Intervention for Inclusivity: Gender Politics and Indie Game Development

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate the interplay between independence as a rhetoric, principles of feminist interventionist work, and different models for creating a more inclusive industry. Through clashing understandings of the needs of aspiring game developers, indie culture can serve to reify dominant narratives of the mainstream industry, including discourses that hinder female participation therein. However, there are successful models in which we can observe other, more inclusive, modes of welcoming previously marginalized and excluded groups, which can be taken up in other contexts for diversifying local indie game development.

Author Keywords

Inclusivity; indie game design; women in games; gender; community; feminist research

Introduction

Digital games[1] culture is no longer the exclusive domain of young males. The demographic landscape of this culture is radically changing, particularly in terms of age and gender. In 2011, the Entertainment Software Association reported that 38% of gamers in Canada were female, and almost 40% of those surveyed who were 55 years or older had played a game at least once in the previous four weeks. This reported diversification of the player base is not, however, mirrored in the games industry. A recent collective analysis of salary data from 2001-2011 reports that men still constitute 90% of the total games workforce, and have consistently outnumbered women in all fields over the last decade except in business operations and marketing (Shirinian, 2012). This unvaried developer base of digital games goes hand-in-hand with a relative lack of innovation and diversity in game representation, mechanics, and interfaces, leading to a market of largely homogenous games based on sequels and adaptations aimed at a population of heterosexual males aged 18 to 35, the de facto market of "hardcore" gamers (Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce, 2007). If the industry hopes to keep their newly acquired market satisfied, and to attract potential players to digital games culture, diversifying the workforce will be crucial going forward. This recommendation to appeal to broader audiences is not intended to suggest that developers who are othered, or who represent difference, innately know or understand what these new and potential gamers want to play, but rather that including diverse perspectives in the design process may assist in disrupting this hegemony and homogeneity.

As Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009) argue, "the game console has been very much part of the apparatus of 'becoming man,' and not of 'becoming woman'" (p. 18), and the context of their production plays a central role in this relationship. Because technological and computing expertise in general continues to be largely associated with the constitution of hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2009; Corneliussen, 2012; Wajcman, 1991), it is unsurprising that there is a shortage of women working in the digital games industry. Strategic efforts to increase the number of women in the industry include creating women-only working spaces or special interest groups, awarding scholarships to female applicants to alleviate the cost of attending game design schools, and making visible the accomplishments of successful women in industry through celebration and promotion. These strategies are instrumental in making the industry appear more attractive to prospective students and supporting those already in the field, but offer little help or support for women who are just beginning a career in game design (e.g. new grads, women pursuing a second career or part-time job in games) or hobbyists. Addressing the needs of this under-served group is mainly carried out through the creation of locally organized, small-scale ventures that focus on training first-time game developers.

This paper reports on one such program: The Difference Engine Initiative (DEI). As a program that received a considerable amount of promotion and funding, the DEI is important for what it can tell us about perspectives on, strategies for, and (re)actions toward the organization and mobilization of community resources for social justice projects, especially since Toronto-based indie game developers are fiercely passionate about promoting and protecting the city's image as a model community for others in Canada and abroad to aspire to (Hawkins, 2012; Munroe, 2012). Indeed, investment in and attention to the question of inclusivity demonstrates a commitment by the indie community to address the exclusionary aspects of digital games culture that its corporate counterparts have yet to make. This declaration is consistent with how the indie community, broadly positioned as an alternative to mainstream digital games culture and characterized by an anti-corporate sentiment, promotes itself as appropriate stomping grounds for grassroots social justice movements. Finding, creating, and enabling means of support for activist work is crucial for sustainability, and en masse, the Toronto indie community firmly plants itself in the corner of women who want to make a name in games. As the first community-directed initiative in Toronto dedicated to generating knowledge to improve the experience of female game developers, we explore the interplay between undertaking messy, complex, and contentious feminist intervention work and maintaining status as a 'model' indie games community.

DEI was a Toronto-based workshop intended to support the entry of women into the indie game community. We became involved in this initiative as invited participant-observers[2] and documented the results of the workshops (also known as incubators) using ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews, researcher observations, surveys, and participant journals, which were contextualized by our immersion in this community through our attendance of local presentations, showcases, networking events, and meetings of the Toronto indie game collective, the Hand Eye Society (HES). We consider the numerous community discourses around and within DEI to understand how inclusivity was envisioned, sought, and sometimes obstructed. Through a feminist analysis of how the program was conceptualized and subsequently delivered, we explore the paradox of focusing on inclusion and gender politics in the context of a set of practices that emphasize discourses of independence and meritocracy. We argue that given this

underlying ideological emphasis, the indie game scene in Toronto also struggles with its aim to produce diverse and inclusive work, and it is no more egalitarian or compatible than the mainstream industry in supporting social justice projects.

