Independent Games, Systems, and the Industry

Like independent press, music, or video games, the idea that there are defining characteristics that constitute "indie roleplaying games" is not simple. A typical argument is that independence implies that the organisation is not subject to funding from outside sources such as investment capital. Nevertheless, one must also recognise the potential of benefactor funding (as was once more common in the arts), which did not impede on independence. Another elaboration of this is that somehow an independent production is antithetical to commercial quality or commercial success, mass popularity, or even the capacity to achieve these successes. This is not unusual with the music industry, where there is not only a certain degree of hipness associated with not being a major label, a defining quality of the majors is having their own distribution channels. However it is certainly not necessarily the case in video game industry, with games such as Minecraft which satisfies all three criteria, and yet is most certainly 'independent'. The Independent RPG Game Awards classify independent as meaning (a) the author retains full copyright over the work and (b) at least 50% of the product is the author's material (to make up from outsourced artwork etc). The awards also note, "[a] fully independent game would be one where the same person or people did all steps of product, including art, layout, printing, and distribution."

Whilst one could get into subcategories such as semi-independent producers who are owned by a larger parent company (e.g., so-called "boutique" labels in music), it would seem that, the strongest definition that cuts across industries and medium is that the producer is either a individual or a cooperative venture of the producers themselves. This provides a particularly strong definition for the roleplaying games industry and there can be little doubt that in the sheer quantity of numbers (if not market share), the independent RPG producers make up an majority of publishers and have done so for a very long time. It is certainly worth noting that Dungeons & Dragons started as a product of an independent company ("Tactical Studies Rules"), founded by Gary Gygax and close friend Donald Kaye. Detractors who consider independent RPG publishing to some sort of vanity press are well reminded that Gygax made a number of attempts to get mainstream publishers to take up his new-fangled game and it was only after this rejection that Tactical Studies Rules was born. TSR stands an interesting example of a game company that started as an independent before becoming a mainstream one, a model that would be followed by others in the near future (e.g., Chaosium, Hero Games, Iron Crown Enterprises, Palladium Books). An interesting aside example was Scott Bizar's FGU, which actively sought designs from independent designers; Bizar himself was, and is not, as designer.

In terms of system design, nearly all independent games until the late 1990s could be classified as "heartbreakers", to use the evocative descriptor given by Ron Edwards. In the early days of the industry when the industry was still finding its place there was enormous debate over what was perceived as the twin poles of playability (e.g., Tunnels & Trolls) and realism (e.g., Chivalry & Sorcery), as readings of Alarums and Excursions clearly indicate - RuneQuest made a point of advertising itself as "playable realism" with more than some degree of success. However the wealth of material that came out during the period are mostly variations from the core model provided by Dungeons & Dragons. The caveat "mostly" is used advisedly here. Like more contemporary heartbreakers they also almost invariably included some gems of setting and system which indicated the imagination of the time - certainly "Realm of Yolmi" and "Wizard's Realm" both fall into this category. One particular game that was truly innovative at the time for including both a vastly different abstract turn-scale and social interactions was GDW's "En Garde!".

One major issue of independent roleplaying games in the period was competing with the three tier model of distribution; publisher to warehouse to game store. Dealing with such an environment requires not only a modicum of managerial skill but also, it must be said, sufficient capital clout to wave the stick at recalcitrant distributors along the

chain. Cash flow issues are far from unusual in small businesses and when one's business is very small, then the problem can almost be a death knell. Looking at the history of roleplaying games one cannot help but be slightly horrified at the number of great games that simply could not compete, not due to any particular design flaws, but because of distribution issues (e.g., "Alma Mater", "The Morrow Project", . Some particularly good games were fortunate enough to be taken up by larger publishing houses, such as Jeffrey Dillow's "High Fantasy", which was eventually published by Reston. One great survivor must be David Nalle's "Ysgarth", which from the first edition in 1979 to the seventh edition in 1998 has been published through Nalle's Ragnarok Press. One certainly cannot fault Nalle for his extraordinary commitment to his game system.

Much overlooked in usual consideration of independent designers is the vast quantity that was released under the d20/OGL period from 2000 to 2008. This is somewhat understandable. For many, independent producers of d20/OGL material aren't game designers in the strict sense, for they haven't actually designed a game system. However there can certainly be no doubt of their independence of many of them as publishers and the fact that they produced scenarios, rules supplements and elaborations, and sourcebooks. Previous issues of RPG Review (14) looked at the d20/OGL in some detail, so additional elaboration here is not really required. However it is worth mentioning that this can be broadly considered part of the "open gaming" approach which views licensing in a similar manner to free and open-source software, such as game systems like "Dominion Rules".

