INDIE INCLUSION?: ANALYZING DIVERSITY IN THE INDEPENDENT VIDEO

GAME INDUSTRY

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Research into mainstream (AAA) video games reveals a popularized form of militarized masculine entertainment that is synonymous with violence toward other men and sexualized violence toward women. The means of successful AAA game production are limited to those who have access to sophisticated game engines, advanced programming skills, and substantial financial backing. Consequently, a robust *independent* "indie" game industry has emerged to promote a greater range of game creation excluded from the AAA model. Drawing on political economic, feminist, and cultural studies approaches, this study seeks to trace the emergent trends and dynamics in the indie industry and analyzes common practices, strategies, and discursive themes of the Independent Games Festival (IGF), their hosting event, GDC, and their parent company UBM. This thesis contributes to media industry studies, game studies, and critical theory and highlights how economic logics shape social relations and influences process cultural change.

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To a Mighty Oak and a Soaring Sparrow.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING THE INDUSTRY

Conservative estimates suggest that in 2015 the video game industry grossed

$23.5 billion in revenue, making it clear that AAA (see Appendix) video games have

become a dominant force in popular entertainment and a highly profitable source of

economic revenue (Morris, 2016). Video games have long sparked debates about harmful

effects on players and damaging impacts on social relationships. Recently, highly

publicized threats of violence have added tension to long-standing anxieties about the

blurring between online and offline aggression.

On October 15, 2014, Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist video game critic, was

scheduled to speak at Utah State University. Shortly before the event, a massacre-style

shooting threat emerged, stating that "feminism has taken over every facet of our society,

and women like Sarkeesian want to punish us for even fantasizing about being men"

(Alberty, 2014, para. 14). When security forces would not ban guns from the event,

Sarkeesian cancelled (Ahmed & Marco, 2014; Tassi, 2014).

Sarkeesian produces a web video series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*

(2014)*, that explores gender, sexuality, and violence in mainstream (AAA) video games.

Though feminist and queer scholars have steadily produced substantial literature

analyzing these trends, Sarkeesian has been one of the first highly visible activists,

critical scholars, woman gamers, and media producers to reveal the overt violent sexism

and misogyny present in video game worlds. The increasing hostility toward Sarkeesian

and diverse Others as gamers and developers reveals long-standing exclusionary practices

within the gaming industry. "There is a matrix of determination at play in the gendering

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of the computer itself which is central to the histories of game cultures" (Dovey &

Kennedy, 2006, p. 80). Historical analysis of the video game industry reveals that games

have emerged from white male-dominated communities and actively embraced white

masculine desires in both hardware and software production strategies (Dyer-Witheford

& dePeuter, 2009; Nichols, 2014; Shaw, 2009) These histories and recent moments in the

industry speak to common trends in the video game industry that favor white, upper

middle-class, heterosexual males as developers and gamers (Dovey & Kennedy; Nichols,

2014; Shaw, 2011). It also taps into a fundamental friction about how video games should

be discussed and evaluated. Rather than focusing on whether games make people violent,

feminist critics, like Sarkeesian, argue that given their cultural dominance, video games

serve an ideological function to by reifying social hierarchies (Beasley & Collins

Standley, 2002; Downs & Smith, 2010; Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2009,

2010; Shaw, 2012). Furthermore, critical scholars suggest that the video game industry as

a powerful media institution should be examined for its exclusion of diverse Others[1]

(Consalvo, 2012; King & Krzywinska, 2006; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003;

Shaw, 2009).

This thesis draws on literature analyzing video game production practices that

employ technological and entertainment industry logics that favor dominant economic,

social, and cultural positions (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter,

2009; King & Krzywinska, 2006; Nichols, 2014; Shaw, 2009; Wasko, 2014). Through

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[1] Hereafter, I utilize the term "diverse Others" to refer to women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals, unless specifically stated. This term draws on de Beauvoir's (1989) conception of women as the foundational objected of subjugation and difference. The subjugation of the Other, functions to define normativity as masculine. In this case, diverse Others serve to define normalcy as white, heterosexual, middle-class, masculinity.

exploring the indie model of resistance to dominant video game culture[2], I build on

critical scholarship that has highlighted the ways in which gamer sub-cultures engage,

resist, and support existing ideological positions (Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002;

Consalvo, 2012; Diez Gutiérrez, 2014; Downs & Smith, 2010; Jansz & Martis, 2007;

Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Ketchum & Peck, 2010; Shaw, 2012; Stabile, 2013; Taylor,

2006; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). The limited amount of research into

indie games has focused narrowly on descriptive industry trends (Gil & Warzynski, 2014;

Ruffino. 2013). Accordingly, this project pays attention to the ways that *interactive*

forces shape cultural definitions, structure internal logics, and guide practices within the

indie industry (Bourdieu, 1993; Hardy, 2014; Nichols, 2014).

In particular, I examine the political economic influences and discursive themes

of the Independent Games Festival (IGF) (see Appendix A) to better understand the

structuring forces behind the IGF as a corporate entity. I further explore how social,

cultural, economic, and symbolic capital, as developed by Bourdieu, flows through the

IGF field and how these capitals position certain agents within the field. I interrogate the

reproduction of an "indie technicity," the distinctive styles, aptitudes, values, and

behaviors of indie gamers and developers structured by intersections of gender,

technology, and play, as a derivative of Bourdieu's habitus.

My findings suggest that the IGF's parent company, UBM (see Appendix), and

their host organization, the Game Developers Conference (GDC) (see Appendix) aims to:

acquire niche markets, organize distinctive events, create unique content, and brand

emergent communities. In limited instances, following corporate social responsibility

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[2] I use the terms "video game" and "game" interchangeably. Thus, for example, when referring to "game cultures" or "the gaming industry," I am referring to video game cultures and the video game industry.

logics, UBM, GDC, and the IGF open social networks, awards economic capital, and offers cultural legitimacy to women and diverse Others. This analysis reveals that these diversity efforts are constructed as ancillary inclusion projects designed to support core economic interests built upon exclusionary tendencies. The IGF is an exemplary illustration of this dynamic and serves two primary functions for UBM and GDC: first, it legitimizes UBM's economic strategies by cultivating an emerging niche game market and segmenting brand identity, and second, it showcases moments of inclusion to authenticate UBM's diversity portfolio. Ultimately, this analysis reveals that through market segmentation and brand iteration, the IGF's fluid constructions of independence and tentative ties toward inclusion function to support economic growth and a maintain exclusionary tendencies.

As a semi-autonomous field in a global media marketplace, the IGF is driven by competitive economic interests to secure vendors, increase game entrants, promote corporate partnerships, cultivate niche market, and update brand identities. As IGF prizes award $2,500 to $30,000 across various categories, indie game developers are motivated to participate in the IGF to make returns on their often costly investments (IGF, 2016). Perhaps, more importantly, is the promise of promotional publicity and expanded social networks, which generate greater development opportunities, possibly employment offers, and further economic prospects. However, these corporate objectives become problematic when the values of the indie community are antithetical to corporate involvement and influenced by progressive cultural pressures to welcome diverse Others. Thus the IGF must constantly negotiate the tension between cultivating the indie markets, capturing vendors, retaining members, and expanding corporate partnerships while

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creating a corporate entity out of developers and gamers that are increasingly defined by anti-corporatism, progressive politics, and cultural inclusion.

Background and Literature

Violent Beginnings

Early popular media attention to video games centered on effects and violence (Crossley, 2014; Schroeder, 2004). On December 1, 1993 during the peak of popular concern over video games, Senator Joseph Lieberman held a press conference where he played recorded VHS selections of the controversial games *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* and announced his intention to create a government-controlled ratings system (Crossley; Donovon, 2010). *Mortal Kombat* had become infamous for its array of bloody "fatality" kill sequences in which players could "finish" their opponents in a range of gruesome ways including pulling their opponent's beating hearts out of their chest (Crossley; Kent, 2010).

Utilizing a full motion video format, *Night Trap* depicted chilling sexualized violence against women, which further blurred the boundaries between virtual and real world violence for a public still wary of the new entertainment technology (Crossley, 2014). "'We're not talking Pac-Man or Space Invaders anymore,' Lieberman told the stunned journalists. 'We're talking about video games that glorify violence and teach children to enjoy inflicting the most gruesome forms of cruelty imaginable'" (Donovan, 2010, p. 78). Not accidentally, Lieberman foregrounded these games to regulate against the production and distribution of an "immoral" new entertainment.

Within five months of Lieberman's press conference, the gaming industry had established the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) (see Appendix) a self-

regulating age-based ratings systems (Crossley, 2014; Donovan, 2010; Nichols, 2014). Such swift self-regulatory action to avoid government intervention is a common strategy employed by burgeoning media industries to maintain control over production and content as cultural controversies and moral panics threaten emergent culture industries (Schroeder, 2004). Continuing their proactive strategy, the industry strengthened the connection between video games and violence with the advent of games like *Doom* (1993, 1995) and *Doom II: Hell on Earth* (1994, 1995), *Grand Theft Auto* (1997) and soon to follow *Halo* (2001) and *Call of Duty* (2003). Such bold moves illustrated the seemingly unrelenting growth of the industry as well as an endorsement of countercultural spirit that deviated from mainstream values toward violence, sexuality, and technology (Donovan, 2010; Frank, 1996; Schroeder, 2004).

Toys to Men

Though the ESRB served to quell mounting cultural pressures, the *Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap*, and *Doom* controversies signaled a larger shift within the industry that lead to embracing masculine violence rather than retreating from it. This decision was economically motivated as violent games garnered significant publicity, profit, and promotional power (Donovan, 2010; Schroeder, 2004). For example, *Mortal Kombat* made a difficult transition from arcade game to console (see Appendix) game (20 million units sold in 2007) as well as successful box office film ($70.5 million in revenue) and has been one of the highest selling game franchises since 1992 (Nichols, 2014, p. 116-121). Though the ratings board attempted to mitigate the damage of publicized moral panic and critical research linking violent video games with real world violence, the

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economic viability of violent video games provided the strongest motivation for continued production.

The tendency toward masculine entertainment and violent content has well-established links to video games early beginnings. At the height of the Cold War, the Depart of Defense employed academics and military personnel to utilize computer simulations and solve the atomic crisis (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). "But simulations could also be a diversion from working on mass death if they were cut loose from serious application, enjoyed for their technical 'sweetness,' an oddity without instrumental purpose, transformed into play" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, p. 45). With great latitude to experiment, highly educated and well-paid white male programmers utilized new technologies to not only resolve political conflicts, but also to escape into play. Video game forms, fantasies, and logics of play emerged from these specific cultural historical circumstances. "Computer games have emerged from within a set of contexts which figure as highly masculine (science, mathematics, technology, the military) and have therefore inherited this particular cultural coding (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 36).

Conceived as a social field, the video game industry was formed out of a particular historical context and cultural location; as such it is embedded with a particular set of logics, meanings, and values. A social field, as developed by Bourdieu, is a distinctive sector of the social world that "has a pre-established and taken-for-granted structure of both meaning and power" (Crossley, 2005, p. 81). As fields tend to reproduce dominant power dynamics, they are generally guided by conservative values and established social networks that reinforce unequal distributions of social resources

(Bourdieu, 1996; Crossley; Grenfell, 2014). As cultural and social dynamics shift, established social fields often come in contact with subversive social agents and values that seek to disrupt the field's balance of power. Throughout the rapid evolution of games as rudimentary war simulations to cutting-edge blockbuster entertainment, the video game industry has continued to negotiate tensions between transformative subversion and entrenched conservative values that protect commercial interests.

The progression of games as war simulations, to children's toys, to militarized masculine fantasies illustrates the ways that the industry reproduced familiar power dynamics in mainstream entertainment. By cultivating a distinctive gamer audience and guiding their desires, skills, and preferences, game companies carved out a distinctive social field that normalized violent and misogynistic masculine game play, advanced technological skill, and habituated economic investment.

Despite these innovative and well-funded origins, the business of video games struggled throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s to create markets, generate demand, produce quality games, effectively distribute products, and manage collective hesitation toward the new technology (Nichols, 2014). Largely led by Atari in the early 1980s, the video game industry had two major failures to overcome. First, in 1975, after creating huge demand for the widely successful Pong arcade game ($3.2 million in 1973 to $39 million in 1975), Atari did not have the surplus economic capital to meet production demands and lost considerable revenue and footing in the industry (Nichols, p. 21). Second, after considerable reorganization, Atari garnered a deal with Steven Spielberg in July of 1982 to create a game based on the blockbuster film *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial*. In an effort to reestablish their place in the market, Atari significantly shortened the *E.T.*

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production period to capitalize on the Christmas buying season (Nichols). "Because the production time was so short, the company decided to modify an existing game, spending little time on developing any plot, meaning the game was a dramatic failure. Nearly all of the cartridges manufactured were returned" (Nichols, p. 22). Not only where the cartridges returned, but they were dumped in a landfill creating a highly publicized moment of failure for Atari and the fledging industry (Donovan, 2010; Nichols).

In an effort to stabilize markets and rebound after costly missteps, such as *ET*'s poor sales and Atari's failure to meet hardware demand, game companies turned to established strategies from the toy, computer, film, and music industries. Though, at the time, many of these strategies were hastily made decisions to buffer further losses, they have endured and continue shape industry practices today. Early strategies include: an emphasis on fourth-quarter sales for the Christmas-buying season, planned obsolescence, content licensing schemas, and loss-leader manufacturing (Nichols).

An early adopter of these strategies, Nintendo, maintained strict software control, set high hardware expectations, and developed strong retail relationships with toy companies to create an effective games-as-toys model. Nintendo marketed the technology as safe family entertainment and dubbed their new console the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), which distanced them from the term "gaming," which by then had become a term loaded with controversy and failure (Nichols, 2014; Schroeder, 2004). The U.S. launch of this retooled strategy in October 1985 was remarkably successful and Nintendo saw a surge in sales throughout the holiday season (Kent, 2010; Nichols). By 1986, the NES had earned Nintendo $310 million of the $430 million industry total and established Nintendo as the leader in the games-as-toys market.

Competing companies, like Sega, sought to find new markets and decided to abandon the family-oriented Nintendo market by returning to one of video game's earlier audiences from the 1970s, young adult males (Nichols, 2014). Galvanizing this games-for-boys strategy were the changing demographics of gamers who, as young children, had become enamored with (NES) games and were aging. Sega, which attempted to gain a foothold in console market after its arcade games increasingly lost revenue, launched the "Genesis does what Nindendon't" campaign to appeal directly to teenage boys instead of families (Kent, 2010). During this time, Sega branded themselves as an edgier company with a console that boasted superior processing speeds. Sega also promoted decidedly more masculine and trendy gameplay, drawing on sporting, action hero, and comic book universes. Through this campaign, advertisements featured Michael Jackson, Spiderman, Tommy Lasorda, Joe Montana, and James "Buster" Douglas (Donovan, 2010; Kent, 2010; Vincent, 2013).

Nintendo's games-as-toys and Sega's games-for-boys strategy surfaced in their differing approaches to *Mortal Kombat*. Though the game was released on both the Sega Genesis and the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), Nintendo's "family friendly" policy replaced the blood with sweat and minimized the violence in many of the "fatality" sequences (Kent, 2010). Though Sega's console market would be unable to compete with the emerging gaming giants (Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony), the narrowing of the market to boys and teenage boys reverberated throughout the industry and companies actively cultivated a hardcore gamer market that was distinctly male (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Nichols, 2014). This practice has been common in other entertainment industries, such as television in which advertisers

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value male audiences over other demographic segments, such as women, despite their potential for considerable buying power (Meehan, 2005).