Indie as Resistance

In comparison to mainstream gaming, which reflects, reinforces and (re)produces the dominant understandings of what counts as legitimate participation in video game culture (Jenson & de Castell, 2010), coming to a determination of what constitutes 'indie gaming' is a slippery task. The exploration of this shifting terrain (i.e. what is or is not indie) directly impacts questions related to inclusion, and we encourage readers to see Lipkin and Ruffino's contributions in this edition, which discusses indie games culture more broadly. For our purposes, the indie identity that we report on here is a particular, local subject-position that was discursively constructed through and by conversations with and between participants, organizers, and other Toronto-based indie community members.

A reoccurring theme that underscored many of our conversations with developers and players was the given understanding that 'indie' not only refers to an employment or career alternative to working in large gaming studios, but also implies a particular political position; one that is held in opposition to what mainstream games culture represents, sanctions, promotes, and protects. As a "hegemony of play" (cf. Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce, 2007), mainstream games, in their content and production, communicate dominant values, and some indie games make use of the same modes to convey alternative or oppositional perspectives. For example, some indie games make very purposeful artistic decisions that are not popular or common practice in mainstream game design, such as: an amateur[3] kitschy style that evokes a homemade aesthetic, "regressive" 8-bit styles that are re-appropriated as a nostalgic celebration of early games culture, and even illustrating characters whose bodies challenge hegemonic expectations of how men and women should be represented (see Parker, this edition, for a discussion on indie game art). These examples can be understood not only as a choice to ignore mainstream art norms, but also as very intentional decisions to respond to and subvert dominant practices in game art and design, making these choices political statements that represent and offer a viable alternative to participating in mainstream practices.

The use of subversive design tactics are part of a discourse that constructs and positions indie game developers as resisting the dominant global hyper-capitalist structure of the video games design industry (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Within this discourse, mainstream game publishers are portrayed as heartless, faceless corporations who are interested in profits, not people. This argument was typically qualified by referencing examples of gaming culture's normalized-yet-offensive practices that sanction sexism, racism, homophobia, and other prejudices for the sake of catering to the "hardcore gamer" and maintaining the hegemony of play (Fron, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce, 2007). This discursively constructs the Toronto indie gaming scene, including indie games, players of these games, and developers, as a productive counter-culture — a viable, alternative space where practices of contestation or resistance are encouraged and indeed a part of 'being indie'. Despite this insistence on difference through a disavowal of the mainstream, the Toronto scene is just as homogenous, characterized as "primarily populated by white dudes" (Goodyear, 2011). This lack of diversity is a major

concern for several leading members of the Hand Eye Society (HES), a not-for-profit collective of projects and people working in Toronto's indie game community: "there are so many under-represented groups — it's time to deal with that and to change that" (Woo, 2011). As part of a broader diversity initiative,[4] HES created DEI in recognition of, and as a way to begin to address, issues of gender inequality in their community.

Indie Intervention for Inclusivity

The primary purpose of DEI was to help Toronto-area women create their first digital game. The 12 participants were selected based on their responses to a competitive application process that received interest from 65 women.[5] The DEI was run twice in 2011; the first incubator (DEI1) in August-September, which was led by two members of HES, and the second incubator (DEI2) in November- December, which was organized and coordinated by two females who were participants in DEI1. In both incubators, the participants met once a week for three hours. These meetings were opportunities for participants to show their weekly progress, troubleshoot technical issues, provide and receive feedback, and discuss other topics related to game development. Actual game development labour (including conceptualization, concept art gathering, programming, drawing, and animating) was completed outside of these meetings. Local female mentors and role models with industry experience were invited to some of these meetings to share their perspectives and experiences on working in a male-dominated space. At the end of their incubation, participants had an additional two to three weeks to finalize their games, which were then débuted to the general public at well-promoted showcases.

Conceptualized by the HES organizers as a first step towards addressing gender inequality, DEI was intended to be an interventionist space that would make a positive difference in the lives of the participants (who were considered to be marginalized), as well as the community:

> "We will take a handful of participants with little to no game-making experience, but who are passionate about games and are interested in learning what goes into making them — these are people with ideas and the desire to make them a reality, for whom the opportunity to get into game development has either been absent or unwelcoming...It's important to note that this Initiative is not the perfect solution to all the problems of gender disparity in this industry, nor is it intended to be. We are hoping to generate some data and theories as to why there aren't more women in game development, and are hoping to learn how to make future endeavors more effective at encouraging and satisfying a more diverse group of people in this industry."

