Indie Dreams: Video Games, Creative Economy, and the Hyperindustrial Epoch

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Abstract
This essay draws on research undertaken as part of a research network project exploring the growth of independent game producers in recent years and the associated changes in the technological and economic conditions of the games industry in the UK, Europe, and the North American continent. It reflects on the possibilities of and challenges to a critical and creative maturing of video games as a cultural medium, evaluating these in the context of contemporary developments in global technoculture and the digital economy. Bernard Stiegler’s critical analysis of hyperindustrial consumer culture is mobilized in evaluating the dreams for an indie future of video games as a creative force in digital cultural transformation.

Keywords
indie games, video games industry, video games as cultural form, neoliberalism, Bernard Stiegler

This essay presents some meditations on the present moment of video game cultures and contexts of production. It is inspired partly by my involvement in the Creative Territories research project between 2014 and 2016. This UK Arts and Humanities

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Research Council–funded project assembled a network of researchers, creative industry actors, and game developers to explore the changed conditions of video game production in the years following the global financial collapse of 2007–2008, in particular, the “rise of the indies.” Case studies of game production contexts in the UK and the Netherlands were conducted, and several game makers participated in the research network along with researchers from disciplines including game studies, social science, business, and cultural geography. Efforts were made to include local community groups and local councils in network conversations. The network shared its findings with UK creative economy agencies, Nesta and the Association for UK Interactive Entertainment, as part of its engagement and impact strategies. Creative Territories explored the possibilities for small and independent game developers and creatives to make their way in an industrial context that had changed considerably from the previous console-dominated landscape due to a combination of factors that I will discuss in what follows. These possibilities include the diversification of video game forms; scope and content through the increase in the number and (potentially) variety of game makers; and the expanded options for funding, distribution, and player community engagement. The maturing of the video game as a form or medium of cultural expression—widely discussed in various fora and thematized in documentaries like Indie Game: The Movie (Pajot & Swirsky, 2012)—was an abiding concern of Creative Territories.

The second major inspiration for these reflections arises from philosopher of technology and cultural activist Bernard Stiegler’s critique of contemporary digital technocultural transformation, in general, and of online media culture, in particular. Indeed, Stiegler’s work informed the framing of the Creative Territories project, which set out to explore nascent initiatives in collaborative colocation among independent game makers—with principals of three such collectives, the Bristol Games Hub (bristolgameshub.com), the Leamington Spa Arch Creatives (archcreatives.com), and the Dutch Game Garden (dutchgamegarden.nl) involved in the project network.1 Stiegler’s writings along with his initiatives addressed to postindustrial urban renewal in France played a part in shaping Creative Territories’ efforts to address the situatedness of video game production.2 As I will discuss below, Stiegler (2011b) characterizes the effects of the neoliberalization of the global economy on societies the world over as a damaging “hyperindustrial” process that erodes the social and cultural structures that situate and orient people in their particular time and place. The task facing those concerned with cultural development today is first and foremost one of exploring the possibilities and pathways for renewal of those structures in the light of the new technological conditions of culture and society today. My interest in identifying and fostering indie game making as a culturally as well as economically valuable and sustainable practice proceeded from a conviction about the importance of conceiving what is often taken to be an essentially digitally networked, global business as belonging in local milieux and regional contexts. The project set out to move some way beyond prevailing notions of the creative industries that have tended to treat creativity as a natural resource of individuals that just
needs appropriate educational stimulus and infrastructural support in order to generate national (or regional) gains in the global marketplace for media, arts, and entertainment (Crogan, 2015; Stiegler, 2014a).

Stiegler’s prolific writings on technocultural transformation have surprisingly little to say about video games. When they do occasionally appear, it is as another example (along with social media platforms and Google search) of the attention-capturing experiential forms of hyperindustrial, globalizing, neoliberal audiovisual media that are the subject of much of his critical account of digital culture’s ills. I will elaborate on this critique of the hyperindustrial “hyperconsumerist” age below.

Inspite of this, and as I have argued elsewhere (Crogan, 2014), Stiegler’s work on online media culture is highly relevant to assessing the development of video games at this “moment” where they have emerged as an important element in wider dynamics of digital cultural change. While Stiegler is severely critical of globalized, neoliberal consumer culture, he nonetheless insists it is vital that, individually and collectively, new ways of employing the technologies and techniques of online digital media and communications are found and forged as viable pathways to alternative cultural futures. The cultural “therapy” (Stiegler, 2013) for today’s multiplying and converging crises—political, environmental, educational, humanitarian—is inevitably a therapeutics of our technological entailments. A consequence of Stiegler’s philosophy of human technicity for his cultural politics of the present is that everything rests on a collective adoption of digital technology in the creative reinvention of digital culture, economy, and society. Here, the potential of video games today assumes its full significance.

