings interested in diversity. One aspect of the growth of indie games is how communities tend to be centered in specific geographical settings that, importantly, allow people to spend more time together in person. In Canada for example, there are clusters in the major cities of Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, and Vancouver, as well as Victoria and Winnipeg.

DIY culture addresses the democratization of craft more generally as a personal praxis. Whilst umbilically connected to craft, DIY is an everyday activity accessible to all, whilst craft implies a commitment on behalf of the crafter to skill in approach, process, and outcome. Maker culture

has grown from DIY practice and consists of a particularly technology-based and hardware-oriented extension to the broader phenomena. Anthropy's (2012) approach to game making as DIY practice connects games to the more politicized viewpoints central to DIY around individual agency and collective responsibility. The maker community approaches accessibility via the publication of manuals, regular Maker Faires, online tutorials, and provision of kits with the intent of making both the technology and the knowledge as widely available as possible.

Beyond the specifics of aesthetic style, game making as a form of personal expression is very much a handmade affair. The tools of digital game making are computational, yet the maker uses her hands to build her game and is involved in all aspects of creation. DIY game development involves shorter development times and less ornate game structures than the mainstream sector. Often the DIY maker is the sole creator, allowing for authorship of the game development process, and playable outcome. The designer's voice and values are reflected in the resulting game. As a craft practice, game design offers a unique opportunity to model action and consequence in a particularly effective manner.

There are fuzzy edges between the categories of indie games and art games that can be seen as productive for both spaces. Art games have been broadly defined as games that "...challenge[s] cultural stereotypes, offer meaningful social or historical critique, or tell a story in a novel manner" (Holmes, 2003, p. 46). Many indie games are exhibited at art game shows and art games celebrated at indie game festivals. It is possible to identify the significance of key festivals and curators as a mechanism for making these games visible in a wider setting. Indie game developers tend to promote their work on these circuits as a way to maximize exposure to either critical or commercial ends. The indie scene is very much typified by individual games and their makers leading to a sector currently made up of a handful of vocal, and mostly male, game developers. Early indie game developers have tended by discipline to be programmers emphasizing technical virtuosity as a prerequisite for visible success, whether identified as an art or indie practice; yet, the range of disciplines involved continues to expand as the tools of creation become more accessible. Whether indie, DIY, or art, making a game provides expressive potential that transcends specific genres, technologies, or platforms.

The Craft of Game Making

Craft has long been typified as a 'lowly' art and held distinct from more culturally valued practices as an 'applied' art form. One historical argument used to substantiate this distinction was that the craft object often has use value. All digital games require a player to play them, which self-evidently is a form of use, albeit not always productive in the wider capitalist sense of the term. However the interest here is not in gameplay but in the craft of game making.

To some degree, aspects of the resurgence of craft can be linked to feminist work that has insisted on the acknowledgement of craft as a significant aesthetic practice. Feminism has claimed a space for non-traditional aesthetic form including process-led and craft-based activity as holding artistic merit. Hein and Korsmeyer (1993) point to feminist theory that allows "...new aesthetic values to emerge, as in the integration of art with the physical world or with politics" (p. 26).

Feminist scholars have argued that all representational form is political; for example Hein's work

on feminist aesthetics states:

“Critics of feminism and of feminist art object that such overtly political representations have no place in art. They, however, are failing to grasp the charge implicit in the feminist art that "conventional" art is equally political...”

Hein, p. 284 (1990)

In this view, there is no objectivity as every artifact made by human hand expresses the values of its maker. This runs directly counter to the presentation of games as “just entertainment” prevalent in the commercial sector.

David Gauntlett’s (2011) exploration of creativity tracks a history of craft from The Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century in the West to modern DIY culture (from the counter-culture of the sixties to punk DIY to digital expression online today) as both an ideological and political mechanism to engage a crafter in creative action. Gauntlett emphasizes process rather than product, as engagement in creative processes gives individuals a sense of agency and potency. His view stands as an accurate description of both the aims and the outcome of the DIY games movement as instantiated by the woman-only games workshops that have run in Toronto, Ontario since 2011⁸. This initiative is discussed in more detail elsewhere (see Fisher & Harvey), but the central framing of a separatist learning and support group is a powerful feminist tool for empowering and enabling those traditionally excluded from full creative participation.

