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Autonomy, Integration, and the Work of Cultural Intermediation in Indie Games¹

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Abstract

Based on empirical research, this article addresses the role of cultural intermediaries in the production, distribution, and reception of independent or “indie” digital games. Festival and showcase curators, local community organizers, co-working space managers, promoters, critics, funders, granting agencies, and other support actors are central to sustaining indie game cultures, but are often overlooked. Our research makes visible the diverse taskscapes of cultural intermediaries; the wide variety of brokering, translating, value-ascribing, connection-making, and care work involved; and the attendant tensions and challenges. We contend that cultural intermediary work in the game industry is characterized by precarity, extensive and largely invisible behind-the-scenes work, complex networks of interdependence and support, blurred boundaries between the personal and the professional, and a delicate balance between autonomy and integration.

Keywords: Game Industry, Indie Games, Cultural Intermediaries, Autonomy

Introduction

In the industry and culture of digital games, community and event organizers, festival coordinators, showcase curators, co-working space managers, promoters, critics, funders, granting agencies, and other such “support” actors are often seen as secondary or peripheral to the “real” work of making games (or else overlooked completely). Based on ethnographic and interview research, we contend that these cultural intermediaries play a pivotal role in small- to medium-scale independent or “indie” game production, distribution, and reception. Our research contributes to growing critical awareness and understanding of cultural intermediation and illustrates that the experiences and practices of cultural intermediaries are more diverse and dispersed than typically understood. We argue that cultural intermediation is multifaceted, spread throughout the industry, and involves an immense amount of underappreciated labor that goes beyond common conceptions of cultural intermediaries as primarily gatekeepers or cultural brokers. Examining cultural intermediation in the game industry paints a very different picture of indie game development—and cultural work more generally—compared with romanticized popular representations,³ characterized by precarity, extensive and largely invisible behind-the-scenes work, complex networks of interdependence and support, and a delicate balance between autonomy and integration.⁴

Cultural intermediation, originally theorized by Bourdieu⁵ but more recently taken up and elaborated by scholars in sociology, media studies, and cultural studies, refers to work that takes place *between, but apart from*, other actors and sectors within a field of cultural production. Cultural intermediaries are in part gatekeepers, brokers, and mediators that use their strategic in-between position, specialized knowledge, and networks to connect cultural producers with the resources, institutions, and audiences they need to succeed.⁶ Cultural intermediaries are connective tissue, sitting “at the boundaries of multiple fields, not only between culture and economy but also culture, society, and community”⁷ and shaping the heterogeneous relations between diverse actors and activities that make up cultural industries.⁸ Research on cultural intermediation reveals a diverse and growing range of

frequently overlooked cultural workers wearing many hats, herding many cats, and exerting a constitutive influence on their fields.⁹

There is a pressing need in media and cultural industries research to examine what cultural workers actually think and do,¹⁰ but this can be difficult to accomplish. The work of cultural intermediaries has a low degree of organization, formalization, and recognition (both internally and externally) that colors their careers with uncertainty and disrupts their sense of identity. Given the strong emphasis on the work of “creatives” (i.e., designers, programmers, artists) in game development and other cultural industries, intermediation is rarely fully visible, existing in the interstices and on the peripheries. Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star describe a similar problem associated with classifying and defining just what it is that nurses do.¹¹ This inability to describe work practices has negative impacts, including the devaluation of essential work, as well as massive variability in quality and consistency in everyday practice, recognition, and education.¹² Following this trajectory, and responding to Julian Matthews and Jennifer Smith Maguire’s call to examine “the broader range of occupations involved in cultural production” and “better specify cultural intermediaries’ shared contexts and characteristics, and their points of differentiation,” we specifically focus on defining the taskscapes of cultural intermediaries in games.¹³ Our research also aligns with Beth Perry, Karen Smith, and Saskia Warren’s conception of a “third wave” of cultural intermediary studies that reclaims and revalues this work.¹⁴