> Metanet (2011)

This statement demonstrates a much-needed political commitment from industry leaders to actively seek out and/or create these opportunities and openings; not only providing the means for the experience, but also co-constructing knowledge that can be shared and mobilized going forward.

Undertaking interventionist work to break down barriers is imperative to opening up a culture to the disenfranchised, but can also be potentially problematic when the existing and largely *invisible* power relations and structures that organize these relations are not explicitly recognized in the planning, implementation, or analysis of these interventions. Even the best-intentioned programs, practices, and people operate within the racist, heterosexist, patriarchal, and capitalist hegemonic orders they seek to topple. Concerns over the distribution of power within these initiatives and how this distribution impacts on the relations between those involved need to be critically considered (Frisby, Maguire & Reid, 2009; Krumer-Nevo, 2009). This requires organizers to (re)think through their assumptions and presumptions about what they are doing and the capabilities of those involved, and deliberately disrupt the practices that have worked to exclude women in the first place, because "the point of productive equity work is not to reproduce the situation, but change it." (Jenson & de Castell, 2011, p. 156). Speaking directly to these concerns, critical feminist researcher Patti Lather (1991) proposes that interventionist work must be guided by theoretical and methodological frameworks that are grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, and reflexivity in an attempt to circumvent what she identifies as the central danger to praxis-oriented empirical work: the imposition and reification of dominant, hegemonic values.

Interventionist initiatives that are not conceptualized as mutually-educative experiences for both participants *and* organizers risk importing, uncritically, taken-for-granted notions and educational practices that work to restrict or limit the ways in which learners experience agency and authority in the process of knowledge construction. Programs based on educational givens assist in concealing the forms of power that naturalize inequality and mutual-exclusion between 'instructors' and 'learners' and can thus unintentionally perpetuate the issues that the program is meant to address. Indeed, some of the participants (those in the first incubator – DEI1) described aspects of the program that they felt were counterproductive to creating conditions of possibility for working towards inclusivity. There was a disconcerting disconnect between the stated goals of the program and how participants' felt upon their exit, which we argue is reflective of the organizers' reluctance to stray from 'business as usual' practices of the indie community and risk engaging in practices where the outcome was unpredictable. In the following sections, we identify and analyze moments before, during, and after DEI1, where opportunities to implement participant-driven changes were passed over in favour of staying faithful to established practices, and in effect, maintaining the status quo.

The Aspiring Female Game Developer and Her Barriers to Entry

Programs designed to educate, intervene, or assist disenfranchised populations are anchored by a representative subject who embodies particular characteristics that the program is meant to address (McDermott, 1993). More often than not, these subject-positions are constructed by program organizers and informed by personal experiences, reported trends and findings (such as media reports and scholarly articles), and sometimes stereotypes. For instance, due to the protocols of academic institutions (e.g. applications for funding and ethics approval), researchers are sometimes required to construct particular subject-positions before they actually make contact with study participants.[6]Although this practice can be viewed as problematic, in that it is an example of the powerless being labelled by a more powerful group (Freire, 2000), it is reasonable to temporarily construct a starting point subject-position, so long as agency to modify

this construction is not limited to organizers and it is not used as a blanket representation for all participants beyond this starting point.

In the case of the DEI, the "aspiring female game developer" subject-position, and perceptions about the barriers that prevent her from entering the field, was constructed through the language employed in various documents, including the call for participation, the program FAQ, blog posts, and early media interviews publicizing the initiative. A discursive analysis of this initial subject-position can provide valuable insight into the underlying conceptual framework through which the HES organizers understand females' experiences and relationships within game development culture, locally and broadly. Within texts about the DEI, the aspiring female game developer was constructed as someone mystified about the game development process in general, intimidated by programming, and lacking access to tools, visible role models, or experienced people to help solve design or development problems. This construction – the helpless, unknowledgeable female – is highly stereotypical and largely reflective of (working to reinforce) the hegemonic framework and guiding patriarchal discourse of digital games culture at large, which is founded on a binary and mutually exclusive understanding of gender where males are naturally proficient with technology and women are not.

