Paolo Ruffino

WHEN ONE IS TOO MANY:
Molleindustria and Paolo Pedercini
Molleindustria, the name of the collective responsible for many of the most controversial video games of recent times, represents in fact just one person. Paolo Pedercini is the man behind Molleindustria. There might have been occasional collaborations, friends or colleagues joining in his projects (after all, how often is work really carried out by a single individual, with no contacts with others?), but I am quite confident in saying that Paolo Pedercini is responsible for pretty much everything that happens within Molleindustria. This fact could be completely irrelevant while approaching their games. But it is, I believe, quite important to understand how I know this, and why it matters for the understanding of Molleindustria in the broader context of independent games.

In 2011, when Molleindustria released their game *Phone Story*, the phenomenon of independent gaming was probably at the peak of its popularity. Just a few months later, in 2012, filmmakers Lisanne Pajot and James Swirsky released their long-awaited movie on independent game producers. *Indie Game: The Movie* was a highly anticipated movie for the gaming community. It also became a reference in the independent movie scene, as it was screened and awarded at the Sundance Film Festival in the same year.

The movie follows the development stories of three major independent games, with a specific focus on the personal stories of their developers. They all share anxiety and uncertainty: after relatively successful careers in the video game industry, each one of them decided to work individually or in small groups and to be in charge of the full production cycle of the
video game, from the initial concept and storyboard to the final release and marketing. Throughout the documentary, the developers themselves justify their career choices as driven by the desire to make something personal and unique.

However, it immediately appears evident that this kind of individualised labour comes at the cost of an increased anxiety over the outcome of one's work, as the safety net of a permanent contract is no longer available. One of the protagonists of the movie, Phil Fish, author of the video game *Fez*, appears to be the most stressed. At one point he describes the relationship between his own work and life as such:

_The game has become a bit of a reflection of me over time. It certainly wasn’t the intention at first. […] and now we’re here. We don’t have any money. I’m overworked and overstressed. I’m on the line. Me. My name… my career. If this fails, I’m done. I don’t think I’ll work in games again. And it’s not just a game. I’m so closely attached to it. It’s me. It’s my ego. My perception of myself is at risk. This is my identity: Fez. I’m guy [sic] making Fez. That’s about it. If that doesn’t work out then […] I would kill myself. I would kill myself. That’s my incentive to finish it… because then I get to not kill myself._

Stephanie Fisher and Alison Harvey pointed out, while looking at the forms of inclusivity in independent game culture, that the notion of independence has no utility when trying to critique the precarious conditions of labour in digital games production. Quite the contrary, ‘a great deal of the values and meanings associated with going indie actually reify the structural inequalities of the mainstream industry through the valuation of a supposed meritocracy.’

This is evident in many of the indie workshops organised at major international game conventions. At the Develop Conference in Brighton, UK, an indie track is presented each year in order to assist hopeful independents in the marketing and distribution of their games. Looking at the feedback that

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new independents receive from experts, it is clear that the standards for success are often dictated by economic needs. A successful independent is expected to sell enough copies of a video game in order to make a return on the initial investment. In order to do so, in an increasingly competitive market where many opt for such instability, it is often necessary to try as many releases as possible. For instance, a good strategy is to release large numbers of clones of the most famous and successful games in the hope of attracting customers who might be interested in having ‘more of the same’ of the games they already played. This appears to be particularly effective when monetizing digital entertainment products for mobile phones, tablets and social networks. Research on experimental or innovative forms of game design is reserved only for those who manage to overcome the threshold of economic sustainability, or who are brave enough to invest large budgets and work on one or a few titles for several years.

As noted by Angela McRobbie (1998) in her seminal research on the emergence of independent fashion designers in the United Kingdom in the late ‘80s, working outside of a big company and being responsible for one’s own work have often been presented in positive terms by those involved.³ The rise of the creative industries has favoured similar modalities of individualised labour, often justified in terms of personal freedom and research of artistic expression. However, the fashion industry workers interviewed by McRobbie revealed that ‘working in an independent capacity they experienced high levels of stress and exhaustion, and were forced into patterns of self-exploitation way beyond that which any employer could legitimately get away with’.⁴ In a later work on the notion of creativity and art as drivers of the neoliberal economy, McRobbie similarly noticed that these conditions of work also affect the quality of the final product: ‘where there is little or no time for thinking, the art-work itself can hardly be thoughtful’.⁵

