



Megabooth: The cultural intermediation of indie games

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Felan Parker

Concordia University, Canada

Jennifer R Whitson

University of Waterloo, Canada

Bart Simon

Concordia University, Canada

Abstract

This article considers the history, practices and impact of the Indie Megabooth and its founders in terms of their role as a ‘cultural intermediary’ in promoting and supporting independent or ‘indie’ game development. The Megabooth is a crucial broker, gatekeeper and orchestrator of not only perceptions of and markets for indie games but also the socio-material possibility of indie game making itself. In its highly publicized outward-facing role, the Megabooth ascribes legitimacy and value to specific games and developers, but its behind-the-scenes logistical and brokerage activities are of equal if not greater importance. The Megabooth mediates between a diverse set of actors and stakeholders with multiple (often conflicting) needs and goals and in doing so helps constitute the field of production, distribution, reception and consumption for indie games. ‘Indie-ness’ and independence are actively performed in and through intermediaries such as the Megabooth.

Keywords

Cultural brokers, cultural gatekeeping, cultural intermediaries, digital games, gaming culture, game development, game industry, gaming festivals and conventions, independent games, indie games

Corresponding author:

Jennifer R Whitson, Department of Sociology and Legal Studies, University of Waterloo, PAS Building, Room 2025, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada.
Email: jwhitson@uwaterloo.ca

We slowly ascend to the fourth floor of Seattle's Washington State Convention Centre, the escalator tightly packed with cosplayers, gaming enthusiasts, press and game developers. The torrent of flashing lights and cacophony of noise becomes a visceral barrage as the PAX Prime expo hall is slowly revealed. The wall of sound is a susurrus of tens of thousands of human bodies layered with bass-heavy game soundtracks and amplified voices from announcers and live streamers scattered across the hall. The 30-ft-tall dinosaurs and neon-lit models of game characters are barely visible, glimpsed amid a temporary city of booths: clogged streets of monitor-clad portable walls, velvet ropes and public relations (PR) staff shepherding hours-long lines waiting to play next season's blockbusters. Beyond this epicentre, the massive gaming and geek culture convention's boundaries sprawl across blocks of hotel convention halls and theatres.

The artificial skies overhead are clouded with hanging, brightly coloured signs, beacons for the booths below: Nintendo, Blizzard and Ubisoft. We spot a yellow, flying saucer-like shape over one corner of the hall, emblazoned with a stylized 'IMB'. Together we wind towards it. The surging crowd, the spectacle and the cacophony of noise and lights persist once we arrive. Literally, there is a red carpet. Here, booths are smaller in scale, eclectic in style and crewed by the game developers themselves rather than beaming-for-hire PR reps. You can crowd in and shake the Purrelled hands of artisanal game makers, commenting on a new mechanic or narrative hook and listen to their replies. Along these tightly packed, impermanent streets and alleyways, eyes dart from screen to screen, looking for the next big thing in small games. Collectively, this bazaar of tiny booths occupies a larger footprint than any other booth on the floor. Welcome to the Indie MEGABOOTH.¹

This article traces the history of the Indie Megabooth, a high-profile showcase of independently produced or 'indie' games, and asks, *What kind of cultural actor is the Megabooth? What patterns of collective activity make it up? What kinds of work take place under its umbrella, and what can it tell us about the contemporary industry and culture of digital games?* Our account of Indie Megabooth and its role in the game industry is based on in-depth interviews with organizers and exhibitors, journalistic reporting on its origins and past showcases and ethnographic research at several Megabooth events (PAX Prime 2015, the Game Developers Conference [GDC] 2016 and PAX East 2016).

Fundamentally, the Megabooth is a clever solution to a problem of marketing in material and perceptual terms. Gaming conventions and trade shows are dominated by the physical presence of major multinational corporations and so-called AAA blockbuster franchises. Rather than individual developers, platform holders and publishers such as Microsoft, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft and others traditionally overwhelm these spaces, capturing both the attention and bodies of fans, popular media and critics via lavish consumer spectacles. As with all marketing in this context, the goal is to capture the attention and imaginations of consumers, in hopes of translating this into brand loyalty and unit sales. The ideal is 'discoverability': to be noticed, to be talked about, to be anticipated and to be desired.

In such an environment, it is difficult for small, independent developers with little or no marketing budget to make an impact. The Megabooth addresses this problem of scale with the application of human, material and financial resources, buying up prime show floor space in bulk at major global gaming events and redistributing it to a curated

showcase of indie developers, thus putting them in front of tens of thousands of gaming fans and potential customers. But, as we will see, the Megaboost is more than a material infrastructure unifying a set of discourses, practices and objects in a market relation, helping players solve the ‘filter’ problem created by having countless games to choose from. It is more than a locus for clarifying and distilling indie identity (whatever that may be). It is more than a boundary organization operating between the production and consumption of indie games.

It is our contention that organizations such as the Indie Megaboost are ‘cultural intermediaries’ that are constitutive of the field of indie games and represent a key area of investigation and intervention for the critical study of digital games. Our historical approach to the articulation of the Megaboost as a cultural intermediary is important for two reasons. First, we wish to draw attention to the Megaboost as an organizational actor with a discernible operational career and life course that can be explored and reflected upon. Second, we focus specifically on the biography of one actor, Kelly Wallick, and her pivotal role in orchestrating the Megaboost as a means of demystifying and revaluing a kind of mediating, articulating, emotional and affective labour that cannot be separated from the activities more conventionally understood to make up the work of creative and cultural production. This is not a hagiography so much as a convenient method for making certain actors and practices visible within a cultural ecosystem that tends to render them invisible. The idea of ‘cultural intermediaries’ thus provides a useful conceptual framework for this intervention, while our contributions to cultural intermediary scholarship are twofold: describing historical processes through which cultural intermediaries are formed and emphasizing the influence of intermediaries on upstream production and distribution processes, in addition to the more commonly described downstream consumption practices.