The Indie Future: Dreams and Doubts

Characterizing the potential of the transformation of the conditions of production of video games in this way may seem somewhat portentous. I hope to justify it in what follows. To do so is for me only a critical intensification of the many articulations in recent years of the possibilities of a burgeoning indie game cultural milieu. Creative Territories’ external partner and game developer and industry commentator Tomas Rawlings of Auroch Digital has championed video games as a media form able to treat topics and themes well beyond the narrow confines of entertainment. In his blog, A Great Becoming (Rawlings, 2017) and elsewhere, Rawlings extols the potential of video game design to tackle any or all of the significant subjects treated in the literature or cinema in different but no less legitimate or substantial ways.

In her presentation at the 2014 “Mapping the Collective” symposium for Creative Territories at the Digital Cultures Research Centre in Bristol, researcher, indie game proponent, and developer, Celia Pearce described the rise of the indies as a watershed moment in the history of video games as a medium. The passage away from a large studio profile of console games production toward a more variegated and diversified sector was envisaged by Pearce as one toward a more culturally rich and less homogenous future for games as an expressive medium, one where they are
able to realize their potential as playful, participatory forms of digital culture. Pearce cited the International Game Developers Association’s (2014) Developer Satisfaction Survey statistic recording almost half (48%) of respondents self-identifying as independent as evidence of this watershed moment.

In the context of Stiegler’s sustained account of the “systemic stupidity” and destructiveness of the predominant mode in which digital cultural transformation is rolling out globally, these predictions for the future of video games appear as a highly contrasting, hopeful vision. From Stiegler’s perspective, the cultivation of such a vision or “dream” of the future is essential for a therapeutic reformation of digital transformation. It must proceed, however, from an appropriately frank appraisal of the hyperindustrial epoch’s “24/7” mediasphere. In *Automatic Society* Stiegler (2016) affirms Crary’s (2014) description of 24/7 global capitalist technoculture as one where everyday life is increasingly mediated for the purpose of the commercial exploitation of consumers, whose logging of their own activity feeds a computational machine monitoring and regulating in return their thoughts and behaviors. This tendency to mediatize every dimension of individual existence is destroying the sphere of personal and social life understood as separate from work and from commercial prerogatives and regulation. Crary evokes this tendency most starkly in discussing how sleep is the “last frontier” of late capitalism inasmuch, as it represents an unprofitable (for e-commerce at least) respite from engagement in circuits of algorithmically driven stimulus and response whose colonization is not yet fully achieved.5

The phenomenon of Free-to-Play (FtP) video game apps on mobile devices, built on a “freemium” revenue model, can be understood as playing its part in the extensive and intensive colonization of everyday social existence by the major media platforms.6 As Nieborg (2015, p. 5) shows in his analysis of *Candy Crush Saga* (King Digital Entertainment, 2012) as an exemplary case study of FtP game success, freemium games became the predominant kind of game app released on the App Store from 2011, in keeping with the general trend for apps on Apple’s platform supporting its iPhone and iPad sales. In this way, they contributed to mobile media’s “disruption” of the existing mediasphere based on “stationary” media systems, including to the destabilization of the relatively settled, console-based games industry, as it had evolved from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. In relation to the emergence of indie games from around this period, it was the combination of the effects of the global financial crisis on domestic purchases of game consoles around the same time as the increase in smartphone use and the explosion of demand for apps that was a powerful impetus for the growth of the independent sector of games production (Crogan, 2015, pp. 10–11).

As commentators such as Simon (2013) have noted, the term indie is difficult to define, referring variously to a mode of production, a style of game design or visual aesthetics, a legal/economic description (to do with ownership of intellectual property), or an ethos or cultural scene of production and reception. Lipkin (2013) has shown that in its evocation of an oppositionality to the mainstream, indie often bears
considerable ideological weight as the independent, alternative, individual, liberated, expressive, artistic (and so on) other to commercialized and standardized mainstream cultural production, but that these valuations are not immune from co-optation by capitalist mainstream promotional and marketing logics. I will return to this issue of what “indie” means from the perspective of game developers below. Lipkin is certainly right to recall that capital is always ready to appropriate what emerges as its alternative. In this essay, I want to maintain Celia Pearce’s sense of the significant potential of the diversification of games production notwithstanding its susceptibility to its appropriation by mainstream games marketing and design strategies but also to take critical account of the platform economics of online media forms that have shaped the conditions of production and distribution of indie games.7

Nieborg’s rigorous analysis of freemium is essential reading for anyone concerned with ludic economics if they are to understand how games form part of the contemporary global media business. He explains how freemium is a constitutive part of the “multisided market” logics of the digital platform business model that has emerged with the rise of the major commercial entities that now dominate the Internet. The platform model is one aimed at generating revenue by putting different “agents” together through the platform’s provision of an infrastructure for access, payment processing, marketing, data gathering and analysis, and so on. Freemium games (and free-to-download apps in general) must be understood, in Nieborg’s analysis, as part and parcel of this platform provision model. It represents the normal and normative mode through which smaller and independent app developers gain access to the platform’s distribution services on an Internet whose original vision of peer-to-peer sharing is severely curtailed and channeled by the major search and platform owners whose names we all know only too well. In return, the smaller creative businesses have the opportunity to amortize their investment in software development through attracting a sufficiently large user base to generate a revenue stream from the very small number of users who can be persuaded to make in-app purchases for upgrades, in-game currency, additional content or customizations, and so on. According to a 2016 industry survey (Swrve.com, 2016), only 1.9% of freemium players made any in-app purchases and the top 10% of spenders accounted for almost half of the revenue. In anyone’s terms, this is a high-risk business model, but for the platform owner, there is close to zero marginal cost in providing platform access to the app developer (Nieborg, 2015, p. 2) and attendant benefits in potential marketing revenues, the maintenance of platform currency, and so on.

