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**PROFESSOR:** I'd like to introduce Jesper. Jesper Juul is a old friend of the lab and currently at the Royal Danish Academy-- So it is very long.

**JESPER JUUL:** It's actually longer than this. Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts Schools of Architecture Conservation and Design, School of Design.

**PROFESSOR:** Right. And you've also taught at NYU. You're a visiting professor here. And you've been a games scholar for a decade now?

**JESPER JUUL:** Yeah, a bit more than that.

**PROFESSOR:** Maybe it's more than a decade. If you take a bunch of the classes here, we sometimes have readings from Jesper-- articles that he's written. But this is another example of the talks that we've been having on this is what people do once they understand game design, right?

Some people study games. Some people do research and write books about it. And ask interesting questions that try to find out more about what makes games fascinating. Or what makes the environment in which we create games or we play games interesting. So with that, I'd like hand it over to Jesper.

**JESPER JUUL:** Hi.

**PROFESSOR:** And this is game design 608.

**JESPER JUUL:** Hello, game design 608. So are you doing digital games, or analog games, or?

We're doing analog.

**JESPER JUUL:** Analog, all right. So I think I'll mostly be talking about digital games right now, but I think it probably applies to some extent. Phil, introduced me so nicely. So this is really a part of a conference presentation I did earlier in April. And so if you're interested in reading the full paper, it's on my website. And it's kind of URL or independent style. And if you just go to /text you'll see some of the other stuff I've written.

And I've written a few books about video games. So I wrote one about video games and storytelling. And one about casual games. And my most recent one, called *The Art of Failure*

is, in a way, about being a sore loser. So it's an essay on the pain of playing video games. So I focus on the question of why we claim we enjoy video games even though if you look at people who claim that, they often look quite unhappy actually. So it's a discussion on that.

But this one is a social study of different things across the culture of independent games. And so, there seems to be a kind of consensus that independent games would become an important aspect of game culture. And you can see this in several ways-- with a very cheap kind of Google engram way of showing that something is popular.

I don't know if anybody knows why it's never flat, this curve. Does somebody know? So in economic game theory, there's actually a concept called independent game. So it means a game that's not attached to other games. So that's why it's never quite fled the curve.

But it shows you that, from 2000 on, people started talking about independent games. And you can also see that somebody at Microsoft, they could spend a good deal of energy to claim how independent game friendly they are with the new console. [INAUDIBLE]

And we can tell by-- probably a few different reasons why we talk about independent games. And one of them may be the budgets have become too big and too late development. So there is this kind of opening for games that are made on a smaller budget. And also that it's become easier to distribute games. So it used to be, in order to distribute a game, you had to find a disc and a box. And that's no longer true, fortunately. And this means it's become possible to make games in different styles.

And they also found that there's this thing that-- which can sound kind of weird-- the independent games, in a way, pre-supposed the idea of independent games. So let me explain what that means. If you're making a game on a small budget, one of the things you need to be able to be sure of is that people who see your game, don't just think of it as a game with too small a budget-- that they actually understand that this is a game that has some positive qualities to it. Or that there's a particular reason why it has a small budget. Or the fact that a bigger budget wouldn't have made this game any better.

And so I think that the idea of the independent game is really that idea that you can actually say I'm making an independent game. And people will understand that this is a game that has a particular set of qualities where it's a feature-- the fact that it's a game with a small budget. And so, it doesn't mean-- you can see the question, what makes people assume that something is an independent game when they see it? I don't think it's just that it says

independent game somewhere. But I do think there's actually a particular style that's come into independent games.

[INAUDIBLE]

**JESPER JUUL:** Essentially you see that when people write about independent games, the first thing everybody will say is that you can't define anything. It's the first thing you have to say. So you always have people say that you can't define it because this creates discord in the game community. Or you want to talk about independent in different ways, economic, technological, or cultural status. And then the third people say, well, there's no point in trying to define independent games in the first place. So I think that's actually [INAUDIBLE]

On the other hand, if you look at what people who make independent games say there's actually a lot of things in common. So Dan Cook talked about that independent games largely favor someone who's authentic and deserving. Edmund McMillen liked to talk about honesty and speaking from your heart. He made Super Meat Boy, and Dan Cook made Triple Town. And [? Robert ?] [? Aumann ?] talks about your personal relationship with the work-- to independent games. [INAUDIBLE] [? Chavez ?] a whole discussion comparing independent games to funk music-- small, kind of personal, anyone can do it kind of thing. And various [INAUDIBLE] has talked about the smaller budgets allowing games to be more personal, more relevant.