It is possible to see a contradiction between the portrayal of indie game making as a display of skill and commitment on behalf of indie developers (for example as made in *Indie game: The movie*⁹) and the presentation of accessible tools for DIY game making. This creates a danger of expectation setting in the gaps between the rhetoric of easy construction and the celebration of designer prowess. The types of games made in learning contexts should be seen as sketches that need further development for release. Getting a playable proof-of-concept is relatively easy but making a finished release build is often hard, and there is a spectrum of difference between game design experiments and fully finished gameplay experience. Within the limits (including time, budget, and skill) the game maker must focus on design constraints in order to complete her game. For example, many DIY games are shorter than mainstream titles and adopt abstracted styles that reference game conventions (whether in content or in structure) that both pay tribute to existing games as well as reduce development time and cost. This re-working of existing material has parallels in traditional craft practice: for example, a quilter recycling fabric in new creations, a knitter unpicking jumpers for wool, or the use of open source libraries to build new software.

Fabriculture

Contemporary theory in DIY culture (Minahan and Cox, 2007; Bratich, 2010; Bratich and Brush, 2011) is interested in how the growing maker communities generate social capital for those involved. It is possible to see in this work a tightly woven discussion of activism and empowerment that has yet to reach game studies. The inclusion of these discussions in the exploration of indie games is important in synthesizing suggestions to connect to politically self-

aware activism – an activism that is vital to the ongoing inclusion of a diversity of voices in indie game praxis.

Scholars have drawn connections between the resurgence of interest in craft and the ubiquity of social networks in the context of gendered spaces of production, and, how this trend “...provides new modes of political activism” (Bratich and Brush, 2011, p. 233). Although their work addresses the rise of contemporary craft practice and its relationship to digital networks, this paper positions DIY game making as part of this wider fabriculture movement. This focus on game communities explores the ways in which these groups are engaging in activist work. Bratich and Brush’s definition of fabriculture refers to “...the broader practices (meaning-making, communicative, community-building) intertwined with this (im)material labor” (Bratich and Brush, 2011, p. 234). They separate the praxis of what they call “craft-work” from this wider context in order to focus on the activist potential of these communities of craft. The fabriculture practices on display in Toronto engage a network of various cultural, academic, developer, and community groups to contribute to a rich gaming ecosystem. This seemingly organic process can be traced to a few originating groups and individuals – The Hand Eye Society¹⁰, for example – but continues to flourish and expand with minimal formal structure.

One aspect of aligning DIY game making with craft history is an acknowledgement of the importance of contextualizing activity within a longer tradition in order to make visible the processes of incorporation active in Western patriarchies. Rather than seeing contemporary fabriculture as a subculture with a potentially brief lifespan – excluding it from a position of power – Bratich and Brush’s work traces a longer tradition of craft surviving on the periphery of dominant cultures. On their account, craft has an ongoing relationship to capitalism – from the guilds, to incorporation into the machine of capitalism, to a devalued status as “women’s work”, to a contemporary resurgence in the setting of online digital technology. This relationship remains subject to the methods of exclusion (including trivializing activity, making invisible, and appropriation) familiar to the wider feminist project. These methods kick-in whenever the status-quo feels challenged, and it is possible to see evidence of this in action via the trolling that follows much feminist activity online.

