# Book Review: Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity

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Jesper Juul. 2019. *Handmade Pixels: Independent Video Games and the Quest for Authenticity*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019, 328pp ISBN NO.9780262042796

How can we look at videogames art historically? The art historian has to balance the aesthetic qualities of objects, their social context, and the always-murky intent of their creator to narratively create an argument for why these things are the way they are, and their relevance to the category of "art." Along these lines, Jesper Juul's approach to analysing indie game aesthetics, the context of their production and the goals of their creators is similar to the argument presented in Lana Polansky's writings at Rhizome, that "indie games" as a recent phenomenon are a product of specific development practices, distribution models and resulting aesthetic positions, more like a "style" rather than the definitive emergence of new alternative production models or loftier aesthetic and cultural concerns within videogames, which have always run alongside the medium in various forms (Polansky, 2016).

Following his previous book on casual games, *Handmade Pixels* is a reflection on the development of independent, or "indie" games as an influential category within videogames. Much of the existing material on the phenomena of "indie" games falls into analysis of commercial and development processes, such as where it is mentioned in popular texts like *Blood Sweat and Pixels* (Schreier, 2017) or academic ones such as Ruffino's (2012) "Narratives

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**Author Biography**

Emilie Reed is a writer, researcher and curator investigating the exhibition of videogames and their history. She completed her PhD at the University of Abertay, titled *Arcades, Let's Plays, and Avant-Gardes: Perspectives for Analyzing and Developing Videogame Exhibitions for Arts Audiences*, which connects forms of technological, interactive, and rule-based artworks and their relationships to art institutions with issues facing the exhibition and conservation of videogames. She has curated work for the Now Play This festival, the Babycastles gallery, and the Blank Arcade 2016. Her research has been published in *ToDiGRA* and *Indie Games in the Digital Age* anthology. She has also written for online publications like *Rock Paper Shotgun*, *EGM*, and *The Arcade Review*.

of Independent Production in Video Game Culture." Academic journals and digital publications discussing videogames also frequently present thematic analyses of specific indie games (see Gallagher, 2019, and Pieschel, 2016, for examples). This book makes a welcome shift of focus to a more historical perspective, with an additional focus on the aesthetic qualities of these games. Juul also clearly defines the scope of his historical focus and aesthetic analysis by looking at winners and nominees of major independent game festivals based in North America and Europe. This is both a strength and a weakness of the overall narrative Juul presents.

On the one hand, his arguments when applied to the changes in origin, sensibility, and scale of the winning videogames at festivals like the Independent Games Festival (IGF), Indiecade and A MAZE over time are hard to disagree with. Juul isolates common threads and themes in the types of highly influential independent production which trickle down to play a role in determining the primary aesthetics on platforms like Steam and the Apple Arcade, and to communities of practice in game development more broadly. Surveying the winners of these festivals over time, Juul comes across three primary ways that independent game makers frame their independence, and what kind of aesthetic choices and narratives of authenticity result from these framings.

Initially, the "independent games" featured in these competitions were, in terms of goal, play style, narrative and visual aesthetic, smaller scale or lower budget versions of established AAA types of videogames, created without financial backing from existing major publishers or game companies. However, various narratives for presenting independent work as meaningfully different from small-time mainstream industry imitators emerged, and subsequent winners indicate these shifts over time. In addition to financial independence, represented by the first category, independent videogames moved on to attempt to define themselves as "aesthetically independent" and eventually "culturally independent" within this context.

Aesthetic independence is described as being independent from mainstream games in formal or aesthetic qualities, and culturally independent games present themselves as a break from the political and cultural positions of mainstream games. While financial independence is a matter of where funding and resources for the games' development comes from, aesthetic and cultural independence can take more subjective, contextual and varied forms. Juul uses the term "authenticity work," initially coined by the country music historian Richard Peterson, to describe the processes players, developers and critics engage in when they frame specific types of games as representative of this idea of independence. This may be related to how the developers present themselves as auteurs able to reflect and innovate on existing videogame tropes, or as authentic representatives of a political position or marginalized group. It can also be communicated through the aesthetic choices within the work, from self-referential retro styles or a tactile "handmade" appearance, to the narrative and gameplay elements, which can rely on existing insider knowledge of videogames, or refer to personal or political themes.

Identifying all of these elements as aesthetic qualities many independent games share and define themselves by is a useful way of exploring broader aspects of the indie game phenomenon. Multifaceted perspectives on aesthetics are not often discussed within Game Studies, even though videogames are diverse, and often overwhelming, technological and audio-visual media. I appreciated that Juul's work also attempts to address specific aesthetic qualities of indie games, but ultimately these sections left me wanting more engagement with the complex ways videogames specifically can be read through contemporary discussions on aesthetics.

A major weakness is the lack of drawing on more diverse and contemporary sources in these discussions. In the same way that researchers often seek to appeal to the authority of older ideas when they make comparisons between recent videogames and more historical forms of gaming like chess, Juul's citations of relevant discussions of aesthetics and examples from art history are weighted towards older, notable names, rather than engaging with the process that got us from Kant's disinterested contemplation to the complicated discussions around practice and aesthetics that exist in, for example, simulation-driven or virtual world-based New Media Art.