Cultural intermediaries

Although it began as an ad hoc community initiative, the organizational activities of the Megaboost extend far beneath the high-profile surface of exhibition showcases. It is an influential curator and tastemaker; a year-round support network for indie developers; and a powerful gatekeeper and deal-broker between developers, platform holders, investors and corporate sponsors. The outward spectacle and physical presence of the Megaboost’s showcases belies a more complex inward operation for which the actual booth is but an epiphenomenon. Beyond the booth is a seldom explored and often misunderstood world of logistical operations, material coordination, social orchestration and mediation and collective action. There is a nearly invisible human scaffold holding everything together. As described by Wallick (2013),

[W]e help make business connections, provide emotional support, open a developer mailing list to share ideas and ask questions, coordinate with press on features, work with platforms and publishers to help with discoverability issues, bring in sponsorship money, provide equipment and run networking events. Essentially I work behind the scenes to provide a support structure to small companies that don’t have the internal infrastructure to handle all the nitty gritty that goes into running a company and showing a game at conferences.

An organization such as the Indie Megabooth does not fit neatly into established categories, but framing it as a cultural intermediary allows us to tease out its multifaceted operations and functions.

The concept of the cultural intermediary is derived from Bourdieu (1984), who used it to account for the emergence of a new, hybrid sociocultural class between bourgeois and folk culture. Specifically, he highlights those occupations and workers involved in the production and circulation of symbolic goods – the production of culture – in post-war Western societies. More recently, the concept has been mobilized by scholars interested in the production of cultural value; legitimacy; and taste, particularly around media and popular culture workers, such as marketers and advertisers (Cronin, 2004) including those in the game industry (Kline et al., 2003), professional buyers (Kuipers, 2012), bartenders (Ocejo, 2012), personal trainers (Smith Maguire, 2008), music producers (Lingo and O'Mahony, 2010) and comic/gaming shop owners (Woo, 2012). The work of Smith Maguire and Matthews (2010, 2012, 2014) extends Bourdieu's concept, proposing that cultural intermediaries are contemporary arbiters of 'good taste and cool culture', operating at the intersection of culture and economy to construct legitimacy and add value by qualifying goods and services. Cultural intermediaries are recognized experts, coordinators, brokers (Foster and Ocejo, 2015) and/or 'maintainers' (Bliss, 2016), who use their privileged position, connections, knowledge and/or abilities to position themselves in the nebulous space between production and consumption and in doing so play an active role in shaping the discourses and practices of both. They may be motivated to do so in order to extract advantage and profit based on their position; to build and reinforce structures for collective good; and/or to translate, interpret and frame cultural products for an audience (Foster and Ocejo, 2015) or, in many cases, a combination of all three.

Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012: 2) articulate two defining features of the concept, neither of which is sufficient on its own. First, cultural intermediaries are 'market actors who construct value by mediating how goods (or services, practices, people) are perceived and engaged with by others' such as consumers and other market actors, including other cultural intermediaries. Second, cultural intermediaries must also be defined by their expert orientation and relational position:

In the struggle to influence others' perceptions and attachments, cultural intermediaries are defined by their claims to professional expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields (and the foundations on which such claims rest). And, they are differentiated by their locations within commodity chains (*vis-a-vis* the actors and stages of cultural production they negotiate with and between, and the goods that they mediate), and by the autonomy, authority, and arsenal of devices and resources that they deploy in negotiating structural and subjective constraints to accomplishing their agendas. (Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012: 2))

Crucially, cultural intermediaries such as the Megabooth shape collective gaming tastes and define the field of indie games, but they do *not* occupy a fixed structural position. Rather, intermediation is a process, and so, empirical case studies are necessary to make sense of the actual socio-material practices of cultural intermediaries and their wider significance (Foster and Ocejo, 2015).

Accordingly, this article tells the story of how the Indie Megabooth became an influential cultural intermediary in the field of digital games. The first half outlines the history of the Megabooth, starting with its roots in ad hoc networks of friends, tracing how it cohered into its mature form as a professionalized, global institution. The second half of this article unpacks its cultural intermediary work, making otherwise invisible labour visible, detailing the wide range of socio-material practices enacted by the Megabooth and analysing its role and impact in the indie gaming ecosystem and wider culture of digital games. We conclude by identifying several open questions to guide future research in this area.

A booth of our own: how the Megabooth grew from ad hoc networks

The story of the Indie Megabooth begins, in part, with Kelly Wallick. Today, she is the near-universally attributed anchor around which the many people, activities and possibilities of the Megabooth have coalesced. In our account, she is less a visionary leader or social entrepreneur than a ‘heterogeneous engineer’ (Suchman, 2000): a skilled facilitator, mediator and ‘fixer’ who finds meaning, value and a certain measure of prestige in a new cultural/economic intermediary role, different in character from the slick marketing schemes that have defined the work of cultural intermediaries in the AAA industry in the past (Kline et al., 2003). This new role emerges at the interstices of a tectonic shift taking place in the global game industry around 2008–2010, characterized by the rise of indie, casual and mobile games; a diversifying gaming public; and the widespread adoption of digital distribution (Whitson, 2013).