As noted above, the growth of mobile device software platforms is a significant factor in the increase in the demand for the supply of video games and the ensuing stimulus to aspiring game makers, further encouraged by the possibility of retaining their intellectual property through the major platforms’ standard terms and conditions. The emergence of mobile platforms should be understood as continuing but also extending the “platformization” processes associated with the Web 2.0 phase of digital cultural development in the new millennium (Helmond, 2015). As first and
foremost an economic strategy (Srnicek, 2017, p. 254) for adopting the technological possibilities of “programmability” (Helmond, 2015, p. 1) in a global capitalist environment, the rise of digital media platforms has been accompanied and supported by discourses promoting an understanding of them as providers of a neutral and open platforms for user interactions and content sharing (Gillespie, 2010). Nieborg provides a rigorous account of how the economic realities of platform capitalism impact on the programming of game developer third parties seeking their fortunes on the major mobile platforms.

In relation to our consideration of the problematic aspects of the explosion in independent game production as part of contemporary global neoliberal media culture, Nieborg’s account of the Candy Crush success describes how developer King Digital has formalized the design and marketing processes of its major hit into a formula for the production of FtP titles. This formalization is marked by the incorporation of platform economics at all phases of the design-to-market journey. Nieborg shows how the serialized monetization logics and marketing strategy infuse the entirety of the game design process, evaluated by “metrics” concerning the prospective game’s player “acquisition, engagement, retention, and monetization” (Nieborg, 2015, p. 6). In King Digital’s production formula, the game is envisaged, developed, released, marketed, and updated as an experience of and in a staged freemium monetization. Toward the end of his essay, Nieborg offers some reflections on the critical significance of this freemium condition of production, noting the inherently monopolistic tendencies of platform capitalism, the concentration of capital and power in the games industry (noting that very few game titles make a profit, and that very few of these have substantial success), and consequently poses a question about the sustainability of the FtP model (p. 9). Through their effects on game design rationale and procedures, these tendencies influence the possibilities for indie game production to contribute to the cultural enrichment and diversification of video games in mobile platforms and more widely.

Leino and Möring (2016) have characterized FtP games as exemplary instances of a “neoliberal” game for a neoliberal player who is no longer (if she ever was) the player conceptualized in “liberal” or “romantic” theories about games and play: Someone with free time on their hands looking for opportunities for self-expression or actualization. The neoliberal player plays in a world where the distinction between work and play makes little sense, and every activity is approached as the opportunity to increase one’s personal capital through achievements, reputation markers, awards, and so on, which can enhance their social media profile, number of followers, résumé, and so on. Leino and Möring comment on the experience of playing the FtP Pocket Planes (NimbleBit, 2012) as typifying neoliberal era gameplay. The game presents itself as a resource management simulation about the logistics of operating an airfreight and transport business. Reflecting on the experience of playing it, the authors propose that Pocket Planes and freemium games like it are not even “games” in the conventional understanding of theorists like Jesper Juul who draw on the liberal formulations of Huizinga and Caillois. What
is essential in Juul’s account—the agency derived from player efforts at developing skills and in-game resources—is routinely rendered inconsequential by the staged introduction of incitements to purchase new capacities for progress through the game’s levels. These new capacities rendered previous gameplay redundant and, retrospectively, futile, so that in effect to purchase an upgrade was the only meaningful “game mechanic.”

This piece of software, which the authors suggest is perhaps better approached through Peter-Paul Verbeek’s description of FtP as a “persuasive technology,” is not so much a video game understood as “as a tool for fun, but rather could be described as a machine designed to extract cash from its users” (Leino & Möring, 2016, pp. 153–154).

This loss of belief in FtP game apps as games is an instance of what for Stiegler is a systemic and profoundly dangerous discrediting of and disbelief in reality in the neoliberal period. It lurks beyond or perhaps beneath the inherently unsustainable nature of the monopolistic drive of the current era of commercial media platforms that Nieborg gestures toward, and which dominate the terrain in which the indie game makers are operating. The “conservative revolution” set in train by Reaganite/Thatcherite policies of the 1980s and accelerated globally in the 1990s “new world order” is in Stiegler’s view less a radical departure from the preceding consumerist capitalism than a decisive exacerbation of the destructive tendency of industrial capitalism’s endless war of technological innovation (Stiegler, 2016, p. 81). He argues in Automatic Society that Roosevelt’s “New Deal” of the 1930s and the subsequent Keynesian Welfare State models such as in postwar Britain and the United States were a politically legislated and publicly implemented compromise in the face of the already apparent tendency toward the technological redundancy of greater and greater proportions of the working population. The social and cultural adjustment to capitalism’ permanent economic war sought to preserve the social and cultural value of labor from its ravages. It is this principle that was abandoned in the free market ideology of the neoliberal revolution, and along with it the credibility and even the significance—which is to say the reality—of a society based on work. Beyond the resulting socioeconomic misery—felt first most intensely first in the deregulated “Global South” of neoliberal globalization—the major casualty was the attendant liberal possibilities of individual actualization and collective improvement built on the capacity to work and to earn the time to dream of and explore a better existence. Today, the predictions of the impacts on employment of the rising wave of digital automation put in doubt the viability of the principle of the right to work and the assumption that full employment is a default goal of economic policy in the industrial democracies.