Noobs to Nerds

Moderately protected by the preemptive armor of the ESRB and emboldened by popularity of the manufactured male fantasy, a mainstream or AAA industry rapidly expanded. (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Kent, 2010; Nichols, 2014). Based on the U.S. grading system, the term AAA denotes high quality production value, similar to the status of Hollywood "blockbuster" films (Demaria & Wilson, 2002). The term evolved during the late 1980s when poorly made games threatened game sales. In response, Nintendo successfully established strict publishing standards and stamped a golden seal reading "Nintendo Seal of Quality" on each of their licensed games to signify their high-quality products (Demaria & Wilson; Nichols). In the late 1990s, borrowing from the successful Nintendo Seal strategy, companies began promoting their games as "AAA" titles (Demaria & Wilson). Since the majority of game revenues come from game sales, the AAA rating, much like a blockbuster film designation, has become an important classification to ensure profits, shape audience expectations, and establish industry standards (Kent; Nichols; Shaw, 2009).

AAA quality, distribution, and sales have benefitted from narrowing their audience to male gamers, strictly controlling content, and deeply embedding masculine gameplay into core business logics (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Nichols, 2014; Shaw, 2009). Economic pressures to limit production costs and increase revenue certainties have lead to high concentration in publishing fields, where publishers often borrow from pre-established masculine tastes, styles and values. Borrowing extensively from cross-

industry franchise development, AAA games owe much of their content to Hollywood. AAA games have drawn extensively from sporting universes and action move genres to provide a source of stability and reinforce audience desires. In this profit driven landscape, game studios "…will do the minimum amount it can get away with in order to differentiate its game from all other games that follow its previously established model and that are being sold to its previously established audience" (Anthropy, 2012, p. 6).

These AAA business logics have overwhelming reinforced the privileging of white men in virtually every aspect: development, production, marketing, distribution, sales, and play (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Nichols, 2014). In this way, the industry has followed trends STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Medical) fields where training, employment, and experimentation in technology overwhelming exclude women and girls (Beede et al., 2011). Thus, despite Nintendo's moderate success in opening the market to girls and older gamers, a strategy they have employed throughout the ensuing thirty years, on the whole, "female players have often been actively or symbolically excluded" (Dovey & Kennedy, p. 15).

Through these exclusionary practices game companies cultivated a strong target "hardcore" gamer demographic: white heterosexual males (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Nichols, 2014; Schroeder, 2004; Shaw, 2013). As game companies have benefitted from a social field established on values and logics that closely align with distinct desires, tastes, and preferences of hardcore gamer, the conception of habitus becomes particularly relevant (Bourdieu, 1996; Crossley, 2005; Grenfell, 2014). A habitus, is made up of socially and historically contextualized norms that manifest as a unique set of tastes, preferences, desires, and styles (Bourdieu; Crossley; Grenfell). In the gaming, the

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hardcore gamer habitus is constructed by a distinctive set of desires, skills, and preferences in both content and technology (Nichols, 2014).

AAA video game spaces shaped hardcore gamer preferences by establishing a set of masculine logics and content themes to guide creation and play. These logics are grounded in highly physical movements similar to culturally bound notions of boyhood play such as daring physical acts of "overcoming obstacles, beating bosses, and mastering levels" (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, p. 271). The masculinization of the game space draws on the early ties to military technologies and imposes the enactment of heteronormative masculine behaviors on players regardless of their gender, sexuality, or background (Anthropy, 2012; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003; Walkerdine, 2006).

> This technology of masculinity is typically manifested in the male and masculine as violence to others (particularly women)… as well as figurative violence in the form of hegemonic flows across the socious and the enactment of masculine violent myths and fantasies (Burrill, 2008, p. 14).

AAA video game worlds thus impose heteronormative player subjectivity within a gendered object world.

The relationship between technology, identity, and privilege is well illustrated in the "PC Master Race" subculture within the PC (personal computer) (see Appendix) gaming subfield. PC Master Race gamers claim an elite status over console gamers so-called "dirty console peasants" (MacDonald, 2013; Plunkett, 2012). The superiority promoted by PC Master Race gamers aligns with Bourdieu's conception of distinction as a superior form of taste in hardcore gaming culture (Bourdieu, 1984). Here, a higher class

of gamers with access to high amounts of economic capital to invest in gaming technologies and cultural capital to develop gaming proficiency is able to access a distinctly superior gaming taste. From the vantage of the "The Glorious PC Gaming Master Race" taste, the superiority of PC play is rooted in features like free online play, backwards compatibility, mods capabilities, upgradability, customization, lower cost-over-time, and performance. Thus the investment in and quality of the PC becomes the marker of superiority and privilege for the gamer (MacDonald; Plunkett). Access to this superior sensibility, is restricted however, to those with high amounts of economic, social, and cultural capital to advance their gaming technologies, skills, and knowledge. Furthermore, the rapid growth of "PC Master Race" communities and investment by large technology companies such as Corsair, Cooler Master, Oculus, and Nvidia, to sponsor events, organize contests and giveaways illustrates the ways in which commercial interests directly influence the reification of this privileged taste (MacDonald; Plunkett).

The PC Master Race also elucidates the ways in which gaming technologies are embedded with the cultural capital of dominant racial constructs. PC Master Race supporters utilize their cultural capital of technological prowess and economic capital to invest in gaming hardware to perpetuate dominant racial ideologies. "Video games represent a powerful instrument of hegemony, elicit ideological consent through a spectrum of white supremacist projects" (Leonard, 2003, p. 2). Thus video games reiterate white privilege not only through normative and stereotypical in game representations, and hardcore gamers and hardware companies also reinforce dominant racial structures by imbuing technologies with racial meaning and cultural value.

Cultivating Capital

Through the coalescence of software and hardware sector dynamics, the industry sets the limits of game play by requiring access to certain social resources, or capital. Capital refers to specific types of economic, social, cultural, or symbolic value that can be exchanged for resources or influence one's standing in a given social field (Bourdieu, 1996; Crossley, 2005; Grenfell; 2014). Economic capital denotes income, wealth, or monetary value; social capital refers to social networks and the ability to access strong social connections; cultural capital implies culturally valued competences that are often embodied; and symbolic value indicates social status and recognition. Forms of capital are exchanged by social agents to gain access to other forms of capital and status within a given social field. The structural dominance of a given social field is maintained through the exchange patterns of various forms of capital, which reaffirm position of dominance within the field. Furthermore, the exchange value of capital is not always equal and straightforward. For example, one does not earn the dominant social status of "whiteness" or "maleness," and once it is deployed, it does not lose its value and can be exchanged endlessly (Crossley, 2005; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). Conversely, the inferior status of "blackness" or "femaleness" is a constant source of value deficiency and functions to block other forms of capital and resource acquisition (Collins, 2000; Dovey & Kennedy).

Here, we can see how the AAA field allows and restricts access to the field, firstly, through economic capital, then through cultivated cultural capital. Hardware design has also been fundamental in setting the boundaries of gameplay and crafting gamers' skill and tastes. Formed out of planned obsolescence models in the hardware sector aimed at promoting regular consumer cycles, gamers have developed a desire to

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stay on top of cutting-edge technologies (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Nichols, 2014).

Evolving game mechanics and accessories encourage gamers to invest in regularly in

gaming habits to hone their skills and experience superior game mechanics.

By requiring the purchase of a new console every three to five years, the industry

limits access to those with the money to enter and then remain in the gaming field.

"Computer games are unlike other games in the way it's absolutely necessary to have

access to a certain type of technology to play them" (Mortensen, 2009, p. 23). With the

cost of consoles at approximately $400 to $600 and the average cost of games at $60,

economic capital is a key resource to restrict access the gaming field.

Without access to evolving gaming technologies, other forms of capital, generated

within the field itself, are highly restricted. The game controller provides a key

illustration of this dynamic. The early NES controller required the mastery of two face

buttons and a single directional pad, allowing a player to pick up and play without

extensive pre-knowledge or advanced skill (Donovan, 2010). As game companies

cultivated the hardcore audience, it also cultivated a specific skillset required to use the

next generation controller. Now, three decades after the first NES controller, the widely

acclaimed 2013 Sony PlayStation DualShock controller is equipped with four main

action buttons, two shoulder trigger buttons, two shoulder face buttons, two analog sticks,

and a directional pad comprised of four separate arrow buttons. The evolution of the

controller has required the evolution of gamers' skills and it has become increasingly

difficult to pick up and use an AAA controller without previous experience, knowledge,

or training.

Casual vs. Core

A key disruption in the refinement of the AAA controller has the taken-for-granted privileges of the hardcore gamer. In 2006, maintaining their family-friendly posture, Nintendo attempted to break the narrowing of the gamer and dramatically simplified the controller design for their Wii console. Nintendo saw a large boost in profitability as first-time and inexperienced gamers, known as casual gamers, including women, older people, and young children entered the market. However, this choice lost credibility with hardcore gamers. As the following review titled "Wii – A Hardcore Gamer's Perspective" demonstrates:

> Within twenty minutes I'm getting near perfect scores in the bowling game, and having tennis rallies that could last forever if I wasn't so bored. Again, this simply reinforces how shallow the controls are - they're very easy to master. A gimmick, if you will. Even my other half soon tires of the relatively simple gameplay on offer - I thought chicks were supposed to dig this zany hand-waving gameplay! (Ring, 2006, para. 7)

As a hardcore gamer, the reviewer reveals the embedded privilege as a man with an advanced technical skill set and preference for sophisticated gameplay. The reviewer's observations about his "chicks" and his "other half" suggest that women are less-qualified gamers with distinctly simpler tastes ("a gimmick"), fewer skills ("hand-waving"), and unsophisticated desires ("zany"). The description that women have less sophisticated tastes and weaker technical skill reinforces the distinction of the hardcore gamer as inherently and even naturally masculine. "They rightly identify a dominant tendency to produce the stereotype of women as technologically ignorant or incapable

and to simultaneously produce the relationship between men and technology as 'natural'" (Dovey & Kennedy, p. 18).

Despite the steady increase of female gamers, the distinction between hardcore and casual gamers has reinforced the gender disparity in the gaming field (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Juul, 2010). Casual games have been noted for expanding female game audiences and are often distributed on smartphone and tablets or housed on social networking sites (such as *Farmville* which launched successfully on Facebook in 2009) (Juul). "They tend to be fairly simple in design, so that players require only minimal knowledge, and to feature gameplay allowing for either interruption and continuation or for repeated play" (Nichols, 2014, p. 67). Such discussions of casual games reiterate the privilege of hardcore gamers deemed as superior (Dovey & Kennedy).

…games which have attracted more gender balanced playing audience, such as *Everquest* and *The Sims*, are frequently cited as deviations for the "classical game model," which implicitly works to reinforce the notion that these are not *really* games and their players are not *really* gamers (Dovey & Kennedy, p. 37).

This relationship between identity, skill, and preferences advances the notion of an indie "technicity." Technicity, as advanced by Dovey and Kennedy, is an iteration of Bourdieu's habitus and integrates notions of technological access, aptitudes, and action into preferences, tastes, and beliefs (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006).

The new term of "technicity" is to encapsulate, in conceptual terms, the connections between an identity based on certain types of attitude, practice, preference, and so on and the importance of technology as a critical aspect of the construction of identity… this historical moment produces technological

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competence as a key marker for success as a participant in the modern culture. A

focus on technicity will also enable us to emphasize the ways in which particular

kinds of technicity are privileged (Dovey & Kennedy, p. 17).

Thus despite a steady balancing of gender disparities in gaming, the relegation of female

gamers to the realm of "casual" gamers and the valuation of men as "hardcore" reinforces

the privilege of a male dominated AAA technicity (Consalvo, 2012; IGDA, 2015;

Nichols, 2014; Shaw, 2009).

Virtual Dystopias

Gender trouble. As AAA publishers and game studios have refined video games

genres and narrowed audiences over the last thirty years, they have steadily produced

variations on themes of dominant male fantasies (Anthropy, 2012; Nichols, 2014; Shaw,

2009, 2012). AAA games have perfected a form of militarized masculine entertainment

that is synonymous with violence (Dietz, 1998; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter,

2003; Shaw, 2009; Stabile, 2013). In AAA video games women are consistently

represented less frequently than men and systematically presented as subordinate

characters and as passive objects in need (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Sarkeesian, 2014).

Furthermore, women tend to be placed in secondary roles that involve sexual

violence, sexual interest, physical domination, and sexual exploitation (Williams,

Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). For example, in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, one

of the easiest ways to increase life points is by paying for "masturbation, fellatio or

intercourse" from a female prostitute. However, this is not a mere case of exploitation, as

stated in the guide of the game:

While the woman is giving you a 'good job,' you gain life points but your money

reserves go down. But if you want to recover the money you've spent, or even

gain more, kill the girl as soon as you get out of your car (Díez Gutiérrez, 2014, p.

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In many AAA games, dominance, exploitation, and violence are inextricably linked in

promotional materials and in gaming interactions with female characters (Díez Gutiérrez;

Williams et al., 2009). Furthermore, the physical attributes ascribed to the majority of

female characters involve exaggerated feminine traits, such as large breasts,

disproportionately small waists, and large hips or buttocks (Beasely & Collins Standley,

2002; Downs & Smith, 2010; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Martins, Williams, Ratan, &

Harrison, 2009; Williams et al., 2009).

Consideration of the increasingly visible playable female lead characters, known

as the "Lara phenomenon" (after Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series), reveals that a

modest gain in female lead characters has emerged (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Ketchum &

Peck, 2010). Conversely, little progress has been made in the sexualized and physical

attributes of female lead and supporting game characters. For example, Lara "appears to

get younger as the years go on, with an unfortunate boob-inflating spike in the years

leading up to Angelina Jolie's *Tomb Raider* film" (Biedenharn, 2014, para. 1). Similarly,

the "Repair her Armor" campaign highlights highly sexualized female armor in video

games that would fail to serve a protective function as major body parts (such as chest,

stomach, and thighs) are exposed (Granshaw, 2013).

On video game box art and at promotional conventions women are utilized as

sexualized attractions alongside other masculine coding (Ketchum & Peck, 2010). Just as

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in magazine advertisements, AAA box art often places male characters in central positions, includes female characters only in relation to male characters, and portrays females as non-central and sexualized (Ketchum & Peck).

> The use of 'booth babes' at game expositions, the use of highly sexualized imagery in the packaging and advertising of games, the Nintendo 'For Men' tag line that accompanied the Game Boy Advance SP campaign and the dominant construction of game characters as 'hypersexual' all serve to underscore this coding (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 37).

Despite these modest gains and changing cultural demographics in the country, and the growing casual game market, Caucasian male characters dominate the gaming space as heroes and protagonists (Downs & Smith, 2010; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2009). Though in many studies characters are operationally defined with some variability (e.g. "playable vs. non-playable," "primary vs. secondary," "leading vs. supporting," "protagonist vs. antagonist," "hero vs. villain") the findings reveal uniform trends. White male characters constitute anywhere from 50% to 80% of the gaming world, with African American, Asian, and Latino men and women being in more supportive roles constituting 3% to 21% of the gaming world (Downs & Smith, 2010; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Martins et al., 2009; Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2010).

Race matters. "Just as video games are a space about and for males, they are equally a white-centered space" (Leonard, 2003, p. 3). Not only are people of color primarily in secondary or supportive roles, but research into race in AAA games also reveals that "being a Black character in a video game is almost synonymous with being a

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violent character" (Yang et al., 2014, p. 698). African American and Latino male characters are often more likely to be violent and dangerous antagonists that are physically larger, muscle-bound, and verbally aggressive drug dealers, rappers, athletes, and fighters (Leonard). Research exploring Asian and Asian American characters suggests that while they are highly underrepresented from video game spaces, women predominate as sex workers and objects of sexualized violence (Leonard; Sarkeesian, 2014). Furthermore, Asian men often emerge in secondary non-playable antagonist positions as violent martial artists and gang members who speak poor English (Leonard; Shiu, 2006). These stereotypical representations of people of color naturalize racial differences and reinforce damaging constructions of racial minorities as violent, inferior, and dangerous (Ferguson, 2000; Leonard; Shiu; Yang et al.).