And so I think these are quite similar in some ways. So they talk about the honest and the traditional and, what I call, minimal complexity. You can understand who made the game. Like we talked about just before with Kickstarter-- if you buy Triple-A game it's not necessarily clear who actually made the game. And with independent games, there's much more of an idea that you will have a feeling of the author's-- of the creator's-- personality.

All right, so you see that these are what I call moral and aesthetic claims at the same time. So it's not just saying that these are better games. It's a bit more deep than that. It's also saying that this is a better way of making a game. So not just that it will be a better product, but that, even say, the quality of life of someone who makes an indie game will be better. But also that we will all be better off if more people make independent games. We'll have more communication, and more ideas being spread, and more diversity, and so on.

Now, the thing is this is not exactly new. So this is called the trellis wallpaper by William Morris

and Philip Webb from 1862. So one of the things that strikes you as indie is that it actually is quite similar to somethings that have happened several times. But I think particularly it happened with the arts and crafts movement of the 19th century.

So you can see when we talk about independent games I do think it ties into several things such as the idea of DIY or the maker movement or the idea of local food production, like the locavore movement-- this idea that if you go to a restaurant you should know where the chicken you ate actually came from. Only yesterday I was at this restaurant called Emu-- I didn't know [INAUDIBLE] and they did list, on the left side of the menu, all of the farms where they get their ingredients. And it has this kind of like, wow, isn't it amazing. And of course I've never heard of any of those farms. I have no idea where they are. But it kind of still works for me because you can understand that there's a kind of honesty or something authentic about it.

But the arts and crafts movement, specifically discussed as being this late-19th century movement, where people reacted against the industrialization and machine production. And they felt that this included a loss of quality or personality. So that you didn't even know who made the product. And the product itself would be, kind of, worse.

And then the proponents of John Ruskin-- he talked about this idea that in medieval times there was a much better-- you had the [INAUDIBLE] by the medieval guild, kind of a small group of people making something like a Gothic building. And William Morris talks about this idea that handicrafts-- the craftsman making something that's much better than what would be made by machine production. And again, not just that. It would be better products, but that society at large, the world, would be a better place if we made things that way.

And I do think you can say that-- I think it's very clear, with the idea of independent games. It's kind of similar in the sense that when they talked about the revival of the craftsmanship and handicrafts, that we actually get a big machine, or big corporate productions-- a mass production. And I think, very similar, you can say that independent games are a reaction against very large Triple-A production teams. And so we have this idea that we should return to the smaller productions, and this will make everybody-- everything better on a number of levels.

Does that make sense? I don't know, do you have strong feelings about independent games?

**AUDIENCE:** An independent game that you get [INAUDIBLE]

**AUDIENCE:** I do completely [INAUDIBLE] I think independent games now have more freedom to explore different mechanics and step away from what sells because they don't have the million dollar investments that they have to make sure it sells. And they don't have to be like, oh, it's been proven to do well with the market. And they have more freedom in that way. [INAUDIBLE]

**JESPER JUUL:** Yeah.

**AUDIENCE:** So I found that, just for me personally, I don't really play games unless I'm planning on playing them a lot. So I play competitively *League of Legends* or [INAUDIBLE] Brothers. And some of the problems I have with independent games is that I don't feel like they're as developed. They're generally on the more creative side. Which is definitely something appreciable but not something that I enjoy. I prefer getting very good at, physically, mechanics and such.

**JESPER JUUL:** Yeah, I guess, [INAUDIBLE] multi-player actually does not [INAUDIBLE] adaptable. There's this new collection out called [INAUDIBLE] Does anybody play that?