At the same time, the digital economy is driven by an intensifying channeling of the attention of individuals less and less of whom have a sustainable level of income to consume the goods and experiences accessible online 24/7 through a shrinking number of global media platforms. Their consumer-based identity is, in Crary’s analysis, reaching the limits of its psychophysiological exploitation, while the neoliberal social transformation provokes environmental and military-security crises.
Consequently, it is increasingly difficult to hold faith with the liberal vision of a right to work and to play, however, tenaciously maintained, it might be in many spheres both within and outside the academy. The maladjustment between the technocapitalist and cultural–political systems appears as what Stiegler (2016) characterizes as a vicious circle spiraling toward the worst (p. 100).

In light of the trends evident in the global technocultural context in which game making has reached this watershed of potential independence, then, I would argue that there is doubt over the future for game creatives to realize this potential through their productive labor. Doubt means to be in two minds, to not be sure of what is or will be the case. Stiegler dwells in this wavering of belief in his critical (and disturbingly prescient) analysis of the widespread signs of a crisis of the Western cultural vision of a liberal democratic industrial society and all of the values that animate and sustain it. What Stiegler calls the “hyercapitalist” turn to the regulation of consumption through the intensive and extensive development of marketing and advertising has progressively undermined the values of liberal democratic social existence that sustained it in the form of what Max Weber’s characterized as the spirit of capitalism. When the spheres of private and collective experience in which personal and social development unfold become commoditized through the strategies of marketing, promotions, sponsorship, and mass mediation, they tend to degrade the singular, particular, and (precisely) nonquantifiable value of that experience. At the same time, the activities, routines, rituals, and skills practiced in these spheres become the object of value extraction, standardization, and consumer conditioning, so that people are “sold back” skills and experiences that were formerly part of their own cultural but not commercial life. As a result, hypercapitalism amounts to what Stiegler (2010) calls a second wave of “proletarianization” after that of the workers stripped of their skills by their having been extracted and incorporated in the new factory machines such as the Spinning Jenny, Arkwright’s Water Frame, the mass assembly process, and the industrial robots that emerged in the postwar period. Just as with the proletarianization of labor so many people lost the traditional skills underwriting their social identity (their savoir-faire), the consumer has been subjected to a process of the proletarianization of their way of life, their savoir-vivre (Stiegler, 2011b, pp. 62–64). The neoliberal abandonment of the principles of the welfare state compromise and the ideological promotion of the “free market” has dramatically accelerated this expansion of proletarianizing, hypercapitalist consumerism.

This was the context of the emergence of the digital age, whose principal vehicle of generalized dissemination, the open-source, open-access, peer-to-peer Internet, was quickly colonized by venture capital and the monopolistic tendencies noted by Nieborg above. Disbelief in a freemium game’s ostensible offer of some fun is, in this perspective, a symptom of a much more widespread and profound disenchantment with the state of social reality as a space offering the realization of one’s dreams. The design and economic logics “realized” in a game like Pocket Planes and like those made according to the Candy Crush formula offer an experience that
many more people than Leino and Möring find to be a cynical manipulation of their hopes for playful engagement in a challenge, for a fun diversion or for some kind of experience of self-actualization, reflection, or liberal agency. This discrediting of the experience of play erodes the incalculable value of the investment in games as worthwhile practice that underwrites the entire economy of video games. This erosion of the very motive to play casts doubt over the future of games as an independent, culturally valuable, and valued form. Beyond or rather by way of the significant constraints on a flourishing, diverse ecology of independent games exercised by the powerful monopolizing impetus of the current platform economics that have driven the rise in demand for games, the pathway to sustainable commercial success for developers has converged with a destructive tendency of those same economics. This paradoxical situation is neither inevitable—the economic does not have to extinguish the life from culture even though it is irredicibly dependent upon it—nor restricted to the realm of video games. Indeed, the current crisis of the globalized hyperconsumerist system extends to all aspects of social, cultural, political, and environmental life in its structurally autodestructive expansion.