As the majority of game protagonists are white males, such reductive representations reinforce the objectification of racial minorities and reinforce a process of "disidentification" (Shiu, 2006). Disidentification suggests that in AAA games interactive subjectivity is delimited to white perspectives and dominant views on racial difference (Shiu, 2006). Such disidentification limits characters of color to the periphery of gameplay and reinforces the subjugation of underrepresented perspectives, experiences, and bodies. Disidentification also functions to reinforce the normalcy of whiteness through a colonization process that places racial minorities in dangerous positions that must be controlled, civilized, accepted, tamed, neutralized, and killed by white characters. Thus as whiteness is centralized and normalized, "the proximity of racialized bodies to white bodies will be negated via the regeneration of white power, pride, and identity" (Shiu, p. 112).

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Reinforcing the subjugation of racial minorities in gaming, academic research has focused largely on issues of gender disparity rather than racial inequality (Leonard, 2003). Furthermore, the AAA industry's disregard for racial matters is evident in their published statistics. In the Entertainment Software Association's annual "Essential Facts" audience report, gender and age are the only demographic categories assessed (Shaw, 2011). Other reported data has included racial demographics about gamers, but focused narrowly on children (Shaw). "Race, it seems, does not matter when it comes to the *construction* of the gamer audience, a form of 'symbolic annihilation' that exists beyond game texts themselves" (Shaw, p. 37).

Safe sexuality. These representations of women and people of color parallel the similarly narrow representations of queer game characters, storylines, and gaming options in AAA games. In some limited instances, such as *Bully* (2006)*, Sims 3* (2009), *Fable 3* (2010)*, and *Mass Effect 3* (2012)*, game characters' are able to kiss, date, marry, or seduce either opposite or same sex characters (Shaw, 2009). However, these are delimited as binary options and presented through identical scripting and unchanged animation sequences. Such representations fail to reflect nuanced representations of homosexual desire or multi-dimensional queer characters and gamers (Sarkeesian, 2014). "Though it may seem like the digital world offers a larger range of representation than cable or Hollywood, the entrenched hierarchies of 'old' media continue to characterize online space" (Fink & Miller, 2013, p. 618).

In "Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital" Lisa Nakamura (2012) explores the way in which the intersections of subjugated racial, gender, queer identities restrict access to "gaming

capital" in the gaming field. She denotes how the gamer identity is a highly limited construct accessible only to those with a narrow confluence of social, cultural, and economic capitals.

> Heteronormative white masculinity is equated with expert, fan knowledge of gaming mechanics, structures, discourses intersectionality functions… Masculinity is performed by the display of technical knowledge, and gaming is the most recent iteration of this form of social display. Gaming itself becomes a mark of privilege within symbolic discourse (Nakamura, para. 10).

As displayed by Nakamura and asserted by Bourdieu, interrogating the naturalization of capital makes evident the ways that uneven distributions and exchanges of capital reinforce privilege and produce social inequalities.

Gamer Over

Despite the limited world of game production and play, steady populations of subversive and alternative gamer cultures have emerged (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Juul, 2010; Shaw, 2009; Stabile, 2013; Taylor, 2006). The development of Gaymer communities, AfroGeek cultures, Gamer Girl collectives, and Queer Games movements[3] as well as the steady increase of female game audiences challenges the reductive nature of "gamer" identities, audiences, and markets (Consalvo, 2012). Through utilizing strong social networks, subversive gamers, employ dominant forms of technicity to generate their own cultural capital. Through skinning, modding, and fan cultures many diverse Others have expanded the technical boundaries of virtual spaces to interact, play, and

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[3] I make reference to the robust critical scholarship around games and online cultures including *Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games* web series (2012-present), GaymerX event (2013-present), AfroGeeks conference (2004/5), and Queerness & Games conference (2013-present).

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resist representations, gameplay, and interactions that devalue and deny their identities as gamers (Cassell & Jenkins; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Nichols, 2014; Stabile; Taylor).

Despite the steady expansion of subversive gamer communities, homophobic and sexist "hate speech" in online gaming communities has become an area of increasing concern in the field (Consalvo, 2012; Shaw, 2013). Common virtual community practices of "trolling" diverse players, saying or posting openly derogatory and hateful statements online or in virtual spaces, reinforce normative player attributes and exclude diverse players, discourage diverse developers, and erase subversive practices (Consalvo; Leupold, 2006; Sliwinski, 2006; Vargas, 2006). In this "toxic gamer culture," harassment of female and LGBTQI gamers has become an increasing trend (Consalvo; Leupold; Shaw). As harassment toward diverse participants in the gaming industry has evolved (as seen most potently in the #GamerGate movement), direct threats of violence have blurred the line between online and offline violence. These behaviors highlight the dangerously misogynistic virtual worlds, homophobic gamer cultures, and exclusive developer landscapes that reassert patriarchal privilege and shape the AAA industry (Consalvo; Dewey, 2014; Stabile, 2013).

Inciting Independence

In a production landscape, third party developers without direct economic support from AAA publishing companies find entry into the market and onto a profitable platform virtually impossible (Gil & Warzynski, 2014; Nichols, 2014). Consequently, a robust independent (indie) video game scene has emerged to promote a greater range of game production excluded from the AAA model (Anthropy, 2012; Gil & Warzynski; IGF, 2016; Ruffino, 2013; Nichols). Emerging in the early 2000s, the indie industry

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began as a core network of developers that were not employed by or in partnerships with any major development studios (Ruffino). Many early indie developers designed text-based games in their bedrooms and distributed their games through a casual and social network of gamers (Anthropy; Darling, 1985; Ruffino).

Though indie games lack a specific definition, indie is a relational term defined by its opposition to the "mainstream." Indie games generally share distinctive qualities and production practices. Indie games are generally developed outside AAA studios, funding streams, and publisher involvement by small development teams on limited budgets. As indie games lack financial support from a publisher they rely on digital distribution platforms. Rather than focusing on highly polished large-scale productions, indie games often utilize online development tools emphasize small innovative endeavors and offbeat artistic visions.

Indie are thus generally distinguished by distinctiveness in style, unique game play, innovations in narrative expectations, and subversion of normative representations (Anthropy, 2012; Ruffino, 2013). Discourses around indie production echo these dynamics and suggest a freedom from creative restraint and an ability to advance technological innovations and artistic visions (Ortner, 2013; Ruffino). Implicit within these narratives and reinforced through industry discursive practices is that indie games allow for developers and gamers to subvert dominant video game paradigms. Indie games thus become a process of emancipation for the developer and resistance for the gamer from the normative constraints of the AAA industry (Anthropy; Ortner; Ruffino).

CHAPTER II

FRAMING THE INQUIRY

Interrogating Indie

Integrating research into diversity projects as "happy-talk" and "stranger-making" (Ahmed, 2012); theories of countercultural commodification (Frank, 1996); conceptions of award festivals as sites of symbolic value and cultural meaning (Ortner, 2013); and media institutions as economic and social organizations (Hardy, 2014; Mosco, 2009) this thesis contributes to a more nuanced and integrated understanding of the indie industry as a distinctive social field, as conceived by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1996; Crossley, 2005; Grenfell, 2014). The IGF is the largest gathering of indie game developers and showcase of indie games in the industry. Exploring two primary transformative pressures: evolving digital landscapes and shifting demographic and social dynamics, I explore the IGF's consistent and contradictory responses to these forces. Awarding over $50,000 in prize money and establishing strong corporate relationships with Microsoft and Sony, the IGF has become a key economic, promotional, and cultural influence within the indie industry. Given the IGF's weight in the indie industry during a time of transformative change regarding social inclusion, I examine the following three questions: 1) What are the definitions of independence in the indie game community? 2) How have definitions of indie evolved over time? 2) In what ways do the IGF's diversity efforts coincide with UBM's strategic objectives?

To examine how the IGF advances UBM's economic goals in the face of external pressures by privileging certain developers and concentrating forms of capital, I employ a case study of the IGF. In this analysis, I draw from critical political economy and cultural

studies. Political economy focuses on the ways in which cultural production is organized by economic forces and political motivations (Hardy, 2014; Mosco, 2009). Many critical political economy of the media frameworks, such as monopoly capital or digital capitalism, expose the logics behind mainstream dominant structures that contradict these formulations (Herman, 1998; Winseck, 2012). Elemental to radical PEM approaches are Marx's assertions that the capitalist endeavor is driven by profits, not by healthy competition, and predicated upon the exploitation of labor, contradiction in the markets, and class struggles (Smythe, 1977).

Not only does critical PEM attempt to reveal power dynamics, but critical theorists also tend to a moral dimension, centered on values of democracy, social justice, and equality (Hardy, 2014; Mosco, 2009). Making these moral values explicit allows critical scholars to place equal emphasis on research and praxis in an effort to shift imbalances of power. From this vantage, scholars explore other market orientations (e.g. state run media) to provide insight into how commercial and state institutions can be reorganized to increase public participation and agency, resist the privatization and commodification of public knowledge and behavior, and reduce the concentration of economic and cultural resources (Hardy; Herman, 1998; Mosco, 2009; Smythe, 1977).

The strength of critical political economy of the media studies lies in the ability to reveal veiled core values and destabilize taken for granted assumptions. Through maintaining an alternative perspective, critical political economy of the media traditions are able to contradict mainstream power relationships and destabilize the specific market logics that are embedded in capitalistic social structures. This critical stance exposes the ways in which dominant media practices commodify social behavior, shape cultural

ideological power, maintain economic inequality, and exert political control (Herman, 1998; Smythe, 1977).

Furthermore, maintaining the assumption that capitalistic markets are necessarily profit-driven has enables critical political economy of the media scholars to develop key contributions such as consolidation, concentration, integration, diversification, and internationalization, exploitation, conflict, oligopolistic ownership, horizontal and vertical integration, and corporate synergy (Hardy; Mosco; Murdock & Golding, 1974). These contributions reveal truths about the ways in which dominant structures disseminate knowledge, generate culture, organize social interaction, and frame political involvement (Herman, 1998).

From this vantage, analysis involves interrogating media industry organization, resource allocation, and logics of practice. Media organizations and practitioners are understood to be in a dynamic environment influenced by power and ideology. Scholarship around critical political economy assumes that economic forces imbue practices with ideological intention and drive the practices that aim to serve strategic commercial interests. Here, the role of the investigator seeks to explore commercial interests shape audience expectations and desires (Hardy, 2014; Nichols, 2014).

Cultural studies approaches suggest that social and cultural meaning is formed out of discursive interactions between audiences and media texts (Hall, 1980). The role of the investigator is to uncover contextually situated cultural meanings embedded in media texts. Cultural studies media scholars explores texts, representation, and discourse and assert that subjectivity emerges in the active interplay between these cultural products (Hall). Through a relatively strong sense of agency, subjects connect to larger discourses

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and "suture into the story" to produce a narrative sense of the self that acts as a process of identification (Hall, 1990, p. 224). Consequently, subjects are able to interpret, influence, and resist discursive realities. Agency to engage with dominant discourse is elemental for cultural studies approaches. Ultimately, through creative action, subjects can "constitute new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak" (Hall, 1990, p. 237). Subjects are thus not passive objects, but active agents in the construction of identity, subjectivity, and culture. Hall is careful to warn against the overemphasis on agency, however.

From a cultural studies vantage, cultural discourses emerge out of fluid interactions between institutional practices, media representations, shared language practices, and individual and collective behavior (Hall, 1980; 1997). Culture is not a static entity or a set of innate qualities, but an active and dynamic process of setting the parameters for inclusion and exclusion through representation and signification (Hall; van Dijk, 2001). Such critical approaches seek to explore dynamics of power and the ways in which cultural practices reinforce contemporary power structures (Suter, 1993; van Dijk). Cultural studies approaches assert that media texts, as discursive representations, help make sense of cultural meanings and reveal the infrastructures of social power (2003). From this perspective, culture is viewed as a constitutive process whereby dominant systems of representation are produced and negotiated to shape meaning and power.

Along these lines, I integrate these two approaches to explore how the IGF's economic interests guide practices of inclusion and shape meanings of cultural diversity. As case studies employ a variety of perspectives to reveal often-obscured details, I analyze the IGF from three distinct vantages. First, I conduct a review of the holdings and

strategic initiatives of the IGF's parent company, UBM plc. To better understand the strategic initiatives and corporate aims of UBM, I analyze ten years of annual reports to investors as well as relevant press releases. To better ascertain how the IGF and GDC are positioned within UBM's strategic framework and the broader gaming community, and since GDC and the IGF do not produce individual annual reports, I analyze the IGF and GDC's websites, press releases, and state of the industry reports. Second, to explore the ways that commercial interests guide institutional practices and shape cultural meanings, I examine eleven years of the IGF Awards Ceremony. Accessed through the GDC Vault, I watched and transcribed the IGF Awards from 2005 to 2015 and identify common themes, disruptive events, and distinctive patterns. Last, I conducted a two-hour interview with Anna Anthropy about her experiences in the indie industry before, during and after #GamerGate (Anthropy, personal communication, March 24, 2015). Anthropy is author of *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form, ZZT* a historical memoir of the influential 1991, MS-DOS game of the same title, and developer of *Dys4ia*, an experimental game centered on the embodied transgender experience of taking hormone therapies.

CHAPTER III

SEGMENTING DIFFERENCE AND DOING DIVERSITY

Political Economic Profiling

Initially a trade publishing company founded in 1918, UBM is now a

multinational public limited media company that has maintained an aggressive and

flexible posture to drastically adjust business practices and remain profitable in the ever-

evolving media landscape. UBM's proactive business strategies include: content

marketing, community branding, and event organization for various business industries

(UBM plc, 2013, 2014, 2015). UBM creates unique marketing content and cohesive

brand identities, then deploys them in distinctive events largely funded by vendors,

paying attendees, and corporate sponsors.

For example, between 2006 and 2012 the IGF commissioned several videos from

the production team Mega64. These IGF sanctioned videos played at the annual IGF

event and provided viewers and participants with insights into the characteristics of indie

culture through various parodies and observational humor. For example, one video from

the 2008 IGF is titled "I'm independent." In video various scenarios include actors

saying, "I'm *so indie…* I don't know what Halo is!" Or, "I'm *so indie…* I only play

games with my heart." Here, the actor holds a controller up to his chest and weeps while

he plays a game. Last, "I'm *so indie…*I filter everything that goes through my body

through an indie game." In this shot, an actor sloppily eats salsa through a gaming disc

(IGF, 2008). These humorous videos played to IGF participants and viewers cultivate a

distinctive indie brand identity. The IGF's employment of Mega64 and screening of these

videos during the event encourages gamers and developers to participate and consume the

IGF event to gain access to these branded meanings and moments. By creating these distinctive brand narratives and identities, UBM makes returns to investors by delivering buyer audiences and promoting brand awareness.

To ensure cohesive and relevant buyer markets, UBM allocates resources (through events and marketing content) to cultivate new distinctive brand identities once mature market have exposed new needs, priorities, or interests. Within UBM's award shows, conventions, and expos participants have the opportunity to increase social status, economic gain, and access to social networks. UBM has thus created a mutually beneficial structure for paying members, partners, and sponsors. However, those without the social (affiliation with participating businesses), cultural (esteemed or shareable knowledge), symbolic (nominated products), or economic (entrance fees) resources to participate in UBM events or attempting to disrupt calculated practices are excluded from participation and access to the cumulative values of UBM logics.