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⁴ Ibid. (page 88)
Thus, in such scenarios inclusivity is not guaranteed, and access to production is not as direct as many believe. Despite the claims in favour of the alleged democratisation of the means of production of a video game, to become a recognised independent game maker takes a great deal of skill, luck, and hard work. Moreover, the perception of the medium, from the perspective of those who are already involved in it, constitutes a social barrier that prevents diverse voices from speaking. The toxic masculinity of video game culture has discouraged female designers from joining in. The Gamergate controversy, for instance, has shown how aggressive gamers can be opposed to the presence of women in game culture. But more subtle examples also show similar levels of conservativeness. In *Indie Game: The Movie* the only woman represented is Danielle, the wife of one of the two developers of the game *Meat Boy*. Danielle is seen most of the time sitting on the sofa while her husband is at work. She is shown sewing stuffed toys to be sold as merchandise for her husband’s game, and begging him to buy her a new cat once the game has been released. She also appears in a video game convention, while her husband is invited to talk on the stage. On that occasion, the partner proposes to her. Throughout the documentary we see her sitting submissively behind her husband, waiting for him to finish his work. In her own words, the happiness of the family depends entirely on the results of her husband’s work. Such depiction of the woman as a passive subject, tangential to video game culture (and yet accepting the importance of such culture for the success of her marriage), only reinforces the dominant perception of the gamer, and the game maker, as a male figure. Such a masculine subject is expected to carry the fatigue of making a video game, a task that would be too stressful for the wife, who is instead represented as an emotionally unstable and fragile character.

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8 Gamergate is the name given to a campaign of harassment against the presence of women designers and commentators in video game culture. It started by groups of male gamers in Summer 2014 and, at the time of writing, still attracts large number of participants, mostly on Twitter’s hashtag #gamergate.

9 In the special edition of the movie each character has an extra epilogue scene, where they talk about how their work and careers proceeded after the movie was released. Danielle has her own scene, too, where she ‘talks about her life after, Cats and Cat-lady-ness’ (Source: buy.indiegamethemovie.com, last access 26th August 2015)
I believe that the work of Molleindustria can be seen as a response to the emergence of issues of inclusivity, affect and individualisation around the production of video games. The relevance of these topics extends far beyond the medium of the video game, and has in fact been appearing with large repercussions in other sectors, mostly within the so-called creative industries. The notion of independence is, for Molleindustria, strategic in order to articulate a counter move against the horrible working conditions of those involved in the video game industry, the difficulties of those excluded and of the exploited (or self-exploited) digital workers. Thus, independence has a strong significance for Molleindustria, despite (or because of) the many critiques that the phenomenon receives. Through the work of Molleindustria, independence becomes a method for making sense of one’s own work and, more broadly, to make sense of one’s own presence within this world.

In a speech given at the Indiecade Convention in October 2012, Molleindustria defined independence as a ‘continuum, a gradient. It’s a degree of compromise with the capital that should not be seen as a degree of purity or just a personal moral stance’. In the same talk Molleindustria explained that we could picture the ‘least’ and the ‘most’ independent game developers, the former possibly being a ‘code monkey for Zynga’ and the latter ‘an African woman making open source games for her local community’. However, in both cases there will always be relationships of dependence and negotiations with economic, technological, cultural or social conditions.

The conflictual aspect of the negotiation between our lives and work lies in the unresolvable condition of independence, a ‘utopian’ project that can never be fully achieved, according to Molleindustria.¹⁰ The selection made on the occasion of the ‘All Work, No Play’ exhibition at Aksioma Project Space in June 2015 is significant: in the collection of exhibited games by Molleindustria we see the theme of the conflict between life and work being repeated through various projects.

Among the selected games we can see *Everyday the Same Dream* (2009). In this game we play as a depressed worker who repeats the same activities every day, with no sense of escape. Throughout the game we are offered the possibility of finding alternative routes or choices in a pattern that appears to be otherwise predetermined and not modifiable. In *Unmanned* (2012) the same conflict is represented, only this time in the context of a military operator of remotely controlled weapons. The game is a parody of the challenge-and-reward paradigm of game design, only in a context where there are no real challenges: the main character of the game has to shave, drive to the military base, manoeuvre interfaces that throw bombs at villages and suspected terrorists living very far away from the site where the commands are issued. The difficult aspect of the game is not really in winning each challenge, but in understanding and questioning what exactly it is that the main character is doing, and what would be an appropriate way of approaching the anxiety
caused by such a dehumanising form of work. The day-to-day tasks given to the soldier are crystal-clear, and his daily life is smooth and repetitive. The acceptance of this simplicity is problematic, as it immediately appears to be complicit with the murder of other living beings.

In *McDonald’s Videogame* (2006), a much earlier work by Molleindustria, a similar rhetoric appears, in which the apparent innocence of the actions taken by the player hide more complex implications – although on this occasion the political message is much more explicit than in *Unmanned*. *McDonald’s Videogame* repurposes the dynamics of a management video game, where the player takes control of a simulated fast food chain. The task of making it economically sustainable quickly forces the player to alter the production cycle by poisoning the cows or the fields where the primary resources are taken from, and overloading the employees with low-paid work. At one point, sooner or later, it will be game over, as the system of fast food production is in itself irremediably unsustainable.