As for many, Wallick’s route towards a career in games was winding and serendipitous. After completing a Chemistry degree in 2007, she worked at start-ups and universities, landing a job as the manager of an MIT chemistry laboratory. After just over a year of overseeing laboratory spaces, experiments, logistics and supply, equipment maintenance and coordinating events and workshops, an accidental steam pipe explosion set her spiralling off towards games. With the MIT laboratory destroyed, Wallick moved to the private biotech sector but quickly grew disillusioned with the work. Much like the ‘invisible technicians’ described in Shapin’s (1989) history of Enlightenment-era laboratories, in these spaces, the practical knowledges and abilities of the ‘maintainers’ who do much of the hands-on work are taken for granted, while those with advanced theoretical degrees and status receive credit and promotions. Around this time Wallick’s software engineer sister, Adriel, had returned to Boston and was also looking for new inspiration. Together, they started attending game developer meet-ups and events, joining the eclectic community of small independent game makers in the region. And so, the story of the Indie Megabooth must also begin with the Boston indie game development community.

Prior to 2009, indie games were mostly an online phenomenon, with developers interacting via web forums and blogs. One effect of indie’s rise to prominence is the proliferation of geographically localized scenes and communities of practice, beginning in hub cities with a critical mass of game developers such as Toronto, Montréal, Copenhagen and Boston and soon spreading outward around the world (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011; Parker, 2014). In Boston, the local scene includes a branch of the International Game

Developers Association, The Boston Indies, Women in Games Boston and the Boston Festival of Indie Games, among numerous other formal and informal groups and gatherings. These communities serve a variety of important functions for participants, providing emotional support, positive reinforcement, collaboration and networking opportunities and access to shared knowledge and resources (Crogan, 2015; Guevara-Villalobos, 2011). The socio-material assemblage of the Boston indie scene opened the space of possibility for what would eventually become the Megabooth.

While playing games had always been a hobby, Wallick had not envisioned it as a potential career until she became involved in the local scene. She worked for 2 years as a project manager at game/software company Infrared5 to gain expertise and familiarize herself with the industry before striking out on her own. During this time, she continued to participate in the indie community, volunteering her time and organizational skills, especially with Fire Hose Games, a company run by her boyfriend at the time, Eitan Glinert.

While informal shared indie booths existed previously, Glinert is generally credited with conceiving the current form of the Megabooth in response to PAX Prime 2011 in Seattle. That year, indie developer booths were relocated to a costly, yet cramped and uncomfortable, space on the sixth floor of the convention centre with low visibility and foot traffic. Glinert described the experience as being relegated to the 'kids table' at Thanksgiving, 'except it wasn't the kiddie table where it's more fun. It's the kiddie table where there's no food, and everyone stares longingly at [successful Minecraft developer] Mojang's chicken' (Tach, 2012b). He had an idea: if enough indie developers pooled their resources, they could book a large and otherwise prohibitively expensive space on the main expo floor and divide it among themselves. While Glinert pitched the idea to PAX organizers and got the indie community on board, Wallick executed the plan, taking care of logistics.

The Megabooth in the form we know it today was first held in April 2012 at PAX East in Boston. It signalled a major shift: indies were moving from the margins to the front and centre of a major gaming convention. In total, 16 developers, all friends and friends-of-friends from across the Eastern United States and Canada, exhibited in a shared 2000-ft² space, attracting enthusiastic throngs of press and fans. Indie development became a bounded geographic space in the chaos of the convention, complete with its own 'Indie Mega Passport' stamp cards encouraging fans to visit every developer. The Megabooth fostered distinct cultural practices, setting itself apart from impersonal AAA installations by taking a deliberately scrappy and playful approach to booth designs and inviting attendees to engage directly with the developers.

Attendee and press response to this 'space of difference' was enthusiastic. The influential gaming website *Polygon* praised the Megabooth, writing that 'its participants are willing to come together in a series of acts that are more than pure self-interest' (Tach, 2012b), while game journalist Christopher Floyd described the Megabooth's teamwork as representing 'everything that the independent gaming scene should be about: innovation, imagination, and emancipation from their big-league counterparts' (Floyd, 2012). Notably, Floyd was the first to interview Wallick about her work on the Megabooth, and he will reappear later in this history. The Megabooth was thus touted as celebrating indie ideals of DIY authenticity, humour, passion, creativity and community collaboration, reinforcing the existing notion that indie development was the primary site of

coolness and innovation in games, as well as a meaningful alternative to the mainstream industry.

Participants from the tight-knit indie community were discursively unified by Glinert as a kind of anti-corporate, ‘disruptive’ social collective, drawing on the language of the new media start-up scene. Described by Glinert half-jokingly as ‘basically communism’, where everyone chips in and takes on tasks from sign-making to t-shirts (Tach, 2012a), the ephemeral discourse of collectivism already present in the ideology of indie was materialized in the first Megabooth and quickly became its prime justification. The positive press, fan and developer response to the first Megabooth revealed a need within the community for intermediary labour. Four months later, with Glinert as spokesperson and Wallick in charge of operations, logistics and a growing host of volunteers, another Megabooth was launched at PAX Prime 2012 in Seattle, this time with double the number of teams and floor space. The impact of the first booth can be seen in media coverage leading up to the second, which already treats the Megabooth not as a third-party, volunteer-run, community experiment but as an ‘official’ permanent fixture at PAX events – portrayed as something that has always been and always will be. In direct contrast, Wallick says that the Megabooth organizers were still gauging its viability at the time and decided to go ahead with a second iteration simply ‘to see what happens’ at a larger convention.

But after the second Megabooth, Wallick says that it was clear that the Megabooth was ‘A Thing’, and developers and fans alike expected it to return to PAX every year (and indeed at other gaming events as well). It is in this moment that the Megabooth consolidates, shifting from ad hoc practices and taking shape as a highly visible and influential actor in the indie gaming space. The Megabooth website now explicitly cued audience reception, evoking language such as ‘creative’, ‘inventive’ and ‘quirky’ to actively promote the idea that indie was the most aesthetically valuable and interesting sector of the game industry (Indie Megabooth, 2012), while hardware donations from Intel initiated ties with corporate sponsors that would become crucial to the organization’s ongoing operation.

