

King of the Indies: Symbolic Capital and the Colonisation of Independent Videogame Development

Brendon Szucs

Swinburne University of Technology

John St

Hawthorne VIC 3122

brendonszucs@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the migration of developers between industrial and independent fields of videogames production, and their use of symbolic capital to facilitate this transition. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory as its principle theoretical framework, it presents a case study of Double Fine Productions and Tim Schafer, and the diverse roles they play within the field on independent production. This paper will argue that through the use of symbolic capital, these agents are able to secure dominant positions within the field, and represent a growing colonisation of independent development by the wider industrial, heteronomous field of production.

Keywords

Symbolic Capital, Field Theory, Colonisation, Pierre Bourdieu, Double Fine, Tim Schafer

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, videogame developer and Double Fine Productions president, Tim Schafer, launched a public campaign on crowdfunding platform, Kickstarter, to fund the development and distribution of an upcoming adventure game title, *Broken Age*. Trading heavily on Schafer's own symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986) as a known and celebrated veteran in the field of videogames development, the campaign was an unprecedented success for the time, securing over \$3.3 million USD in funding for the development of the project.

In the years since *Broken Age* was successfully funded, Double Fine Productions, with Schafer as its most prominent public face, have established a firm foothold within the field of independent videogames development and its surrounding culture. In addition to the successful crowdfunding of two further projects including *Massive Chalice* (2015) and a sequel to the critically praised *Psychonauts* (2005), the company has branched out into various key roles in the field. Schafer, for example, participates on the advisory board of Fig, a rival crowdfunding platform targeted specifically at the production of independent videogame projects, partially funding the development of Double Fine's own *Psychonauts 2*. "Double Fine Presents", the company's foray into external publishing, has helped bring a number of independently produced titles such as *Escape Goat 2*

Proceedings of DiGRAA 2019: What's Next?

© 2015 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

(2014), *Everything* (2017), and *Gang Beasts* (2017) to console and personal computer markets through digital distribution platforms. Perhaps most prominently, in collaboration with production company Iam8bit, Double Fine hosts an annual independent videogame developer festival, “Day of the Devs”, in San Francisco. Now in its sixth year, the festival draws an international cohort of developers and studios from both independent and industrial fields of production, showcasing new and upcoming videogames to both press and public, and highlighting the efforts and identities of the developers behind these projects.

Through the confluence of these various approaches to independent games development, publishing and advocacy, Schafer and Double Fine Productions have become important cultural power brokers within the field of independent videogames development in their own right. In a landscape already dominated by various cultural and economic gatekeepers and institutions (Parker, Whitson & Simon 2017), such movements, based on heteronomous modes of operation of the industrial field of production, risk the autonomy of the field they seek to preserve, placing it on a trajectory towards a deeper entrenchment of formalised operation and dependence on these same mechanisms of production. In *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), Pierre Bourdieu outlines this dichotomy, which is central to the undertaking of this paper. For Bourdieu, all fields of artistic and cultural production are categorised by the dual, conflicting imperatives of restricted production (art for art’s sake), and large-scale production (art for commerce). Further, as a natural tendency, large-scale production will, to some extent or another, invariably exert influence, dominance, or colonise (Everett 2002) the field of restricted production, for the sake of capital gain, primarily economic or cultural.

Though not explicitly set in Bourdieusian terms, Kerr (2016) notes that the economic and cultural colonisation of the field of independent videogame development has been increasingly prevalent within the industry over the last decade. Commonly, this is represented through large companies and platform holders, for example console manufacturers like Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo, courting not only the increased content portfolio of independent videogames, but also the prestige and cultural capital they imply (Parker 2015). In effect, what is being executed under this model is the subsuming of the autonomous field of independent videogames development into the heteronomous industrial field, for both economic profit and cultural legitimation (Bourdieu 1993). In contrast, this paper seeks to explore an alternate phenomenon; agents and developers migrating towards and adopting dominant positions within the field of independent videogame development, through the deployment and transformation of the considerable symbolic, cultural and economic capital gained through their positions in the field of industrial production. What is common in both is a gradual alignment of the restricted, autonomous field, with the operating principles, and capital value, of the industrial, heteronomous field of production. In either case, Bourdieu is instrumental to our understanding of this process.

Drawing upon Bourdieu’s theoretical framework of field analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), this paper will explore this process of migration, and suggests that it represents a further colonisation of the field of independent videogames development, specifically through the use of symbolic capital. Presenting the case study of Tim Schafer and Double Fine Productions, it will interrogate how symbolic capital is accrued and deployed within the intersection of industrial and independent development, and how the relation between these fields influences the transformation of symbolic capital value taking place therein. I argue that through this process of migration and colonisation,

developers like Schafer and Double Fine Productions are becoming increasingly dominant figures in this space, and will attempt to explore their place and impact in roles such as development, distribution, publishing and advocacy for workers in the field of independent videogames production.

BIO

Brendon Szucs is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. His doctoral thesis explores the role of authorship and symbolic capital in the political economy of videogames production, and its impacts on the changing landscape of the contemporary videogames industry.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boneloaf (2017). *Gang Beasts* [PC Computer]. Double Fine Presents. San Francisco USA.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986) "Forms of Capital" in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Double Fine Productions (2015). *Massive Chalice* [PC Computer]. Double Fine Productions. San Francisco USA.
- Double Fine Productions (2005). *Psychonauts* [PC Computer]. Majesco Entertainment. Hazlet USA.
- Everett, J. "Organizational Research and the Praxeology of Pierre Bourdieu" in *Organizational Research Methods*, Vol. 05, No. 01, January 2002, pp. 56-80.
- Joseph, D. "The Toronto Indies: Some Assemblage Required" in *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, Vol. 07, No. 11, 2013, pp. 92-105.
- Kerr, A. (2016) *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era*. London: Routledge.
- Kirkpatrick, G. (2013) *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- O’Rielly, D. (2017). *Everything* [PC Computer]. Double Fine Presents. San Francisco USA.
- Parker, F. "Canonizing *Bioshock*: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game" in *Game and Culture*, 2015, pp. 1-25.
- Parker, F., Whitson, J. and Simon, B. "Megabooth: The cultural intermediation of indie games," in *New Media & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 05, 2017, pp. 1953-1972.
- Nichols, R. (2014) *The Video Game Business*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- MagicalTimeBean (2014). *Escape Goat 2* [PC Computer]. Double Fine Presents. San Francisco USA.