As a UBM award show, the IGF, its participants, and sponsors have mutually benefited from UBM's investment, making it the largest and most influential showcase for independent game development (Ruffino, 2013). IGF recognized games such as *Super Meat Boy* (2010 Seamus McNally Grand Prize Finalist), *Minecraft* (2011 Seamus McNally Grand Prize Winner), and *Fez* (2012 Seamus McNally Grand Prize Winner) have earned great financial success and garnered significant critical acclaim.

UBM's core logics have served as the IGF's "invisible structures" formed the IGF's brand identity, diversity efforts, and logics of inclusion (Bourdieu, 1996). Despite the field's rapid growth, UBM's cultivation of the GDC and IGF brand has been marked by contradiction, as the maturing AAA market has exposed dissenting market segments

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and calls for inclusion (Anthropy, 2012; Ortner, 2013; Ruffino, 2013). Exploring the organization of UBM's strategic core focused on unique content creation, branded events, market acquisition and segmentation, and social responsibility outlines a field that honors distinctive production strategies but privileges normative developers and industry members. In the face of external pressures from changing social fields and disruptions in their strategic efforts, UBM has constructed a strategic core that deploys diversity efforts in line with corporate social responsibility logics, brand awareness, and economic interests.

A Brief History

Over its long history and many transformations, UBM has remained flexible to adopt new tactics and prioritize differing initiatives. After a long period in newspaper ownership between 1918 and 1969 (*Daily Chronicle, Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper,* and *Yorkshire Post Newspapers)*, the company recognized that the rising influence of technology on mass communication would require change (Pederson, 2003; PR Newswire, 2015). After acquiring PR Newswire in the late 1980s, the company began using electronic terminals for copyediting and computerized message handling transmission systems "…to create a true national distribution network reaching some 22,000 media outlets and 675,000 financial institutions directly" (PR Newswire, para. 2). UBM's shift toward utilizing technology to transmit unique content allowed them to weather the collapse of print journalism.

PR Newswire emblemized UBM's core strategy of the 1980s and 1990s to collapse distinct marketing, publishing, and media vehicle roles. In this cohesive model UBM provided businesses with targeted branded content and integrated network

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technology to directly reach their audiences (PR Newswire, 2015). "PR Newswire provides end-to-end solutions to produce, optimize and target content – from rich media to online video to multimedia and then distribute content and measure results across traditional, digital, mobile and social channels" (United Business Media, 2010, p. 156).

Continuing to merge marketer, publisher, and media vehicle roles, UBM has become is a leader in niche market event organization and has strongly invested in the procurement and direct development of emerging markets (UBM plc, 2014, 2015). In November 2014, UBM launched their "Events First" strategy. Their events strategy integrates their core practice of creating unique marketed content and directly connecting business to consumer audiences. Through their distinctive events UBM guides the flow of capital to meet participant and client needs. "We help our customers achieve a return on their investment in attending our exhibitions" (UBM plc, 2014, p. 9). Thus UBM acts as an organizing entity that brings businesses together and translates brand awareness, network expansion, symbolic recognition into marketable commodities.

A 2015 press release UBM summarized key findings from their Tech Marketing Priorities Report reinforced importance of their events strategy and foreshadowed another transformation for the company: "trade shows and events, and content creation are rated the most successful marketing tactics" (Jansen, 2015, para. 4). In December, UBM announced the sale of its most enduring marketing content property, PR Newswire. The sale of PR Newswire was significant for UBM signaling their final shift away from publishing content to focus on their business-to-business (B2B) events segment (UBM plc, 2015). This has solidified UBM's belief that marketing strategies in digital climates are best achieved through unique content-driven events, which avoid direct competition

with other digital-only platforms and circulate brands through shared community experiences.

Events First

UBM host events in three primary categories: awards shows, conventions, and expos. The Events First strategy highlights UBM's aggressive stance toward controlling content and consolidating revenue streams by collapsing traditional roles of market, media channel, and publisher (UMB plc, 2014). During UBM branded events, paying attendees gain access to unique, network-based, real-time content that is generated and shared by UBM and their strategic partners and, in turn, attendees are delivered as "buyer audiences" to vendors, corporate sponsors, and strategic partners (UMB plc, 2015).

These branded events are revenue-producing fields in which attendees pay for entrance to network, vendors pay for space to sell, and sponsors pay for access to attendees. By creating events in which vendors and corporate sponsors pay for access to "buyer audiences," the Events First strategy employs commodity audience logics in which the audiences, as potential consumers, are sold as commodities to advertising companies (Smythe, 1977). These concepts provide the foundational structure of UBM event. Bourdieu's discussion of the journalism field is particularly relevant in discussing the structuring dynamics behind UBM's branded events:

> The world of journalism in itself is a field, but on that is subject to great pressure for the economic field via audience ratings. This very heteronomous field, which is structurally very strongly subordinated to market pressures, in turn applies pressure to all other fields. This structural, objective, anonymous and invisible effect has nothing to do with what is visible…" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 54).

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As a marketing field is driven by economic pressures to advance their clients' profit margins, satisfy corporate partners, and meet their own commercial interests, UBM focuses on the cultivation of buyer audiences.

UBM's primary vehicle for producing valuable buyer audiences is through owning and hosting branded events (UBM plc, 2014). Here vendors, attendees, and sponsors coalesce to access buyers of products, connect to consumers of content, and expand their brand awareness. UBM's event portfolio is diverse; examples include jewelry and gem tradeshows, fashion exhibitions, power sports events, medical equipment showcases, digital textile exhibits, sustainable building tradeshows, and video game conferences (UBM plc, 2014, 2015). UBM prioritizes their events portfolio not by relevant content, public interest, applicable themes, or innovative specializations, but by their *revenue potential*. UBM's interest in these niche market events focuses on their rapid growth trends, promised delivery of new members, multiplicity of potential vendors, and expansion potential for returning and new attendees.

As a part of their Events First launch, UBM highly publicized their 2014 acquisition of Advanstar, bringing its total holdings of "major" events to 118 and its total number of events over 300 worldwide (UBM plc, 2014). What is key here is how UBM classifies their events by earnings; so-called "major" events earn over £1 million in revenue annually. In 2015, UBM made three additional key global acquisitions of major events including, Hospitalar, eMedia, and the CSTPF (China Shanghai Textile Printing Fair). The information reported on the CSTPF acquisition in the 2015 annual report stated: "the purchase of CSTPF, a digital textile printing show, provides entry to an attractive niche with growth of 25%+ pa" (UBM plc, 2015, p. 12). This description

reinforces UBM's prioritization of profit, emphasis on growth, and focus on expansion to niche targets. Furthermore, this description illustrates that worth is determined solely by its potential revenue growth (UBM plc, 2013, 2014; United Business Media, 2010). UBM's focus seems not on the artistic achievement, cultural value, or social impact of the China Shanghai Textile Printing Fair, but on the way in which it extends commercial interests through geographic and commercial expansion.

Brand Arts and Market Crafts

To serve a wide range of industry sectors, UBM has created a cohesive brand rooted in the forward-thinking utilization of cutting-edge technology to adapt to the ever-changing media milieu (UBM Tech, 2014). Elemental to building a cohesive community brand is establishing traditions and generating shared practices, celebrating brand history, sharing brand related stories, and widely communicated the values, sensibilities, and specific preferences of the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). UBM's holistic Events First strategy creates an ideal framework for paying attendees and vendors to create branded memories, learn about brand history, share event related stories, and reinforce the values and sensibilities of the community brand (Muniz & O'Guinn). UBM also provides media networking services (through specialized apps and websites) to solidify contacts made during UBM branded events. "It is within our branded communities that technology professionals gather offline and online for critical discussions, advice, news and debate" (UBM Tech, para. 4).

UBM thus creates a recognizable brand value that vendors, members, and participants can exchange to expand social networks, sell products, and gain industry

knowledge during their events. Through the exchange of these collective values and

shared visions UBM manufactures predictable and stable business community identities.

> Our culture of innovation and collaboration brings our people together around
>
> common interests to create value, enhancing our ability to do exactly the same for
>
> UBM customers and the communities UBM serves. So, whatever their business
>
> and wherever they operate, our customers do better business through us (UBM
>
> plc, 2016, para. 3).

As the second largest business events corporation in the world, UBM's clients have

rallied around their forward-looking vision for marketing in the 21st century easing

collective anxieties about staying relevant in a digital landscape (McChesney, 2014;

Rushkoff, 2013).

> UBM has not only developed an aggressive, flexible, and forward-thinking parent

company brand identity, they have also cultivated many iterative brand cultures in the

variety of sectors they serve. UBM identifies shifting global communication and

consumption patterns in which an ever-narrowing world is producing ever-narrower

niche communities (Rushkoff, 2013). Accurately capturing the characteristics, values,

and qualities of rapidly evolving communities is elemental to a successful brand identity

(Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Each of these niche markets have unique values and distinct

qualities such as the appreciation for exotic gems, the exhibition of refined automobile

machinery, the commitment to sustainable building practices, or the display of forward-

thinking avant-garde fashions (UBM plc, 2014, 2015).

> However, UBM does not leave these matters to conjecture or chance, rather UBM

draws on pre-existing assets and creates brand identities in new community markets

(Meehan, 2005). Two interrelated key practices advance UBM's niche branding strategy: expanding niche markets and segmenting markets. These two related practices create a cohesive approach to brand growth and expansion. Niche market expansion involves the investment in or acquisition of "undiscovered," emerging, or obscured markets (Hunt & Arnett, 2004; Meehan; Nichols, 2014). Segmentation involves the narrowing of pre-established markets into smaller targets often focusing on new demographic, geographic, behavioral, or cultural trends (Hunt & Arnett; Meehan; Nichols; Smythe, 1977). Such discovery often emerges through adjacent market interactions, market maturation, and industry research (Hunt & Arnett).

A prime illustration of niche market investment and expansion through segmentation is UBM's 2011 acquisition of EcoBuild the "leading sustainable building exhibition and the fastest growing trade event in the UK" (UBM plc, 2013, p. 6). As their research indicates, UBM has set its sights on the geographic Asian and Latin American markets where many untapped buyer audiences exist (UBM plc, 2013, 2014, 2015; United Business Media, 2010). Accordingly, UBM invested in EcoBuild brand event, adapted it for the Chinese market, and launched EcoBuild China in 2012. Investments in niche markets and segmentation tactics have proven lucrative as annual events in China accounted for 35.9% of overall annual events revenue in 2014 (UBM plc, 2014, p. 34). Furthermore, UBM is able to reduce risk and lower production costs by recycling and re-versioning UBM branded content. The homogenization of content into new segments also allows UBM to saturate their brand in untapped global markets (Meehan, 2005).

Similarly, UBM conducted market research, which indicated a gap in the European jewelry market. Building off the success of their other jewelry and gem shows

and in conjunction with the recent acquisition of the Istanbul Fair, UBM launched a

Freiburg Jewelry & Gem Fair in Germany. "By leveraging our strong 'Jewellery & Gem'

brand, coupled with our industry expertise, the second edition of the [Freiburg] show will

be 47% larger in size" (UBM plc, 2014, p. 28). These instances illustrate UBM's

integration of the niche market and segmentation strategy and with a singular asset 1)

UBM captures an emerging niche market and 2) establishes a homogenized UBM brand

in an emerging geographic market (UBM plc, 2014).

Corporate Social Responsibilities

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts refer to an ensemble of policies,

practices, or investments by a business corporation in support of a particular community

or issue to generate goodwill among stakeholders (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Fallon,

2015; Little, 2001; Tonello, 2011). Often these practices are ancillary to the core business

model of the company and have no bearing on the direct operations of the company. In

many cases, corporations do not know what they may face in terms of social criticism,

scandal, or accident; having a strong CSR message and established CSR track record can

serve as risk management tool (Carroll & Shabana; Fallon; Little; Tonello). Benefits to a

CSR profile include: reputation management, risk profile and risk management,

employee recruitment and retention, investor relations and access to capital, learning and

innovation, competiveness and market positioning, operational efficiency, and license to

operate (Carroll & Shabana; Little; Tonello).

Furthermore, the pressure to promote a clear CSR message and portfolio has

become increasingly powerful and shareholders now benefit and bottom-line incentives

grow when corporations engage in CSR efforts (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Fallon, 2015;

Little, 2001; Tonello, 2011). A recent business blog stated: **"**Millennials are redefining what it means to connect and give back…It's not just about having a recycling program or sustainable products. People want to feel good about what their dollar is doing…" (Fallon, para. 10). As the CSR movement integrates into to business and consumer culture, an increasing number of companies proactively build a CSR portfolio rather than wait for a scandal, protest, or accident to occur in which they must rebuild their brands, experience external regulation, endure costly litigation, or manage their public image (Fallon).

UBM has evolved their CSR portfolio over the last five years. Between 2010 and 2013 these efforts centered largely on environment responsibility, promoting diversity through global partnerships, creating a positive corporate culture where individual merits are rewarded (United Business Media, 2010, 2012; United Business Media Limited, 2009; UBM plc, 2013, 2014, 2015). In 2014 and 2015 their CSR initiatives began including the direct aim of ameliorating gender disparity in their company through increasing the number of women in senior management positions (UBM plc). The 2015 report states: "Highlighting the Board's commitment to increase the proportion of female Directors on the Board to more than 30%, UBM has now achieved 40% female Board membership" (UBM plc, 2015, p. 9). The 2015 report details that women make up 59% of company employees, 56% of wider management roles, and 40% of board membership. Evaluating UBM's reporting of these trends highlights the utilization of a CSR approach.

First, reporting the appointment of Marina Wyatt to Board in the *same* 2015 Annual Report that introduced the women in management goal frames the new objective as instantly completed. Second, the "wider management roles" category is comprised of

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the Board members and the Executive Committee. Marina Wyatt was appointed to the

Board of Directors *and* the Executive Committee in 2015, and UBM counts her twice.

Third, the measurement of 59% of all female employees also includes "wider

management roles" and Board member counts in this calculation (as well as the double

counting of Marina). Thus describing the Board's composition in terms of *growth* aligns

with CSR strategies that deemphasize weaknesses (gender disparity) by emphasizing

areas of progress (the appointment of a woman to the Board). UBM's reporting subtlety

inflates the overall representation of women in the company, which seems to obfuscate

patterns of gender disparity in media and information industries (Martin, 2002).

Another 2015 highlight of UBM's valuing diversity strategy, was their creation of

a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) group, named "UBM Pride" (UBM plc,

2015, p. 29). In 2015, UBM Pride partnered with the Stonewall (a LGBT rights charity)

to organize their participating in the London Pride and L.A. Pride Parades (UBM plc, p.

29). Apart from the creation of "diversity workshops" and participation in Pride walks,

UBM does not identify the allocation of specific resources or company policies that

support or alter LGBT personnel or rights within the company. UBM's Sustainability

Leadership Initiative follows CSR strategy trends in highlighting areas of growth to offset

vulnerabilities or challenges.

As Ahmed (2012) argues diversity efforts deployed as inclusion projects often

create culturally codified and ancillary committees, groups, events, and positions that

signal the successful inclusion of diverse Others. Analyzing common practices of "happy

talk" which are similar to CSR strategies of emphasizing positivity, growth, and

achievement and "stranger making" processes of signaling otherness and difference

"offers critical insights into the mechanisms of power as such and, in particular, how power can be *redone* at the moment it is imagined as *undone*" (Ahmed, p. 7). UBM's "happy talk" over meeting goals of gender inclusion, implies that through the appointment of a female board member, inclusion goals have been met, and gender disparities allayed. Furthermore, the creation of the "UBM Pride" group reinforces "stranger making" practices as LGBT individuals are differentiated from the normalized UBM community. In the moment of undoing heteronormative power by adding, "Pride," power is *redone* as it reinforces the heteronormativity of "UBM." Signaling diversity through "happy making" and "stranger making" institutionalizes otherness and reproduces normativity within the organization.