In the drive to mass production, the devaluation of craft was its alignment with the domestic setting; yet, it is the domestication of personal computing that is opening up new possibilities for craft practice whether digital or not (increasingly technology itself is seen as a tool for individual craft praxis). The Internet allows makers to act locally whilst being connected globally, building connections directly between communities of interest regardless of physical location. Digital technology has been a central enabler for the growth of the modern DIY movement. The resurgence of craft values and practice is not purely about peer-to-peer connectivity (whether computational or in person) to facilitate direct distribution, but also involves a commitment to ensuring that digital making practices are more accessible to more people. Open access politics has grown from initiatives like the Free Software Movement of the mid-nineties, in which the open development and sharing of technical interfaces afforded significant benefit, cutting development time and ensuring community literacy. Approaches to game culture have only recently started to address the consolidation and growth of independent game making. Yet it is exactly this start of a community of practice that holds the most potential for establishing an equitable and inclusive space for traditionally excluded groups.

A DIY Games Ecosystem

Toronto-made indie games and their makers are visible on the international festival circuit¹¹, and leading companies like Capybara Games¹² are vocal about coming from Toronto, which has been effective in bringing attention to the local community. Game community events in the city are regular, mostly free, and focus on a wide range of activities from game showcases (that mix student work with independent practice), to knowledge sharing (both formally through public lectures, workshops, and informally through social play and design feedback sessions), to education initiatives at all levels. Many of the individuals that have been instrumental to the rise of DIY game making in Toronto are also active in the city's maker community. Alex Leitch, Director of Site 3 CoLaboratory and Dames Making Games states:

“DMG.to's broad connection to Makerism is that we're both DIY, and both movements are intent on convincing people not to be afraid of their own curiosity. To learn by doing. To make a thing that's good enough to convince ourselves that we can change and have some say in how we live our lives and what we do with them.”

A. Leitch, personal communication (December 4, 2012)

The level of activity around DIY game making continues to grow, and is focused on opening up the process of making over and above the games made. This is important as it allows skills to develop and successful games to emerge from a rich ecosystem of makers.

Fabriculture activity supporting DIY game making has grown via publicly funded partnerships with both cultural institutions and academic research partners in a range of ways. Cultural activities like the TIFF Nexus program¹³ of cross-sector public education initiatives have productively run at the same time as academic research projects: for example, the SSHRC-funded Feminists in Games (FiG) network¹⁴ led by York University (in which the author is actively involved). These types of funded initiatives have developed alongside a rich Canadian tradition of media project funding increasingly focused at game projects: e.g. the Canadian Media Fund (CMF)¹⁵.

Much activity has been aimed at building diversity and, as a maker community, is oriented around knowledge sharing and the empowerment that this provides. Initiatives focus on creating and supporting game making activities that are accessible to and inclusive of new voices as a specifically feminist intervention. The mix of indie developers, education researchers, and groups of learners has enabled a particularly potent grouping for ongoing activity. As one example, TIFF Nexus has been so successful with the Difference Engine Initiative (DEI)¹⁶ that variants of the creative jam (which morphed into Dames Making Games), have, at the time of writing, run a total of four times, expanded to two other international locations, and are increasingly led by volunteer activity. Game jams¹⁷ have become a key mechanism in building a community of makers and are intensive, fixed duration, practically oriented, and project-led workshop sessions that center on making a creative digital or technological artifact to empower the maker.

A brief glance at the first two sets of DEI games¹⁸ show a wide range of themes. These game demos are just that – sketches of game ideas that reflect themes of interest to the makers – and

engage in similar techniques of abstraction evident in the wider indie community (i.e. the use of 2D and 2.5D graphics, platformer conventions, keyboard controls, etc.). There are also more experimental approaches: for example, Hannah Epstein's *The Immoral Ms. Conduct*¹⁹ that uses YouTube as a gaming platform. As a starting point, these games point to a rich set of themes and voices engaging in game design practices. Many participants in the two initial sessions have continued to make games and remain active in the local game development community. Indeed part of the commitment to these free sessions involves mentoring subsequent jams and publishing guidelines and tutorials. This is standard practice in maker communities.

Most DIY game initiatives are presented informally after work or on weekends, and consist of small peer groups that mutually support each other, much in the same way as many early feminist groups did. As effectively summarized by Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble, "The organizing cell for the first phase of feminism was the sewing circle..." (Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble, 1998, p. 48). What is particularly encouraging about the ongoing activity of Dames Making Games is how many participants have moved forward to active engagement in game culture (Fisher & Harvey). As more people are exposed to DIY approaches to making games – a process that can be seen as part of the wider domestication of technology – it remains of central importance that visible signs of diversity are on display.