In 2011 Molleindustria released *Phone Story*, one of their most controversial games. *Phone Story* simulates the production stages of a mobile phone, from manufacturing and marketing to its planned obsolescence. *Phone Story* is about labour in the digital age, and how the abundance of hi-tech commodities is based on the exploitation of workers and pollution of areas that are far from our sight. However, it is also played on those same tools that are the outcomes of these crimes – mobile phones and tablets. For this reason, *Phone Story* was banned from the Apple Store soon after its release. Curiously, it is still available on Google Play, as if the critique was directed only against Apple as a mobile phone manufacturer rather than, more broadly, at the discontents of the contemporary economy of which Google is certainly one of the main actors.

While *Phone Story* could be understood as activism through video games, other games from Molleindustria take a much less explicit approach in explaining problems and their solutions. *How to Build a Better Mousetrap* (2014), for example, is played as a social theory simulator. The player has to balance the use of human workforce with the introduction of tools of automation.
in a system that involves manufacturing, research and a given number of subjects that can be converted into workers. The more automation is used, the less human workforce is needed, and the more unemployed workers will be on the screen, slowly generating protests that can make the system break apart. The game seems to imply that brute force and detention, one of the available options, is the only solution to make such system work, or that maybe some elements are missing in the represented political system (such as, one might say, the introduction of a citizen income, or the possibility of working less for the same salary). In *MayDay Net Parade* (2004), Molleindustria were already proposing the necessity of alternative networks and models of mutual assistance among those precarious workers who are misrepresented by labour unions and political parties. *MayDay Net Parade* allowed visitors to register with an avatar and a personalised slogan in a virtual march. The registrations closed on May 1st 2004, Workers’ Day, and from that date on the parade has remained on display on Molleindustria’s website. The collection is supposed to represent those workers, invisible to labour unions and political parties, who were already emerging by that time: the precarious class that lives through temporary and hourly paid contracts. In the virtual march of *MayDay Net Parade* we can see, at an early stage, attention towards debates around labour and relations of power and how these are perceived by those who are mostly disadvantaged by the new modalities of work.

In Molleindustria’s games there is a sense of urgency to speak about how we live, and about how we relate to others and our work. Independence is the name that we could give to this feeling of necessity to define oneself. From this perspective, the co-presence of Paolo Pedercini and Molleindustria, the individual and the collective, can be reinterpreted. Pedercini appears as a result of the pressure put on Molleindustria to present and explain themselves. We know Pedercini as a public speaker because it is necessary, for Molleindustria, to present what they do and connect their own games with other experiments in game design and media arts. In all these occasions, Pedercini has to present his own independence. But talking about independence requires something, or someone, to be independent of. It requires the definition not just of oneself, but of others too. One’s own independence can perhaps more appropriately
be described not as a position on a gradient or continuum, as Molleindustria argue, but as a concept around which one produces discourses where the relationship with others is questioned and problematised. That concept will always be in negotiation, never reaching a final compromise between what independence, or its absence, mean.

In *Indie Game: The Movie* the main characters are subjects who talk about themselves and the significance of their work in their own lives. This stress on the individual can indeed encourage narcissistic behaviour, and narcissism can easily become solipsism. Phil Fish, who threatens to kill himself, has probably crossed that boundary and can only see himself and his own video game outside of any relationship of *dependence* with other game developers and gamers – or friends and family members, for that matter.

We can look at the work of Molleindustria/Pedercini through this unresolved coexistence of an individual and a group. Such coexistence emerges whenever they are asked to present themselves, thus, whenever relations with others are required and discussed. Independence forces us to think ethically, rather than ontologically: it is a question about how our presence in the world takes something from and gives to others, rather than about who we are.\(^\text{11}\) To forget about this ethical question leads to the over-individualisation of the video game developer (and the artist, more broadly), which is very often the problem of neo-liberal ideologies.\(^\text{12}\) On the other hand, the open question of who Molleindustria/Pedercini are can help us imagine independence as a form of ethics, that is, as a struggle to find our own place, our own definition, while relating to the lives of those that we are not.

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12 In a private conversation with Paolo Pedercini he has reminded me that the conflict between individuals and collectives in the context of artistic production has been explained and critiqued by the Critical Art Ensemble in “Observations on Collective Cultural Action”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 72-85, College Art Association. In this intervention CAE propose that the research of forms of organisation between artists are becoming as important as the time spent on researching materials and final products. According to CAE, the market-driven individualisation of artists is forming alienated figures that cannot afford to specialise in one single area or medium, but needs ‘individuals with lots of skills for maximum exploitation’ (61-62).
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