From a Critical Vantage

Through this strategic core UBM has generated new responses to marketing and advertising challenges in the digital age. In *Critical Political Economy of the Media*, Hardy (2014) points out:

> The most challenging feature is that advertising is much less dependent on media vehicles; advertisers can buy access to selected audiences without the need for publishers…marketers have much greater opportunity to reach consumers without subsidizing or accommodating media content providers (p. 149).

Through their totalizing Event First strategy that employs brand creations, event hosting, niche market acquisition, and market segmentation UBM collapses the roles of media vehicle, advertiser, and publisher. UBM creates marketing content and delivers it directly to audiences through their branded events. Furthermore, by emphasizing the importance

of face-to-face networking and interactivity, UBM circumvents digital-only marketing strategies. The implications of this strategic core are threefold.

First, UBM has much greater control over the content, production, and distribution of media content and advertising messages. In this move, UBM conflates the distinctions between paid, earned, and owned media and increases the accessibility, reach, and saturation of owned media in important civil sectors. As UBM's owned media circulates within public digital spaces where weighty social discussions carry material consequences, UBM's participation in these spaces becomes suspect. For example, in the wake of #GamerGate, conversations about harassment, diversity, and journalism bias carry great weight. As UBM's content is highly controlled, UBM's involvement in these matters becomes particularly complicated.

Second, this dynamic reveals an increased tension between public and private interests and between commercial and civil actors. Prioritizing events by revenue potential and institutionalizing otherness signals that UBM's strategic core maintains a "structural, objective, anonymous and invisible effect that has nothing to do with" the content of their events or civic interests of individual stakeholders (Bourdieu, 1996). These structuring forces convert attending members to buyer audiences and transform diversity projects into reproductions of privilege (Meehan, 2005; Smythe, 1977; UBM plc, 2016). This structural logic remains veiled in the brand distraction of ostentatious growth. As UBM garners significant social, cultural, economic, and symbolic influence, their ability to subdue civil interests that contradict their own becomes apparent. For example, the IGF's careful suppression of anti-corporate themes over time (as discussed in Chapter 4) and silencing of dissenting opinions (discussed below) narrows the range of

information and ideas available in the indie conversation about culture, art, technology, production, and power.

Third, as UBM advances its presence globally, their brands narrow the available potentialities within emerging communities. Infusing niche markets with homogenizing practices and pre-existing brand values places emergent cultural production within a frame of commercial interest (Wasko, Meehan, & Phillips, 2001; Meehan, 2005). Though resistance, subversion, and rearticulation of homogenizing brand values and identities are commonplace and have generated powerful disruptions in patterns of privilege (Hall, 1980, 1997; Sharp, 2008; Wasko, Meehan, & Phillips, 2001), UBM has demonstrated exclusionary tendencies when these subversions threaten to disrupt the logics of their strategic core.

If event content is functionally immaterial, if UBM's events are united solely by commercial interest, and if attendees and members serve as the primary commodity for UBM and their corporate sponsors, exploring the ways in which participants benefit from UBM events provides an essential counterweight to understand the core functionality of their strategies. Relevant social actors garner significant forms of capital through UBM's branded events. These relevant forms of capital ensure that vendors, members, attendees, and strategic partners are equally invested in the successful actualization of UBM's goals.

A Tale of Two Properties

Game Developers Conference

An analysis of UBM's Game Developers Conference (GDC) and Independent Games Festival (IGF), two well-established UBM brand events, elucidates how UBM's economic interests drive their strategic core and serve distinctive industry professionals.

Exploring their diversity efforts and indie recognition practices demonstrates the ways that they align with UBM's overall strategic core, deploy diversity efforts as inclusion projects, and privilege select developers.

After acquiring in GDC in 1988, UBM rapidly grew the convention to be one of the largest industry gatherings in the world (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). In fact, in the 2015 Annual Report, UBM notes that GDC's strong performance offset losses in "regional medical device and manufacturing events, tech and chemical events" (UMB plc, 2015, p. 39). "The Game Developers Conference has grown from an informal gathering of about 25 developers in the living room of a notable game designer 27 years ago, to a week-long conference for more than 23,000 industry insiders" (Game Developers Conference, 2016a, para. 3). GDC annually hosts as many as 400 lectures, panels, tutorials and round-table discussions covering a wide range of game development topics by leading AAA industry experts (Game Developers Conference). The GDC expo showcases relevant game and cutting-edge development tools, platforms, and services.

As "invisible structures" guide the organization of particular spaces and fields to meet certain interests, it becomes relevant to explore the objectives behind GDC's organization of participants and relevant forms of capital. Building on UBM's forward-thinking technologically inclined brand and commercially driven motivation, GDC invites successful cutting-edge game companies to play a central role in the event through their sponsorship structure. Accordingly, at a cost of $250,000 elite "Diamond Partners" are able to influence panel formation, exhibition content, and receive "exclusive benefits such as VIP Registration (no waiting in lines!), booth build-out discounts, early move-in, priority hotels, as well as premium marketing benefits onsite and exclusive access to

events" (GDC, 2016c, para., 2). GDC 2016's Diamond Partners included Xbox, Amazon, Google, Oculus, Sony, Intel, Unreal Engine, Valve, and Nvidia. By restricting access to greater visibility and recognition through significant financial investment, GDC ensures that their commercial interests are met and successful companies dominate the GDC landscape.

Partnering profit. AAA games have become increasingly costly endeavors with massive development teams, lengthy timelines, and expansive budgets as an AAA title can "require as much as $60 million to develop" (Nichols, 2014 p. 52). As the majority of revenue is made through game sales, marketing strategies are big business in the industry. Capitalizing on this dynamic and their ability to highly control marketing content, GDC has strategically promoted AAA games and studios. This strategy is mutually beneficial to AAA companies and GDC, as high quality studios and titles generate interests and drive event investment in GDC and promotional recognition at GDC boosts game sales.

Not only do AAA games top best-seller list year after year (*Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Halo*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Destiny*), but AAA publishers and first-party studios such as Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, Nintendo, Sony, Microsoft, and Activision Blizzard dominate at GDC in terms of booth space, exhibition opportunities, sponsorship deals, and award recognition (Morris, 2016; Nichols, 2014). For example, GDC has consistently given the "Game of the Year" award to best-selling AAA titles such as: *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED), *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (Monolith Productions/Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment), *The Last Of Us* (Naughty Dog/Sony), *Journey* (Thatgamecompany/Sony Computer Entertainment), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios), *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San

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Diego), and *Uncharted 2* (Naughty Dog). This cyclical reciprocity between AAA studios

and GDC secures buyer audiences, reinforces the reification of genre expectations,

cultivates audience tastes, and concentration of profits. Both GDC and AAA companies

benefit from reinforcing familiar gamer, game, and play expectations rationality (Cassell

& Jenkins, 1998; Walkerdine, 2006).

Limited labor. "To be understood fully, games have to be situated within the

cultures in which they are created" (King & Krzywinska, 2007, p. 217). Partnering with

the International Gaming Developer Association (IGDA) (see Appendix), GDC produces

an annual State of the Industry Report that details the production environment and

conditions of labor within the game industry. The 2015 IGDA Report confirmed a highly

limited demographic landscape: 51% of developers are between the ages of 25-34, 78%

do not have children, 74% completed a college degree, 75% are male, 75% are

white/Caucasian/European, and 73% are heterosexual (IGDA, 2015). These numbers

reflect a closed cultural production community that limits tastes and styles to dominant

views, beliefs, tastes, and experiences (IGDA; Jackson, 2007; Lopez, 2004). "The

problem with video games is that they're created by a small, insular group of people"

(Anthropy, 2012, p. 5).

Game development jobs mirror the computer industry and require advanced

education and training in which immaterial laborers create cutting edge graphics with

minimal subversion from established genre expectations (Nichols, 2014). Earnings tend

to range from $50,000 to $100,000 for entry-level designers to creative directors,

respectively (Nichols). Satisfaction in this sector is low, however, as employees are often

on limited contracts, lack the ability to unionize, maintain crunch-time work hours based

on fourth-quarter production cycles, and earn bonuses that are dependent on fluctuations in the larger economy (Nichols). Consequently, this labor profile restricts access to the field of game production to a privileged few. Here, white middle-class American and European males dominate these sectors as developers, programmers, publishers, artists, animators, writers, and creative directors (Anthropy, 2012; IGDA, 2015; Shaw, 2009).

Similarly, GDC requires that attendees pay entrance fees, which range from $199 to $1,599 to access a range of GDC events. Panel members, speakers, and press members enter for free (Game Developers Conference, 2016a). As the GDC Advisory Board list suggests, participants are esteemed members of the AAA industry representing companies like Electronic Arts, Microsoft, Oculus, UbiSoft, Bandai Namco, Blizzard, and Double Fine Productions (Game Developers Conference, 2016d). Furthermore, press members are connected to established games journalism and media institutions such as Gamasutra (another UBM poperty), Game Mob, Gamers On, IGDA, PC Gamer, and Pixel (Game Developers Conference, 2016e). In these strategic partnerships, GDC exchanges earned media content for access to social networking, status, buyer audiences, and cultural recognition. This mutually beneficial relationship gives participants access to social and cultural capital and allows GDC to further develop their brand identity and increase cultural capital by owning forward-thinking industry content.

Doing diversity. As GDC has matured and mutually served their interests and stakeholder needs, the emergence of new demographic segments and social responsibility niches have brought inclusion issues to the fore (Walters, 2015). In order to maintain the strength of their strategic core, GDC has been strategic about the ways in which they incorporate women and diverse Others into their event. GDC has created designated

spaces for "happy talk" and "stranger making" in their Choice Awards Ceremony, panel discussions, and invited talks. At the Game Developer's Choice Awards Ceremony, two types of awards are given: Special Awards and Regular Awards. Special Awards include Lifetime Achievement, Pioneer Award, and Ambassador Award (Game Developers Conference, 2016g). An invite-only group generated by the GDC Advisory Committee known as the International Choice Awards Network (ICAN) determines the nominees for Special Awards (Game Developers Conference, 2016g). The GDC Advisory Committee and ICAN members then vote for a winner from this nominee pool.

Unlike Regular Awards, which often go to AAA titles, Special Awards have been a site of inclusion and clearly identify the "happy talk" strategy. As the Ambassador Award archive page states:

> The Ambassador Award honors an individual or individuals who have helped the game industry advance to a better place, either through facilitating a better game community from within, or by reaching outside the industry to be an advocate for video games and help further our art (GDC, 2016g, para. 1).

In 2014, Anita Sarkeesian was awarded the Ambassador Award for her work with *Feminist Frequency*. Suggesting that the Ambassador has "help*ed* the game industry advance to a better place" in the past tense reinforces the positive completion of inclusion and alleviation of inequality, rather than focusing on the areas of growth or inequalities that endure. This strategy is particularly indicative of "happy talk" and CSR approaches, considering that a threat emerged the morning of the ceremony reading:

> A bomb will be detonated at the Game Developer's Choice award ceremony tonight unless Anita Sarkeesian's Ambassador Award is revoked. We estimate the

bomb will kill at least a dozen people and injure dozens more. It would be in your

best interest to accept our simple request. This is not a joke. You have been

warned (Totilo, 2014, para. 3).

During the ceremony, the award presenter Neil Druckmann (Writer and Creative Director

for the AAA acclaimed *Last of Us*) references her work as "attempting to create an

accessible space for feminism in the industry." He then references the threat and the

hostility Sarkeesian faces in the industry. He then states, "And, why does she keep doing

this? After talking to Anita, it's become very clear… She loves games. She thinks they're

worth fighting for" (Game Developers Conference, 2014). Here, an integration of "happy

talk" and "stranger-making" are utilized to manage this undoubtedly complicated matter.

First, in a "happy making" tone, GDC claims that Sarkeesian has made the industry a

better place and frames her contribution as positive, successful, and complete. Describing

Sarkeesian's work as a brining feminism into the gaming industry makes feminism

"strange" by reinforcing its presence outside the industry. Furthermore, emphasizing that

it is *games* that are worth fighting for and not *women*, GDC reinforces the importance of

commercial interest and privilege of male dominance in the industry. GDC's initial

calling out of gender harassment through Sarkeesian undoes male privilege and relegates

commercial interest to the background. However, the simultaneous assertion that

diversity has been accomplished and the valuation of games over women reasserts these

entrenched privileged logics.

Adding to their diversity efforts and building a robust CSR profile, GDC has

hosted several panels endorsing the "the Diversity in Games Movement" and others

exploring gender, sexuality, and race in the AAA industry including: "Counting Women:

The Dollars and Cents Behind Female Gamers" (Game Developers Conference, 2005), "Are Women the New Hardcore Gamers?" (Game Developers Conference, 2010a), "What Color is Your Hero?" (Game Developers Conference, 2010b), "Creating Safe Spaces at Game Events" (Game Developers Conference, 2015), "Ripple Effect: How Women-in-Games Initiatives Make a Different" (Game Developers Conference, 2016e), and "Don't Fear the Queer: Audiences are Ready!" (Game Developers Conference, 2016b). The inclusion of these panels followed patterns of market segmentation, but also tapped into other corporate trends, which aim to highlight social responsibility.

Critical game activists and developers such as Anna Anthropy, Mattie Brice, and Sarkeesian have been recognized at GDC and invited to speak on several annual panels. At the "Hothead developer rants" during GDC 2013's closing remarks, Anthropy, a transgender game designer and writer, performed an emotionally charged, highly politicized poem about the AAA game industry and its subjugation of difference and exclusion of diverse others, here meaning mostly women and trans women (Game Developers Conference, 2013). An excerpt of her poem "John Romero's Wives" reads:

> There comes a time when you're more angry than tired/ There comes a point where sitting in silence is more terrifying than standing and speaking/ The games industry is a man in love with his libido/ I have a libido/ Had to be joked away at conferences / Had to be scrolled past on internet forums / Had to be hissed under your breath / Had to be leant over a keyboard at 3am / Had to be seen in the statistics / Had to be segregated in schools / Had to be guided away from the sciences / Had to be a self-taught programmer / Our apathy and the games industry are in cahoots (Game Developers Conference, 2013).

These critical narratives reflect the development of a subcultural identity that is resistant to the AAA industry. As Hebdige (1979) asserts, identity and resistance are expressed through the development of a distinctive subcultural style. Subcultural agents often use mainstream products and culture to communicate a specific resistance to and iteration of that culture (Hebdige). Yet subcultural styles, expressions, and fashions are co-opted by mainstream industry producers and re-absorbed into the components of mainstream culture, thereby diffusing the resistant qualities (Hebdige; Frank, 1996).

GDC's inclusion of critical subcultural agents, like Anthropy, is thus mutually beneficial for critics and GDC. Critics earn cultural legitimacy for subjugated experiences and garner social support for their concerns, while GDC develops a more robust social responsibility profile and garners cultural capital for the inclusion of an alternative niche community.

Furthermore, the inclusion of these dissenting voices aligns with Frank's (1996) insights into the co-optation of countercultural values. In an effort to contain the transformative influence of revolutionary dissent, some businesses co-opt dissenting narratives and embed sanctioned qualities of subversion into their brand identities. From this logic "business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture in order to cash in on a particular demographic and to subvert the great threat that 'real' counterculture represents" (Frank, p. 7). Thus the integration of dissent into particular events, panels, and awards, allows GDC to simultaneously absorb countercultural consumers, update brand identities, contain transformative influence, and protect commercial interests.