**AUDIENCE:** [? Bobby ?] [? Pinchot ?] [INAUDIBLE]

**AUDIENCE:** [INAUDIBLE]

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

**JESPER JUUL:** Yeah, that's true it's not, in a way, a competitive sport. It's not that at all. There's a game I like, [INAUDIBLE]. Yeah. So that's kind of part of that complex.

**AUDIENCE:** So kind of on the opposite note, I think, not all, but a lot of independent games have the ability to just be quicker in single-player mode because-- While not all competitive aspects might be not be there, because massive multi-players [INAUDIBLE] They can be hard in single-player mode because they don't, for example, they don't need to remake the investments up. So a lot of people are frustrated when they lose. But they explore that realm more readily.

**JESPER JUUL:** I do think it's also a kind of nostalgia for an earlier time. And I do think that it's also part of the question of difficulties. So it's a part of it in the sense that all of the edges are being removed, or the challenge is being removed from big game productions to please everybody. If you make an indie game, you can make something that's more harder, more focused, and have things like extreme difficulty. I think that's certainly an argument that people make.

**AUDIENCE:** Actually I have a question. Does anybody remember the phrase, Nintendo hard?

**AUDIENCE:** Yeah.

**AUDIENCE:** OK, because that's not what Nintendo is anymore, right?

**AUDIENCE:** Not really. But on the flip-side to that coin, aren't you sort of breaking the number one design rule, flexibility? When you make games incredibly difficult such that you're carving out a very small niche audience and saying, screw you to everybody else.

**JESPER JUUL:** Yeah, and so these are subjects we'll get to in a bit-- that the arts and crafts movement also has this political theme that it would be for everybody-- art by the people, for the people. But then the criticism is that it ended up making conspicuous consumption for rich people.

And you see the same thing with the locavore food movement. It's usually pretty expensive actually. And so it's something that happens, that in a way you cannot have these ideals of broadening things, this kind of production. But often it also [INAUDIBLE] flip-side of actually narrowing it and making it an elite object for [INAUDIBLE]

One thing I thought was interesting was anything common in the way-- just talking about the visual style in independent games. And he had three games that we often talk of as being independent, and [INAUDIBLE], which has a pixelated or large pixel style and yet it moves this torn paper and crayons [INAUDIBLE]. Obviously, children's drawings with crayons. And so on one hand these are different graphical styles.

But actually, you can see what they do have in common is what you can call a double layer. It's a representation of a representation. So the [INAUDIBLE] represents 1980s size pixels which then represent a game world. And yet it moves with the sense paper which then represents a game world. [INAUDIBLE] the sense experience which then represents a game world.

And compare this to a modern Triple-A game. You don't really have that. You have 3D graphics within the game world. So when can say that-- I think that's pretty common. And I think without a representation of independent game-- I think when we usually see a game and recognize it as being an independent game, it's often because you have this type of style-- a representation of a representation.

And often we'll have to use something from contemporary technology, obviously. But you said, to emulate something that's low-tech and cheap, right? So you can see that-- you can

compare this to some casual games like matching games which might signal jewels or diamonds or something. I think it's very clear that most independent games tend to emulate very cheap materials like torn paper and things like that.

I think also the reason why people do this is that, in a way, what you've done is that you're signaling that we have made a deliberate choice to have this style. And we have deliberately chosen to make a game on a small budget. So I think this is [INAUDIBLE] but I think that's what this kind of style signals. And it's also signalling this thing of [INAUDIBLE] authenticity, or knowing who made the game, or transparency in the production process.

And so you can think of it like this, that indie is using this [INAUDIBLE] to mean two different things. Indie, on paper, means a financially independent team. Then I think that's also [INAUDIBLE] that people talked about indie from the game-development community-- talked about it in a way that it was morally and politically and aesthetically better. Not just better games but also better for everybody when games are made this way because you can communicate values and ideals, and so on. And that indie has a particular kind of style.

And I think that this kind of style of having these kind of representation of a representation, is one that people use to signal, now we are making a game with a small team. And it has this positive value of being authentic and something that we can figure out what's going on on who made it.