In more contemporary times however, the lay of the land for independent roleplaying games has changed substantially. There are two related major factors at play here; the Internet, and game design theory. From the former perspective the production and distribution model has changed qualitatively. Whether it is through generic publishing agents who specialise in print-on-demand (e.g., Lulu) or with PDF only products, the necessity of the designer to publisher to warehose to retail chain is broken, and, it must be added, increasingly so. Whilst there is still a market for the hardcopy produced and distributed in such a format this market will both centralise, due to increasing capital costs, and decline, with increasing improvements in the technology of the electronic format, both in terms of the referencing systems that are incorporated through hyperlinks (whether in HTML or PDF) and through the physical medium itself, with the increasing portability and speed of lightweight tablets and various e-reader products. As this hardware becomes easier and faster to use than physical books themselves, one can easily imagine a situation where the book becomes a collectible rather than a core product.

With regards to game design theory there is no need here to give a thorough exegesis of contemporary game design theory. It is more than sufficient to mention that analysis of creative agendas in players and game systems have lead to a significant increase in the popularity of "narrativist" roleplaying game, many of which are strongly associated with independent design. One only has to review the winning Independent Game Awards for the past several years for verification of this statement: 2010 Apocalypse World by D. Vincent Baker, 2009 Kagematsu, 2008 Mouse Guard by Luke Crane and David Petersen, 2007 Grey Ranks, by Jason Morningstar, 2006 Spirit of the Century, by Robert Donoghue, Fred Hicks, Leonard Balsera, 2005 Polaris, by Ben Lehman, 2004 Dogs in the Vineyard by D. Vincent Barker, 2003 My Life With Master by Paul Czege, and 2002 Dust Devils by Matt Snyder. The reason that this is related to the rise of the Internet is at least partially due to the popularity of increasingly sophisticated MMORPGs, from Ultima Online (1997), EverQuest (1999), RuneScape (2001), and, of course, World of Warcraft (2004). Deriving from MUDs in the 1980s and early 1990s, the MMORPG has replaced many of the detailed simulationist and gamist features of the "pencil and dice" roleplaying games of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. It is probably an unconscious act of strategic gap analysis that has led many independent game designers - from Hero Wars onwards - to adopt a flexible, rules-light systems, which are dominated by narrative descriptors and interpretation.

This does not mean that the future is sunshine and lollipops for the aspiring independent game designer and publisher. They will, in fact, suffer some very significant challenges which are again Internet-driven. The first is that the barriers to entry are substantially lowered for independent game publishing and everyone and their dog can join the party. Whilst this is a beautiful example of part of the requirements for a free market under perfect competition, it equally reduces the consumer's market knowledge - which is a step away from the ideal market situation. At least 27 roleplaying systems were published in 2011, of which 24 were first editions. It takes a particular level of dedication to

review all of them - it also doesn't help that two of them had the same name. The second challenge is an intersection point of technology, economics and law. In economics, there is an inevitable tendency of the price of a product to equal its marginal cost in an open market. It doesn't take rocket science to work out what that is when it comes to electronic products. Whilst so-called 'piracy' is much maligned among sellers, for obvious reasons, consumers are also wary of DRM-crippled products and are actually quite fond of a technology which allows them to download an out-of-print supplement from a publisher long out of business. We may note with some wisdom the decision of Wizards of the Coast in 2009 to pulled all digital downloads of their products from their online stores, and the effect (i.e., none) this had on preventing pirated pdf versions of their books.

It is tempting to think that the independent game designer and publisher is going to find themselves reduced to a hobby-level producer. Whilst there is a tendency in this direction it is not necessarily so. Most consumers, assuming sufficient disposable income of the few dollars to purchase such products legitimately, are quite willing to do so. However there are a few caveats; firstly the products must be of the highest possible use-value. In other words, using the time-honoured advantage of consumer sovereignity in such a market, the products provide what the consumer wants. It also means that the designer must be able to provide sufficient support supplements to keep the gamer interested in their product and product line. Finally, if the designer wants to convert their hobby activity that brings in a few pennies into something that approaches a low-paid job, then they must be able to provide a game system that has sufficient depth and detail to ensure continuing interest.

Independent RPGs of the 2000s have largely satisfied the first criteria and, in some cases, the second. Certainly for many of these designers they don't particularly care and nor are they dependent on any income received on their product. They have some innovative ideas, they've put them into a game system, and perhaps a few or several hundred other people will find them interesting as well. If they make a bit of money, then that should pay for the cost of their website for a while, or maybe the huckster fees for a couple of conferences. Rather like this modest journal, the activity is carried out because the people involved just love gaming. For those independent publishers and designers who are looking for their games to provide a more substantial and ongoing source of income, a game system that incorporates the above as well as detail is required. To date, the best examples of such a product is undoubtedly "Burning Wheel" and "Mouse Guard", albeit it is noted that the latter is not available for sale in electronic format. As a whole however, the technological and design trajectories favour independent games and publishers and also the quality of such games. It bodes well for the hobby.

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