

# Indie Creatorship: Rendering the ‘Indie-ness’ of Indie Games

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## Keywords

Indie games, narrative games, artgames

## INTRODUCTION

Non-traditional or ‘indie’ videogames represent an idiosyncratic form of videogames that embodies a variety of diverse and nuanced mechanics, narratives, and themes. Despite this, many current conceptualisations of such games explore the form through highly specific lenses, and as a result may struggle to offer a holistic rendering of the disparate nature of indie games. For example, when discussing the politics of production in indie games, Nadav Lipkin (2012) conceives indie games as a product of their methods of distribution, tools of development, and an idiosyncratic subculture, while Mikhail Fiadotau (2015) defines indie games in terms of a relationship between reduced commercial influence and more personal narrative content. Conversely, Andrew Bailey problematises the indie game subgenres of ‘artgames’ and ‘walking simulators’, contending that such terms are often applied to games ‘that do not connect easily with ludic definitions’ based in ‘much longer histories’ of games (2019, 126).

While each of these explorations suit the context of their discussion, each focuses on a specific approach to classifying and categorising the ‘indie’ aspect of the games, and as such is potentially reductive in its exploration of the form. Despite their differences, these conceptualisations need not be mutually exclusive, and if combined, may contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the non-traditional videogame form.

This paper proposes the concept of indie creatorship; a holistic exploration of the range of nuanced interactions, features, and structures that constructs the ‘indie-ness’ of indie videogames. Based on Janet Murray’s exploration of digital environments (2016), and Marie-Laure Ryan’s defense of videogames as narrative media (2006), indie creatorship conceives videogames as multifaceted media works that integrate interactivity and narrative content in unique ways. This approach is then supplemented by numerous more precise theories and models,

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2021

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such as Alan Dix's principles of designing for appropriation (2007), Kari-Lynn Winters' 'authorship as assemblage' (2011), and Kaufman and Beghetto's 'Four C's of Creativity' (2009), which provide the structures and terminology to explore the distinctive features of indie games in detail.

Indie creatorship renders a process that explores engagement with indie games across a variety of perspectives. For example, Winter's model of authorship (2011) provides principles for exploring the active role of the player in narrative games, while Dix's principles of designing for appropriation may be adapted to explore the role of the player in games where narrative is emergent and constructed by the player. This flexibility constructs indie creatorship as a non-prescriptive and open system, allowing for both the full gamut of games encapsulated under the 'indie' descriptor, but also providing scope for the concept to adapt in line with changes in indie games themselves. As a result, indie creatorship may offer a more complete—or more universalised—rendering of indie games than that provided by more niche perspectives.

This concept will contain four principles that seek to develop a holistic rendering of indie videogames by exploring their mechanics, narrative content, and how players interact with them. The first principle asserts that indie creatorship involves a process of meaning-making by the player as they assemble meaning from various resources in turn mediating their perception and experience of a game. The second principle renders the concept as spatial, and poses that player experience is mediated by the organisation and navigation of game structures, roles, and outcomes. The third principle proposes that indie creatorship is active, requiring direct actions by both player and system, and destabilising boundaries between player, designer, and game system. The final principle posits that indie creatorship is a socially connected phenomenon, simultaneously conceiving games as textual objects reflecting wider contexts, and as media for players to explore and communicate connections to wider contexts.

These core principles of indie creatorship will be tested through a survey of player, designer, and researcher perception across a selection of five non-traditional indie videogames. This survey will gather and investigate respondent perception of game mechanics, interactions, narrativity and structures, framed within the principles of indie creatorship. This will serve to validate the applicability of indie creatorship in use-cases, by applying the principles to existing indie games.

In addition to providing a model for conceptualising the indie game engagement from a holistic perspective, indie creatorship reflects on the idiosyncratic nature of this process as distinct from more traditional forms of games. This in turn enables a better understanding of the uniqueness of non-traditional indie games, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced perception of the videogame form. In the context of increasing importance of greater diversity in game content (Weststar et al. 2018, 17; Weststar et al. 2019, 18), indie creatorship provides potential for concise-yet-accurate conceptualisation of the diverse nature of indie games and their content, while still maintaining flexibility, providing scope for adjusting to advancements in indie games.

## **BIO**

Christian Hayes is a current PhD candidate being supervised by Dr Karen Le Rossignol and Professor Stefan Greuter at Deakin University. Christian's project is exploring the intersection of narrativity, interactivity, and novel game mechanics within the process of meaning making in indie videogames. This research seeks to help conceptualise the idiosyncratic nature of indie games and how players construct

meaning in the context of this nature. Christian comes from a literary studies and media and communication background.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This research acknowledges the support of the Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

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