**Communities of Production in the Hyperindustrial Age**

The tension between personal and cultural development and the destruction of experience through its commodification was borne out in the dialogues among participants of the Creative Territories network. Those contributors pursing the indie game pathway all professed their passion for games as a major source of their motivation. As Banks and Hesmondalgh (2009) note, research on the reality of work in the creative industries shows that it is often marked by an exploitation of the passionate investment of workers committed to the intrinsic value and rewards of self-actualization from their labor. In the case of the aspiring game creatives striking out on their own in start-up and small-size enterprises, this investment in creative realization is what sustains them in this risky venture, as much if not more than the remote possibility of achieving “wealth and fame” by becoming the next Rovio (*Angry Birds*) or King Digital—another motivation for aspiring media creatives to be found in the “creative industries discourse” (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009, p. 418). In fact, this hope of a smash hit success was mentioned only occasionally, and indeed commercial motivation generally was articulated as a desire for financial stability and security.

This affective commitment to the creative pleasures of the highly technical, logistical, and laborious work of making interactive digital media forms was shared across friendship groups that connected them in various alliances and informal associations and support networks. Guerara-Villalobos (2011) has characterized these as a “community of practice” among game and other digital creatives. The establishment of the UK game hubs involved in the project, the Bristol Games Hub and the Arch Creatives of Leamington Spa, was animated by the shared communities of practice of the respective founding members. What made these hubs different
from the kinds of university and local government initiatives in incubator and coworking spaces for game developers and other digital creatives was the extent to which they were driven by members of such communities of practice rather than by the objectives and economic agendas of these other institutions. It was the desire to develop these communities into more organized forms that materialized key aspects of the collective support and cooperation they provided—into what in *The Good Hubbing Guide* (Crogan, 2015, p. 12) I call a “community of production”—that led them to the formulate and formalize their collective arrangements for the provision of a shared working environment.

These communities of production have so arranged themselves to support their members through taking advantage of collective cooperation in various ways. In most cases, those independent enterprises must nevertheless negotiate with the demands of the evolving mainstream video game industry to grow and maintain the revenue required to survive against the odds which do not favor new businesses in any domain. The two founding principals of the Bristol Games Hub, Auroch Digital and Opposable Games, have been successful at this negotiation, growing from small- to medium-size enterprises. Their output has consisted of a mix of self-authored games, contracted work on licensed titles, commissions and awards to design games for heritage, third sector and other kinds of noncommercial organizations, independent commercial releases, and more experimental or aspirational projects. Opposable Games’ flagship title, *Salvaged!*, an innovative dual screen game that procedurally generates new maps, is available on Steam Early Access at the time of writing, while its work on license includes *Legends of Xor* (Rendog) for the Android platform and a cross platform mobile game of the children’s television program, *Bottom Rocker Street* (CITV/Fubaloo). Like Auroch Digital, Opposable has also made projects for the UK scientific research institute, the Wellcome Foundation, as part of its ambit of popularizing and communicating science. For its part, Auroch has a similar mix of projects for which they own the intellectual property of some and others they take on under commercial contract as well as experimental work. In regard to the latter, Auroch’s Serious Games initiative is influential in promoting the expansion of the nature and scope of experiences and subject matter with which video games can meaningfully engage.

The indie game enterprises involved in the project find themselves in a dynamic situation where exposure to the pressures of the commercial mainstream is a constant. They must respond with appropriate “resilience” to technological and commercial shifts in the mode and conditions of production. For instance, the rise of the Steam personal computer (PC) distribution platform and the Steam Greenlight initiative which began in 2012 opened up incentives for indie game makers to return to the PC platform. This led to a significant retooling for developers who around 2010 had imagined that the Apple app store and Google Play would dominate the foreseeable future of game distribution. Steam’s Greenlight initiative and the platform’s more player-oriented community ethos emerged as a significant alternative to the platform logics of the app distributors whose monopolistic tendencies have become
increasingly apparent. User support (in the form of pledges to contribute toward the “greenlighting” of a game) played a significant part in Steam’s decision to support the most popular Greenlight games going onto the Steam service. Nothing stays the same for long, however, as the promise of Steam’s Greenlight initiative and the platform’s relations with aspiring developers have altered, with more commercially oriented (and less community driven) procedures for Steam Greenlight’s replacement, Steam Direct. Just launched at the time of writing, Steam Direct appears to provide developers something closer to the “open market” of the app platforms. Subject to a brief verification process, any game can be uploaded onto Steam Direct for a fee (initially set at US$100). This fee is only refundable if the title earns US$1,000 in revenues through its premium or FtP release strategy (Steam Blog, 2017).15

The Greenlight venture led to a vast explosion of new game titles published monthly on the Steam platform, and Steam Direct seems designed to exploit the popularity of the platform as dominant marketplace for PC games. Greenlight’s effect on PC game development had already led to predictions of an “indiepocalypse” through the flooding of the game market with an uneven mass of games in β version, making it difficult for the better quality projects to be recognized and to find the player support to take them from β into full production. Most prominent of these predictions was put forward by Savchenko (2015) on Medium.com. What Savchenko did not mention is that this oversupply echoed the situation on the mobile app platforms where it has become less viable for the vast majority of developers to provide content to the platform with little chance of achieving revenues to amortize the costs of production.