I'll just show quickly how that kind of style appeared. So this is looking at the-- do you know Independent Game Festival? Did you follow this? So that's all right. So anyway, this is a game dealers conference every year since 2000. There's been Independent Games Festival. And this is the longest running festival of independent games. And this is a jury-based competition. And so one of the things that's interesting is looking at the winners of the grand prize in this Independent Games Festival.

And one of the things that's kind of odd is that if you look at the first five years, none of the games actually signal independent very well in a contemporary way. So you can see that the three of them are somewhat regular games of armed conflict. And then Wild Earth is a Pokemon snap-style game. The Bad Milk is this weird, never released associational CD-ROM. You click on things, and then other things appear, and so on. It never came out. But you can see that this feels like it's from a different time. If you see the picture of the two top games, there's nothing that signals independent game in a modern sense.

And I think part of this is because at this time online distribution just wasn't that big a deal. And so when people submitted to the festival what they did was sometimes probably just they hoped that they would get noticed by a publisher. Who would then fund them, so they could make a very big version of the game which could then be shipped on a disc.

And then we see that from 2005 on, the winners of this festival gradually became more of this style I'm talking about. You see the paradigmatic 2-D platform with some kind of twist. [INAUDIBLE] Then with the winner we see a low-poly style that I think refers to a movie like *Tron*. And then we see various takes on water colors and the hand drawing graphics. And you see, this actually coincides with the gradual rise of digital distribution. So first there's things like downloadable casual games, that it becomes possible-- or those Flash games sites. It was more possible to distribute a game without having to put it in a box.

More recently then we see, we still have this pixel style. But then that gets merged with different things, like in a game like *Monaco* it has these various lighting effects. And then in *Minecraft* and [INAUDIBLE] it gets moved into a third dimension-- so not that-- and this is what I call counterfactual nostalgia-- in a way it's pixelated as if there was a time in the 1980s when people would make [INAUDIBLE] games with big pixels. This never happened obviously. But we have this Steampunk anachronism about it. But still, you can see, it signals that this is a particular game-- or a particular style and then they used modern effects on it.

In the last two years you have this flat mostly gray-scale pixels [INAUDIBLE] now. But then there are certain things that seem to be happening in the game play where half [INAUDIBLE] to me the life of a poor [INAUDIBLE] and pay the police simulates being an immigration officer. And so I think it goes to [INAUDIBLE] people talk about the moral current. Like there is a lot of discussion about participation, in various ways, in games and certainly a lot of emphasis on trying to make games with more serious themes so they'll cover a broader range of themes.

And so you see-- so this shows you where this kind of style comes from-- the representation of the representation. You'll also see that basically every single winner since 2005 of this festival has had this representation of representation.

All right. What does it mean? Well, I think there are a few contradictions in independent games. So one of them has to do with what we call the DIY movement. It's that anybody can make a video game now with independent games-- versus the idea of independent games as being a way for people to do games that are particularly expertly crafted. So some of those

like Terry Cavanagh-- he talked about how it's easy for him to make a game with this pixel style because he doesn't consider himself that great a graphic artist. And so this pixel style is easy for him to do-- to make in a convincing way.

On the other hand, if you want to make a game like that in a tool like Unity 3d. But people at Unity 3d really doesn't want you to do that. So the people at Unity 3d will do a serious filtering thing on your texture so if you just draw something with big pixels it will be very blurry, like the image on the left. So you have to do various things of changing the settings in the rendering of Unity 3d to actually do pixel style. That's not really what the tool is meant for doing anyway. So this develops the possibility of demonstrating technical expertise, by working against the intentions of the tool. And that is a kind of feature.

And so I think certainly that's the conflict within independent games-- between making independent games being these very small games in which you develop and have the opportunity to show off how great they are at various technical skills in a delicate and very small system. Versus independent games as being something where it's open to everybody.

So you can take a designer like Anna Anthropy, who wrote a book called *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters-- How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. So it's about making game development more democratic. And at the same time, when you see Anna Anthropy's games, she's actually a very, very good designer. So she makes these kind of games that are very-- she's good at combining elements from game history and to use them in a new way.