This discourse extends past the sphere of digital games culture. It is the normalized ways in which people conceptualize their everyday interactions with technology (Connell, 2009; Cornelissen, 2012; Wajcman, 2007), and it is plausible that some women choose not to engage with game development because of these very reasons. However, many of the women interested in DEI *did not* identify with the organizers image of first-time female game developers. For instance, at the first pre-incubator information session for DEI, attended by over 40 women, a significant number of potential participants spoke about their enthusiasm to learn programming languages, named female game developers that they held in high esteem, suggested software and resources that they had previously tinkered with, and, overall, provided a great deal of evidence that directly challenged the imagined subject-position put forth by the HES organizers.

Participant contestation to this subject-position continued into DEI1, where the first discussion revolved around how participants enjoyed access to the very things that organizers assumed they lacked: experienced friends and colleagues (support), knowledge of game development software (tools), and females working in game-related careers who we admired and were inspired by (role models). Moreover, everyone had very clear ideas and goals about what they wanted to accomplish – for their game, but also within the larger diversity project – and what they needed to make that happen. Despite this, as the weeks went on and it became increasingly evident that the participants were neither helpless nor unknowledgable about game development, narratives about aspiring female game developers were not modified to better reflect the identities and experiences of the participants in DEI1. From a feminist intervention perspective, forgoing this opportunity to tell a very different story about female game developers is inconsistent with the goal of promoting alternative knowledges to disrupt business as usual, yet entirely consistent with maintaining existing power structures.

A closer look at the language used to describe the program can be illuminating here. Incubators, for example, are meant to create or provide the optimal conditions for a specimen to not just survive, but grow and thrive. Significantly, an expert who possesses knowledge of how to keep

the specimens alive determines these perfect circumstances. Those who are subject to incubation are very much dependent on these experts, who are in full control of the incubator environment. While this description is appropriate for the operation of actual incubators (such as those used in medical contexts to assist in the care of premature offspring), this model of expert-administered care and nurturing is problematic in a social justice equity project because it positions learners as dependents and implies that they do not possess an understanding of their own ideal, optimal conditions to thrive in the environment. Adopting a stance that views knowledge as dynamic and power as fluid between everyone involved would means that *everyone's* knowledge and understanding of this issue is, and can only ever be, partial and limited. This challenges the conceptual organization of DEI1 that positions the HES organizers as the experts. Even though it did not reflect the situations of the participants, insistence on the subject-position and incubator model enabled HES organizers to maintain exclusive authority to validate what 'counts' in this culture, such as legitimate barriers to entry.

Indie Girls Don't Cry

Significantly, some of the reasons DEI1 participants articulated about why they had not yet developed a game were due to barriers that were not explicitly recognized by organizers as such. Although participants pointed to time– both inopportune and a general lack of it –as the main reason, their hesitancy to create a game was also partially due to the sexism, misogyny and marginalization that they had experienced in Toronto and elsewhere as visible females engaging in public game related activities (playing games, attending conventions or socials). During a DEI1 session, one participant described how she felt awkward attending HES socials, as though she was intruding on a private invitation-only affair. She shared how the noticeable lack of other women at these events made her feel unwelcome, which prompted other participants to share similar experiences, such as how they felt that they required to bring a male escort to these events to legitimize their presence, but not their participation – in these spaces, women are immediately read as the (non-gaming) girlfriend of a male attendee instead of a person who is also interested in game design and culture.

Even though the saturation of men in the Toronto indie games community was a rationale for the creation of the DEI, organizers did not consider participants' experiences as a barrier to entry into the community. As the president of a small indie development team, and a co-founder of HES, the female organizer of DEI1[7]offered embodied-evidence or proof that gender is not a significant enough marker of difference to prohibit entry and subsequent success in this industry. During sessions and in public interviews, she (re)articulated her view that people "only need to motivate themselves to learn and seize the opportunity" if they want to make digital games (Goodyear, 2011). Although she shared her experiences of sexism in the industry (e.g. clients only wanting to talk to her male team members and not her), she was unwilling to concur with the participants' view that harassment and general misogyny were a significant barrier to career success. Rather, she advised participants to develop a thick skin and to not take it personally. However the "it's not personal, it's business" discourse works to exclude women in two ways: (1) It effectively naturalizes the organizing patriarchal values of the culture and industry that make it difficult for women to be and feel successful, and (2) it also keeps the business world a male-domain by characterizing female responses to inequitable situations (taking it personally) as irrational, which has a long standing association with femininity, and is not valued.