A booth between: how the Megabooth became a cultural intermediary

Relying only on written accounts of the Megabooth or examining it from our present vantage point, it is difficult to imagine it ever being otherwise. We fall into the trap of thinking that the Megabooth – and the communities of developers, platforms, fans, influencers and media it coheres – is ‘A Thing’ that has always existed and will continue unchanged. But in 2013 and 2014, the transformation from informal network to formalized cultural intermediary was still an open question.

Within a year, the Megabooth had exploded in scale, hosting 62 games by 50 developers at PAX East 2013. Media attention peaked, epitomized by a glowing magazine-style profile of the booth and its history accompanied by a short video documentary in *Polygon* (Dunn, 2013). This inspirational article raised public awareness of the Megabooth as an institution, emphasizing the considerable infrastructural work accomplished its organizers. At this time, the Megabooth was still a loose volunteer assemblage of friends, but

Wallick started appearing more centrally as the 'logistical mastermind' behind the operation. The coverage shaped the Megaboost's organizational identity and opened up a new tier of partnership opportunities.

The space between PAX East in April 2013 and PAX Prime in August 2013 marks an important transition as the current Megaboost took formal shape, legally incorporating under the tongue-in-cheek name 'Indie Megacorp, Corp'. Wallick left her career at Infrared5 and became the Megaboost's first full-time employee, acting as president, secretary and treasurer, with Glinert as then vice-president, and supported by a rotating cast of part-time contractors, volunteers and community members, as well as a board of advisors composed of indie scene stalwarts. Significant changes were also made to the Megaboost's activities and practices, most notably the introduction of an open application and selection/curation process for exhibitors and an expanded range of support and services for developers in the Megaboost network.

Outward changes at PAX Prime 2013 followed. The Megaboost claimed the largest single booth in the convention, having doubled in size in each of its first three iterations. Beginning with Prime 2013, some applicants were offered plinth-like standing stations to exhibit in a shared area dubbed the 'Indie Miniboost', allowing more teams to exhibit without drastically expanding the space. This partitioning also created a tiered system within the Megaboost, with larger, more seasoned or more successful developers occupying larger, increasingly professional booths while smaller, less experienced or less market-friendly developers were relegated to the tightly packed, less costly Miniboost area, with the hope that they would one day 'graduate' to a full booth.

The outward appearance of a laid-back, community-oriented group of supportive indies masked the tremendous amount of back-end work involved in holding everything together, including the constant anchoring performed by Wallick. The logistical expertise and coordination skills she developed through her previous management work scaffolded the smooth interaction of people, corporations, equipment, game software, press and fans behind the scenes. The Megaboost walked a fine line, balancing everyone's needs and interests while simultaneously encouraging cooperation towards a larger common goal. Most of the Megaboost volunteers were full-time developers and exhibitors themselves, contributing whatever they could to the organization based on their abilities and availability. But the scale of the Megaboost's operations was such that it could not continue to function as a one-employee operation without a more permanent support structure. Following the success of PAX Prime 2013, Wallick focused on professionalization efforts, hiring former journalist, game developer and Boston Festival of Indie Games organizer Christopher Floyd as the Megaboost's second full-time employee, who took on a substantial portion of the game selection, event planning, exhibitor relations and PR work. A relatively stable organizational core was put in place around Wallick and Floyd, with Ryan Burrell responsible for the website and technical infrastructure of the Megaboost, Jessica Floyd (Christopher's partner) handling graphic design and merchandising and Eric Chon coordinating the dozens of volunteers. Glinert and other early organizers gradually receded into the background, while Wallick embraced her role as the public face of the Megaboost, as evidenced by increasing deference to her in the indie community and the gaming press as Indie Megaboost 'Overlord' (her unofficial title) and 'one of the most powerful women in indie gaming' (Kuchera, 2013).

With Floyd having taken over some of her previous duties, Wallick focused more of her time on sponsorships and industry partnerships. She expanded the geographical and temporal reach of the Megabooth, increasing year-round communication activities, outreach and social presence. The Megabooth moved far beyond the PAX circuit, running new events at the GDC in San Francisco (beginning in 2014); EGX in Birmingham, the United Kingdom; and BitSummit in Kyoto, Japan (both beginning in 2015), and off-site Megabooth showcases at E3 in Los Angeles (beginning 2015), along with a number of other Megabooth events including one-off appearances at Gamescom in Cologne, Germany (2014) and the Taiwan Game Developers Forum in Taipei (2016). This expanded the Megabooth's audience far beyond North American player/consumers. Signposting their increasing globalization, the Megabooth hired Japan-based developer and event organizer John Davis as their operations manager in 2015. Through their international events, the Megabooth now intermediates between different global indie communities and markets, bringing American developers overseas and making it easier for international developers to attend PAX and other US events.

This evolution from a geographically localized, informal network of friends concentrated around twice-yearly PAX events to a year-round international operation, characterized by an organizational hierarchy, brand outreach beyond the booth space, formal adjudication and curation processes and external funding sources and partnerships, allowed the Megabooth to integrate itself into a larger, globally distributed network of small-scale developers. However, this has not been without consequences. Rapid growth and expanding influence has at times come into conflict with the collectivist ideals of the original Megabooth, threatening the balance between organized cooperation towards a larger common goal and meeting the interests of many individual actors.

