



Truly Independent Game Development: A Case For Making Games By Yourself

- Lindsay Grace, August, 2009

For years the industry has focused on the increasing size of development teams. It is both a blessing and a hassle. Teams grow; the quality of games increase. Teams grow; the complexity and investment in each game increases too.

But the industry didn't start this way. Roberta and Ken Williams made *Mystery House* at the kitchen table, with Ken developing the game from sketches Roberta made. Steve Wozniak developed one of the first designs for the arcade classic *Breakout* in four days, flying solo.

A brief examination of some of the advantages of truly independent development may prove a plausible approach to building specific types of outlier games. What is a truly independent developer? One person designing and building a game.

There is a little monster inside most creative people that yearns to be able to conceive every idea, from notion to production. There is the dream of coming up with an idea and having the ability to build it without the intervention of other people. The question is, why don't we do it? Does every game need to be photorealistic? Does every game need dialogue that pops and 3D graphics that amaze? Clearly, no, but much of what bloats the game development team simply bolsters these goals. In the leanest sense, if it takes two team members to develop the water effects for *BioShock*, why not dump the water and worry about improving gameplay?

What I call the "independent independent" development approach is, at least, a design and development approach for affecting the creative production of games. If paper prototyping can help shape a design, independent independent development offers a few advantages in the innovative development of new games.

To start, there is the oft dreamed of design freedom afforded by autonomy. This is the advantage that the Western tradition of fine artists seems to enjoy. There is the notion of developing under a single designer's vision and worrying not about bottom-line financials, politics,

audience needs, franchise equity, and other practical distractions.

Of course, this is a romanticized notion. Solo developers still concern themselves with all the fundamentals of microeconomics, from affording enough time to eat dinner to the cost of engines and assets. Even a starving artist must eat. Yet, there is still the advantage of working under one set of priorities. The priorities set by the independent developer.

Autonym, however marginally improved by solo development, is not the only advantage for developing independently. Independent developers have the ability to take risks that larger companies don't. Risk is the domain of those who have the least to lose. What does an independent developer risk? Reputation -- which in many circles is easily made anonymous, through company names and pseudonyms. The majority of related concerns, franchise equity, investor returns, and others are eclipsed by the solo developers' basic goals. Make a good game.

This is perhaps the most refreshing reason to make games as an independent developer. The goal of making good games is in itself often eclipsed by all the other noise of business. In many circles games are a business center. Developing a game independently moves the endeavor toward the artistic, where ideas and creative expression reign.

This is where it is tempting to insert quotes from the film *Jerry McGuire*. These quotes would herald returning to core values and getting back to some mystical purity. Wherever your sense of pure game design rests, there is the practical truth that if you put one person on a task, and that person is disciplined, remaining on task is simpler. The expression is "herding cats", not "herding a cat". Keeping a design team on task, centered on a singular goal should, in theory, be simpler with smaller groups.

But, before we dismiss groups we have to recognize there is an obvious disadvantage to working with them. Groups help reorient projects. Second opinions refine ideas by chipping away at them. But, the question is, does the recipe get better with too many cooks or with too many tasters? Independents can always use players to refine their ideas. What opinion is more valuable than a player's?

Why Now?

Independent game development is affordable in ways it hasn't been before. There are plenty of warehouses of development resources. Engines, assets and audience abound. The trick now is pulling them together. There was a time when one person couldn't produce a game without becoming a programmer, artist, and designer. There are clearinghouses for each now. Yes, even game designs are dumped in web repositories for the creatively challenged. The quality of these resources varies greatly, but the multitalented independent developer can pull together resources surprisingly seamlessly.

There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to developing games by yourself. Anyone who has worked on a class project in a difficult team has likely wished they were doing it by themselves. Yet, most aspects of creative development in the digital world are moving toward team oriented production.

To explore how teams and independents fit into game production we can tell game history another way. Our first independent developers were explorers, or to follow cliché, pioneers. They stepped out into uncharted waters and made a new home. That home was immediately commercialized and cities developed where they had built their homes.

Mystery House begat *Alone in the Dark*. *Alone in the Dark* begat *Resident Evil*. *Resident Evil* begat *Silent Hill*. Each generation makes itself bigger and arguably better. Occasionally a new city is built from the home of another pioneer. Sometimes those cities just emulate on a style. *Tetris* begets mountains of *Tetris* clones; *The Sims* creates McSims franchises of its original design.