Types of Practice

There are significant differences between game makers with practices as diverse as fan activity (whether digital or real world) to artistic interrogation of game form to those activities that center on 'playing with' game form – modding, machinima, and so forth. This richness of practice stands as a way of 'making one's own' in an increasingly engaged player community. Although authored games (as conceived by Anthropy) focus on the personal voice of the maker, the inherently active nature of gameplay blurs the boundaries between the active consumption of the player and the maker's crafting of cultural form in a productive manner. In the actions they take, players are always already creating their own gameplay experience regardless of their interest in making games. The point here is that, beyond the potential for game making to facilitate empowerment, gameplay is driven by player action, which in itself holds promise, as evidenced in the growing Games for Change movement²⁰.

Whilst DIY is often framed as amateur practice, a potential schism within the indie community rests on the professionalization of indie game practices. Aggregation of indie games is a low risk activity for distributors and many traditional game publishers carry indie titles on their network, which problematizes the status of indie itself. One approach to differentiating between amateur and professional practice has been to look at whether payment is exchanged; yet payment is only one value generated by game making activity, and carries with it expectations for marketable content. Potential values of DIY game making include a sense of agency, identity, involvement, and affect on behalf of the makers and the communities they generate. The sharing of these values within a group set the ground for ongoing activity, activism even, that may work to counter dominant industry norms. Like any DIY endeavor the potential values created by making games, or game culture, are generative – yet capitalism fails to recognize or value this potential as it falls outside existing frameworks of remuneration.

Many successful indie game developers are visible in an international scene made up of a handful

of festivals, locations, commentators, and competitions that create a setting ripe for reproducing exclusionary practices of its own. Merit-based systems and ideas around free markets are all very well, but who decides which games are seen in the first place? Who says which voice is heard in indie praxis? For a diverse community, this needs to remain an open process in order to enable as many different types of games made by as many different individuals as possible. In Toronto, this is currently approached through openly accessible showcase opportunities where the high level of interest in games has created multiple opportunities to show work. This openness creates situations where student games are often shown alongside professionally released games, as well as more experimental titles. In the broader indie community, visibility is secured through games journalism and indie game festivals like Indiecade²¹, GDC²² and GameCity²³, as well as curated game exhibitions. These activities are run by a relatively small group of individuals whose methods for selection are not necessarily motivated by a desire for diversity, and this potentially narrows the range of games selected even assuming that DIY makers care enough about these mechanisms to submit their work in the first place.

For feminists there is a key challenge fundamental to these issues; whilst access to the processes of creation are hugely significant in opening up the potential diversity of this sector, is it the visibility of the artifacts created that holds the longest lasting marker of success? Success in this sense means the ability to open up and maintain engagement with diverse groups of people. Most feminist theory acknowledges feminist activism as a relatively cyclical affair, as successive generations necessarily discover their own multiple feminisms and take action on issues specific to their time and place. Each success builds on previous work but progress is erratic as dominant ideologies continue to undermine feminist progress. The challenge of self-discovery for each generation lies in the visibility of those who have gone before. Feminist strategies from other sectors have included setting up a women's press to enable outsider voices to be published, and the creation of courses and resources on feminism to build more persistent resources. These processes of feminist intervention operate by making traditionally excluded voices visible. However, this opens up these voices to patriarchal mechanisms that devalue and minimize the impact of those who venture into visibility.