As we have argued elsewhere, cultural intermediation tends to be difficult to discern and “only becomes ‘sensible’ within the broader networks of intermediaries spread out across the entire cultural industry in which they are embedded.”¹⁵ Unlike some more traditional intermediary jobs (such as the local geek shop owners examined by Benjamin Woo),¹⁶ cultural intermediaries in the game industry are members of a geographically dispersed and socially fragmented pseudo-occupational group, often lacking a fixed place of work or a regular schedule. The cultural intermediaries studied in this article include co-working space coordinators, festival curators, funding and awards panel judges, community organizers, and public advocates for indie games who (at least in their intermediary capacity) are not affiliated with any one game development team and are distributed across different international game industries and scenes. In order to address these issues, we hosted an international symposium at the Technoculture, Art, and Games Research Centre at Concordia University, explicitly framed as a way to better understand their work. As a kind of pop-up water cooler, our unconventional symposium-as-research-site method was able to bring indie intermediaries and their networks to the surface, granting participants who rarely have time to pause for reflection or mutual commiseration the time, space, and social prompting to do so. In the process, we were also able to collectively name and make visible the particular form of cultural work that our participants are engaged in, which generally goes unnamed and unacknowledged even by those who perform it.¹⁷ The site was documented via note-taking, photos, audio recordings of interviews, and video recordings of talks and panels. Written ethnographic vignettes and reflections, along with the interviews, are the primary basis for our arguments in this article.

In this article, we strive for a more fully realized account of the work of cultural intermediation, one that takes into consideration its diversity and intermediaries’ own difficulties in establishing and maintaining their positions within cultural industries. First, we map the multifarious taskscapes of cultural intermediaries; second, we examine some of the core functions of cultural intermediation: brokering, translating, and ascribing value; third, we

Table 1. Taskscape of Cultural Intermediaries.

Typology	Key tasks	“Post-It” examples
Game-related activities	Game-making; game-playing	Writing game prototypes; supervising art direction; writing code; fixing bugs; playtesting; reviewing games; submitting for games festivals
Outreach, networking and promotional activities	Social media; direct communication; contact building and networking; event attendance	Browsing and posting on social media; updating websites; reading, answering, writing e-mails; introducing contacts to one another; moderating discussions; going for drinks; visiting games festivals, tournaments, opening parties
Business and finance-related activities	Applications; accounting; dispersing funds	Writing applications for jobs, funds, and grants; assisting with applications; writing and assessing budgets; navigating government bureaucracy; negotiating funding, rent, and investments; accounting; preparing for audits; invoicing members; paying bills
Management-related activities	Spaces: maintaining/managing material infrastructure; event planning; travel planning	Organizing and attending meetings; scheduling events; organizing maintenance; buying supplies; booking travel and attending; curatorial discussions and decision making
	Humans: managing human resources; relationship management; leadership	Providing emotional support; reviewing others’ work; defusing conflicts; mentoring

Table by Authors.

but also emphasizes the considerable amount of “slippage” between tasks as many crossed multiple categories. Cultural intermediaries spend a substantial amount of time immersed in game-related activities, whether playing, making, or both. Playing as many games as possible is key to maintaining cultural currency and feeds into other tasks such as networking, research, and knowledge-gathering activities. Outreach, networking, and promotional activities centers on collecting and disseminating information, connecting others, and directly promoting one’s own activities, events, and organization. The final two categories relate to managing both material and human infrastructures. Business and finance-related activities relates to applying for (and dispersing) funds, and management-related activities refers to the logistic and maintenance work associated with operating physical spaces (e.g., events and offices), as well as activities associated with managing humans, such as coordination, mentorship, and conflict resolution. These management tasks, and the amount of time and effort required of them, occupied a significant portion of our discussions.

A cultural intermediary’s claim to authority rests on the competent execution of a diverse taskscape, aspects of which may not align with a clear occupational role. Amir provides a telling anecdote, about his first game industry job:

I had to get business cards printed, and Andy, the boss, was designing the card and was like, ‘What do you want your title to be on the card?’ [. . .] So I said: either put ‘developer’ on it or leave it blank. In some ways, putting a title on the card will be confusing, because I will be doing so many different things.

As Amir notes, what he actually did within the studio, and in the larger community, did not fit into a discrete occupational category. The status of intermediaries is always uncertain—untitled—even as they exert considerable influence.