The organizers' strategy to play-down the motivational power and significance of emotions/emotionality in the game development process reflects a zero-tolerance stance on what are perceived to be feminine expressions, and reinforces gaming spaces as domains for enacting traditional masculinities. Here, emotionality is viewed as potentially detrimental to achieving industry success, needing to be kept under control. From this perspective, success depends on the woman's ability to take on, or at least perform, masculine traits that are valued in a business context (stoicism, toughness). Instead of recognizing how sexism is operationalized to exclude females and strategizing how to make it more inclusive, it is individuals, not the system, that are labelled as the problem and the ones that need to change. In this deficit model, accomplishment in the game development industry is premised exclusively on a meritocracy – anyone can make a name in games if they just try hard enough. In this way, systemic inequalities and oppressions are disavowed and responsibility for overcoming challenges is delegated entirely to the individual, regardless of whether they have the necessary privilege.

Participants of DEI1 felt a loss of authority in that the organizers' experiences, sentiments, and knowledge were valued over their own, which were met with critiques of female sensitivity and emotionality, as articulated by the female organizer at the Game Developers Conference:

> "The DEI was designed as a creative space where people could challenge themselves, develop their abilities and learn alongside one another in a warm, encouraging environment. But instead, [the incubator] was viewed as a support group underscored and necessitated by the reaction to an unequal social world, and where learning was secondary to the formation of bonds and relationships."

<div align="right">Alexander (2012)</div>

Closing down opportunities to gain an understanding grounded in other experiences about the lack of female game developers in Toronto not only goes against previously-stated intentions, but is also another example of structural inequity between organizers and participants, as well as highlights how women's experiences continue to be trivialized and their voices silenced. The absence of a dialogic or reciprocal working relationship made participants feel that they were being wrangled into subordinate positions in relation to the organizers – the inferior "aspiring female game developer" who allows emotions to get in the way of making games.

Modelling the Indie Way of Doing Things

In praxis, making a difference requires that the knowledge, culture, and conditions of those on the outside should be privileged over dominant cultural values. Those who commit to improving the lives and conditions of the excluded are critical cultural workers, and they should be the ones to struggle with the hegemonic values that are present in society and within themselves (Friere, 1970). DEI was promoted as an intervention to tackle issues of inequality and it is therefore unsurprising that participants expected that equality would be the framework guiding their incubator experience, both in terms of how they interacted with organizers to make games, as well as how they would work to create social change, as partners.

Organizers of DEI1 presented themselves as equals by creating games alongside participants; however this did little to erase the clear hierarchical relation between them. DEI1 was conceptualized as a traditional model for teaching and learning, where novices learn from experts and the "exchange" of knowledge and ideas works as a unidirectional transmission.[8] As previously mentioned, employing a top-down model in a community education initiative implies that experts fully understand the issue at hand and know how to fix it. Indeed, before they had met participants to ask what they needed, the organizers had already outlined a full curriculum for the program based on what they believed participants needed to become empowered. When the solution to perceived needs is an administered response, learners are viewed as consumers of a predefined pedagogy, effectively "rendered passive, positioned as the recipients of predefined knowledge and services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions" (Fraser, 1989, p. 174; McDermott, 1993). The implementation of such a model demonstrates that contrary to the motivation of DEI and the intentions of the organizers, in practice, these incubators served to re-entrench an authoritarian environment that limited the agency of the participants through the persistent interpellation of a fixed and limited subject-position.

The adherence to a predefined model was a source of tension between organizers and the participants of DEI1. We would like to note that the DEI1 program is a carbon copy of the Artsy Games Incubator (AGI), an HES program encouraging artists to extend their practice to games development. Significantly, the AGI did not have a social justice agenda, nor was it a female-only space. Yet organizers did not modify the AGI program for use in DEI1 – everything, from curriculum to delivery, remained untouched and was imported wholesale. This one size fits all approach to teaching game design – no matter who the participants are – ironically demonstrates an insensitivity to individual differences, as well as HES organizers' commitment to not disrupt established practices. When participants suggested alternative ways of doing things, these ideas were rejected because they challenged "how things are done." For instance, participants wanted to use Twitter to communicate with each other in lieu of email or the DEI blog hosted on the HES page, both which were found to be unsuitable for their needs. The participants' knowledge and frequent use of Twitter made it an ideal tool to facilitate a peer-mentoring educational environment, where they could make requests for help and also provide assistance to each other quickly and easily. Twitter was, however, a technology used by participants, but not the organizers. Organizers did not stop participants from using Twitter as the primary mode of communication, but they also did not encourage it, nor did they make an effort to use it themselves. If participants wanted help from organizers, they would have to approach them through the channels that the organizers themselves were comfortable with.

