Platforms for Platforms: How the Aesthetics of a Genre Afforded a Culture and Vice Versa

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ABSTRACT

This work begins with brief parsing of every video game title surveyed by Metacritic.com from the period of January 2006 to December 2013. The website has associated each with at least one of 18 genres, a publisher, a platform, a review score, and a release date. From this gathered data, the following anomalous behavior is detected and analyzed. Each year from 2006 to 2010, between the PC, Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3, roughly 3% of games were platformers. By the end of 2013, that number had already risen to 8%. What is more, during that same period the average platformer’s score of rose approximately ten percentage points. Dominic Arsenault has convincingly argued that genre categorizations of games are highly fluid, and subject to multiple biases. He has even demonstrated this by pointing to how relatively few genres Metacritic chooses to use for categorization (2009). This essay intends to explore the fluidity of genre in further depth, exploring this particular shift in genre categorization. In particular, it makes the claim that the concept of platformer is interwoven with a shift in cultural reception and the emergence of “indie” game development. Game studies scholarship has already begun to unpack the multiple economic and political actors involved in the emergence of indie (Deuze and Martin 2009; Joseph 2013; Rietveld 2011; Guevara-Villalobos 2011), but none have tied it to the aesthetic affordances of a reimagined platformer genre. Not only do its formal properties facilitate the emergence of indie culture through its materiality, but its cultural positioning allows for a categorization, valuation and construction of indie as a genre itself. In their essay “The Independent Production of Culture: A Digital Games Case Study,” Deuze and Martin write that in the cultural discourse, indie is “assumed to embody a process of creative innovation that will deliver the next great cultural (and financial) leap forward in the computer and video game market” (278). I will argue that this criterion, “Attempt at innovation,” is intricately tied to an explanation for the rise in platformer scores, and subsequent rise in quantity of games being classed as platformers.

While notable scholarship has been done on video game genre generally (see Aarseth 2004; Apperley 2006; Arsenault 2009), and on particular genres specifically (see Järvinen 2002; Carr 2003; Perron 2006), little in-depth analysis of the platformer has been produced. This work is not designed to fill that void, but will necessarily move along parallel lines in order to make the claim that the platformer has medium-specific properties that afford radical game design. That said, the platformer will be presented as a dynamic entity, a moving target that alters the possibility space for game creation. Whereas it once stood as form of play more than anything, it now additionally, and
sometimes solely, acts as a nostalgic veneer. While we might have assumed that an increase in platformer games was the result of an increase in production, I will argue that it is the result of a new broader cultural understanding of what platformers are.

**Keywords**
videogame, indie, platformer, genre

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