Bringing together indie game cultural intermediaries and collectively mapping and discussing their taskscapes reaffirmed many of the tasks traditionally associated with cultural intermediaries (networking, curating, brokering of material and symbolic resources, etc.) and also highlighted activities and agencies less commonly associated with the role. This exercise suggests that the most commonly shared characteristic may be in their uncertain and always-negotiated boundaries; we might even be tempted to answer the question of what cultural intermediaries actually do simply by saying “everything.”¹⁸ This is a challenge for cultural intermediaries, whose struggles to define their own work and workload ultimately reduce their visibility and external understanding of what they do. But this ambiguity is also their strength: Cultural intermediation thrives on flexible connections across multiple networks and is inevitably an uncertain endeavor. Understanding the tensions faced by cultural intermediaries who may be unable to construe their own work is the focus of the rest of this article. Drawing on interview data and observations gathered at our symposium-as-research-site, we offer a deeper analysis of the slippages between autonomy and integration faced by cultural intermediaries. In doing so, we offer new insights into the evolving ways that cultural intermediaries perform and characterize their own work, and in particular the under-explored question of how intermediaries situate themselves in relation to one another.

Brokering, Translation, and Ascribing Value

Cultural intermediation in indie game development, as in other industries, conditions the social and cultural existence of its products. Cultural intermediaries help make certain games visible and understandable to the various actors who co-create “game culture.” Leveraging their in-between position and connections, intermediaries gain access to, broker, and translate valuable social, cultural, and economic resources such as access to publishers and platforms; press, influencer, and industry connections; sources of funding; and featured spots at festivals and showcases.¹⁹ These resources are increasingly seen as a necessary precondition for indie game developers to legitimate their work in crowded digital marketplaces dominated by a small handful of heavily marketed AAA franchises backed by massive, vertically integrated, multinational corporations. Reliant instead on more “horizontal” management and mentorship structures, the context of indie game development is unique in its heavy reliance on social capital, cultural intermediaries, and tastemakers to break through an oversaturated and competitive market. The work of cultural intermediaries is thus especially important for smaller independent studios who cannot access these platforms, resources, and networks on their own (or who can access them but are not able to leverage them to their full potential).

As Liz McFall contends, intermediation is not only about qualifying finished products for consumption, but is rather an open-ended process of “forging more and more relationships in an expanding network” in order to secure the position and status of a cultural object or practice.²⁰ Tracey describes how connections are commonly brokered between developers and influential industry actors in the co-working space she manages:

if you're going to release on Steam, I should know, so that when the opportunity arises, I can help [you] meet the influencers and tastemakers. Kickstarter was in the space last week and one of our teams has a Kickstarter campaign, I told them to go and sit with Luke [to discuss their campaign].

Networking events organized by or hosted in the space offer potential points of connection that Tracey is able to mediate. Cultural intermediaries also broker connections to other intermediary institutions, such as festivals, awards, and press coverage, that have a ripple effect in the wider local community. Co-working space directors, local developer organizations, and other intermediaries thus produce (more or less permanent) hubs of inward and outward connection for indie developers that organize the flow of mutual encouragement, mentorship, advice-giving, reviewing, and knowledge exchange (about funding institutions, financial opportunities, working conditions, etc.) as well as more substantive opportunities.²¹

Aspiring and early-career independent cultural producers often operate with little to no actual capital, but “alternative forms of capital—social, cultural, and symbolic—are readily available resources to be mobilized and converted in the struggle to build a career.”²² Cultural intermediaries play a key role in these processes of “capital intraconversion,”²³ for their own benefit and for others. For instance, they can trade on the “indie coolness” of the scenes and communities they inhabit in exchange for sponsorship and in-kind contributions. Amir recounts how he used his co-working space’s reputation in his local indie scene to obtain a financial contribution from a large tech company that “doesn’t have a very good reputation, because devs would talk about how much they disliked working there. I was like, your HQ are in [this city], I’m doing this thing in [the city] if you really care. They gave us 50,000 dollars.” In this case, Amir was able to identify an opportunity to “spend” cultural capital (in the form of indie credibility) to gain economic capital (in the form of a major sponsorship).

