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The Toronto Indies: Some Assemblage Required

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Abstract

This article seeks to develop an approach to independent video game production through a synthesis of recent work in assemblage theory and critical political economy. As an alternative to the (still important and useful) Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter's immaterial-labour oriented study in *Games of Empire* (2009), I propose studying videogames through their historically and materially specific context, thinking about videogame development communities as assemblages (DeLanda, 2006). The assemblage of videogame production should not be conceptualized as an object over determined by global capital's immanence towards new forms of exploitation. Rather it is negotiating its way through capital, state bureaucracies, aesthetics, ad hoc decision making and the flows of bodies through urban spaces. Using interviews and data collected concerning the development of Toronto made iPad and iPhone game *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*, I show how work of videogame production is both immaterial and expressive, as much as it is firmly grounded in existing material relationships to a panoply of objects. This paper then has two goals: 1) to illustrate an ontology and method of political economy and 2) contribute to the growing scholarship on indie games in the field of Game Studies.

Keywords

Game Studies; Indie Games; Immaterial Labour; Assemblage Theory; Political Economy; Ontology.

Assembling an Indie

“The problem is, the innovator has to count on assemblages of things that often have the same uncertain nature as groups of people.”

Bruno Latour¹ (1995)

Producing videogames in Canada is big business. Canada is home to some of the largest videogame studios in the world, with American-owned Electronic Arts' main development campus in Vancouver, the French-owned Ubisoft's massive development campus in Montreal, and numerous others such as Bioware in Edmonton, and Disney Online Studios in Kelowna (Dyer-Witthford & Sharman, 2005; ESAC, 2012). There are more than 350 companies Canada-wide, employing almost 16,000 people while experiencing high rates of growth (11% in the last two years), despite the economic slowdown in 2008 (OMDC, 2012a). While the multinational corporations based in Canada comprise the biggest part of the estimated \$1.6 billion value of the videogame industry, a growing segment is the diverse group of independent producers making

‘indie games’. These indie game companies are not owned by one of the major videogame publishing corporations, and subsequently have full (or at least more) creative control over their work, without the need to please corporate overseers more interested in profits than creative/cultural practices.²

The purpose of this article, which grew out of my MA thesis, is to further understand how the cultural practices emerging in indie game production are considered a central pillar of economic growth for Canada's industrial and cultural policy by organizations such as the Ontario Media Development Corporation (OMDC), and how they take material shape. This research will explore how indie games are getting made in the context of constraining and enabling cultural policy along with numerous other actors. My probing research questions include asking how Toronto become a hub for indie game development, and why these indie games developers are increasingly becoming a central part of Toronto's vision of itself as a global “creative class” city plugged into today's high-technology capitalism (Florida, 2002; Harvey, 2012; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Sassen, 2001).

This proposed inquiry is significant for two reasons: first, indie games are increasingly visible as an emerging creative industry practice. This visibility can be attributed to films such as the Canadian documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* (2012) that attempts to showcase the precarious lives of indie game developers. Similarly, in academia, videogames are being discussed as the paradigmatic commodity of contemporary capitalism (Wark, 2007; 2012; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Klein et al, 2003). If this is the case, focusing on the destabilizing qualities of the indie game industry is necessary. The second is the interest on the part of the Canadian government in supporting the economic growth of these immaterial labour-intensive (‘creative class’) organizations. A prime example of this is the OMDC, which has supported indie developers through grants, incubation projects such as the Difference Engine Initiative, and the TIFF Nexus Comics vs. Games program (OMDC, 2012a). Government financial support of this industry suggests a perceived value and/or benefit to the provincial and national economies.

This article develops a theoretical framework to study independent video game production through a synthesis of recent work in assemblage theory and critical political economy. Building on the political and economic work of Kerr (2006) and Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter's immaterial-labour oriented study in *Games of Empire* (2009), and following the methodological and ontological footsteps of Taylor (2009; 2012) and Giddings (2006), I am studying videogames through their historically and materially specific context, analyzing videogame development communities as assemblages (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Parnet, 2002). Specifically I take aim at certain elements of *Games of Empire's* conception of videogame production and consumption. Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter view videogames primarily through a modified use of Hardt & Negri's (2000) concept of Empire, viewing videogames entirely in their relationship to networked juridical and ethico-political character of contemporary, expansionary capitalism (Hardt & Virno, 2006; Camfield, 2007; Dyer-Witheford, 2002; 2009). DeLanda's assemblage offers an entry point because it provides a non-anthropocentric ontology necessary to unpack the assumptions and build out from Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter. This theory can give a voice to traditionally ignored elements (or actors) in political economy such as the expressive qualities of grant forms, the oppressive nature of aesthetic paradigms, and the illusive constraints of software (Bryant, 2011; Latour, 1995; 2007; Montfort & Bogost, 2009).