The precarity of this balance became evident in 2014. Riding high on 2013's successes and the organization's renewed mandate, the Megabooth hosted their largest showcase ever at PAX East 2014, with a staggering 120 games from 90 developers. Wallick describes a palpable shift from an atmosphere of collaboration to one of calculated competition, with the Megabooth being treated as an impersonal, on-demand 'marketing arm'. She compares the experience to working as a waitress for exacting customers:

You know, people sort of bossing you around and expecting you to do a million things even though you're busting ass all the time. [...] Everyone was complaining about everything, no one was happy about stuff and it just felt like, 'why am I doing this, why did I like sacrifice all this stuff personally and financially just to have people treat us like they didn't care about us and they just wanted to get theirs?'. (Personal interview, 2015)

Making matters worse, logistical issues with conference centre unions resulted in unexpected financial strain and equipment delays. This was exacerbated by emotional turmoil in Wallick's personal life. Both Glinert and her sister had ended their involvement with the Megabooth, weakening her support network. Wallick and Floyd found themselves alone in the convention centre at 2:00 a.m., abandoned at the end of the show amid the detritus of tens of thousands of attendees, packing and cleaning up the space. They both admit that this low point could have been the end of the Megabooth. They held

soul-searching discussions and decided to continue but resolved to keep events to a manageable ‘human’ scale – in this case, between 60–80 developers per event – and emphasize community ideals criteria for Megabooth exhibitor selection. This anecdote illustrates the layers of emotional and infrastructural labour involved in cultural intermediary work. In the second half of this article, we unpack this work, describing just what it is that cultural intermediaries do in the contemporary game industry.

The labour of logistics: doing cultural intermediation

In this section, we outline the diverse range of social and material practices that take place under the aegis of the Indie Megabooth in its mature form (from late 2013 onwards) and analyse its impact, beginning with the on-site logistics of running the Megabooth. Much of the work associated with the Megabooth could be described as ‘herding cats’. In addition to booking and allocating space for 60–80 teams and promoting each showcase, every aspect of the booth’s material and technical infrastructure, from walls to wet wipes, must be ordered, paid for or donated, delivered, mounted and unmounted after the show. *Polygon*’s profile includes a partial list of tasks overseen by Wallick during PAX Prime 2013:

About 1,000 maps are printed out to help PAX attendees navigate their way around the space. Dozens of boxes full of monitors, keyboards, mice, controllers and other such equipment are brought in, even after sponsorships to help offset costs fell through just a couple weeks before the show began. Forms to pay for electricity and internet are filled out. Same goes for carpet. Food and drinks are ordered in advance to nourish hundreds of people. Parties are planned to keep all these tiring folks sane. Mailing lists are updated to include and inform all the participants of the show. Bargained payment rates are negotiated to ensure that the modest developers aren’t being slammed too much beyond their means. Developers’ press kits are collected, and then the press itself is contacted and addressed. Banners are designed and printed for the sides of the space, while the [...] hanging sign above the show floor is created and lifted too. (Dunn, 2013)

As Negus (2002) points out, this kind of boring, mundane, unglamorous and often invisible articulation work – work that enables work (Strauss, 1988) – is just as important as the more obviously creative and cool activities commonly associated with cultural intermediaries, producing direct material benefits for other actors. By negotiating on behalf of the group for better rental prices, donated or sponsored equipment and bulk orders, the Megabooth cuts costs for its participants by hundreds or even thousands of dollars. When on-site problems arise – a malfunctioning cable and a forgotten laptop stand – the Megabooth team is quick to respond and troubleshoot solutions. The amount of time and energy required for a developer to mount a solo booth might otherwise be dedicated to actually working on games, and so, for many indie developers, the savings and support can make the difference between showing their game or staying home (see, for example, Camilleri, 2015; Chyr, 2014). From the beginning, the Megabooth’s central placement and the promise of significant logistical support, as well as the camaraderie and mentorship of co-located developers made it a highly desirable venue even for those who could afford to branch out to their own space. This increasing demand, coupled with

changes in the indie scene and the industry more broadly pushed Wallick and her team to expand their operations beyond promotion.

From collective to curator

The move from open collective to curated showcase was a direct result of the Megabooth's successes in 2013. In theory, before that time anyone with a recently or soon-to-be-released indie game could join the booth. In practice, the booth had grown along interpersonal networks, snowballing out around past exhibitors who invited new teams to join, share or sub-divide their booths. The Megabooth's increasingly high profile meant that many developers now had to be turned away. Wallick decided that a formal application process was needed and assembled a small judging committee out of the existing network of Megabooth organizers and collaborators. Under this system, developers submit their game, trailer and a rationale for why they should be allowed to join the Megabooth via an online portal. For each major event, the committee reviews 200–300 submissions; assigns scores based on a variety of aesthetic, technical and social criteria, including the team's 'fit' with the community and collaborative attitude; and produces a shortlist from which Wallick, Floyd and their core team make the final selections. With this move away from the community/collective model, the Megabooth has evolved, tentatively, into a curator and has, along with other curator-gatekeepers such as the Independent Games Festival and Indiecade, helped define the contemporary ethos, aesthetic and taste culture associated with indie games (Juil, 2014), galvanizing the popular discourse around 'indie-ness' in the game industry and gaming culture.