We argue that this tension around the use of Twitter is less about the tool itself, and more about what it represents and enables: direct peer-to-peer support and assistance disrupts the hierarchical structure that the incubator operated on. Organizers were not uncomfortable with learning a new tool, but with how it modified the way things were done. Indeed, in their pre-DEI written description of "support," for example, the contributions of local mentors and HES organizers are mentioned, but not peer-to-peer help networks: "we will be bringing in local mentors as well as providing lots of advice, tips, answers to questions, and support for the game makers" (Metanet, 2011).

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A more significant example relates to the unveiling of the DEI1 games. To promote female visibility at the event, participants requested that they be able to stand on stage with the organizers and introduce the games personally. Independent game development was a potential full-time career option for some of the women and it was very important to them that they be known and recognized as individuals, and not lumped together and introduced en masse, or as indistinguishable from each other. This request was rejected on two grounds – (1) organizers insisted that the game should, and would, "speak for itself" and for you, and (2) the majority of the game-playing public does not know or care about the person behind the game anyways. The use of two normative (and contradicting) discourses as a rationale to reject this modest request to increase female visibility (an issue they knew and experienced first hand at HES events) was troubling for participants, as it seemed counterproductive to the objective of doing things differently. This oddity was later bolstered when participants learned that the (mostly male) participants of the AGI were allowed to talk about their games at their social, and that the guest speaker of the night would be showcasing her work-in-progress game to the audience. When confronted about this double-standard at the DEI1 post-mortem, the organizers admitted that their decision was made out of concern for participants' reception within the community, as the high level of publicity and media attention on DEI was apparently producing a negative backlash from some male indie game developers as preferential treatment. The organizers wanted to simultaneously "protect" participants as well as appease community members who were upset at the special attention and perceived hand outs that these women were receiving. Such a response to the expressed desires of the participants is exemplar of both the paternalism of the top-down incubator model, as well as the contradicting discourses that circulated within the incubator, as protectionist measures do not align with the organizer's injunction to develop a thick skin.

These examples of tension are representative of the ways in which unequal power dynamics produced a schism between participants and organizers even though everyone involved was ostensibly working towards the same goal. Participants were expected to follow through with the program, but not make any changes to it or question the status quo of how things get done in this community of practice. As the weeks went on, participants became bolder in pursuing what they knew they needed and decided as a group to create their own conditions for empowerment, including making radical changes to the organization of DEI2 (which two DEI1 participants facilitated), and forming the basis for a community group focused on addressing the many barriers to entry and multiple potential types of aspiring female game developers, as discussed in more detail below.

DEI1 could be characterized as an expert-centered learning experience that sought to groom these female game developers for entry within the community in a way that was undisruptive to the existing power structures. It is important to note, however, that these tensions and conflicts had a productive outcome of creating conditions for group cohesion, which then led to the restructuring of the second incubator. In response to the authoritarian environment of DEI1, the facilitators of DEI2 took a collaborative approach in the conceptualization and execution of the second iteration, leading to a more democratic forum where organizers did not make assumptions of participants' capabilities, needs, or preferences. For example, instead of limiting participants to using object-oriented game development tools, DEI2 organizers offered a range of tools for all skill-levels for participants to consult, with the prerogative to also use tools that were not on the list or beyond the expertise of the organizers. While DEI1 participants only used two tools

(Stencyl and Game Maker), DEI2 participants each used a different tool, ranging from Adventure Game Studio to Flash to Unity, and were much more experimental in terms of content and mode (see for example *The Immoral Ms. Conduct,* a game about young women's' experiences in prison played on YouTube, cf. Poplar, 2012). DEI2 participants were also fully involved in the planning of their showcase, which did not feature a guest speaker and focused completely on the participants and their accomplishments during the incubator.

Understanding the underlying causes for the friction in the first sessions enabled the leaders of DEI2 to foster a participant-centered environment that was inclusive, open to feedback, and subject to participant-driven change. Unsurprisingly, the DEI2 participants reported a greater level of satisfaction with their experiences. Significantly, the topic of gender-based discrimination and exclusion was one that emerged less frequently in DEI2, and we suggest that this may be because inclusion was intentionally built into the structure of this incubator as opposed to simply providing motivation.