The Independent Games Festival

GDC's strategic inclusion of diverse Others and dissenting perspectives has ultimately aligned with UBM's strategic core of segmenting mature markets, recognizing diversity, institutionalizing difference, and creating unique branded content. Similarly, UBM has invested in alterative forms of game development toward the same end. Recognizing the rapid development of a niche indie development community and a growing segment of offbeat, socially grounded, and independently produced games, UBM aimed to cultivate the market and launched the IGF in 1998 (Independent Games Festival, 2016).

Annually, the IGF distributes the following eight major awards to independent game developers: the Seamus McNally Grand Prize ($30,000), Excellence in Visual Art ($3,000), Excellence in Audio ($3,000), Excellence in Design ($3,000), Excellence in Narrative ($3,000), Nuovo Award ($5,000), Best Student Game ($3,000), and the Audience Award ($3,000) (Independent Games Festival, 2016). The IGF as a promotional tool for indie developers grants symbolic capital and increases social recognition to award finalists and winners (Ortner, 2013; Ruffino, 2013). As developers are recognized for their achievements amongst their peers, their relative status in the industry improves. As the IGF allows finalists free entry to GDC, they primarily make their money through corporate sponsorships (Independent Games Festival).

To secure sponsors, the IGF cultivates legitimacy, scope, and relevance by increasing the number of new and returning entrants. Similar to independent film festivals as detailed by Ortner (2013), maintaining a "grassroots" approach to indie development makes the acquisition of cultural and symbolic capital appear accessible with continued effort. Many winners refer to years of failed entries suggesting that even

in failing they accumulated social capital in the form of name recognition and cultural

capital in the form of learning jurors' preferences and tastes. The 2012 winner of the

Technical Excellence Award references his cumulative efforts in achieving his win:

> I've been doing this for three years [gets choked up] and I went from an honorable
>
> mention, to a nomination for the Nuovo, an honorable for tech, to a win for tech.
>
> And, the key was that I never stopped trying. And, I hope that you never do too
>
> (Independent Games Festival, 2012).

In addition to messages of accessibility and the allure of prize money UBM also

partners with corporate sponsors to provide winners and finalists with collaborative

opportunities, additional prize monies, or employment opportunities. For example, in

2004 Flash Bang Studios won Cartoon Network's Project Goldmaster Contest and

worked with the Cartoon Network intellectual properties and game development team.

The game, *Sealab 2021: Sweet Mayhem,* launched on adultswim.com in November 2004.

Cartoon Network went on to host three other Flash Bang games between November 2004

and the summer of 2005 (CMP Game Group, 2005).

Thus participation in the festival, garners significant forms of capital for selected

developers. Winners and finalists earn significant social capital as they are easily

recognizable, highly publicized, frequently involved in ensuing IGF shows, and better

socially networked after winning. Successful developers also garner cultural capital, as

they are deemed experts and leaders in their field. As Host Andy Schatz says in the 2008

opening comments, "the financial success of this year's indies has put us in the driver's

seat, steering innovation in the rest of the video game industry" (Independent Games

Festival, 2008). IGF winning developers also cultivate economic capital in the form of

prize money, which often translates into greater economic capital as further development

opportunities, employment offers, increased game sales, and corporate sponsorships are

made available to award winners. Thus winning at the IGF not only proffers networking

opportunities, but also can provide enough capital in various forms to significantly

change a developer's access to resources, opportunities, and life experiences.

Early on, indie games generated very little profit. In fact, before the IGF launched

the festival indie games were a small community of programmers and developers who

were frustrated by the ever-narrowing field of AAA development.

> If you want to do a game, do it for fun, but don't try to do game designs to make
>
> any money. The odds are so much against the individual that I would hate to wish
>
> that heartbreak on anyone (Darling, 1985, para. 35).

Despite these overwhelming odds, with IGF's continued promotion and investment and

financial successes of notable IGF indie titles, the industry steadily grew. In 2008, the

unprecedented critical and commercial success of Jonathan Blow's indie game *Braid*

(2008), distributed via Microsoft's Xbox Live, generated a new economic and cultural

legitimacy for the industry. After ten years of steady development, *Braid*'s achievement

signaled that indie games could be highly profitable and widely distributed (Clark, 2012).

Similar successive indie breakouts such as *Minecraft* distributed by Mojan in 2009, *Super

Meat Boy* distributed by Xbox Live in 2010, and *Fez* distributed by Xbox Live 2012 have

established an economic viability for indie games.

Recognizing the potential profitability of indie games, AAA distribution

platforms such as Microsoft's Xbox Live and Playstation's Playstation Store opened

access and began investing in indie games (Clark, 2015). However, these platforms

require corporate recognition, assessment, and approval. The widely accessible Steam online distribution platform owned by Valve has generated a strong distribution and audience network for indie games over the last ten years (Gil & Warzynski, 2014). However, the heavy saturation of indie games on Valve has lead to what some are calling the death of indie games or "indiepocalypse" characterized by overproduction, reduced demand, and limited profitability (Clark). These dynamics characterize a unique moment in indie industry where the potential for profitability is extremely high, but the probability of achieving that level of success is extremely low.

Despite economic turbulence, indie games and modes of production are gradually gaining cultural legitimacy. Events and festivals such as *Indiecade*, *Indie Game Jam*, *Indie Fund*, and *Nordic Game Jam*, have established social strong networks, garnered cultural and artistic legitimacy, substantiated indie modes production, and expanded traditional notions of gameplay (Ruffino, 2013). Released in 2012, *Indie Game: The Movie,* a documentary about IGF recognized indie developers, emblemized indie developers and popularized the indie scene. *Indie Game* received critical acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival and popular recognition within the gaming community (Pajot & Swirsky, 2012). The film followed three celebrated IGF developers, Jonathan Blow, Edmund McMillan, and Phil Fish, through their dramatic struggles in indie game production. The confluences of the promotional power of film and the IGF, enabled Blow, McMillan, and Fish to achieve considerable financial success and legitimacy in the industry. However, *Indie Game* also revealed tensions about dynamics of privilege in the indie community as all three developers represented the same demographic profile: experienced white male programmers (Hawkins, 2012).

Indie inclusion? *Indie Game* not only emblemized narratives around indie production, but also familiar trends of privilege in the industry. Over the last eleven years, the IGF has overwhelmingly favored white males. As the "Diversity in Games Movement" and criticism around exclusionary trends mounted, the IGF responded to external pressures for inclusion with CSR inspired strategies. The IGF created award categories such as the Audience Award and the Nuovo Award balance the gender disparity in "excellence" categories, by creating more accessible criteria for recognition and nominating diverse Others in those categories.

The Audience Award is based on popular vote. However, we see that established social networks, fortified by years of privileging and promoting similar developer groups, ultimately, favor normative developers. All except one of the Audience Award winners for the last eleven years have been white men (a husband and wife team won in 2006). Conversely, the Nuovo Award, aimed at recognizing offbeat, short form, and auteur-like creations, has been a site of inclusion of women. In 2013, the IGF nominated Anna Anthropy's game, Dys4ia, an autobiographical game about her experiences as a trans woman undergoing hormone replacement therapy for the Nuovo Award (Independent Games Festival, 2013). Furthermore, the 2014 Nuovo Award granted the first African American woman an IGF award (Independent Games Festival, 2014). In 2015, the IGF awarded Nathalie Lawhead, the Nuovo Award, making her the first woman to earn an award on her own. Through familiar strategies "stranger making," however, these moments ultimately reinforce the institutionalization of otherness and the privileging of white male developers as normal (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4).

(Trans)Forming boundaries. In November 2014, Mattie Brice, a transgender game critic, indie game designer, IGF juror, and identified SJW, took to Twitter, as she often does, and responded to the escalating harassment campaign of #GamerGate. During her Twitter rant she made sarcastic statements about her power as an IGF judge and claimed she would favor diverse game representations and "downvote" any normative "white male" representations (Marcotte, 2014). Many who were frustrated by, angry with, and fearful of the mounting violence welcomed Brice's comments (Dewey, 2014; Tassi, 2014). #GamerGaters notified the IGF of Brice's tweets (Hockensen, 2016).

The IGF requested on Twitter that Brice refrain from commenting on the IGF judgment process and, then, dismissed her as a judge (Marcotte, 2014). Rapidly altering their approach, the IGF deleted the Twitter feeds that renounced Brice, issued a formal apology on their website, and invited her back as an IGF judge. The apology titled "An Apology and a Statement of Inclusivity" read:

> At no point was the IGF's intent to silence any particular judge's point of view or personal beliefs, and the idea that any of our statements made today could be construed to be in support of or a capitulation to a harassment campaign -- which itself has worked to silence the exact kind of diversity we intend to celebrate with the IGF -- is enormously troubling (Independent Games Festival, 2016, para. 6).

Here, we see clear markers of "stranger-making" employed as the IGF refers to Brice as "the exact kind of diversity." This statement frames Brice and diverse Others, not as resident community members, worth industry delegates, or valued people, but as specific components of a calculated diversity effort. Since these events, Brice and Anthropy have left game development, claiming a lack of support by the IGF (Rae, 2014). "After they

[GDC and the IGF] asked us to constantly martyr ourselves without support, I realized that games are not more important than my life" (Anthropy, 2015, personal communication, March 24, 2015). These incidents exposed a rupture in the IGF's strategy toward inclusion and hints at the ways that diversity efforts are kept to the periphery of strategic logics and diffused before become foundationally transformative. Along these lines, Anthropy's clear distinction between valuing herself over the importance of games is a notable reversal from Sarkeesian's stated "fight" for the love of games.

UBM's collapse of traditional marketing channels has lead to strict control over their branded content and complicated their place in socially transformation events. Furthermore, their cohesive organization around economic growth and market segmentation has reduced complicated social change to isolated moments of progress, exceptional individuals to recognize, and iterations of brand identity. Exploring the IGF's annual award show provides unique insight into the ways that UBM's investment in and legitimation of the indie games has formed a countercultural community into a robust corporate entity. Along these lines, UBM's strategic core has guided the indie brand through fluid definitions of independence and strategies toward diversity consistent with "happy talk" and "stranger making."

CHAPTER IV

FROM A COMMUNITY TO AN INDUSTRY: THEMES OF THE IGF

"These games represent what punk is to pop, what belly button rings are to nipple rings, and what mohawks are to faux hawks" (Host Andy Schatz, 2009 IGF Awards).

IGF Award Ceremonies from 2005 to 2016

The IGF is a demonstration of UBM's total integration of their Events First, marketing segmentation, and branded communities strategies. Examining the common discursive themes of the IGF's annual event helps unpack the definitions, qualities, and values embedded in this community's distinctive brand. Ortner's (2013) study of independent American films focuses on indie festivals as they serve an important function in defining "what counts not only as an independent film but as a good independent film" (Ortner, p. 8). Echoing this valuable role of festivals and award shows, IGF Chairwoman Kelli Wallick stated in the 2016 IGF opening remarks, "I see the IGF as facilitating a yearly conversation about what it means to be an independent developer" (Independent Games Festival, 2016b). Analyzing the IGF's annual conversation about indie games reveals the ways in which the definitions of indie production, developers, and games are constructed, defended, and transformed (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996).

Anti-AAA

Similar to Ortner's findings, the indie game community has largely defined itself in opposition to AAA industry. In the early years of the IGF, straightforward anti-AAA sentiments are some of the most enduring definitions of the emergent industry such as 2008 Host Andy Schatz's opening remarks:

Is big budget really better than Indie? No. Is Indie just a brief and obscure stop on the road to success? No. The weather here is just fine. The financial success of

this year's Indies has put us in the driver's seat, steering innovation in the rest of

the video game industry (Independent Games Festival, 2008).

During this time, early IGF winners express being particularly constrained by the

oppressive AAA corporate intellectual properties, management influences, sluggish team

dynamics, publisher demands, and genre expectations. These populist inspired

sentiments, frame the AAA industry as a monolithic and oppressive power structure that

constrains creativity and freedom (Frank, 1996).

In breaking from these oppressive constraints, indie developers are characterized

as brave countercultural pioneers who, with hard work, are able to follow a path toward

creative freedom. As indie developers turned co-chairmen, Matthew Wegner and Steven

Swink discuss their ten year journey through the IGF:

It seemed as though independent developers were just sort of following what the

retail developers were doing, but they were doing it with less people and at a

smaller scope. Every GDC since then the halls of the conference have been filled

with murmurs, bemoaning the lack of innovation, the endless sequels, and

licensed properties limiting creativity. While the game industry was stagnating,

Indies were quietly honing their craft and building the games they wanted to

make. And, they've been getting a lot better. So, 10 years later, the indie's are

here to steal the spotlight. *This* is the heart and soul of the game industry

(Independent Games Festival, 2008).

Celebrating developers that liberate themselves from the bland and totalizing mainstream

industry, the IGF imbues indie games with the qualities of passion, creativity, personality,

and innovation. As many hosts and winners express often, it is the subversion of the

controlling AAA industry that directly leads to innovation over stagnation, creativity over monotony, and expressive art over meaningless commerce. "Indies make the games *they* want to make. Free from external constrains. These are *very* personal creations" (Independent Games Festival, 2009).

As indie games, with the help of the IGF and their corporate sponsors, start to become economically successful, a growing neoliberal sentiment emerges (Frank, 1996). Synthesized themes of countercultural spirit and neoliberalism emphasize rugged individuality in expression and production, freedom from surveillance and influence, rewarding opportunities through hard work, and rational development options for those that choose to abandon the repressive apparatus of the AAA industry (Frank). As the Technical Excellence Award Winner for *Alien Hominid* states, "We decided to risk it all and chase that dream. It's the dream that so many of you have out there. And, luckily for us because of a lot of hard work, a lot of *very hard work*, it paid off for us" (Independent Games Festival, 2005).

With the AAA industry as a symbol of limitation, regulation, and control, indie games are the solution to generating an unfettered marketplace that will allow the best games and developers to profit. In awarding the Direct2Drive Vision Award, Jessica Chobot characterizes indie development as expanding distribution channels, "Independent developers are the new drivers of digital game distribution" (2009, Direct2Drive Vision Award). Furthermore, the role of the consumer starts to emerge as an elemental part of supporting this free-spirited free marketplace. Chairman Steven Swink states in his 2009 opening remarks:

We've got game's journalists, industry, and even players, *perhaps mostly importantly players*, are beginning to really appreciate indie games… the game playing public is beginning to understand that a tiny team with a brilliant vision can make better games than people with a corporate mandated millions of dollars to spend (Independent Games Festival, 2009).

As the IGF highlights role of consumer players in expanding the subversive indie market, they embed the co-optation of countercultural values into audience cultivation strategies. Here, the IGF invites active participation into the indie movement through game play. Consumption takes on a distinctively important, subversive, and revolutionary act and has direct consequences in garnering indie success.

Negotiating Corporatism

While indie games have steadily proven that there is room for life outside the AAA high-budget first-person shooter and the top-selling open-world dystopia, there is also trouble in this idea of an unfettered anti-corporate indie paradise. Through their distribution of over $60,000 in awards and sponsorships, UBM's investment has increased IGF membership numbers, boosted attendance, amplified vendor sales, increased media visibility, and cultivated a robust indie audience. The 2010 opening remarks by Matthew Wegner and Steven Swink illustrate the IGF's role in cultivating the indie scene:

I think that the highest praise that you could say about a festival like this is that because of it something wonderful was born...More developers were motivated, more people completed their projects, and more people pushed themselves to

explore their genius under the pressure of IGF deadlines (Independent Games Festival, 2010).

Solidifying these corporate relationships, in 2005, Cartoon Network awarded Flash Bang Studios with the Project Gold Master Award and, in 2009, Microsoft honored Capy Studios with a dedicated publishing spot on their XPLA platform. During the 2005 awards, Cartoon Network representatives stated:

> "...we're committed to the idea that licensed games can be both compelling and innovative. It takes a license holder who cares about their characters enough to choose the right character for the right game. And, it takes independent developers like yourselves that are willing to take risks and who are excited about making games for our demographic. So that's what Project Gold Master is all about. Matching developers with good characters" (Independent Games Festival, 2005).