That the aesthetics section mostly relies on existing game studies texts about the vague idea of "play" seems like a missed opportunity to engage with new sources for understanding a highly mediated and technological art practice.  For example, Graham and Cook's (2010) *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media,* provided an overview of the varied "behaviours" which new media formats allow, and how these behaviours affect typical approaches to displaying, viewing and analysing artworks. Other Game Studies scholars like Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) have incorporated consideration of these qualities and used insights from studies of digital aesthetics and hacking cultures to inform their analysis of speedrunning and modding in *Metagaming.*  These are insights into aesthetic developments that a focus on "play" in the traditional sense, or a history of videogames that presents them as separate from hacking, consumer software and the internet cannot incorporate.

An important question when evaluating an academic book is: what is this book for? With its abundance of full-color images, straightforwardly broken up sections, and sidebars providing quotes from interviews with independent game developers, it feels like the aim of this book is to be a textbook for the increasing number of game design courses which are moving away from mainly preparing their students for large studio development pipelines, now also steering them towards medium to small studio roles, or starting their own solo or independent enterprise. The lack of reflection on the remit of the book, with Juul only spending a few sentences, largely attributed to another writer, on the fact that the discussed festivals are based in the US and Europe, almost all charge an entrance fee, and many require the nominees to attend in person to receive the award, limits most of the later discussion of aesthetics and cultural authenticity to works made in a context where a creator consciously makes this initial "investment" in their work anticipating a potential entrepreneurial "return," either in

money, reputation, or future publishing and funding opportunities.

This may suit many who organize game design programmes within the current neoliberal, customer-oriented university system. In that sense, this book is a good guide to existing aesthetic concerns and forms of practice for independent developers seeking to effectively frame and distribute their work within these major festivals. This is no small thing, but it's not everything either. While the focus on a specific set of festivals works as a historical context, it has the effect of writing out many alternative practices and contexts as major influences on the aesthetics, production, and distribution of videogames in general.

For example, the IGF Pirate Kart is only mentioned briefly. This project sought to compile a large variety of games which were implicitly excluded by the entrance fee and aesthetic norms of the IGF, and utilized the form of commonly bootlegged "1000-in-one" style cartridges to present hundreds of these games at once. The community surrounding the Glorious Trainwrecks website was strongly represented in the unconventional ethos of the project as well as the chaotic, humorous, and personal character of many of the included games, but within the text is not mentioned or credited in the direction this project took. Examples like this are not merely too marginal or "overlooked" within the already marginal independent game scene to be worth mentioning in depth. Many creators whose commercial work is mentioned elsewhere in the book released smaller scale or prototype projects through this site, which means making such a connection could provide valuable historical context.

As Brendan Keogh (2018) observed in his analysis of varied game making practices, these are "the much broader field of creative practice that the formal videogame industry is (and has always been) embedded within." And in this case, the absence of these works, contrasted with the sizeable presence in the text of games which had already, years ago, started discussions of a hegemonic indie aesthetic such as *Braid*, can only seem like a deliberate exclusion. Practices which, for a variety of reasons, including resources, scale, programming ability, location, copyright law and even just the aesthetic inclinations of an individual, do not lend to them being positively evaluated by major conferences and festivals can only appear as marginal notes in a history that is based around official narratives and accolades. This creates an incomplete picture where things like Twine, flash portals, and fangame communities appear as small details next to the amount of analysis and prominence granted commercially distributed titles with an identifiable programmer figure, if they are mentioned at all. Juul cites sociologists of culture like H.S. Becker and Pierre Bourdieu whose work illuminates these structural problems, but their insights should have been applied more thoroughly to the focus of the book itself.

When Juul laments that aesthetic authenticity work also risks "importing more traditional views of what an artist looks like," and yet generally limits his inquiry to games which can be framed in this way, he arguably extends this problematic framing to another book speaking about artistic, experimental or independent games. Moments gesture at the deeper insights

further critique could offer, such as an analysis of the backlash faced by *Flappy Bird* creator Dong Nguyen, who had created what was essentially a financially and aesthetically independent (and very successful) casual phone game, and yet was largely rejected as a legitimate indie game creator primarily due to his country of origin. Ultimately there is too little questioning of the already well-trod indie game narrative, or the common assumptions of game studies as a discipline to fully address this lack.

While Juul offers new ways of looking at the entrepreneurial winners of the indie games boom, the conclusions feel limited in their ability to interpret everything else happening in the context of "indie games:" the creators who are finding ways to squeeze their own idiosyncratic work into this system, or attempting to find a niche outside of it. Returning to Polansky's (2016) *Rhizome* article, she notes "a cultural shift that begins with a historical understanding of games-as-art which doesn't treat this reality as anomalous, "fringe" or somehow contradictory, will open up our contemporary understanding of the form, and let in scores of artists who've been excluded from consideration."

This book offers a history and set of aesthetic concerns that are quite applicable to a specific set of international festivals and awards, which in some cases have become synonymous with what individuals, publishers, and institutions mean when they use the term "indie," but it also is insufficient when framed as a broader overview of independent games, or even the recent era of "indie games." Despite some insightful observations, this book is dissatisfying to me at this moment in time because Juul's methods appear to move in the opposite direction that Polansky's analysis encourages, reinforcing definitions and categories at the expense of an acknowledgement of an increasingly splintered and varied field, which has now far exceeded just three categories, or three festivals.

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