



CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORY
OF INDIE GAMING

Even the most casual of gaming observers will have noticed the 'rise of the indies' in recent years. In the era of Xbox and PlayStation dominance, contemporary console culture is as much coloured by innovative releases from the margins as it is the usual suspects, the roll call of heavyweight franchises like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Call of Duty* and *Halo*. Online stores are stuffed full of smaller, quirkier, but no less compelling, interactive experiences, from throwback-styled platformers to ingenious puzzlers and nerve-shredding horrors.

Nintendo's eShop is similarly swollen with independently realised releases, and while its Wii U and 3DS platforms aren't home to as many system exclusives as Sony and Microsoft's equivalents, the Japanese giant's acceptance of third-party gaming from tiny teams – or even a single creator – is among the most crystal indicators of the indie sector's position as a powerful player in the modern video games market.

In PC gaming, Steam (created by tech company Valve) is a channel through which members can both buy and sell software, alongside a host of community features. And when it comes to mobile gaming, Apple's App Store opens its doors to over 400 new games every day. Of course, their quality fluctuates wildly, but a great many of these smartphone-friendly downloads come from independent developers.

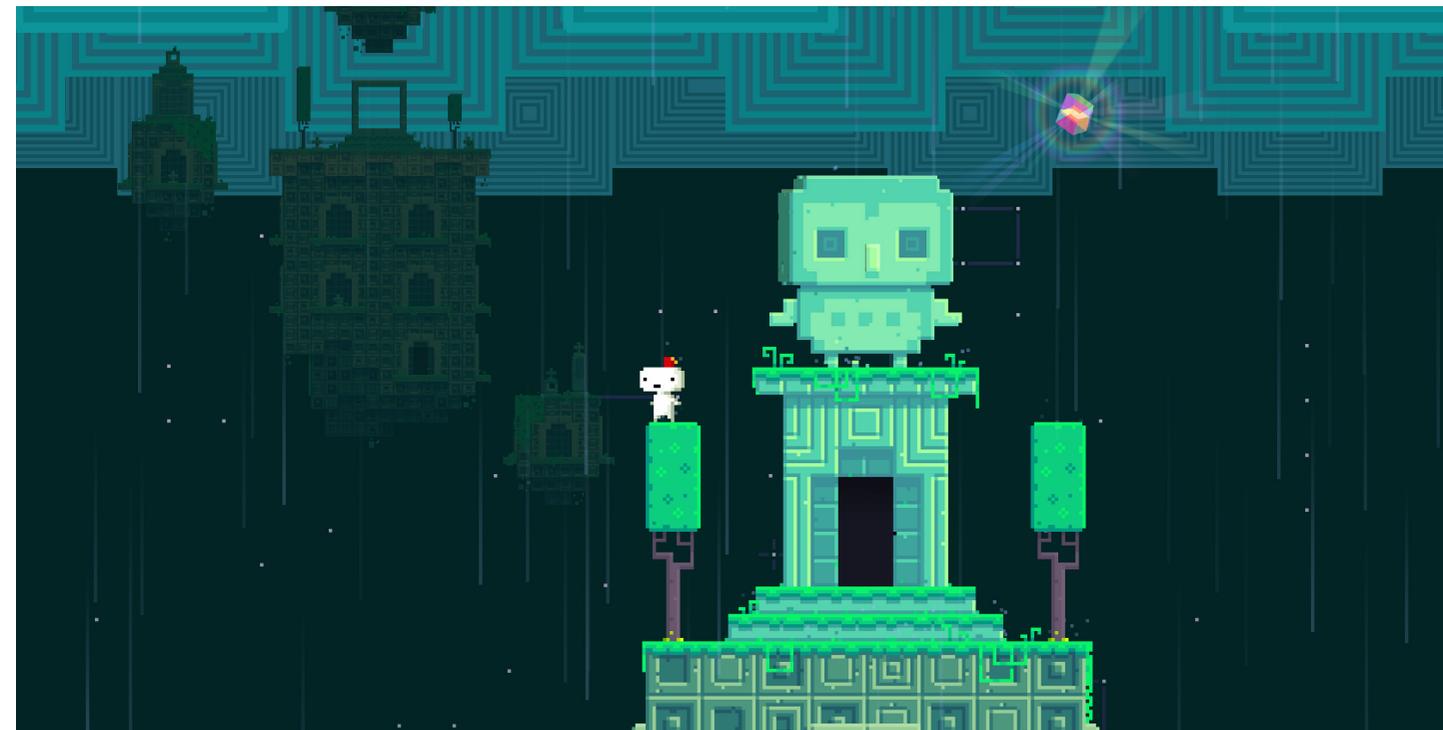
It's in the indie sphere, operating deep beneath the monolithic major studios shaping big-budget blockbusters, where genre traits and tropes are unshackled, mangled, remoulded. Here, reduced manpower and money represents no limit to imagination. It's a space of near-infinite possibility, manifested most frequently through digital distribution – cheap, reliable and direct to the homes of the consumers. It's a scene alive with excitement, with eyes set on forward momentum, rarely pausing to look back at past successes with the intention of replicating them in a shinier, slightly louder new-gen render – something that can't typically be said for those mammoth teams working on yearly iterations of gaming's biggest-selling franchises.