As scholar and former film festival programmer Czach (2016) argues, the responsibility of selection brings with it a tremendous amount of pressure and emotional labour. Curators and cultural programmers are often met with mock jealousy or disbelief when people learn they get to watch movies or play games for a living, but in fact curatorial work involves endless hours of sifting through submissions of widely varying quality, carefully considering their merits and saying *no* to the vast majority. In effect, curators are tasked with repeatedly crushing applicants' dreams and managing their negative reactions. Christopher Floyd describes the frustrations of this often overlooked and misunderstood process:

[Attendees] don't see the months and months of playing hundreds of video games, picking your favorites, then killing your favorites because you can't have space for them. The amount of agony that goes into putting all that stuff together ... I can point to that game and see the three-hour argument that went into how do we make sure that it can get in and this other game can get in, are they too similar, all that kind of stuff. (Floyd, 2016)

Participating in the Megabooth was already understood to be a marker of quality and distinction, but the application and selection process formalizes their gatekeeping and taste-making role. It also helps establish the Megabooth as a distinct organization, rather than a project of the indie community as a whole, as it had often been framed in the past. The ability to provide a 'best-of' snapshot or 'vertical slice' of the indie scene in a given moment highlights creativity and innovation for the rest of the industry and is now a key

part of the organization's brand identity. The 'finger on the pulse' claim to expert knowledge that comes from playing hundreds of new games each year distinguishes the post-2013 Megabooth from its earlier iterations and strategically reinforces its intermediary position.

In recent years, indie game developers and enthusiasts have become acutely aware of the need for intermediaries. The market for indie games is flooded to the point of oversaturation, as digital distribution, accessible tools and a string of highly publicized breakout hits have driven countless aspiring amateurs and industry pros to 'go indie', leading to editorials debating whether the 'indie bubble' is about to burst (Clark, 2015; Vogel, 2014, 2015). One blogger (Poon, 2013) captures this anxiety in his description of the PAX Prime 2013 Megabooth:

It [...] felt like a bewildering flea market [...] attendees clamored around tables and foldout tables, shifting and shambling around impossibly cramped quarters. [...] This is in stark contrast to just last year when you could still call the Megabooth an actual booth and not a Burning Man-esque roving city of small-time developers. Just one year ago and this was still a finely contained microcosm within an already diminutive subset of the entertainment industry.

Discussing the impact of digital media on processes of cultural intermediation, Foster and Ocejo (2015) argue against the idea that new technologies such as digital distribution represent a 'democratization' of cultural production and a closing of the gap between production and consumption (p. 2). This popular notion belies the continued importance of expert intermediaries such as critics, curators and 'influencers' who are able to cut through the noise of a crowded market and grant visibility, distinction and legitimacy to certain objects and practices; moreover, in the absence of traditional intermediaries, independent creators are often forced to do the work of intermediation on their own behalf, in addition to doing creative labour (Baym, 2015; Kribs, 2017). The Megabooth is thus both exemplary of the perceived 'discoverability' problem and well positioned to address it. As we will see below, the move from collective to curator does not reflect a total abandonment of the Megabooth's collectivist ideals – the discourses of collaboration and community that are so central to the organization's self-image inform a host of other intermediary activities.

'Keeping everyone happy' in cultural intermediation

By mid-2013, it had become apparent to the Megabooth organizers that simply providing booth space and promoting indie games to potential consumers was not making enough of a difference for developers. In the research on cultural intermediaries, there is similarly a tendency to focus on cultural gatekeeping and taste-making, but as Smith Maguire and Matthews (2014) argue, 'downstream' consumer-oriented activities are complemented and augmented by 'upstream' activities oriented towards 'those in elite positions [...] who control the allocation of resources or distribution of information' (p. 10). The Megabooth's initial focus on better exposure was a straightforward solution to a simple problem of visibility in 2011, but in 2013's crowded indie game market, it seemed too narrow, even naive.

In order to maintain a persistent community and media presence beyond its show-cases, the organization revamped their website and social media presence, updating more frequently with posts relating to indie games and game development, including Floyd's weekly *Indie MEGACAST* podcast discussing 'the hidden (and sometimes not-so-hidden) gems of the indie video game scene' and a Twitch channel for live-streaming gameplay. While internal mailing lists and messaging channels are used to coordinate with exhibitors at specific events, the Megaboost hosts two larger, permanent lists, one for public facing news and the other an exclusive private forum for Megaboost 'alumni' to maintain communication and share knowledge and resources, which is seen by members as an undeniably valuable source of 'insider' information and advice. Together, these additions allowed the Megaboost to start moving beyond event planning.

The Megaboost has increasingly pursued more lucrative sponsorships and partnerships with major industry players to broaden the organization's network and influence. It has always relied to some degree on equipment sponsors and donations, but these were largely unobtrusive and practical (Kuchera, 2013). Sponsorship at a level sustaining year-round operations – which could only come from major gaming corporations – was a different matter. Wallick describes the behind-the-scenes discussion as 'a big huge debate', in which the ideals of the indie ethos clashed with the realities of making ends meet. Concerns over 'selling out' and diluting their indie brand identity have resulted in Wallick spending much of her time chasing down and vetting potential sponsors, who are 'curated' just as carefully as exhibitors and often rejected. Financial support from a large assortment of sponsors, both corporate (Microsoft, Sony, Intel, Twitch, Google, etc.) and independent (Cards Against Humanity and various Megaboost alumni paying it forward), allows for organizational longevity, more opportunities to offset costs for exhibitors and subsidies and sponsorships for those who cannot otherwise afford to attend.

The Megaboost operates as a boundary organization, discovering areas of convergent interest between what may seem to be oppositional parties, such as corporate platform holders and indies. By remaining accountable to both, and performing tasks useful to both sides, they transform contestation into collaboration. As O'Mahony and Bechky (2008) put it, boundary organizations such as the Megaboost enable directly competing parties such as indies and the mainstream industry to 'substantively collaborate by building a bridge between divergent worlds that allows collaborators to preserve their competing interests' (p. 426). The Megaboost not only acts as intermediary and gatekeeper between developers and potential fans but actively maintains and connects dispersed networks of developers, industry partners and other 'powers-that-be' in the game industry. Crucially, Wallick is able to move between and speak the language of both worlds, equally comfortable among scruffy, entrepreneurial indies and well-groomed corporate types.