Establishing strong social networks of select developers into the IGF organization, members of both Flash Bang and Capy Studios (Matthew Wegner, Steven Swink, and Nathan Vella) went on to become prominent leaders in the IGF as chairmen, hosts, and organizers.

As the presence of corporate involvement becomes increasingly beneficial to the indie community, the negotiation of anti-AAA tensions takes center stage. 2010 Host Erin Robinson pokes fun at these dynamics when she says, "Ok, who are we kidding? Indie developers just want a bunch of money and a ton of free stuff like everybody else" (Independent Games Festival, 2010). In the 2008 opening remarks, host Andy Schatz mimics an Obama style rhetoric as he makes overtures to soften the anti-AAA indie edge.

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When I look out across this sea of beautiful game developers, I do not see an

AAA community and an Indie community - I see a *game development community*.

I see a game development community that has hope even in the face of our

economic crisis...If you feel the hope that I do, the hope that we can make a living

and make better games, stand together. AAA and Indie and cast aside the

divisions of the past, celebrate our achievements as one (Independent Games

Festival, 2008).

Here, Schatz attempts to mollify earlier sentiments of intolerance toward corporatism. By

referencing the economic crisis, he emphasizes the importance of increasing the bottom

line rather than maintaining a moral one. This active effort to make compromises with

corporate interests gives rise to the active questioning of what indie means. Chairman

Matthew Wenger questions rudimentary conceptions of indie that are limited to notions

of commercialism.

Indie developers go indie because they want to do their own thing, have their own

opinion. And there are a lot of different opinions on the IGF. But, getting bogged

down in questions of innovation, commercialism, and "indie-ness" is missing the

point. If you participated as a creator, as yourself did you push yourself to meet

your own expectations of what an IGF game should be? Are you closer to

realizing your vision and your dreams because the IGF exists? (Independent

Games Festival, 2010).

In an effort to start shifting definitions of indie-ness away from anti-AAA views, other

characteristics of indie identity and development start to circulate. To foment this shift,

the IGF borrows familiar characteristics and assumptions from the AAA industry.

Indie Distinction

As indie games are defined initially as subversions to the AAA production model,
the IGF transforms these definitions to emphasize the sophistication of game knowledge
and design. In the indie community, innovative destabilization of established archetypes
often serves as the direct pay off for attention and acclaim. In this construction, a keen
awareness of AAA genre archetypes and normative mechanics are elemental to creating
successful indie subversions. For example, a first person shooter (FPS) is based on quick
action, rapid destruction of enemies, advanced controller skill, and deliberate stealth
action. FPS games require a certain set of skills and knowledge to play including
precision, action, speed, and patience (Nichols, 2014; Mortensen, 2009). Likewise, a role-
playing game (RPG) is predicated on team leadership, character investment, turn-based
fighting sequences, and narrative immersion. RPGs require advanced strategy skills,
considerable time investment, pre-knowledge of character archetypes, and literary
proficiency (Mortensen, 2009; Nichols, 2014; Taylor, 2006).

The expectation that indie game developers know traditional game archetypes and
conventions surfaces throughout the awards as games are lauded for their ability directly
mimic and transform these standards. For example, in describing the 2007 winner of the
Excellence in Audio Award, Host Schatz says, "Gamma Bros is a retro-style space
shooter akin to classic arcade games like *Galaga*, *Gradius* and *Robotron*, but with a
modern twist" (Independent Games Festival, 2007).

In this adaptation of indie, not only is the deep knowledge of game conventions
valued, but advanced programming and design skills to deliver clever iterations of these
conventions also become requisites for successful indie production. Host Schatz refers to

his own winning game, *Monaco,* as a sophisticated innovation of a common game genre "…I made a multiplayer turn-based strategy game with no down time. None. You don't spend a second waiting for your opponent" (Independent Games Festival, 2012). Knowledge of established game universes and genre expectations as well as an ability to incorporate these familiar mechanics and features into indie games is valuable currency at the IGF.

This preference for proficiency is bolstered by the IGF's classification of four of the seven major awards by "achievements in excellence" (design, audio, visual art, and narrative). IGF hosts often make reference to the superiority of winning games because they "use sophisticated game engines and cunning physics" (Independent Games Festival, 2009). As the IGF awards developers with excellence these distinctions become embodied an accomplished few indie designers. Host Anthony Carboni naturalizes these qualities in his 2011 introduction to the Technical Excellence Award, "the best I can tell is that [the award] goes to this year's most serious math nerd" (Independent Games Festival, 2011). 2014 Host Nathan Vella, jokes about the embodied abilities of game designers in the Excellence in Design Award introduction, "Now, I'm not a designer, but I do regard that process as magical and unnatural. As such, I suggested that instead of presenting an award for Excellence in Design, we burn the recipients at the stake." These descriptions naturalize developers' technical skills and erase the resources and experiences that produced these proficiencies.

Revering technical experts reinforces taken-for-granted privileges in the AAA industry and, in fact, many winning developers reference direct experiences in AAA production. As winner of several 2005 awards, the developer of *Alien Hominid* states,

"We were all layoffs from our companies! Instead of getting back into the job market, we decided to risk it all and chase that dream" (Independent Games Festival, 2005). Similarly, after winning the 2010 Seamus McNally Grand Prize Award, Andy Schatz references his period in AAA development:

> I don't have too many more people to thank except all the people, including all of you AAA game developers… Because I used to be with you guys too, until you pissed me off too much. And, you really taught me a lot (Independent Games Festival, 2010).

Thus rather than a naturally occurring talent or innate ability, having experience in the AAA industry provides access to the sophisticated tools to excel in indie game development.

However, defining indie developers as sophisticated experts destabilizes neoliberal beliefs of rationality and countercultural values that suggest indie development should be open to anyone willing to work hard and take risks. Balancing preferences for superiority and claims toward accessibility creates a noticeable tension at the IGF. Candid statements, jokes, and confessions about the difficulty of game development disrupt these naturalized notions of indie aptitude. "Development is a pain in the ass! And, when you're independently funded it's an even bigger pain in the ass" (Jessica Chobot, Direct2Drive Vision Award, 2010). "And, I just want to tell all of you guys who are not in the IGF this year, it just takes hard work and it just takes persistence. It just takes believing in yourself" (Audience Award Winner, *Frozen Synapse*, Independent Games Festival, 2012). "…Telling stories in games is not an easy task. Seriously. It sucks. It's hard" (Host Andy Schatz, Independent Games Festival, 2013). "Because let's

face it, making video games is fucking hard" (Host Nathan Vella, Independent Games Festival, 2014). "I didn't really know how much, like, went into a game. Like there's a whole writing plot background stuff and drawing and all of it's super important" (Rising Star Award Recipient, Independent Games Festival, 2016). "Telling a meaningful story that resonates with people is genuinely hard. There's only a handful of successful examples that truly stand the test of time" (Host Nathan Vella, Independent Games Festival, 2016).

Other winners openly defend notions of accessibility and distance themselves from identities of privileged indie technicity. As 2013 Seamus McNally Grand Prize Winner Richard Hoffmeier states, "The tools are there, everybody jump in, they're super easy, and replace me. As soon as you can. It's easier than you think" (Independent Games Festival, 2015). Introducing the 2010 Student Showcase Award, host Erin Robinson reconnects to the spirit of indie accessibility. "The students help us realize what can be done with just a little experience and a lot of heart…students have shown us you don't need budgets, producers or schedules or legitimately purchased software" (Independent Games Festival, 2010). Interestingly, these descriptions often circulated in earlier descriptions of indie development, but here, serve reference newer and younger members of the field.

Thus as definitions of indie-ness evolve in the annual IGF discourse, straightforward characteristics are increasingly destabilized and expose tendencies toward privileging particular kinds of indie developers and development. Exploring the explicit and implicit boundaries of IGF membership elucidate the IGF's inclinations toward experience male developers.

Game Boy Networks

  As opposed to a casual social network, the IGF is a community based on a privately owned and operated contest and embeds the parameters for belonging in the rules of participation. However, the IGF entry rules reveal ambiguity rather than clarity. The IGF "Restrictions/Eligibility" guidelines for "Independently Created" reads:

    Independently Created: The Nominating Committee must be confident that the

    submitted game was created in the 'indie spirit' by an independent game

    developer. The Nominating Committee reserves the right to refuse any game at its

    sole discretion (Independent Games Festival, 2016a, para. 27).

Requirement for inclusion based on a vague classification of "indie spirit" requires that developers have pre-knowledge of this explanation. The ambiguity in this definition also reinforces taken-for-granted ideas about indie development (Bourdieu, 1996). As the guidelines further state, "If entrants to the Contest are in doubt about the amount of externally created or contributed content in their game, please contact the organizers for clarification" (Independent Games Festival, 2016a, para. 28). Maintaining a relatively imprecise definition of belonging allows the IGF ability significant latitude in determining the boundaries of entry and obfuscates open accessibility.

  As explicit definitions provide inadequate guidance in determining community belonging, exploring which community members are frequently recognized and made familiar helps tease out established networks and parameters of belonging. During his 2011 opening remarks Anthony Carboni calls out recognizable faces in the audience "I think I just saw the Messhof and Gaijin Guys give me a thumbs up, so, right back at you dudes!" (Independent Games Festival, 2011). In her 2016 introduction Chairwoman,

Kelli Wallick, recognizes the status of the evening's host, "Now, I'd like to introduce one of my favorite people in the games industry. Of Capy Games, your host, for this evening's awards ceremony, Nathan Vella" (Independent Games Festival, 2016b).

Along similar lines, in the 2016 introduction to the Excellence in Visual Art Award, Host Vella jokes, "So one special highlight for tonight's winners. As you walk backstage after receiving your award, you'll be greeted by Jonathan Blow who will remind you all that you are bad programmers. I love Jon" (Independent Games Festival, 2016b). After several wins at the 2014 awards, the IGF humorously highlights the importance of developer Lucas Pope by creating the "Excellence in Being Lucas Pope" award during the 2015 ceremony (Independent Games Festival, 2015). Making a succinct statement about the dynamics of audience membership during the 2011 Direct2Ddrive Vision Award introduction, Alex Austin states, "Hello nerds and bored girlfriends of nerds" (Independent Games Festival, 2011).

Such expressions of importance, familiarity, and belonging provide insight into the well-established social networks of the IGF community. With ill-defined formal definitions of belonging, these informal references suggest that entry into the IGF network requires taken-for-granted knowledge and access to connections with esteemed developers and IGF associates.

Judging Legitimacy

Over the years, the IGF recalibrates what it means to be indie in the face of the ever-present corporate antagonist. To allay concerns that these corporate interests influence award outcomes, the IGF becomes particularly concerned with legitimating the judging processes and defining the IGF's position within the indie community. These

efforts are often expressed humorously to provide discharge tensions and ease common criticisms. For example in 2011, Host Anthony Carboni explains the new IGF assessment process by joking that it takes place in a Dr. Strangelove style war room (Independent Game Festival, 2011). In 2012, host Andy Schatz suggests that "...the IGF can sometimes be a bit of a black box" and goes on to explain the evaluation process (Independent Game Festival, 2012). Continuing to address these concerns in 2012, Schatz addresses doubts about the impartiality of the judging process in his explanation of the Audience Award, determined by a crowd-sourced popular vote.

> But, you know what – not that this happened tonight – but, sometimes juries get it wrong. Hell, I mean I was on two juries this year and I have to tell you, I have terrible taste! So, luckily, even though I'm a moron we do have an award to correct for this. It's called the Audience Award (Independent Game Festival, 2012).

A slightly more dramatic and pointed illustration of this occurs in 2011 when after four-time host, and IGF darling, Schatz wins the 2010 Seamus McNally grand prize. Following IGF custom, he appears on stage to present the next year's grand prize award. As he begins to speak, the two members of the Super Meat Boy development team, who were also nominees for the 2010 award Schatz won, appear on stage as if threatening Schatz. Schatz's seems thrown off, turns to them and says, "You guys can have my awards!" This stunt seemingly attempts to address the criticism within the community that Schatz's game won due to his deep involvement with IGF and was undeserving of the title (Independent Game Festival, 2011).

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Judging is thus a site of tension for the IGF as it is the place where corporate

interest directly meets the community's interest. Here, the IGF attempts to legitimatize

their event as emerging from within the community rather than being influenced by the

corporate sponsors.

Diversity as Countercultural Subversion and Global Diversion

While demographic shifts increased and the "Diversity in Games Movement"

mobilized, the IGF faced another hurdle of authentication. Aiming reconnect to their

countercultural foundations, the IGF embraced CSR strategies to emphasize areas of

growth and achievement in their embrace of challenging AAA norms. Conflating notions

of racial and gender diversity with counterculture subversion becomes a common theme

in this transformative period between 2009 and 2013. As host Andy Schatz states in the

2009 awards, "These games represent what punk is to pop, what belly button rings are to

nipple rings, and what mohawks are to faux hawks" (Independent Game Festival, 2009).

Such countercultural symbols abound in the IGF; however, they become unstable as the

mounting popularity of the industry normalized indie-ness. Three years after this

statement Schatz returns to as host and states,

> Seven years ago, ya'll were crazy punk rock idols; telling the world that the right
>
> way to make games was to sell, fund, make small games, and that dependency
>
> was bad and that weird was good. But, guys, we got a little problem. It's hard to
>
> be counter culture when the system we're fighting actually kinda likes us now…
>
> But, we're still punk. The problem is, is that the *whole world* is a little punk now!
>
> Like it or not we're not The Clash anymore, we're Green Day (Independent Game
>
> Festival, 2013).

As countercultural subversion becomes an area of weakness it is less emphasized in the ensuring years.

In an effort to distinguish other areas of progressiveness, the IGF has emphasized their inclusion of *global* rather than domestic diversity. Host Anthony Carboni echoed the diversity as internationalism during the 2011 awards:

> You know, without the restrictions and confines of corporate structure or a
> traditional development team, an indie game can be anything.... I mean, as long as
> it's made in Canada or Sweden it's indie (Independent Game Festival, 2011).

Framing diversity as international inclusion ignores the reality that gaming industries (both AAA and indie) are dominated by white heterosexual men. Furthermore, this proactive CSR strategy evades internal racial dynamics and reinforces social hierarchies that actively exclude diverse Others (Dávila, 2008).

Diversity as a Stranger

Attempts toward domestic socio-cultural inclusion begin to appear in 2014 after the early foundations of #GamerGate begin to take root. At first these are statements attempting to address the overwhelming overrepresentation of white men in the community such as the 2014 closing remarks by Host Nathan Vella: "Well folks, we did it! We made it through another awards ceremony. Awkwardly hosted by a series of white dudes" and his 2015 closing statement: "What a huge night for Independent Games. And, for predominantly white male game developers" (Independent Game Festival, 2015).

However, drawing on Ahmed's (2012) work it is crucial not only pay attention to dynamics of privilege, but also to explore the specific ways that diversity efforts can reassert privilege once it has been exposed. As privilege is exposed, the IGF codes

notions of diversity as "strange," "wild," and even "threatening." A familiar site of inclusion for the IGF, the Nuovo Award is the only IGF Award that has been given to women two years in a row. Consequently, the Nuovo is often made strange. "Weird" translates into diversity as stranger-making rhetoric frames the award and women subsequently appear on stage. For example, before awarding the first solo female developer the 2015 Nuovo Award, host Nathan Vella states:

> Now at this point I'd like to take a second to ask all audience members to make
> sure your minds are totally open, your third eyes fully aligned with your chakras,
> and also double check that your USB vaporizers are fully charged. It's about to
> get gloriously, wonderfully different (Independent Game Festival, 2015).