Game developers on the Creative Territories project identified with Doulin’s (2010) characterization of indies as “mindies”—indies who accommodate the mainstream as part of their mode of operating in order to maintain a viable revenue stream and so sustain the projects they are personally invested in both aesthetically and financially.16 For some, this mindie mode of operating has and will prove to be effective for a shorter or longer period of time depending in part on the mindie’s exposure to changes in the technological and economic trends in game production and how they impact regionally and locally. Recent history has shown this to be a very fluid situation, with new trends in digital media such as Virtual Reality (VR) quickly emerging to attract attention and considerable investment, but susceptible to disappear just as quickly.

In some ways, this is as it has always been in the age of “industrial arts” that demand the kinds of capital investment and technological research and development to become and remain profitable in the permanent economic war of innovation. Alfred Hitchcock discussed the tight constraints on his artistic aspirations—the passion that drove him to continue to work in pictures within the Hollywood system—by contrasting the costs of film production to the costs of painting a picture:
I am a prisoner of commercial compromises. I wanted to make movies by abandoning myself to my ideas, but that would only be possible if a film came in no more expensive than a pen or a sheet of paper. What would happen if one gave a painter a blank canvas worth a million dollars, a palette worth $250,000, $300,000 worth of brushes, a $750,000 box of paints, and then told him to do whatever he wanted according to his inspiration, but without forgetting that the finished painting would have to bring in $2,300,000? (Hitchcock in Stiegler, 2011a, p. i)

As Adorno and Horkheimer’s mid-20th-century analysis of the “Culture Industries” showed, the industrialization of mediation has been driven by the requirements of the capitalist system to coordinate consumption with production. In this influential analysis, the commercialization and monopolization of the means of producing images, signs, and symbols tended to insert the individual mentally as well as physically in the modern industrial system. Stiegler accepts much of this analysis but questions its assumptions about the nature and potential of industrial technology. In Stiegler’s account of the technicity of the human, industrial machines must be approached as a compositional element of individual and collective becoming. The reification of psychic life and social relations is a particular, toxic exploitation of human industrial becoming and not its inevitable outcome. He nonetheless proposes that the digital transformation has (unhappily) coincided with and exacerbated a hyperindustrial mutation of this systemic exploitation of culture, which “integrates the world of culture and the mind in its entirety into an enormous technological-industrial system where the same machinery produces material goods and disseminates symbols and other forms of ‘spiritual nourishment’” (Stiegler, 2017, p. 97). For Stiegler, who is a thinker of tendencies, the hyperindustrial describes a dangerous adoption of the possibilities of the digital technological transformation of the very means of symbol making and sharing. In this view, the frequent Silicon Valley–led “disruptions” of the established industrial, economic, legal, and sociocultural organization of our collective existence take on a nihilistic character in their exclusively neoliberal capitalist motivation (Stiegler, 2016). This can be extended to the rise of the mobile and game distribution giants under consideration in this essay.

The potential of the expansion of independent games production articulated in the hopes and dreams of Pearce, Rawlings, and others discussed above is the potential for a significant reorientation of the adoption of the digital toward a less monopolized and prescribed symbolic production, toward more diverse communities of production and consumption of digital games, communities whose organization and raison d’être are not reducible to the commercial prerogatives of platform economics. Indeed, at stake is the dream of realizing the most significant potential of networked, interactive digital communications—to reverse the systemic deskilling of the consumer as one who can only receive manufactured goods and experiences and who lacks the knowledge of their production required to interpret their collective significance and even to participate in their iterative reproduction. The player as critical interlocutor and cocreative supporter and
collaborator, as co-investor, as community member, these are all formulations of
the desired dream of the rise of the indies.

In the postbroadcast media environment that video games exemplify and indeed
ushered in as part of its vanguard, aspiring media creatives do not seek positions in
large industrial organizations like the movie studios that provided Hitchcock the
labor, expertise, technical, and capital resources to produce media. They are
increasingly expected to invest in themselves and bring their creativity to a multi-
sided market provided by the platform (itself piggybacking on the common wealth
generated by the Internet’s engineers and inventors, and state-supported commu-
nications infrastructure). In neoliberal terms, they are enjoined to act as the entre-
preneur of the capital of their own (suitably incorporated) person. The large
platforms owning the most profitable aspect of industrialized production—distribution—can afford the luxury of choice as to whether or not to invest in the
creative labor that sustains the entire system and which aspect of its inventiveness
to speculate on.17 This is so long as sufficient numbers of small and indie providers
take on the risk themselves and by doing so sustain the variety and vibrancy of the
platform and so maintain the attention economics of its multisided revenue gen-
eration. So long as—but this is of course an unsustainable situation, as Nieborg
hinds at toward the conclusion of his analysis.