While in the past, the Megaboost negotiated on behalf of exhibitors as a collective whole, increasingly Wallick and her team are doing more granular brokerage work, arranging introductions and meetings between specific indies and powerful cultural/economic gatekeepers such as platform holders, publishers, press, pop culture 'influencers' and investors. For example, a platform holder may be seeking visually interesting titles to flesh out an upcoming digital promotion, or a popular YouTuber may reveal a new penchant for survival sim games. In such cases, Wallick and her team act as 'matchmakers',

vetting reliable or promising Megabooth exhibitors and alumni and introducing them to key industry actors. By constantly and meticulously performing what Baym (2015) calls 'the relational labour of connection', the Megabooth organizers are able to create the conditions for potentially beneficial partnerships. At PAX Prime 2013, the Megabooth debuted its annual 'Platform Mixer' party, a private event open only to Megabooth exhibitors and industry representatives. The party is billed as a low-pressure networking opportunity for indies to make potentially career-making connections in an informal atmosphere, away from press and fans, with appropriate social lubricant and personal introductions from the Megabooth organizers. It is important to note that these are services provided not only to the indies but to the industry gatekeepers as well, who rely on the Megabooth to mediate connections and who may ultimately benefit more from their activities than any individual developer.

As Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) suggest, 'the personal is necessarily professional' for cultural intermediaries (p. 5). In this intermediary/brokerage role, Wallick and her people's personal reputations, credibility and social/cultural capital act as an assurance that untested indies, who are often lacking professional skills (and in some cases, social skills in general) are worth doing business with; conversely, Wallick extensively vets her industry partners on behalf of the indie community, to confirm that their goals align and to ensure 'mutually beneficial' relationships. A failed or unsatisfactory deal will hurt not only the parties involved but also the Megabooth's reputation, and once the connection is made, Wallick has relatively little control over the outcome. The Megabooth thus performs subtle professionalization work, priming actors as to intersecting interests and goals, 'lending' them social/cultural capital and informally coaching them on interactional strategies before making these introductions. The alumni mailing list serves as an additional site of professionalization and emotional support, offering organizer and alumni advice to less experienced indies on how to comport themselves within these industry relationships.

While the Megabooth clearly operates as a 'cool' gatekeeper and tastemaker, maintaining the Megabooth's social networks involves a great deal of both emotional (Hochschild, 2012) and affective labour (Hardt and Negri, 2005). In her role, Wallick must handle the emotions of different actors, while also working to produce the right kinds of affects to encourage enthusiastic and effective collaboration. She describes her work as aligning a diverse assortment of 'passionate, stubborn, entrepreneurial, smart, and creative' people with 'wildly different interests' that need to be juggled. Compared to her past work at MIT and the mostly 'hard' technical work of managing science experiments, the Megabooth emphasizes the 'soft' side of managing people and, as she puts it, 'keeping everyone happy'. This self-description is common among cultural intermediaries (Lingo and O'Mahony, 2010; Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014), who are tasked with managing the personalities, feelings and expectations of a diverse range of people, as well as their creative and business needs, with care and empathy. An enthusiastic, optimistic and jovial atmosphere characterizes Megabooth get-togethers, an affective environment only achieved via extensive, invisible labour. As Wallick explains in *Polygon*, this positive atmosphere is deliberate. She 'spaces out meetings, puts people face-to-face and assigns tasks in a way to alleviate as much stress from the team as she can' at the risk of her own burnout. She notes, 'There's a very specific reason why it's

sort of all “rainbows and kittens” and all these other things ... I work very, very hard to put a lot of “rainbows and kittens” into this’ (Dunn, 2013). While we do not wish to overdetermine Wallick’s identity as a woman, it bears noting that these forms of labour are commonly gendered and denigrated as feminine (Jarrett, 2014). Despite this devaluation, the Megabooth’s intermediary function is rooted in managing emotions, affects and relationships, whether between different indies, between indies and consumers or between indies and the wider industry.

The question of impact

To what end does the Megabooth perform its intermediary role? What is achieved, for the Megabooth and the actors it services and supports? In a sense, the Megabooth occupies a role similar to that of a publisher. Publishers such as Activision-Blizzard and Electronic Arts are major corporate actors, intermediaries in their own right that maintain a stable of in-house and contract game development studios and whose powerful marketing/promotion and distribution engines exert a structuring influence on the game industry and gaming culture. Indie-focused publishers such as Devolver have a similar degree of influence in the indie space (Vanderhoef, 2016). In recognition of these similarities, but also the collectivist nature of the indie community, Christopher Floyd half-jokes:

[Indie Megabooth] is a publisher minus the part where we make money from the games at the end. We review the pitches, we choose the games that we like the most, we put them on display hoping to make them successful and help them succeed, and then they succeed and then we don’t see them anymore. (Personal interview, 2015)

As Woo (2012) notes, ‘both production and [inter]mediation are embedded in a culture without which they would be unintelligible’, and so, the Megabooth must be understood as co-constitutive with the field of cultural production in which it operates (p. 674). The Megabooth’s structure and operations have thus been shaped by gaps in the indie game production, distribution and reception process. It provides crucial services to developers, but all this connecting, cultivation and supporting does not directly benefit the Megabooth when exhibiting developers go on to be successful. This is somewhat unique for a cultural intermediary, differing from the royalty and profit-sharing systems in the music and film industries. Conversely, while the Megabooth is ideologically invested in socio-economic sustainability in indie game development, it is also insulated from the risk of failure, which is ultimately shouldered by individual developers.