Indie intermediaries also facilitate the trajectory of developers’ creative work outward and toward various audiences, some of which may fall outside of the usual gaming public. Independent games have a complex relationship to cultural legitimacy, sometimes materialized in an ambition to be understood and appreciated in artistic terms, which may be problematized by commercial or enthusiast ambitions.²⁴ This version of indie legitimacy is discursively positioned against the mainstream commercial game industry’s traditional focus on marketing and entertainment. When indie game developers want their games to be recognized as a form of artistic expression (whether for the sake of prestige or in order to access material resources like arts funding), they may look to cultural intermediaries with one foot in the art world or other media industries, who are equipped to perform the necessary legitimation and translation work.²⁵ As knowledgeable and well-connected actors in indie scenes, intermediaries contribute to legitimation of games and developers, whether within the game industry or in the broader cultural and artistic field. Emilia explicitly describes her work with a local indie game community organization in these terms. Game culture is “very commercialized” and often seen as juvenile, making it hard for developers to gain outside recognition; so much of her work involves adapting time-tested legitimation strategies from other artistic fields such as film and theater for indie game developers.²⁶

Emilia organizes workshops in which she literally translates the commercial, fan language of game developers into an artistic language that is more appropriate for cultural institutions

such as arts councils and granting agencies, which may not be accessible to developers otherwise.²⁷ “People call themselves ‘content creators’ instead of artists. They talk about return on investment, you don’t even know what that means!” She provides an example:

One particular applicant wanted to make a mobile game with a comedy clown duo. It was theater. [. . .] But the way they described it in the application was, it’s a franchise, pre-existing intellectual property. That’s an example of those terms that the jury read and think, “That’s not something an Arts Council should fund.” But if you framed it in terms of artistic collaboration with theater, merging media art and theater, that would have been perfect.

In order to facilitate the integration of game developers into the wider artistic field, Emilia encourages them to “de-specialize” the language they use, coaching them on “how to describe your game to people who don’t play games” because “not everyone on the jury is gonna be a video game player.” Similarly, co-working space director Lee and festival organizer Viktor maintain active relationships with government and arts agencies as a means of mediating between developers and potential sources of funding beyond investors, loans, and other market-oriented models emphasized in the game industry, in doing so influencing how governments “define and place” games as a medium and a business.²⁸ Mobilizing their expertise, social connections, and cultural capital as a “third who translates,” each of these intermediaries uses their position to bridge across seemingly disparate cultural worlds.²⁹

Qualifying and adding value to cultural objects is a well-established function for cultural intermediaries, and several strategies for tastemaking and highlighting certain games among the chaff of a crowded indie market were discussed by participants involved in festival curation and event organizing. Festivals and showcases for indie developers can be incredibly important for cutting through the noise and gaining access to larger audiences and key industry contacts. Identifying trends, highlighting promising but not yet well-known developers, and putting games in front of other influential intermediaries are common tactics.³⁰ Describing his event coordination and promotion work, Viktor explains that he spends his days talking to journalists about what the current trends are in digital art and indie games, a straightforward instance of tastemaking in which the cultural intermediary uses their specialized knowledge and position to put forward an authoritative stance on what is relevant in their cultural field, circulated via field-specific or mainstream media coverage. However, like other participants, he expresses uneasiness with the idea he is a cultural gatekeeper. Tastemaking activities do not always play out as intended and may be taken up or misrepresented in unexpected ways. Viktor often finds his words and intent decontextualized, becoming a spokesperson for game design practices and technologies he is personally ambivalent about, or outright critical of, such as virtual reality (VR). This is echoed by Robert, who states he is aware he “works for [Facebook CEO Mark] Zuckerberg” when he advocates for VR and that this “isn’t a good feeling.” In these cases, cultural intermediaries have found themselves uncomfortable with the compromises and tensions inherent in their work. By bringing together many intermediaries into one place, with the explicit goal of reflecting on their work, our findings demonstrate that the support cultural intermediaries offer to cultural producers and other actors is manifold and far-reaching, but not without complications.

Fostering Care and Boundary Work

Contrary to some formulations of cultural intermediation as the insertion of self-interested, exploitative “middle men” between production and consumption, we contend that cultural intermediation is not a simple or straightforward process limited to value extraction and symbolic qualification of cultural objects—nor is this how intermediaries understand or experience their work. Intermediation actively shapes *cultures* of production. As McFall contends, “production and consumption have to be always already, dynamically connected to continue at all,” and intermediation is a distributed, nonlinear process involving “a whole ‘crowd’ of intermediaries [. . .] many of whom may be engaged in activities that are not easily designated production or consumption, but might be anywhere within the surrounding space.”³¹ This resonates with our conversations with game industry intermediaries, who point to aspects of their work that are more aligned with noncommercial, non-materially productive work such as parenting. Accordingly, we argue for a conception of cultural intermediation that renders visible the most invisible, naturalized aspects of an already largely invisible occupation.³²