Even more rarely, a city becomes so big it creates its own suburbs. *Grand Theft Auto* inspires a whole community of like-minded, formulaic clones. Regardless of your preference, Levittown will always be an important suburb, simply for being the first.

If you subscribe to that version of game history then you might want to look back at those pioneers for inspiration. Those adventurers who step well outside the city limits often set the standard. A bit like Louis and Clarke, Jonathan Blow and David Hellman paired to map a new type of game experience. A whole troop of want

to be explorers, independents looking for the next awe-inspiringly clever game design, being by follow

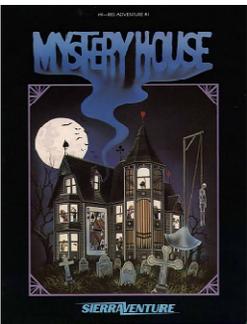
For years I told my students that the days of lone ranger game development were dead. They aren't dead; they just don't exist within the city limits. Making games that fit within the expectation of the standard AAA title is a bit like trying to build a skyscraper with one carpenter. With contemporary tools, a single developer has little chance of making a game that competes with the complexity, breadth and depth of a comparable title built by a professional team. However, where a construction team might struggle to make an intricate miniaturized model or a structure with no historical equivalent, a solo developer's svelte independence becomes an advantage.

There are still tasks in our daily lives for which team construction is a problem. The team is sometimes its own Achilles' heel. It is its own *harmatia* -- an attribute in classical Greek tradition that has always proven advantageous until it leads to its owner's demise. Large development teams are often too big to adapt to change, too consumptive to starve, too established to take substantial risk.

But even small indie companies share some of these attributes. A one person team, on the other hand, doesn't fight amongst itself and it doesn't require pay to keep it cohesive. It doesn't require buy in from all stakeholders. It needs energy and an idea. Unlike a tribe, a lone developer can at least scavenge and move on. The fewer mouths to feed, the less food it takes to stay alive.

The independent developer is a champion of innovation. It is the Edison, Gandhi, etc. The independent drives the hordes toward a new space. It encourages people to go where they were afraid. It jumps in the water and exclaims, "Jump in! The water's fine!" Or, it warns -- in its last yelps before drowning. But, just as single explorer scouts have taken the risk for the larger masses, they have offered themselves for all the criticism.

Regardless of the palatability of this rhetoric rich championing of solo development, there is a part of game culture that continues to romanticize the notion that a game was the conception of a single person. Marketers know that we like the sound of *American McGee's Alice* instead of *EA Games and American McGee's Alice*. We prefer *Sid Meier's Civilization*, to *Firax's and Meier's Civilization*. Just as cities are



sometimes named after their founders, there is something intrinsically attractive in the idea of a product developed under the direction of a single person, even if we know *Madden NFL* never required the football coach to debug a troublesome null pointer. We like the idea of *ones*, even if we secretly know that nothing is ever done truly independently.



As it goes, every lone gunslinger still buys their gun from someone. Even the most independent developer will be assisted by others, as every pioneer has to ask for a little help. People who develop games on their own, get help from others. They ask for feedback on their designs. They get coding help. They have been taught their skills. They are supplied assets or borrow resources from others. Jonathon Blow's *Braid* may have been conceived in its original implementation by one person, but it was popularized as a beautiful joint venture involving the art of David Hellman.



Despite your own feelings about the advantages of truly independent development, it is in itself, clearly educational. Every time you go exploring you learn something. If your goal is education, nothing beats the breadth of education afforded by developing all the aspects of your game. A single developer certainly must trade depth of knowledge for breadth of knowledge, but if you are training to manage deep knowledge

specialists or working toward the liberal arts education of game making, solo development is an exceptional trainer. Talk to the people who sail the open seas in a one person boat or go orienteering in the wilderness by themselves. They rarely say, "I don't know how to use a compass. We have someone do that that for us."

I once received advice from an experienced tracker who routinely spends months in the wilderness. He listed a few items to take. Top on his list was a lighter. He said it was simple -- why bother rubbing two sticks when all the technology is there to use in a convenient package? It seems that if you are really curious about developing a game solo, you should look for a lighter. Find some technology that streamlines game building but affords you go-anywhere portability and a wide range of possibilities. Not only will it help you get through the wilderness, it will make life a lot easier on your own.

This article is reprinted from Gamasutra/Game Career Guide:
http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=24944