The second element-- second contradiction I think is more on the use end. That, on one hand the idea of independent games tends to have this idea of democratization. It becomes games by the people for people. On the other hand, I think also that now that it's so common to play video games-- and more than 50% of the population actually plays video games on a regular basis-- then I think to some extent indie games can be this way of showing that you have a more sophisticated taste than the great masses, right? That if everybody played Candy Crush, then you can show that you are playing some obscure game from the Humble Bundle that regular people don't really under-- have learned to appreciate. Then it becomes more this kind of fine wine tasting issue.

So I think that certainly you have break-out indie games like *Minecraft*, obviously. Which of course is a very, very broad hit across a lot of countries. It sold, what, 50 million copies?

**AUDIENCE:** Yeah, mind-blowingly large.

**JESPER JUUL:** Mind-blowingly large. And then of course still the developer, [INAUDIBLE] He still has this scruffy look to him. So [INAUDIBLE] they said he had stylists to make him scruffy so he keeps his indie credibility.

**AUDIENCE:** He's [INAUDIBLE]

**JESPER JUUL:** Yeah, but you can see this as an ongoing conflict within independent games-- whether this was something that's supposed to be very broad, or whether it is a connoisseur thing. And I should say, I do think that you can actually see this as a result of the fact that so many people are playing video games. So it used to be that you could say, the fact that you play video games made you belong to a particular category of people. But now that video game playing is so common you need to-- people need to select a certain subset of video games to have an identity as video game players. And I think that indie games can be seen as a kind of response to that. It's something-- it allows you to feel that you have a particular place, right?

So according to authenticity and the [INAUDIBLE] Richard Peterson talked about the idea of the authentic-- [INAUDIBLE] So one of the things he studied is country music. And he looks at how different people argue for various types of country music as being authentic in different ways. So it can be authentic in terms of who recorded it, or in terms of style, or various things like that. And so he says that authenticity works when people try to put in effort in order to make something appear authentic. So it's just like the restaurant that they spend energy listing all of the places from where they got their ingredients to make the whole menu appear more authentic and local.

A kind of critical-- this particular kind of critical argument against the thing that you like is, to be experienced as authentic, something must be marked as authentic. And this makes it authentic-- inauthentic rather because something has been done deliberately. And you can certainly see all kinds of products, obviously, where you can see there's some kind of advertising agent. He has spent a large amount of time trying to figure out how to make that particular thing look authentic-- by choosing the right [INAUDIBLE] or colors, or making it appear like an old country store even though it's a big multi-billion dollar corporation.

And so you could see this as-- you can think of-- this would be a critical idea of-- this would be a critical thing you can say about independent games. But of course you don't necessarily

have to make games with this particular style, right? And then test it in ways that something inauthentic about choosing a kind of style to seem authentic.

And so I think it's also a bit more complicated like that, right, because, in a way, just the fact that it's possible to make a game and choose a particular style. That style is so interesting because it's actually cheap-- it is fairly cheap to make games with large pixel or scanned paper, or things like that. So even though you could say it's not-- it's something that people deliberately choose. And so it's not authentic in that sense, but it's still something that enables game development. It does solve that particular problem of how do you make a game on a small budget and make it appear as a deliberate choice, rather than just a game with too small a budget. So you can see that this is what that particular style does.

I should say there are a few games that we tend to talk of as independent which doesn't necessarily match this style. So [INAUDIBLE] is a particularly interesting case because it does have this representation of a representation style. It's made to look at the painting. So in a particular way, it's not meant to look as somebody tried to off-hand improvise a painting or drawing. It's actually meant to look a bit like fine art. And so, you see, it-- in a way it has this thing of being a representation of a representation. But here it's actually supposed to signal this having fine and nice or sophisticated.

And there is-- and I think this [INAUDIBLE]. You guys play [INAUDIBLE]? So [INAUDIBLE] is meant to be a kind of work of art with a capital A. And I do think this is why that particular style was chosen. I think it's a bit simplistic