Emphasizing commodification or gatekeeping as the primary task of cultural intermediaries does not reflect how cultural intermediaries themselves understand their work. Much of the work of cultural intermediation is personal, relational, and emotional at its core.³³ Our participants are acutely aware of this: One “Post-It” note from the taskscape exercise reads, “How hard it is to reject someone’s work/project, esp. when you know them well: extra care and emotional work to make the feedback less difficult to hear.” As Perry et al. argue, formulations of cultural intermediation that emphasize self-interest and personal gain are ill-equipped to account for more community- and sustainability-oriented aspects of cultural intermediation, but these are central to the self-identification of many intermediaries.³⁴

Community-minded cultural intermediaries express a strong sense of responsibility for attracting and retaining game developers in indie game scenes. They perform emotional and care work in order to ensure that projects go through and teams stay together, performing invisible, gendered tasks that fall outside of the game development “triangle” of designer–coder–artist and can go neglected on smaller indie teams.³⁵ This side of their work causes some friction, because it complicates the notion that intermediaries must maintain a degree of autonomy and not become too deeply involved—after all, they generally work with many different teams and projects at the same time. In conversations with co-working space coordinator Tracey, she remarks that while she is not a member of any one team, and at the end of the day is not responsible for any decisions, she performs a great deal of work and care to aid these studios. She manifests this care as an “open arms policy” of membership that is not reducible to the for-profit business model of other co-working spaces. This extra work, of fostering a space of acceptance and support for developers, is work that goes unrecognized among Tracey’s day-to-day tasks of managing the space but is both resource- and time-consuming.

The number of sticky notes with what may be perceived as nonwork activities—such as playing games or having drinks—suggests an erasure of boundaries between the professional and personal that is endemic throughout the game industry. As Nancy Baym argues, the

“boundary between social and economic relationships has always been far blurrier than theoretical distinctions might suggest,”³⁶ and the work of cultural intermediaries is characterized by blurred boundaries between work time and personal time, as well as between personal, professional, and mentoring relationships. Our participants are keenly aware of this erasure of boundaries. For example, having a meal with friends is a form of work when all your friends work in the same industry, and even more so when they are looking to you for informal mentorship or connections. Many cultural intermediaries work constantly and certainly do not have prototypical nine-to-five days. Thus, they fit personal responsibilities into the idiosyncratic rhythms of their workdays (driving the kids to school, cleaning the apartment, etc.), compounding the erasure of work/life boundaries. This is consistent with research on cultural work and intermediation in other fields—the work of intermediation bleeds out into all aspects of everyday life, making their work even more difficult to “name” and study.³⁷

During the symposium, several participants indicated displeasure with this aspect of their work, among themselves and in interviews, and their comments suggest a “helping fatigue.” Tracey explains that she resents having to provide certain kinds of care to developers in her space, which she feels should not be part of her job: “Most of the emotional labor management is when teams don’t talk to each other and try to talk through me or vent. [. . .] they use me as a sponge to hold their emotions,” she explains, expressively capturing the gendered dynamics of emotional labor and care work in cultural intermediation, which women are expected to take on regardless of their actual job.³⁸

A parenting metaphor emerged to describe this dimension of intermediary work. Kyra is sometimes referred to in her scene as “indie mom,” an honorific she greets with ambivalence, while Lee is often confronted with the reality that he is acting as both a landlord and a mentor to the developers in his co-working space. The tension between these competing identities becomes apparent when they backfire: Kyra notes studios that have failed to find commercial success may hold intermediaries responsible as invested parent-mentors, rather than as noncomplicit landlords. In one respect, Lee’s identity is tied to the idea that he is here to help these developers learn to run their businesses—a role Tracey also identifies with—but they are often put in difficult positions. Lee compares his space to a university dormitory, notorious for cramped conditions and uncleanliness, and describes his discomfort with needing to chide developers to clean the kitchens before sponsors, government agencies, or press visit the space. The delicate balance required for cultural intermediation is complicated by the many roles and tasks they are expected to perform.