The Political Economy of Videogames

The Political Economy of videogames and the videogame industry is a relatively recent project with a small amount of work touching on a number of issues. Montfort and Bogost's (2009) *Racing the Beam*, is a rough sketch of the social, political, material, technological, and economic factors that contributed to the development of the Atari VCS. Similarly, Lugo et al's (2002) study of the Latin American videogame manufacturing industry showcased the methods by which multinational corporations and local economic elites drive the development of Maquiladoras and special economic zones in support of the console hardware manufacturing sector. In Europe, Kerr's (2006) work on the everyday business practices and culture of large videogame firms has also been integral. In Canada, Dyer-Witheford has been at the forefront of critical political economic analysis of the videogame industry, publishing several co-authored works.³ In their 2009 work *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter elaborate on how the videogame industry "is increasingly revealing itself as a school for labour, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital" (2009, p. xix). The book sketches a critical, political-economic analysis of the digital games industry and game culture based on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2000) theoretical concept of "Empire".

As Simon (2011) alludes to, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's (2009) is "a perspective that directly implicates academic game studies in a concern with either being part of the 'problem' or part of a 'solution'". It should be noted that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter operate with a modified conception of Empire, one that re-emphasizes the role of the nation state (in opposition to the more decentralized, stateless Empire of Hardt and Negri) and de-centres the hegemonic position of immaterial labour (p. xxiii). While I find this particular critique insightful and important when one considers the political economy of videogames, I wish to move away from some aspects of it as the ideal way to study and understand videogame production, in part because Empire and Multitude function as totalities that have difficulty taking into account the "uneven existential peculiarities engendered through actually existing production" (p. 7). One strain of critique (Greaves, 2011; Camfield, G. 2007; Caffentzis & Federici, 2007) of Hardt & Negri focuses specifically on the unevenness of labour in iPad manufacturing in China and copper mining in Kazakhstan. These existential peculiarities are downplayed, or reduced, when juxtaposed with the hegemonic force that constitutes Empire. Empire, and its particular all-encompassing ethico-political and economic character, constitutes a fundamental, core difference. It is treated as the "ground, or *explanans* of all other entities" (Bryant, 2011. p. 131). Bryant (2011) refers to this reduction as a "hegemonic fallacy", a "difference that makes all the difference" (p. 131). When this reduction takes place, the problem is that one can end up focusing only on the proposed hegemonic force, missing out on the differences of innocuous, often more "local" situations and actors. If labour is irreducible to hegemonic processes such as Empire, what might be irreducible in video game production?

This might best be framed in the terms of Molleindustria's Paolo Pedercini (2012), who recently spoke of being an indie game developer in terms of a continuum. Rather than a series of binary values that determine one's "indieness" (separation from big publishers, commitment to unusual ideas, challenging norms, etc.) he says that being indie exists on an infinite continuum, one that is contingent and constrained:

“There’s no absolute independence because you’ll always be constrained by technological platforms, protocols, hardware or infrastructures. Beyond gaming, you’ll be entwined in a web of power, privilege, exploitation, and dependency, as long as the current modes of production persist.”

Pedercini, (2012, moleindustria.org)

Indie game production is configured in a range of particular ways in any given historical context, due largely to its relationship to other things – be it capitalism, technologies, or affects. The point is to study *this* particular configuration of how indie games are made. Assemblage theory opens up an analytical method for understanding how indie games are enmeshed and entangled with a variety of objects at different scales – from the flows and pressures of the global videogames industry all the way down to the affective relationship between an artist and their artwork. At all times the scale is shifting, from local particularities to perceived global norms, without reducing any one element to the other.

An Ontology of Interrelations

As I have alluded to, I am interested in a form of political economy practised without Hegelian⁴ totalities and monolithic structures, which subsume all to their essence. This is inspired particularly by Simon's (2011) review of *Games of Empire*, wherein he questions the usefulness of such a totality. While he agrees that “game studies scholarship has not been critical enough of the implication of games and therefore players in the military-industrial complex, global flows of labour, resources and capital and race and gender politics that frame gameplay,” he advocates for a micro-sociological approach that has more in common with the work of Mia Consalvo, Helen Kennedy or T.L. Taylor, whose studies of videogame players and cultures reveal complicated and nuanced relationships between individual subjectivity, social forces, and material conditions. T.L. Taylor's (2009; 2012) work has engaged most directly with this line of thinking, calling for videogame researchers to pay attention to the assemblages videogames are entangled with:

“Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes.”

Taylor, p. 332 (2009)

Instead of thinking in terms of totalities, I am interested in theorizing the political economy of videogames through what DeLanda (2006) calls assemblage theory. Influenced by Deleuze's (2002) conception of the assemblage, DeLanda builds a theory of analysis for various objects at different levels of society. The smallest exists at the level of the human individual, while the largest exists at the level of the geographic state. Despite the difference in size, all assemblages

have two core interior dimensions to their functioning: the first is that the *expressive* (linguistic and non-linguistic practices such as clothes, gestures, etc.) and *material* (tools, buildings etc.) components of the assemblage occur in mixtures – one is never completely separate from the other; the second is that the various processes that form the components of the assemblage can either *stabilize* (territorialize) or *destabilize* (deterritorialize) the identity and homogeneity of the assemblage.