Between 2012 and 2016, the Megabooth has showcased over 575 indie games. Many of these are commercially successful (*Don’t Starve*, *Crypt of the NecroDancer*, *Banner Saga*, *Guacamelee!*) and critically acclaimed (*That Dragon Cancer*, *The Stanley Parable*, *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes!*, *Antichamber*), and many others are not. The impact of an actor such as the Megabooth is difficult to determine, partly due to the lack of enduring legal or financial ties to past exhibitors. We cannot at this stage directly measure the boost they give to indie developers or their role in determining what games find success. Assessing the Megabooth’s impact is made especially challenging by the generally high degree of uncertainty in indie gaming in this historical moment. In their study of country

music producers, Lingo and O'Mahony (2010: 62) argue that the process of cultural production is rife with ambiguity, and the role of intermediaries is to attempt to minimize the ambiguity inherent in the process (which can never be completely eliminated). The parallel to our case study should be clear: indie developers, gaming enthusiasts and the gatekeepers of the game industry all place their trust in organizations such as the Megabooth to minimize, or at least mediate, the overwhelming uncertainty that permeates the field. Nothing is guaranteed by the Megabooth, but the intermediary space that it has come to occupy allows it to intervene and exert influence in a diverse range of cultural and economic processes. It helps make indie game development more financially viable for a select group of developers, but more importantly, it exerts a structuring influence on the field of indie games, constituting patterns of collective activity and interaction well beyond promotion to consumers. In 2015, Wallick became chairperson of the Independent Games Festival, another of the most prominent institutional actors in indie games (Juul, 2014), further expanding her sphere of influence and cementing her own position as a powerful intermediary. Regardless of its perceived or actual impacts, the Megabooth has woven itself into the fabric of the game industry and gaming culture.

Conclusion

In its highly publicized outward-facing role as a curator and gatekeeper, the Indie Megabooth ascribes legitimacy and value to specific games and developers, reinforcing the dominant popular idea of indie games. But we contend that the Megabooth's behind-the-scenes logistical and brokerage activities are of equal if not greater importance. The Megabooth can be productively analysed as a cultural intermediary, mediating between a diverse set of actors and stakeholders with multiple (sometimes conflicting) needs and goals. In doing so, alongside other similar institutional actors, they help constitute the field of production, distribution, reception and consumption for indie games. The ethos, community, identities and aesthetics associated with indie gaming must be understood in context of the often overlooked but crucial work of cultural intermediaries such as the Megabooth, through which 'indie-ness' and independence are actively performed. With the present case study, we have demonstrated the utility of this conceptual framework for untangling the threads of contemporary gaming culture.

This leaves us with a number of directions for our ongoing work with the Megabooth and other indie intermediaries. First, as noted above, assessing the impact of cultural intermediaries involves tracing the long-term fortunes of specific game developers to determine whether and how organizations such as the Megabooth contribute to economic and critical success, sustainability and survival for indie game developers. If there is not a direct causal link, where can the actual impact of their activities be located? Second, while this article focuses on 'upstream' production processes, developers and academics alike know little about 'downstream' consumption compared to other media cultures, including who buys and plays indie games (and why). Studying the Megabooth and similar organizations positioned between producers and consumers is useful for understanding how the audience for indie games is constructed and captured through curation and gatekeeping practices. Third, as Negus (2002) points out, there is a tendency to romanticize cultural intermediaries, which risks glossing over Bourdieu's core question of

whether their work challenges or reinforces dominant social, cultural and economic hierarchies. For all the oppositional, utopian rhetoric of creative emancipation and entrepreneurial collectivism, indie gaming cultures often reproduce the problematic practices, ideologies and economies of the mainstream industry (Fisher and Harvey, 2013). In the spectacular temporary cities of game conventions, the Megabooth quite literally carries the 'indie' banner. From the colour of the carpet, to the enthusiastic, collaborative social atmosphere of the booth, to the seemingly unmediated access it provides to new games and up-and-coming developers, it sets itself up as a space apart from the mainstream industry. Yet, these neat distinctions are breaking down, and the cultural-economic futures of commercial indie game developers and the Megabooth itself are tightly bound to the unpredictable vicissitudes of the larger industry. The Megabooth is in the thick of it, fighting a compromised battle for sustainability on multiple fronts. In fact, shortly before the publication of this article, several longtime Megabooth employees moved on to other careers, leaving Wallick to re-build the organization and re-orient its priorities in the shifting industry. The 'indie moment' may have already passed (Parkin, 2017), but the strategies, tactics and operational mobilizations of cultural intermediaries have set the stage for whatever comes next.

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Note

1. For readability, we will hereafter refer to the Indie MEGABOOTH in the lower case.

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Author biographies

Felan Parker is an interdisciplinary researcher and teacher specializing in media studies, game studies, and cinema studies. He is currently a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow at Concordia University's Technoculture, Art and Games Research Centre, and the principal investigator on the "Indie Interfaces: Examining Independent Game Development Support Networks" SSHRC Insight Development Grant. In July 2017 he will join the University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto as assistant professor of Book & Media Studies.

Jennifer R Whitson is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology & Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo. In addition to studio studies and ethnographies with game developers, she researches digital media surveillance, social influences on software development processes, gamification, and governance in online domains. You can find her work in journals such as *Surveillance and Society*, *First Monday*, *Economy & Society*, and *FibreCulture*.

Bart Simon is associate professor of Sociology and Director of the Milieux Institute for Arts, Culture and Technology at Concordia University in Montreal. His work combines cultural sociology, game studies and science and technology studies to look at modalities of play and technology in everyday life.