Possibility Spaces

Since the split between the domestic sphere and the factory²⁴ devalued and made invisible labour not directly related to mass production, feminists have worked to expose this schism and the often gendered dividing line drawn between these spaces and notions of productive and immaterial labor. One of the major shifts in the age of ubiquitous technology is the collapse of strict distinctions between the spaces and types of labor as technology becomes more personal, the workplace increasingly mobile, and the domestic more visible. Some domestic acts have become leisure activities, and in the growth of new craft movements it is possible to see that many of these have become highly social. The contexts of value production are no longer so clearly delineated; yet the gendered divide remains remarkably persistent. Bratich (2010) explores the status of craft as affective labour pointing to its significance as a driver for action and illuminating how the "...resurgence of fabriculture has occurred alongside of digital, virtual culture..." (Bratich, 2010, p. 305). It is possible to see aspects of this new craft movement – specifically to the interest of this paper, DIY games – as temporarily outside the capitalist machine, and thus affording a possibility space for interventionist work.

So not only is domestic space provisional and under challenge in the context of ubiquitous connectivity, but activities most recently thought of as domestic are increasingly being performed as political acts (e.g. knitting). This process is intimately connected to digital connectivity. The connections between real world and digital craft activity offers those who have access to the technology a wide range of expressive choice together with the machinery to publish and promote their creations. Probably more than anything else, this widespread access to the means of distribution holds the most potential for feminists in terms of building a diversity of voices, whether in game form or beyond.

Routes Forward

This paper has identified some key processes that contribute to the growth of DIY and independent game making activity:

1. Wider access to the means of distribution
2. The digital tools of personal expression are more available to more people than at any other time
3. The support of a progressive public funding program
4. Significant real world social engagement
5. Game making increasingly spreads beyond the for-profit space altogether
6. Significance of key festivals and curators as a mechanism for making games visible in a wider setting

None of the above are unique to Canada, yet there is evident momentum building in cities like Toronto that can be seen via the broad range of cultural institutions supporting games activity. A multi-pronged approach involving developers, educators, researchers, cultural institutions, and funding agencies allows for different groups to contribute based on expertise, interest, and individual agendas. For example, there are a handful of international funding initiatives targeted at the game industry, yet few funds that support either broad educational initiatives like TIFF Nexus or applied research networks like FiG.

Toronto's indie game community is mature enough to support a wide range of activity from the grassroots²⁵ to the professional²⁶. An early dearth of big game developers (no longer the case since Ubisoft's sponsored entry to the Toronto games community in 2010) led to an ecosystem of small startup game companies supported by project development funding and service work for the significant broadcast presence in the city. Yet this is not purely a commercial activity and those involved have donated a lot of time, effort, and energy in order to build an accessible and open community. There are increasing numbers of game courses across college and university-level programs that, along with community programs, have created an ongoing feed of talent into the local scene.

The expansion of the indie game community in these ways holds potential for feminist interventions to support, celebrate, and encourage diversity in the indie game community. It is in this specific context that DEI, DMG, and FiG have come to the fore to work towards diversity in games. Whilst this activity holds potential (see Fisher and Harvey for a detailed discussion) it is

important to find models for its expansion and the activism that could grow from successful grassroots activity. Broadly speaking, ongoing work needs to build:

1. Diversity of engagement for those entering education and training programs
2. Visibility for diverse voices in game development
3. Support for those game designers interested in releasing games to transition from skills acquisition to the festival circuit and distribution
4. Strategies of response to the post-feminist issue
5. Creation of coalitions with similarly motivated international groups e.g. the Maker community

Conclusion

“...not just a source of creativity but also a site for the generation of alternative social orders, for political interventions, for utopian imaginings.”

Dovey and Kennedy, p. 35 (2006)

The ongoing fragmentation of the game market holds potential for games that represent a diversity of voices, which could work towards more equitable game development practices. While the commercially oriented indie industry maintains a capitalist status quo, the more DIY expressive productions remain outside the commercial imperative and stand as fertile ground for the experimentation and learning necessary to engage a broad community of makers. This paper points to the potential of game making to engage a diverse group as productive for the evolution of form – the more different type of people that engage in game making, the more that different types of games will emerge. This broadening is central to achieving a diverse and inclusive game development community. Diversity in game content holds potential to be the next evolution in a sector that has historically been controlled by a small number of large organizations.