Challenging Indie Ideology

These divergent methods of organizing DEI1 and DEI2 demonstrate how the use of particular dominant discourses can serve to maintain an exclusionary field of practice, whether it is in mainstream games culture or the indie games scene. In our conversations and observations, what was most pervasive and disconcerting was the sentiment that we are past the point where gender matters because we have achieved equality, and our success is solely premised on a meritocracy wherein individuals have the unhindered freedom to do and be all that they want. This perspective was articulated by one of the two organizers during her presentation "Why I Hate Women in Games Initiatives" at the 2012 Game Developers Conference on her DEI1 experience. When considering this disavowal of women-focused projects like the DEI, we can understand her hesitation to support the participants in ways they wanted as partly a product of her own personal experience taking up the female game developer subject-position; nobody helped her, she always felt like she needed to have a thick skin to deal with this environment, and she (as well as the very few other women in the industry) found success. However, this "if I can do it, you can do it too" attitude is problematic because it elides the important differences between her experience as a woman in indie game design and others who have faced other forms of intersectional oppression. The organizer's use of personal experience as evidence that women can succeed "without handouts" reproduces given ideological systems and does not allow us to see difference as constituted relationally (Scott, 1991). What is missing is recognition of other intersections with gaming culture (including, but not limited to, race, class, sex, age, orientation, and ability) that can constrain, as well as enable, what is considered to be legitimate access to and participation within gaming culture. Within the discourse of meritocracy - which is prevalent in the post-feminist, neoliberal sensibility that emphasizes the empowerment available through choice without addressing how political and cultural influences limit our choices – present-day women are autonomous agents that face none of the previous power imbalances (Gill, 2007). Here, women have recourse to free choice, and to succeed, the strategy is typically to become more like a man. This is in no way an inclusive strategy, as it charges those who wish to participate with fitting into a mould rather than questioning such a mould in the first place.

In this way, the indie culture that purports to be in opposition to the practices of the mainstream games industry mirrors some of the keys ways of excluding women from participation. The DEI was meant to introduce difference into Toronto's homogeneous indie game scene, and yet when difference was enacted or suggested, it was bypassed by HES organizers in favour of maintaining a construction of first-time female game developers that created minimal disruption to the status quo both within the incubator and in the community. Difference abounded in DEI: between participants, between participants and the 'aspiring developer' construction, between participants' and organizers' ideas of what was needed to feel empowered, and more than can be listed in this short paper. We do not doubt the sincerity of the organizers' intentions to diversify their community; however, we think it is important to recognize that the "add women and stir" approach we observed in DEI1 is not interventionist work that can make significant gains for women in the long run.

In many ways, the rhetoric of meritocracy reflects and indeed reifies the post-feminist and neoliberal context of digital games culture at large, where the increase of women players arguably diversifies the player population but the underlying framework continues to cast female participation as innately subordinate or inferior to their male counterparts (Harvey, 2011; Jenson, Fisher & de Castell, 2011). The numbers indicating broader participation in games culture are by no means an adequate signifier of cultural change.

New Girl in Town

Reluctance to deviate from sanctioned, normalized practices – whether it be the theories and methods we use, or the roles we play– can snuff out opportunities to experiment with different or new praxes that might improve the lives of those on the margins (Freire, 2000; Jenson & de Castell, 2011). Dominant ideas are not adequate to reverse the reproduction of the forms of exclusion that characterized the culture. A more appropriate starting point is critical dialogue and a profound respect for the disadvantaged and their knowledge. As adult women who were all too familiar with experiences and practices that cast them as always already inferior in the larger games community, it was disheartening to re-experience it in an initiative that was meant to introduce difference and change. We cannot ignore, however, the ways in which DEI laid the groundwork for more sustained and inclusive models of participation, and provided opportunities for women in Toronto to get into indie game development.

Despite the challenges, DEI had an extremely positive impact on the community, both in making women's game design and activist work visible. Furthermore, it directly shaped the revamp of the second incubator, and addressed how the community could accommodate demand for women-only workshops and spaces (i.e. how to serve the other women who attended the preliminary information session or applied to participate). Reflecting on their experiences in DEI1, participants and allies were more eager than ever to work towards fostering a more inclusive indie game development community in Toronto. This prompted several participants from both incubators to create a central group for women who did not necessarily have ties to other groups within the HES collective, and/or found independent representation intimidating. The work is currently being carried out by Dames Making Games Toronto (DMG), which acts as a welcoming committee to women new to the local game development community, and provides ongoing support to women who already work in the industry. As a work-in-progress feminist

intervention space, DMG is committed to supporting women game developers and their allies through hosting casual socials, presentations and networking opportunities, training workshops and jams, and providing online support and outreach (for more about DMG, visit http://dmg.to and see Westecott, this edition).

The differences between the one-off, top-down incubator and the creation of a self-organized hub for female-identified developers can be understood in the important distinction between emphasizing the individual woman who wants to break into a community of practice with established norms and the creation of a community that strives to be safe, welcoming, and inclusive of many different types of experiences. In the former, shaping participants into the indie identity as an already-constituted subject-position is prioritized, while in the latter, building a community with a shared goal of pushing back against exclusionary norms to foster the kind of environment that allows for many different identities to take up game design is the desired outcome.