Think of it like movies, or music: not every film you love is a Hollywood smash, and the albums you adore aren't all from the

same major label. The same logic applies to gaming – an 'indie game' might be smaller of means, but no less affecting of appeal.

Indie's present position in the public consciousness can be traced back to the release of *Indie Game: The Movie*, a 2012 documentary made by Canadian filmmakers Lisanne Pajot and James Swirsky. Their account of the creative processes behind indie titles *Super Meat Boy* (developed by Team Meat), *Fez* (Polytron Corporation) and *Braid* (Number None, Inc) – all three of which were published initially by Microsoft and released through its Xbox Live Arcade (XBLA) service – not only provided an amazingly comprehensive slice of marketing for the games in question, but also made their core individual talents into relative, and in some cases reluctant, indie gaming celebrities. It's through *Indie Game: The Movie* that

GAME: Fez PUBLISHER: Polytron Corporation



Phil Fish (*Fez*) and Jonathan Blow (*Braid*) became figureheads for a movement that shows no sign of letting up.

‘The widely publicised success of Jonathan Blow’s *Braid*, which made him a multi-millionaire, inspired many developers at larger studios to strike out on their own,’ says British Brighton-based games journalist and author Simon Parkin, whose first non-fiction book, *Death by Video Game*, came out in 2015. ‘Independent developers answer to nobody, so don’t need to be media-trained,

or watch what they say, as they don’t have shareholders. There’s freedom in this, but peril, too. Phil Fish is a good example of an extraordinarily talented independent game maker who frequently speaks his mind, and has suffered severe consequences as a result of that openness.’

Fish announced in 2013 that he’d be exiting the indie development scene, having clashed with critics, most viciously GameTrailers’ Marcus Beer, who called Fish a ‘w***er’ and ‘f***ing asshole’,

GAME: Super Meat Boy PUBLISHER: Team Meat



GAME: Braid PUBLISHER: Number None, Inc



prior to Fish suggesting that Beer should ‘compare your life to mine, and then kill yourself’. To date he’s not followed up *Fez* with anything new. *Indie Game: The Movie* did wonderful things for *Fez*, but its profile had a career-compromising effect on its maker Fish. Just as in indie music, where some artists can’t take the fame that comes with an unexpected commercial breakthrough, indie gaming has claimed its share of victims. Nevertheless, it remains the area of the industry where imaginations can run relatively unchecked – reflecting, perfectly, comparable attitudes in music and film.

‘I’m constantly drawing that analogy when talking to people about video games,’ says American games journalist Leigh Alexander, editor-in-chief of gaming site Offworld and author of *Breathing Machine: A Memoir of Computers* and *Clipping Through: One Mad Week in Video Games*.

I can see them not really understanding what I mean, until I say: ‘Film critics wouldn’t only write about Michael Bay movies, about Hollywood productions; they’d also write about indie films.’ And then it clicks for them.

The ‘average’ punter doesn’t know what indie games are. I have to explain on a daily basis what they are, to people, when they ask what I do and why I’m interested in video games – because the evidence for being interested in games is certainly not visible in the commercial space. Even having to explain to people that there are indie games is a constant uphill thing. I still think a lot of people misunderstand what indie means. Maybe they’ve seen *Indie Game: The Movie*, but that’d be it.