**Conclusion**

The threat posed to the growth and maturing of independent game production by
oversupply bubbles in the mobile app platforms and, more recently, on Steam, can
perhaps be identified as a continuation of periodic boom and bust cycles in the short
history of the video games business. This view is consonant with Mirko Ernkvist’s
account of this history in which he argues that “crashes and shake outs were a regular
part of the video game industry during its first 15 years [1971-1986], with a number
of severe crashes or major firm shake outs occurring in every platform after a short
period of high growth” (Ernqvist, 2006, p. 1). Following the relative stability in the
1990s and early 2000s of the major console era—one, however, in which histories of
intensive intellectual property acquisition and rationalization drives and various
 technological wars over console and controller technology, gestural interface sys-
tems, and so forth, deserve further attention—the “interesting times” of the global
video game business have returned.

Ernkvist takes a rather positivist attitude to this history, identifying it as the
inevitable phenomenon of what Joseph Schumpeter termed in the mid-20th century,
the “creative destruction” that characterizes modern techno-industrial capitalism
(Ernqvist, 2006, p. 21). Derived from Marx’s critical account of capitalism, creative
destruction is Schumpeter’s (1976) dialectical theorization of the capitalist industrial
war of innovation that proceeds by creating new products and services that destroy
the value of established ones (pp. 81–86). As a default rationale informing hyperca-
pitalist disruption, creative destruction has the merit for neoliberal proponents of
attributing creativity to the capital-intensive, heavily marketed ventures aimed at destroying established commercial–legal and sociocultural arrangements in order to create a new desire for a new product or service. Despite his own ambivalence about the long-term sustainability of this “essential fact” of capitalism (Schumpeter, 1976, p. 82), Schumpeter’s dialectical “sublimation” has been adopted in free market capitalism in a perspective which tries to skip over the risks attending the composition of destruction with creation in the capitalist war of innovation. For Stiegler, the question that must always be asked of creative destruction is under what conditions can and does it become “destructive destruction?” When and how does the work of introducing technological innovation tend to form a less creative and a more toxic and damaging alteration of society and culture?

For Stiegler (2016), in the age of neoliberal globalization—that coinciding with the history of the video game industry—“creative destruction turns into destructive destruction, something that becomes visible, even if it does not become totally clear (far from it), with the crisis of 2008” (pp. 81–82). It tends increasingly to destroy, for example, a society’s orientation to collective goals and values and limit the capacity of people to reflectively and creatively adopt a technological innovation into their social existence. It demotivates people, so that they see no point in cultivating their creative or other skills or are satisfied to resort to a routine exercise of them according to calculations of revenues and marketability. This turning from creative to destructive destruction is the challenge today for the rise of the indies. Their exposure to the ongoing cycles of “industrial mutation” (Schumpeter, 1976, p. 82) in the video game industry in the predominantly precarious mode of neoliberal flexibility is the tempering condition of the vista of a diversifying and culturally enriching expansion of independent game production. Contrary to received notions, as Hitchcock’s ruminations and the resonating mindie label indicates, creative workers are by no means commercially naive. They have been negotiating with commercial constraints for a long time in industrial society. And if the compromise between exceptional creativity and the established routines of production and monetization is ongoing, this does not mean it is somehow perpetually animated as if some undying “creative instinct” or spark will always sustain hypercapitalism. In question today is precisely the sustainability of the globalizing neoliberal intensification of the siphoning off of creativity (among the other cultural and environmental “assets” it draws upon) for commercial prerogatives. We are indeed at a watershed in this regard. The cycle of creative destruction might not repeat endlessly; in fact, nothing is more doubtful today.

The dreams of those individuals and collectives whose passion for the creative potential of forming significant experiences through the symbol making and configurative potentials of video game technologies are a projection, a fictional support for their laborious, risky efforts to negotiate the limitations of the mindie compromise. This is not to say that they are insubstantial or a delusion. On the contrary, those dreams are at the origin of the creative realization of indie and, indeed, of all creative media production. It is crucial to be “able to differentiate between good and
bad fictions” as Stiegler (2017) has it, inasmuch as “reality is . . . always projected by
the imagination: fiction is a component of consciousness” (p. 99). In this regard, the
“watershed moment” of the indies assumes its broader significance as a moment of
possibility and challenge to the hyperindustrial mediation of “reality” by the “bad
fiction” of the “systematic industrial exploitation of our consciousness” (p. 99)
prosecuted today in the increasingly destructive destruction of disruptive neoliberal
globalization.

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Notes
1. The Bristol Games Hub website: http://bristolgameshub.com, the Leamington Spa Arch
Creatives website: http://archcreatives.com, and the Dutch Game Garden website: http://
dutchgamegarden.nl.
2. Through both Ars Industrialis—the association he cofounded in 2005—and the Pompi-
dou Centre’s Institut de Recherche et d’Innovation (IRI) that he leads, Stiegler has been
involved in projects in Nantes and Provence exploring postindustrial urban renewal with
local stakeholders. For IRI, he leads a major cross-institutional project in the Plaine
Commune region aimed at cultural and economic renewal of this socioeconomically
challenged area in the northern suburbs of Paris (Institut de recherche et d’innovation,
2016).
3. In this regard, I would note that, in discussion (Ars Industrialis, 2011) of a paper I gave at
the inaugural conference of the Ecole d’été d’Epineuil-le-Fleuriel in 2011 on the critical
possibilities of experimental video games, Stiegler accepted my proposition that video
games are, like other technical forms mediating experience, a technical pharmakon—that
is, in Stiegler’s analysis, they are both poison and cure, a technical prosthesis of an
irreducibly prosthetic human existence with curative and therapeutic as well as toxic
potential for the ongoing individuation of human psychic and collective becoming.
4. As principal of Auroch Digital, Rawlings was a cofounder of the Bristol Games Hub. This
would also be a further (hardly necessary) riposte to the controversial denial of any such
potentiality for video games by the Chicago film critic, Robert Ebert (Ebert, 2010). Auroch’s own initiatives for expanding the scope of games as expressive and critical forms constitute the “GametheNews” division of Auroch’s activities.