DMG supports the growth of an emergent community by addressing needs that were not being met by the existing infrastructures around indie game design, and indeed challenges the solo auteur vision of the indie designer in general by emphasizing the important role of colleagues, collaborators and support groups for those seeking to engage in independent game design (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011). Independence refers not to the emancipated individualism celebrated in the rhetoric of neoliberalism but to self-supported and self-motivated labour that is often lonely, incredibly challenging, and rarely lucrative. Community can provide instrumental resources, as well as provide the support that was so denigrated within DEI1 when the organizers dismissed the importance of sharing experiences of sexism and exclusion as important to the production process, further advising participants to combat feelings of exclusion and inferiority by turning a blind eye towards elements and practices of a sexist culture.

While one can potentially seek out and receive assurance elsewhere, marginalized groups often face a different set of challenges in hegemonic spaces that are not often understood by those in privileged positions. Building a community committed to exploring and addressing these issues is vitally important to addressing barriers. For some, strong, supportive relationships can be as fundamental to the game development process as a computer, and while DEI participants took advantage of the networking opportunities and developed relationships with others in the larger Toronto indie scene, it did not replace the security and reassurance provided by the cohort of others in a similar position.

Conclusion

Being indie in no way translates to being inclusive. Rather, a great deal of the values and meanings associated with going indie actually reify the structural inequalities of the mainstream industry through the valuation of a supposed meritocracy that not only denies persistent systemic exclusion but celebrates in its own way the precarious labour conditions of digital games production. The process of becoming an indie developer in DEI1 was not a disruption, but an expansion, where those in power maintained their roles and status while the foundation upon which they stood grew through the expansion of the number of indie game developers, small studio start-ups, and transmedia engagements with game mechanics *within* the current

frameworks and practices of production. Inducting more women into this 'model community' without questioning the dominant narratives of the system that excluded them was the identified solution, but participants pushed back, turning their efforts towards community-building activities that circumvented the legitimization of particular practices, objects, language, knowledges and subject-positions related to 'being indie'. By embracing rather than resisting the dynamism and variation of needs within, the members of DMG are instrumental in rewriting what being indie in Toronto might look like and committed to actively creating opportunities and openings for difference to be engineered.

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[1] We use the term digital games to refer to any and all digital games played online or offline, on a gaming console, computer, or handheld gaming device.

[2] The authors took on the role of what the organizers called 'embedded academics' and fully participated in the incubators alongside the other women, including developing and showcasing a playable game in DEI1. Stephanie was the embedded academic in DEI1 and Alison in DEI2.

[3] This statement does not imply that indie games are or should be considered amateur productions, or that indie game developers are amateurs in terms of their skills and/or professionalism in comparison to professionals who work in larger studios. Rather, the point here is that this art style is used as a response to the overemphasis on art realism and 3D modelling tools as representative of "better" (i.e. more expensive) games.

[4] DEI was part of TIFF Nexus, a provincially funded initiative to explore a range of emerging trends in interaction design (one of which was diversifying the field and industry by bringing in and working with marginalized groups) and foster connections between academics, industry members and enthusiasts. Additional information about the TIFF Nexus project can be accessed at http://tiffnexus.net. Please see to Harvey & Fisher (forthcoming) for further discussion of DEI participants' activities within the TIFF Nexus network.

[5] The women selected to participate in DEI were middle class, born in North America, between the ages of 20-30, of Caucasian or east-Asian descent, and had completed some form of post-secondary education. Most participants were either involved in a new media or technology-related career (e.g. freelance illustrator, graphic designer, film production, network administrator, professional blogger, etc.); however, none were working in the games industry prior to their involvement in DEI.

[6] An exception here is when researchers employ a participatory action research (PAR) methodology and framework, where participants are (typically) involved in the research process from the initial stages.

[7] We focus on the actions of the female organizer in this paper because she played a more active leadership role in DEI1 than the male organizer, who acted as her mentor. Although they referred to each other as co-organizers, in practice the female organizer did the work of facilitating the sessions and communicating with participants and journalists. Having the female organizer lead and represent DEI1 was a strategic move to hedge the (anticipated) criticism of a male presence within a designated female-only space. The implications of this male gaze/surveillance of the DEI1 participants and the female organizer were not lost on researchers, participants and the journalists and community members who followed the activities of DEI (cf. Creighton, 2011).

[8] To be clear, our criticism of this model is focused on how it (again) relegates participants into a subordinate position, not the pedagogy per se.