While some intermediaries are placed in roles where care is expected, others actively care for their scenes and communities through advocacy for diversity and inclusion. All cultural intermediation work is, of course, political³⁹—if not undertaken with an explicit political mandate, it is likely reproducing the inequitable status quo of the game industry.⁴⁰ Although most participants spoke in favor of improving diversity, Emilia addressed the issue head on, explaining that her mandate is primarily about making indie gaming spaces less exclusionary. To this end, she has implemented several changes regarding her staff’s salary and working conditions: \$25/hour for everyone, converting volunteers into paid employees, and taking diversity explicitly into account during recruitment. This effort shows how intermediaries can direct their efforts to pursue a form of “creative justice” that actively works to counter the precarity of cultural work in order to do right by the people involved.⁴¹

While gatekeeping and tastemaking are undeniably part of the process of cultural intermediation, close examination invites a more multifaceted understanding of their work. Much of this work involves care, spread across the taskscape in subtle ways and rarely noted in critical work on the production of cultural value and taste.⁴² As such, we argue for a conception of cultural intermediary work that is affective, everywhere, and dispersed throughout networks of production, distribution, and reception. Moreover, the blurring of boundaries inherent in the work of cultural intermediaries—between care and commerce, interpersonal and professional—impacts how these intermediaries are situated in creative communities and industries and how they establish their autonomy as cultural workers themselves.

Networks, Autonomy, and Integration

Expanding the cultural intermediary taskscape to include activities usually left invisible or considered nonwork broadens our understanding of this category of cultural work. This also has implications for how we understand the struggle for autonomy and authenticity in creative work and how they are established, maintained, and experienced through their diverse array of activities. We contend that cultural intermediaries' claims to authority and competence rest on a precarious balance between integration with and autonomy from the surrounding industry. As Matthews and Smith Maguire argue, intermediaries derive much of their authority from their relative autonomy.⁴³ They operate in the cultural sphere of indie games, but their status as neither developer nor consumer places them at the boundaries of this sphere, which affords certain kinds of influence. However, autonomy is not a clear-cut value in cultural work,⁴⁴ and at the same time they are deeply integrated in the markets, social networks, scenes, communities of practice, and other collectivities without which their work would have no purpose or meaning.⁴⁵ Intermediaries must keep these competing values in balance to avoid losing touch with their networks, on the one hand, and becoming absorbed into other people's projects, on the other.

Maintaining this balance is a daily struggle for cultural intermediaries that colors virtually all aspects of their work. In this way, our work suggests that Mark Banks' conception of "negotiated autonomy," wherein cultural producers strive to balance the artistic and the commercial, the ethical and the social, can be extended to cultural intermediaries as well.⁴⁶ This balance produces opportunities for cultural intermediaries as they explore the mutable possibilities of connection, as described above, but is also marred by precarity and exploitation.⁴⁷ Much like the indie game developers they work with, who strive to remain independent from outside influence even as they are deeply dependent on indie scenes as well as distribution platforms and economic opportunities afforded by interfacing with the "mainstream" game industry, intermediation is a compromised and compromising pursuit.

Cultural intermediary work depends on the ability to purposefully position oneself in relation to various actors and networks while maintaining a degree of autonomy and avoiding total integration or absorption into other entities. This balancing act of gaining the necessary access to perform intermediation without being reduced to taken-for-granted nodes within larger networks represents an ongoing challenge. For cultural intermediaries, as we will show, this manifests as a constant, dynamic renegotiation of position, connections, and

workload. As an ice-breaking activity, at the entrance to the symposium we invited participants to take an instant photo of themselves, paste it on a large sheet of paper, and draw lines indicating personal and professional links between themselves and other participants. The result was a dense, tangled web of nodes and interconnections that exemplified the central role of cultivating and leveraging networks in cultural intermediation. However, despite these dense connections, many of the participants were meeting in person for the first time. Both the strength and precarity of cultural intermediation lie in the management of large, low-intensity networks, and symposium participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of this never-ending task.

The tension between integration and autonomy in cultivating networks is apparent in the way co-working space manager and former event organizer Amir prides himself on his extensive knowledge of people in the industry. During an interview, he displays his high degree of integration by going through the list of symposium attendees and explaining how he has interacted with almost all of them after years of working in the industry. Conversely, Amir notes that he and his fellow participants generally keep one foot outside of the indie scenes and communities they work with, referencing two other attendees across the room:

You mentioned how I've done many different things, and in some ways Rishi and Keith have the same story. We're all people that have [a lot of] touchpoints, like there was so many different reasons we could have possibly met.