But maybe they’ve – maybe *you’ve* – seen that documentary and jumped off it, into deeper waters, exploring entirely new territories of video gaming culture. And it’s not as if indie gaming as we know it began with the work of two filmmakers. Gaming began as an independent enterprise long before corporations properly formed and colossal publishers – Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, Square Enix,



ABOVE
GAME: *Elite Dangerous*
PUBLISHER: Frontier Developments

RIGHT
GAME: *Elite 1984*
PUBLISHER: Acornsoft



Rockstar and so on – established their grip on the industry. In the beginning, the makers of games were doing things by themselves, in a manner so certifiably DIY that one can draw parallels between it and the fundamental principles of the music scene’s punk circles: self-production, self-promotion, self-distribution.

‘I think that the independent games scene of today echoes the 1980s,’ says David Braben OBE, the CEO of Frontier Developments, the studio behind *Elite: Dangerous*, and co-creator of that game’s seminal 1984 forefather, *Elite*.

We go directly to customers now, and in the early '80s there was a period where games were distributed by stuffing envelopes from home with cassettes you duplicated yourself and photocopies of instructions that you folded up and put into the cassette box. We've been helped by a lot of what are now called indie games, which are bringing in new ideas. Games have got very close to coming of age. If you look at film, it took quite a while to become a medium in its own right. Early films were really just a joining together of spectacle – men hanging from clock faces, railway trains hitting cars on crossroads. It wasn't really until the late 1930s and 1940s, and the likes of Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles with *Citizen Kane*, that they became a medium in their own right. Otherwise they were more of an adjunct to stories that'd first made their mark in literature.

I think games have been doing the same. They've gradually, through indie games primarily, become things in their own right. And they're growing. We've not often taken advantage of the way we can do storytelling in games, which is a new way. Film didn't take advantage of how it could tell stories for quite a while.

Just as it's incorporating new gameplay mechanics within familiar frameworks – take a look at Finnish studio FacePalm's *The Swapper*, ostensibly a puzzle-platformer, but one where the player clones their character to reach new areas – indie gaming today is embracing storytelling in a way that's never been attempted before. This new energy has revealed itself via both (fairly) conventionally scripted but envelope-pushing interactive narratives – check out Michael Lutz's text-only horror game *The Uncle Who Works For Nintendo*, which is free to play online. It's there, too, in the reserved yet riveting minimalism, and narrative ambiguity, of Danish studio Playdead's 2010 critical hit *Limbo*: a nameless boy navigates a succession of deadly traps and puzzles in pursuit of his missing sister, only for the game to cut straight to black, no denouement offered, upon him reaching the end.



GAME: *The Swapper* PUBLISHER: Facepalm Games, Curve Digital

And then there's the emergent plots generated by open-world, user-shaped releases, which happen without direct designer influence, cued instead by whatever the player does within the vast worlds they're provided with. The most successful of these indie releases is the global phenomenon of *Minecraft*. 'In indie



GAME: Minecraft PUBLISHER: Mojang, 4J Studios



GAME: Minecraft PUBLISHER: Mojang, 4J Studios

there's hundreds and hundreds of popular brands,' says Alexander. 'And *Minecraft* is an indie game! There's a lot of very financially successful indie games, especially if you look at the App Store, where everyone's indie, basically.'

Dan Pinchbeck, founder of British indie studio The Chinese Room (best known for *Dear Esther*, *Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*), agrees that *Minecraft's* breakthrough has done wonders for 'mainstream' acceptance of indie gaming. 'The importance of *Minecraft* in breaking free of the graphics arms race and becoming one of the most popular games on the planet is hugely important,' he says. 'Games don't have to just look better and better. You now reach for the game that *interests* you – [and with indie gaming] there isn't a limited amount shelf space with just four or five titles.'

Minecraft creator Markus Persson, known in gaming circles as Notch, ultimately sold his indie studio Mojang to Microsoft for an eye-watering \$2.5 billion, subsequently buying himself a Beverly Hills mansion that'd also caught the attention of superstar couple Beyoncé and Jay Z. That a Swedish games designer in his mid-thirties

with one hit game (albeit an unprecedented runaway one) beneath his belt was able to out-bid two of the music industry's wealthiest players says much about gaming's overall financial growth – global gaming revenues have outstripped those of Hollywood for a few years now. But it also says something significant about indie gaming, and what drives its array of original-thinking artists.

It says that one amazing idea can change the gaming landscape completely. It says that money's great, sure, but that having the right independent spirit is what's going to lead to the most worthy rewards. With today's hardware, any game can look amazing. But it's how it feels, and makes *you*, the player, feel, that really matters.