As games continue to grow in cultural significance the application of feminist knowledge to the issue of diversity in game making becomes increasingly relevant – there are models for change that have grown from the feminist movement. In a supposedly post-feminist world, it has become normal to hear that the time for feminism has passed; yet the ongoing gender-specific inequity highlighted in mainstream media – for example, the Pussy Riot case in Russia, the “legitimate rape” discussion played out in the 2012 presidential election in the USA, and the egregious online abuse of female identified gamers – illustrate the recurrent need for each generation to discover their own personal feminisms and to continue the ongoing effort towards equity.

By blending discussions of DIY game practices within older traditions of feminist theory and recent work on craft, it is possible to create a genealogy for DIY games that takes into account previous activism and presents possible strategies for ongoing action. By using DIY game activity in Toronto as one example of a community consciously engaged in mobilizing around diversity it has been possible to both identify environmental factors that create possibilities for progress and to propose specific options for moving forward.

The indie game activity in Toronto has opened a space that engages communities of interest in a

wide range of publicly available learning contexts that could expand the range of indie practitioners that make and release games. The movement between interested groups and active practitioners is a fertile and challenging space for support frameworks. From one perspective, it is significant to open up the potential pleasures of making to a wider spectrum of voices regardless of outcome. Importantly DIY game making holds potential to make the practices of game development accessible to more people as an everyday creative practice. Concomitantly, to maintain the dilation that allows broad creative inclusivity, it is necessary to ensure ongoing visibility for those makers from outside mainstream practice and for the games that they make. Increasingly this can be seen as an activist project in which frameworks need to be put in place to recognize, support, and extend the wider social, cultural, and political potential for digital games to become truly inclusive.

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¹ Indie research hybrids can be seen in both the work of Douglas Wilson on folk games in titles like Johan Sebastian Joust <http://gutefabrik.com/joust.html> and Propinquity from the TAG Lab at Concordia,

<http://wyldco.com/projects/propinquity/>

² <http://www.instituteofplay.org/about/team/>

³ Beyond the work on socially activist games of Flanagan (2009) and thesis work by Frasca (2001)

⁴ http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_161/5109-Rise-of-the-Videogame-Zinesters

⁵ <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1012312/Indie-Gamemaker-Rant>

⁶ <http://www.auntiepixelante.com/?p=960>

⁷ That of the indie game scene in Toronto, Canada

⁸ Initially seeded by TIFF Nexus and continuing through the Dames Making Games initiative, see

<http://www.damesmakinggames.com>

⁹ <http://www.indiegamethemovie.com/about/>

¹⁰ The Hand Eye Society, see <http://handeyesociety.com>, a Toronto-based videogame arts organization founded in 2009

¹¹ No less than three 2012 Indiecade Nominees come from Toronto-based developers, see

<http://www.indiecade.com/2012/nominees/>

¹² <http://www.capybaragames.com>

¹³ <http://www.tiffnexus.net>

¹⁴ <http://www.feministsingames.com>

¹⁵ <http://www.cmf-fmc.ca/about-cmf/overview/>

¹⁶ <http://www.tiffnexus.net/jamsincubators/the-difference-engine/>

¹⁷ The most well known of which is Global Game Jam, see <http://globalgamejam.org>

¹⁸ <http://handeyesociety.com/difference-engine-initiative/>

¹⁹ <http://www.tiffnexus.net/jamsincubators/the-difference-engine/the-immoral-ms-conduct/>

²⁰ <http://www.gamesforchange.org>

²¹ <http://www.indiecade.com>

²² <http://www.gdconf.com>

²³ <http://festival.gamecity.org>

²⁴ Rendered by capitalism in its drive towards mass production.

²⁵ e.g. Toronto Skillswap (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/205500202826431/>) where regular free skills sessions are run and D-PAD (<http://dpad-yyz.tumblr.com/about>) a pop-up art arcade that blends games, music and game art.

²⁶ e.g. IGDA Toronto (<http://www.igda.org/toronto/>) a local chapter of an international member organization promoting professional development