



## *Our Immiscible Future*

*April 27, 2013*

Here it is, I think: the moment the world of video games definitively chunked up into discrete groups and congealed. The emulsifier we used to have, this kind of shared sense of exploring a new medium, simply isn't working any more. The space has grown too big, the number of participants intractable. We've been denying it for as long as we could, saying to ourselves and to gamers: don't worry, good games are good games, no matter where they come from! Big triple-a developers and indies are great friends! Heavily systems-driven games and not-games can play together!

In fact this is not really true, not any longer.

I've commented to a few people that GDC this year reminded me of entering high school, and I didn't mean this as a criticism, exactly. It was more that the feeling in the air reminded me of when the social structures of one's classroom, amorphous through the elementary years, really start to become sharply defined— when you realize that hanging with a certain group means cutting yourself off from other groups, not because they implicitly hate each other, but because their world views are incompatible.

There have long been “indie versus mainstream” arguments, of course, but they never really amounted to anything meaningful. Partially this is because indie itself is an overburdened word, used to describe twenty-person startups as much as a solitary dabbler. More importantly, while indie implies an absence of corporate funding and influence, indie certainly did not deny itself capitalist influence overall. The most famous indies are now self-made millionaires, and the definitively-titled *Indie Game: The Movie* celebrated this fact. Many of the developers today who self-identify as “indies” clearly hope to follow those footsteps precisely.

Thus, if indies really did mean to break with the mainstream industry, they did so incompletely, and quickly began to recapitulate some of the structures and patterns that made the mainstream so undesirable in the first place. At the IGF awards, host Andy Schatz quipped

that indies used to be The Clash but were now Green Day (and with the actual punk movement thoroughly digested and regurgitated in the form of [lush coffee table books](#) and a [costume show](#) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, this comment was at once resonant and dismaying).

A new broadside against both this *and* the mainstream can be found in the form of what at least one person termed the “zinesters,” and in the last few weeks a loose, sloshing argument formed on blogs and social media about... well, it was difficult to determine exactly what it was all about. Part of my unease with that “formalists versus zinesters” “debate” was how unnecessary it seemed (beyond providing some personal edification to the instigators); it was as if a faculty member from Juilliard had expressed a desire for “a dialogue” with Sid Vicious about chord progressions. It’s not that these two don’t see eye to eye on matters of music theory, which is what the professor thinks, it’s that the punks have arrived on the scene with such a completely different set of values that they might as well be from different planets.

There is also little fruit to be found in having a “dialogue,” I think, because it doesn’t seem particularly hard to see where the “zinesters” (if I must use that word) are coming from, and the idea that they need to explain themselves is confounding. This group consciously and deliberately rejects indie’s failed split from the mainstream and its poorly-concealed capitalist underpinnings, and instead upholds personal expression as the highest ideal, the only goal that matters. And in order to do that successfully,

they must break off completely, not at a branch somewhere on the tree but at the very root of the established order. This cannot be papered over or explained away; no amount of hemming and hawing over the definition of the word “game” will fix the fact that there are games out there now that willfully abnegate other games.

That refutation is necessary and inevitable. It is both thrilling and, for me, tinged with a little sadness. The image of high school cliques I brought up earlier has negative connotations, and it would be understandable to wish that we could return to the prelapsarian niceness of thinking that everyone should hang out with everyone else. Wouldn't it be great if we could all still be in this video game thing together, eventually agreeing on a universal definition of game, or art, or whatever else? But there is no going back. We try to come out of our teenage years with a slightly better sense of ourselves, but there is an element to defining the self that is made out of forsaking something else. That's just something that happens as you grow up.

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**MC** 9 years ago · 0 Likes

the dialogue should be happening through the games, not people's twitter or blog comments. the best refutation to any argument on art is a well-executed piece of art. because we're a bunch of fucking nerds, gamers get caught up in theoretical shit way more than is healthy for the medium.



**Chris Bateman** 10 years ago · 0

Likes

Hola,

Very interesting perspective, thanks for sharing.

I confess to not really knowing who the "zinesters" are supposed to be, but regardless: no matter how much they declare themselves separatists from the fusion of capitalism and games, they are intimately entangled in capitalist production because their medium is the computer, which can only be an industrial product. This is a lazy kind of rebellion - unfairly compared to punk in many ways, although perhaps via the electric guitar the same critique could be launched at the 1970s.

This reminds me of the way that some gamers despise the big corporations while subscribing to Xbox Live and praising Notch for succeeding "on

his own". Oh the irony - the accumulation of money is acceptable when it is concentrated in a \*smaller\* number of people! What a strange perspective on finances we're carrying around in our heads...

Alas, most of the low grade pappy games out there in the fringes of indie development are utterly parasitic on the games establishment. More power to them if they want to make what they want to make, but more fool them if they think they're treading new ground. There are some wonderfully creative corners to the development community, but much that is interesting is happening with small teams that accept the commercial background of games development while rejecting the corporate culture of mass production and lowest common denominator franchises. It is not a crime to be paid for work, and 'creative expression' should not be confused with 'derivative individuality'. There's a hell of a lot more of the latter than the former in the shady corners of gamedom!

Hmmm... wrote more than intended - ever my sin!

Very stimulating. Many thanks!

Chris.



**Daniel Primed** 10 years ago · 0

Likes

There are a few things I find terribly confusing about the zinester vs formalist argument. Firstly, where are the formalists? It appears that this label has been given to anyone who has ever tried to anchor their discussion by defining a word or two, as opposed to real formalists who use a \_vocabulary\_ to critically discuss games (like this guy: <http://critical-gaming.com/>), of which there are perhaps less than five in the blogosphere. Secondly, why do zinesters care what formalists think? I'm a formalist because I want to ground my discussion of games in clear language; what does this have to do with someone making interactive narratives in Twine? Thirdly, zinesters and formalists aren't even on opposite ends of the same spectrum, so why is there the comparison? As a formalist, I'm inclined to think that all of these terms and ideas have been conflated together because people who blog about this stuff online lack the language and understanding of games to make sense of it all. But I'm a formalist, so of course I'm going to say that. :P



**Kelsey Higham** 10 years ago · 0

Likes



It's weird to see you say

“zinesters” (if I must use that word)

and

abnegate

in the same paragraph.



**mike** 10 years ago · 0 Likes

I'm not so sure! It certainly doesn't feel like *players* have to choose sides; people can play Team Fortress, Passage, and Minecraft in quick succession without experiencing any particular cognitive dissonance. If you were to time travel to 1972 and replace half the tracks on a Beatles fan's LPs with punk rock and they didn't care, would it still be punk? Because I think that's the situation we're in. A game that willfully abnegates might be the holy grail of an upstart movement, but outside of that (thankfully) brief fad of games that deleted your hard drive as you played I don't think anyone's managed yet.



**Zolani** 10 years ago · 0 Likes

I'm okay with cliques, in the sense of games. Let people pursue their interests and reach their goals



with people who are like them. Why not?

I think the politicization or the 'side-taking', if you will, shows sign of maturity, that people within games are starting to figure out what they really want from games as a medium/industry, and they're taking action to achieve it. I think that's okay.

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