5. Crary (2014) notes, however, that surveys are showing that many people report being awoken by notification signals emanating from the online devices lying by their bedsides (p. 8).

6. Through her conceptualizations of “ambient play” and “soft play,” Hjorth (2017) elaborates the influence on everyday culture of digital games and “ludified” experiences more generally through their pervasive mobile mediation.

7. In a similar vein, in their study of the development of the Indie “MEGABOOTH” promotional venture in major games industry expos and conferences such as PAX (originally known as Penny Arcade Expo) and the Game Developers Conference (GDC), Parker, Simon, and Whitson (2017) explore how the ambiguous status of indie games vis-à-vis the mainstream is powerfully marked in the history of Indie MEGABOOTH. They provide a thoughtful analysis of its work both in the well-known showcasing of indie games at industry exhibitions but also as cultural intermediary for indie game makers through networking and support activities, including between key actors and gatekeepers in the mainstream games industry and the game developers whose aspirations straddle financial security and indie ideals of creative self-realization.

8. Leino’s analysis of playing Pocket Planes was also the substance of his paper at the 8th Philosophy of Computer Games: Freedom in Play (Bilgi University, Istanbul, 2014). The frustrating and demoralizing character of this encounter with the freemium business model masquerading as a game was powerfully evident in his presentation.

9. The crisis of belief in the news reporting of events in the “fake news” phenomenon is the latest and perhaps most serious manifestation of this accelerating crisis of belief today.

10. Frey and Osborne’s (2013) Oxford Martin School report on the future of work is the most well-known analysis and prediction of the effects of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based developments in automation on employment.

11. Hypercapitalism is hyperindustrialism seen from the perspective of mediated consumer society. Stiegler (2011b, 2013, 2014b) analyses hyperindustrial hypercapitalism across the three volumes of the Disbelief and Discredit series. See the third volume entitled The Lost Spirit of Capitalism (Stiegler, 2014b) for an account of hypercapitalism as the crisis of the “spirit of capitalism” that Max Weber identified as the psychic and collective dream (Stiegler’s formulation) animating capitalist modernity.

12. Stiegler (2013) resumes his analysis of “generalized proletarianization” in the introduction to the second volume of Disbelief and Discredit: “The process of individuation today, and insofar as it consists in a permanent transformation of savoir-faire, of savoir-vivre, and of knowledge [connaissance], occurs only in conditions of extreme control, to the point that it becomes doubtful that this is still a matter of individuation. Gilbert Simondon expresses such doubt in relation to the savoir-faire of the worker-become-proletarian, hence his assertion that the proletariat has become disindividuated. And I myself harbour such doubts in relation to the savoir-vivre of consumers, whom I
believe to be disindividuated, and thus proletarianized in their turn, resulting in what I have called generalized proletarianization” (p. 3).

13. The Dutch Game Garden (DGG) came into existence more through the efforts of founding principals supported by regional government initiatives in linking university graduates with enterprise opportunities. It nonetheless drew on the informal contacts and networks of the founders in building the structures of cooperative and mentoring support for the indie developers taking residency in the DGG.

14. The *Good Hubbing Guide* (Crogan, 2015) provides a description and evaluation of the key features of the organization of the three game hubs included in the project’s network.

15. Greenlight also required an entry fee from developers, but this was donated to a charity by the Steam platform owners, Valve Corporation. No such undertaking appears in the communications attending the launch of Steam Direct.

16. I thank Neils Hoogendoorn for introducing this term into our discussions at the first Creative Territories Worshkop at the Bristol Games Hub, Bristol in May 2015.

17. This is the key insight of Chanan’s (1990) “Economic Conditions of Early Cinema”: the commercial potential of the mass reproduction of experiences—of what Stiegler (2011a) calls “industrial temporal objects”—emerges not first but most substantially in taking control of and investing in their mass distribution. It remains valid for thinking the conditions of the emergence of the “new media” as they were called, however, transformed the conditions and technologies of distribution are in the “hyperindustrial age.” It is the very persistence of this capitalist control over distribution, which is enabled by the established legal and institutional supports of intellectual property even as the disruptive actions of digital venture capital exceed and render outmoded existing legal and social frameworks, that is, central to the destructive (and indeed autodestructive) tendency of hyperindustrial capitalism.

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