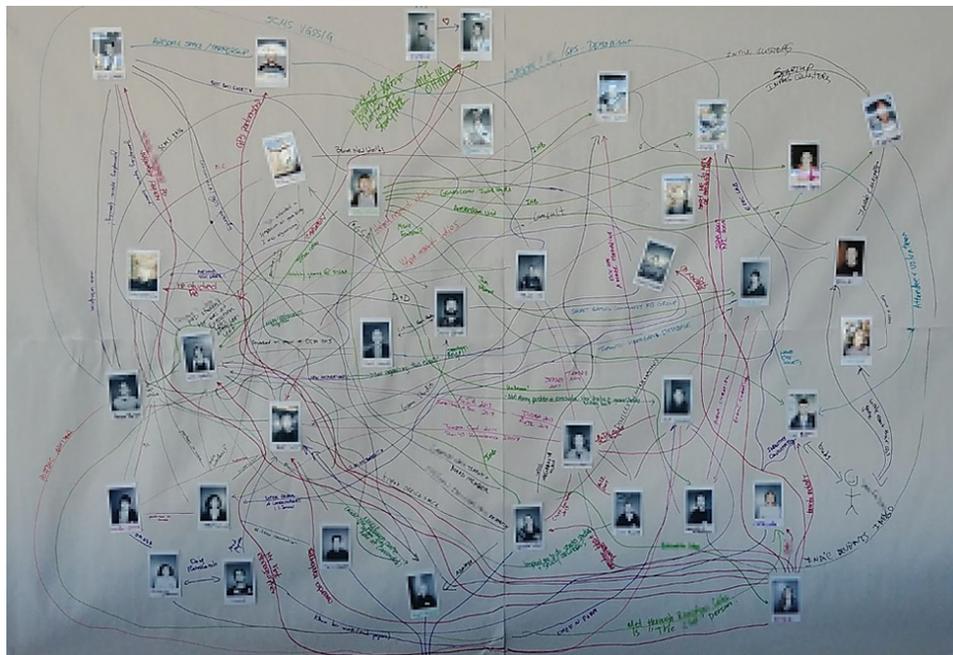


Figure 2. An anonymized photo of our network map, where participants each drew how they were connected to each other professionally and personally.

Photo by Authors.

This distinguishes intermediaries from developers and other creative actors who generally remain “inside” specific indie scenes or sectors of the industry, and relative exteriority affords certain advantages. Following Martin Beirne, Matt Jennings, and Stephanie Knight, we suggest this level of integration in a cultural industry, however loose, allows Amir and other cultural intermediaries to maintain a higher degree of resilience in their careers than is common in indie game development.⁴⁸

One prominent indie intermediary and developer, Rishi, mentions in an interview that he has worked hard to establish an extensive network of contacts and relationships in the game industry. This network allows him to bypass certain hurdles and speed up parts of the development process, such as releasing games across multiple platforms and consoles, by calling in favors. He is also part of a network of indie developers that provides assistance to promising indie studios, shepherding them through complicated processes that would be difficult for up-and-coming developers in the industry. All of this is based on building up relationships of trust with a wide range of actors⁴⁹ and suturing selected games and developers into as wide a “network of interactions” as possible in hopes of ensuring their success.⁵⁰ The lack of formal corporate structures and resources in the indie game space means that these networks are increasingly important. The blurring of boundaries discussed in the previous section comes into play here as well. Rishi notes that he has to keep up with his contacts’ birthdays, illnesses, and family news in addition to their game releases in order to keep the valuable relationships going. This no doubt benefits cultural intermediaries and the developers they work with, but at a high cost in terms of their constant “relational labor of connection,” which in many cases goes unnoticed and unreciprocated.⁵¹

As cultural intermediaries take on a prodigious range of tasks, they make themselves indispensable to the people they work with. As a consequence, intermediaries sometimes come to personally embody the spaces, organizations, or networks they maintain. With such a diverse taskscape and lacking a stable professional identity, cultural intermediary work results in a disassociation from traditional organizational frameworks, instead becoming “essential services.” Nobody notices these services until they stop working, and likewise intermediaries’ professional and personal identities become indistinguishable from the surrounding assemblage. This is particularly apparent in the interactions we observed between managers and coordinators of local game development co-working spaces, who formed a close peer group over the course of the symposium.⁵²