And, before awarding the first African American Woman the 2014 Nuovo Award, Vella says:

> Ok now for the weird games. Now it's easy to think that weird is bad, but for the
> Nuovo and for the independent gaming community as a whole, weird is actually
> really really good… Nuovo nominees show the diversity in games. They give us a
> chance to play something different and maybe even understanding something a bit
> differently. Sometimes we may not understand them (Independent Game Festival,
> 2014).

Continuing to make diversity the stranger, this year's first female chairperson, Kelli Wallick, began the 2016 opening remarks by framing herself as a potential threat. She states "Many of you may already know me from my intimidating title as Overlord of the Indie MegaBooth. But for those of you that don't know me, don't worry, I'm not nearly as frightening as the name implies." Here, Wallick is careful to address fears that

she as a woman, she may be dangerously disruptive to the norms that have defined the community thus far. Furthermore the appointment of Wallick speaks to larger UBM diversity initiatives that appoint women to leadership positions as accomplished inclusion projects. Replacing Brandon Boyer with Kelli Wallick is undoubtedly an inclusive action, however, it aligns with CSR strategies that highlight accomplishments of inclusion rather than underscore practices of exclusion and privilege.

Diversity as Happy Talk

As peripheral inclusion projects attempt to ameliorate tensions within the IGF about exclusion, by positively reframing privilege the IGF contains criticism and diffuses concerns (Ahmed, 2012). In 2014, Boyer references the recent violence of #GamerGate in a decidedly positive and even graceful tone. Initially he nostalgically likens the development of the indie scene to the growth of a tree.

> It was the birth of a scene, a culture where most people ran around the same circle, sat around the same fire pits at the end of GDC. Everyone knew each other's names…In the past few years especially that trunk has branched radically. That radical growth hasn't been painless and it never is, as faces and perspectives diversify and become unfamiliar… And even though some might be tempted to call this diversification a fracturing, something that threatens to divide to sort of monoculture that came before it, I prefer to think of it as a blossoming; an undeniable sign of real healthy growth of this bizarre beautiful organism that, for lack of a better term, we keep calling indie games (Independent Game Festival, 2014).

Boyer utilizes both "happy talk" and "stranger making" as he sentimentally evokes the early days of the scene as a campfire gathering. This description echoes conservative nostalgias of the pre-Civil Rights era before "political correctness" and "diversity agendas" required uncomfortable growth and inclusion (Frank, 1996; Omi & Winant, 2015). Then, drawing on stranger-making tools, he refers to "radical" branching and potential "fracturing" of the tree as a threat to that stability. Boyer's offering of a "blossoming," an unambiguously feminine term, returns to happy making as he frames the aggression toward difference as an essential part of achieving social justice and a sign of "real healthy growth." Through this integration of stranger-making and happy talk Boyer minimizes the experiences of harassment and the severity of subjugation by naturalizing processes of privilege and exclusion.

Diversity as Social Responsibility

Expanding its CSR-related diversity efforts and distancing from areas of tension, the 2016 IGF made several notable inclusions of women. For example, more women appeared on the IGF stage to receive awards than in any other year. The 2016 IGF welcomed their first female chairperson, Kelli Wallick, who spoke of the IGF's commitment to supporting diversity in games as a part of a larger social responsibility toward equality. Wallick stated, "As we grow and welcome more diverse voices we have a rare and unique opportunity to shape a discussion larger than ourselves" (Independent Game Festival, 2016b). Continuing the trend of inclusion, the IGF welcomed on of their largest sponsors, Microsoft, to the stage to present a Rising Star Award to the Girls Make Games (GMG) program.

After displaying an upbeat slideshow of the GMG program, Katie Stone Perez, Senior Program Manager of ID@XBox, invites the participants of the program on stage stating, "We ask that all of you help us extend a warm welcome to this next generation of game devs" (Independent Game Festival, 2016b). Standing ovations and loud cheers of support usher the eight young women on stage. In their acceptance of the Rising Star award the founder of the GMG program speaks to the enthusiasm of those waiting to gain entry into the industry.

> ...there are 100s and 1,000s of girls out there that want to make games, that want to be a part of this industry. And, I urge everyone here to just kind of extend a hand out, that's all you need to do at this point and they'll jump right into it and make games with you (Independent Game Festival, 2016b).

The energetic presentation of the Rising Star Award reiterated the IGF's commitment to welcoming women into the indie gaming field. These inclusive efforts have framed diversity efforts as successfully completed inclusion projects. These delimited actions toward inclusion illustrate UBM's engagement with diversity on the periphery rather than within the core operational practices.

CHAPTER V

PRACTICING PRIVILEGE AND COMPLETING INCLUSION

Discussion

Tracing UBM, GDC, and the IGF's common practices and reveals tendencies toward profitability, expansion, and segmentation. After reviewing the political economic influences that shaped the development of the IGF from a countercultural niche community into an economically viable corporate entity, the structuring forces of the IGF commercial interest become apparent. Through the allocation of resources and initiatives aimed at crafting brand identities, acquiring niche markets, and segmenting mature markets, UBM is able to maintain a robust forward-thinking parent brand identity that nurtures the emergence of distinctive niche communities. Their Events First Initiative is a comprehensive strategy that enables UBM to concentrate control over content, the cultivation of brand identities, and access to relevant resources. However, in recognizing how external forces generate disruptions in these crafted strategies and common practices, tensions between UBM's commercial interests and respective community interests emerge.

Privileging Indie Technicity

Early definitions of indie development expressed straightforward opposition to corporate involvement. Building a corporate property on these subversive foundational values provided a significant challenge to UBM. This contradictory relationship is evident through the evolution of the IGF Award Show, as the IGF attempted to co-opt the countercultural indie spirit into something more supportive of economic interest. The cultivation of this altered indie brand becomes evident in the annual IGF discussions

about what it means to be an indie developer. Bringing notions of artistic excellence, technological innovation, and potential economic success to the fore, the IGF cultivated new preferences, tastes, and beliefs in the indie community. As IGF hosts, award winners, and sponsors infuse AAA characteristics of development into the field, a preferred indie developer that aligns with familiar logics of privilege begins to take shape.

Ultimately, indie technicity strengthens similar privileged intersections of gender, technology, and play to AAA technicity and reveals the often embodied nature of capital. Through valuing and naturalizing particular elements of indie development including deep knowledge of genre archetypes and game mechanics as well as aptitudes in programming, design, and narrative exposition that game companies have directly cultivated in white males, the IGF authenticates a distinctive privileged indie technicity. This indie technicity reinforces the accumulation of cultural capital through technical training, financial investment, and extensive game play often afforded to boys and men and overwhelming denied to girls and women. Furthermore, honoring normative indie developers perpetuate established social networks that concentrate social capital for a privileged few.

The IGF strengthens the embodied nature of capital by awarding predominately well-networked and well-trained white male developers accolades, money, and publicity. Celebrated indie developers are then imbued with greater symbolic value, which allows them to garner corporate sponsorships, profitable strategic partnerships, higher promotional visibility, increased game sales, and ultimately, greater economic value. This concentrated distribution of capital naturalizes indie qualities as inherently masculine and

erase the ways in which they are actively restricted and reproduced by controlled exchanges of capital.

Diversity as Done

Over time, as demographic shifts and cultural criticism around AAA game culture placed pressure on the industry to dismantle practices of privilege, the IGF deployed specific practices in line with UBM's strategic initiatives to contain claims of inequality and privilege. Drawing on CSR approaches, UBM's Sustainability Leadership Initiative proactively highlights the development and completion of inclusion projects rather than exposing and grappling with entrenched exclusionary trends. Focusing on two primary strategies: 1) the placement of women in leadership positions and 2) creating auxiliary diversity campaigns (such as Pride Walks and Diversity Workshops), UBM reports evidence of completed efforts of inclusion and frames diversity efforts as fulfilled. As Ahmed (2012) suggests, such inclusion projects, allow institutions to meet diversity goals quickly without having to engage systemically with institutionalized privilege and inequality. Furthermore, by employing practices of "stranger-making" and "happy talk" UBM can discursively signal difference, contain dissent, and reinforce normative privilege.

After reviewing the strategies, practices, discursive themes of GDC and the IGF, it becomes evident that the IGF's diversity efforts closely align with UBM's two primary CSR strategies. The appointment of Kelli Wallick, an established IGF professional interpellated into UBM's structural logics, allayed concerns that men dominate the IGF. Furthermore, designating specific awards as sites of inclusion explicitly (GDC's "Special Awards") and implicitly (the IGF's Nuovo Award) allows the IGF to keep preferred indie

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developers in core positions of privilege. Taking a proactive stance toward inclusion allows the UBM to diffuse critics with greater transformative resources to mobilize change and disrupt established systems. Approaching the inclusion of diverse Others as a series of rapidly completed inclusion projects, public statements, awards, and appointments insulates core business structures and keeps positively framed projects of inclusion and goodwill at the borders of practice.

The 2016 awarding of Rising Star Award illustrates the synthesis of these dynamics. A year after the violence and hostility of #GamerGate engendered forceful demands for change, the IGF promptly presented the Rising Star Award (an ancillary award the IGF had not given in several years) to the Girls Make Games (GMG) program. A celebrated moment of inclusion becomes more complicated as field dynamics and flows of capital are considered. Here, a program sanctioned by AAA companies (Microsoft and Sony) and the IGF has limited independent resources and therefore little influence to disrupt these larger systems. Furthermore, recognizing disenfranchised teenaged girls with limited forms of capital provides a weak counterpoint to entrenched structures of male privilege. During the acceptance speech the GMG founder acknowledges the limitations of this strategy and instead appeals to the goodwill of veteran developers, "I urge everyone here to just kind of extend a hand out, that's all you need to do at this point and they'll jump right into it and make games with you" (Independent Games Festival, 2016).

However, the IGF deals with potentially transformative figures like Mattie Brice, who has acquired relevant forms of capital as a hardcore gamer, respected critic, and emergent developer in the face of embodied cultural deficiency, quite differently. As a

diverse Other, Brice's mockery of the IGF judgment process exposed the infrastructures of privilege and threatened to disrupt the IGF's practices of legitimating their judging process. The IGF's contradictory treatment of Host Andy Schatz for a similar action reveals embedded logics of privilege at play. The IGF continued to honor and promote Andy Schatz despite his claims during an awards ceremony that got "it wrong" as an IGF judge because of his "bad taste."

In contrast, Mattie's tentative status as an IGF community member is revealed as the IGF quickly frames the disclosure of her tastes as an outside threat to be neutralized. Accordingly, the IGF contained Brice's potentially transformative influence by silencing her, making her strange, and ultimately, excluding her. Their final action of apologizing and reaching out to Brice, illustrates their hesitant, contradictory, and inconsistent efforts toward inclusivity. Furthermore, by deleting the tweets that admonished Brice and publishing not only an apology but "A Statement of Inclusivity," the IGF maintains their CSR posture of proactive positivity, which in this instance, *literally erases* practices of exclusion.

It is through analyzing awkward and disruptive moments in the indie industry, where infrastructures of change meet the strategies of commodification. As the IGF responds to the socio-cultural fluctuations in the community, they take care to avoid alienating core brand norms by softening anti-corporatism, authenticating indie-ness, and buffering social exclusion. Analyzing these tensions challenges traditional notions of social change and cultural progress. Rather than an organic process of democratic change or cultural evolution guided by civic interests, there are *specific business strategies and*

profit-oriented logics, which guide the ever-shifting definitions of independence and redraw the ever-fluid boundaries of inclusion to maintain structures of privilege.

Future Directions

This thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the video game industry and the logics behind its production practices and strategies. Focusing on the indie industry provides initial research into the rapidly evolving culture industry as it experiences dramatic internal and external fluctuations in structure, practice, and production. This study contributes to the larger bodies of critical political economy, video game, cultural studies, and feminist scholarship that aim to explore the ways in which dominant structures frame the engagement and negotiations with existing ideological positions. This study would be greatly enhanced by incorporating the direct insights and observations of IGF winners as well as GDC and IGF organization members and participants. Expanding this area of inquiry could incorporate adjacent media fields including comic book communities (Comic-Con) and science fiction communities (Hugo Awards), where similar dynamics of hostility and exclusion as well as calculated inclusion and progressive diversity have recently surfaced.

APPENDIX
Acronyms, Key Terms, & Definitions

AAA: *Mainstream video games and industry.* The AAA term refers to high quality production techniques, advanced graphical capability, and established genre expectations. Generally, AAA games are developed for one of the three major gaming consoles (Microsoft's Xbox, Sony's Playstation, or Nintendo's WiiU) or PC (personal computer). Major studios develop AAA games with large development teams (50-200 members) on a relatively large budget ($10 to $60 million).

Console: A video game console is a device that outputs video signals and images to display an interactive video game. The term "video game console" distinguishes from arcade machines and home computers as a machine primarily designed for consumers to use for playing video games in their home. Game consoles are currently in their 8th generation of development and concentrated by ownership shared between Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo. In recent years, starting with the 6th and 7th generation, game consoles have focused on media convergence and connectivity to allow consumers access to other forms of media (music, television, movies, internet) through the console.

ESRB: *Electronic Software Ratings Board.* Established in 1994, the ESRB is a self-regulatory organization that designates age and content ratings. Ratings include Early Childhood (EC), Everyone (E), Everyone 10+ (E10+), Teen (T), Mature (M), and Adults Only (AO). The ESRB was established in response to criticism of violent and mature content in games such as *Night Trap* and *Mortal Kombat*.

GDC: *Game Developers Conference.* Established in 1988, GDC is a conference for professional video game developers. UBM Tech acquired GDC in 1998. GDC includes an expo, networking events, awards shows such as the Independent Games Festival and the Game Developers Choice Awards, and a variety of tutorials, lectures, and panel discussions by industry professionals. Topics include: programming, design, audio, production, business, management, and visual arts.

IGDA: *International Game Developers Association.* The IGDA is a non-profit professional association founded in 1994 to provide advocacy and networking opportunities for game developers. In response to the mounting criticism from violent and sexual content in video games, the IGDA networking opportunities through chapter memberships, special interests groups (SIGs), advocacy work, and events to "advance the careers and enhance the lives of game developers" (IGDA, 2015).

IGF: *Independent Games Festival.* The IGF was established by UBM in 1998 as an ancillary event to the Game Developers Conference. The IGF is an annual festival and largest annual gathering of the indie video game industry to recognize the best independent video game developers. The competition awards a total of

$50,000 in prizes to independent developers in the Main and Student Competitions comprised of ten primary categories. Awards include Seamus McNally Grand Prize, Nuovo (Innovation) Award, Excellence in Visual Art, Excellence in Audio, Excellence in Design, Technical Excellence, Excellence in Narrative, Audience Award, Best Mobile Game, and the Student Showcase Award.

PC Game: *Personal Computer game.* A PC game is play on a personal gaming computer. A PC gaming computer is a standard desktop computer that typically has high-performance hardware to manage the demands of high-quality "PC games." High performance hardware features include: a powerful video card, processor, and memory. A number of companies manufacture prebuilt gaming computers and accessories including, mice, keyboards and headsets geared toward gamers.

UBM: *United Business Media Corporation.* Headquartered in London, UBM plc is a global business-to-business events organizer. Founded in 1843, UBM was initially a trade publication company. After much reorganization, UBM has shifted from newspaper and trade publications to becoming a multinational media company. In 2014, UBM launched its current focus on business-to-business event organization. Its principal operations include live media and business-to-business communications, marketing services and data provisions. UBM principally serves technology, healthcare, trade and transport, ingredients and fashion industries.

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