For example, Tracey reflected on the differences and similarities between her space and the other co-working directors’ spaces. In her view, she essentially is the space; without her labor, the space could not function. Until recently, she was a one-woman operation, answering only to a board of directors who did not work in the space or aid in day-to-day work. While her work mainly revolves around the mentorship and support of the studios working in the space, she remains on the outside. Even with the more recent hiring of additional staff, she remarks that her work week will still be over forty hours. Deeply integrated cultural intermediaries in similarly indispensable positions may find difficulty securing new positions in a niche industry if their existing organization disappears. Padma reflects on this difficulty, speaking about the closing of her past organization and how a co-worker is now “lost in the woods.” Despite being exemplary at their jobs in terms of networking and brokering relationships between studios, as well as the less visible tasks of intermediation, without the

infrastructure of the now-shuttered organization, prospective employers weren't sure how those specialized but wide-ranging skills translate to new scenarios. Cultural intermediaries may find themselves in precarious situations if they are too highly integrated in a specific context while their surrounding networks expand and evolve.

The experiences of these cultural intermediaries clearly show that their work is not only between production and consumption but dispersed across many facets of cultural industries. Following Mark Granovetter's social network theory, cultural intermediaries specialize the administration of weak ties and brokerage across different networks,⁵³ increasingly enabled by social media platforms.⁵⁴ The weak (and arguably shallow) connections Rishi describes can take just as much effort and investment as "strong" ties, and thus are taxing in terms of his involvement in other people's lives and work, but were he not to maintain them it is unlikely he would be able to do the work he needs to do as effectively. By contrast, the ties that Tracey describes are fewer in number, but more personal and demanding to manage, leading to feelings of unappreciation and isolation. Given their greater emphasis on social and cultural capital and legitimacy compared with corporate AAA game development, working in indie game scenes necessitates navigation between these two poles. Herein lies the difficulty: Cultural intermediaries work to resist the pull of any one specific network, institution, or project, because it could negate their intermediary position and endanger their effort to maintain a widespread network (resulting in an ever-smaller number of stronger ties). At the same time, it is fruitful to be well integrated in specific networks and institutions, because those stronger ties can yield greater resources. The resilience (or lack thereof) in cultural intermediation lies in this balancing act.⁵⁵

Conclusion

As Matthews and Smith Maguire suggest, "cultural intermediaries serve as an empirically grounded point of entry to highly complex political, economic and cultural processes."⁵⁶ The findings and anecdotes presented in this article demonstrate that cultural intermediary work is both broader and deeper than commonly understood. By putting our participants in the same room and encouraging them to reflect on these questions, we have been able to affirm intermediation as a distinct category of cultural work that is central, not peripheral, to indie game development and which goes well beyond traditional notions of gatekeeping and tastemaking. Far from simplistically re-presenting cultural objects to interested audiences as in linear "transmission" models of culture,⁵⁷ indie intermediaries engage in a whole host of networking, brokerage, translation, care, and support activities that impact all aspects of game production, distribution, and reception. In discussing their blurry professional and personal lives, intermediaries return frequently to concerns about how autonomous or integrated they are in relation to other actors and networks, resonating with the more general fixation on autonomy and cooptation in independent cultural production.⁵⁸

These tensions for cultural intermediaries are ultimately "bound up as part of the complexity of their work," which is difficult to capture in abstract theorizing.⁵⁹ By engaging directly with on-the-ground cultural workers, we are able to offer an empirical perspective on these questions. Rather than positing "indie intermediaries" as a fixed role or position, we see here

a “distributed, crowded network of intermediaries,”⁶⁰ ranging from small-scale and individual actors to sizable operations, all of whom move strategically through and between other actors and entities in the game industry, maintaining claims to specialized knowledge of different aspects of indie game development, and undertaking diverse and shifting taskscapes in order to accomplish their equally diverse and shifting social, cultural, and economic goals. In doing so, indie intermediaries must constantly balance their autonomy as third-party actors with their integration into the communities they service and the larger, institutional structures of the game industry they navigate. By drawing attention to the wide variety of tasks and underlying tensions involved, we hope to satisfy McFall’s imperative to avoid getting “carried away with all that symbolism, signification, and taste-making at the expense of the more mundane work,”⁶¹ as well as Mark Deuze’s call for “a renewed focus on the social, communal, and collaborative aspects of contemporary cultural work.”⁶² The work of cultural intermediaries is neither straightforward nor glamorous nor lucrative and is often laced with ambivalence and uncertainty, but as our participant Lee proudly declares, it is the oil that keeps the engine of independent cultural production in motion.

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