What this analytical frame adds to the political economy of videogames is a way to understand *how things get done*, how things touch, guide, cajole, and move each other. When things *happen* in the assemblage it is neither necessary nor logical. Instead there is a series of events, discussions, and pushes that need a theory of causality capable of understanding their complexity – be it personal motivation, material causality, expressive signals, or systemic social dynamics. Assemblage theory thus builds *on top of* critical analytical approaches like Marxian political economy, institutionalist sociology, and game studies. In this paper I show how rich such a theory can be for social science broadly, and game studies in particular.

Sworcery's Assemblage

In 2012, indie game studios based in Toronto are enjoying a decent amount of financial and critical success. One such example can be found in the Toronto-developed *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* (2011), a game for the iPhone & iPad made with a team of about five people by Superbrothers Inc. and Capybara games, which has grossed more than \$3 million in sales (Joseph, 2011). Although small compared to the hundreds of millions in first day sales for big budget videogame titles such as Activision's *Call of Duty* franchise (Horn, 2011), this can be considered a runaway success in the sphere of indie games.

In the summer of 2011, I conducted a series of unstructured interviews with Craig Adams, the head of Superbrothers Inc. for research relating the role the state has played in the historical development of videogames (Joseph, 2011). In the process of these interviews, as well as through field reports and document analysis, I noticed two internal, causal dynamics that appeared to be a driving force in the assemblage of Toronto based videogame design: Canadian cultural policy, and the spatial dynamics of urban environments. Following DeLanda (2006), I consider these three elements at two different scales: organizations & governments (cultural policy), and cities and nations (urban geography).

That being said, Adams' account is only one among many – one part of a greater whole. His story, of developing *Sworcery* as well as his interactions with other actors in the assemblage like the Ontario Media Development Corporation (OMDC), is just that – his own. The experience he presented to me, as well as the one I glimpsed through documents produced by the OMDC is the ideal one, a perfect story for attracting investors to the city. I believe that it is important to think of Adams' discussion with me as a very ephemeral assemblage, a “social encounter” (Goffman, 2008) with the *public persona* of a social actor. This public persona is only one layer of a complex web of relations, and only the slightest glimpse into this world. I have only peeled back one tiny layer, and my hope is that more people will peel away other pieces in future research.

Cultural Policy & the Organizational Assemblage

In contradiction to the partnerships that define most videogame development, the developers in

Toronto often do not have an advance by a large corporation to cover the costs of designing the game. It was through discussions with Adams that I became aware of the OMDC, which Superbrothers and Capybara Games successfully petitioned for grant funding in the process of developing *Sworcery*. As a government organization that specializes in supporting the burgeoning cultural sector of Ontario, it serves as a lens through which to frame my discussion around government institutions. One way to think about organizational assemblages are the *material* and *expressive* roles they play.

Put simply, all components of the assemblage can be placed on a line with two axes; at one end, there are material roles, and at the other, expressive. Both function as different forms of causality; material components have causal relationships with other components, while expressive components have catalytic relationships. Expressive components function as signifiers of identity, and can trigger responses with other components. In the animal kingdom, for instance, smells, colours, growls, and walks are all expressive – they activate responses in all sorts of other animals – while the brute force of claws, legs, and bodies have material causality. And yet both expressive and material qualities are emblematic of the mixture. Smells are never entirely expressive; they have material components – molecules in the air – that find their way to the nose. A claw of a bear cutting at an invader in the ecosystem causes blunt material trauma, but also contributes to a simple expression – stay away.

The most visible role the OMDC plays is expressive. It functions in line with the long tradition of Canadian cultural policy, which is as much about discourses of nationalism and the state as it is about materially supporting such a culture. The OMDC was created by the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture to spur economic development in Ontario's media sector. It describes itself as the “central catalyst for the province's cultural media cluster including publishing, film and television, interactive digital media, magazine publishing, and music industries” (OMDC, 2012a). It does this through a number of processes, from “contributing to the expansion of the business environment of Ontario” to “administering provincial tax credit programs and such other programs and initiatives” (OMDC, 2012a).

As a videogame, *Sworcery* qualified for the OMDC's support through their Interactive Digital Media Fund (IDMF). The IDMF describes its goals as “supporting the creation of high quality, original interactive and digital media content” and “providing flexible funding options that support partnerships between Ontario Interactive digital media companies and companies from other creative cluster industries.”⁵

Beyond these goals, the IDMF is designed specifically to cater to the needs of interactive media. It sets out the qualities it requires of the company and the media that fit into this category. First and foremost (and repeated numerous times throughout the documentation) is that the corporation (and all applicants must at some point in the grant process become incorporated) must be Canadian owned. They must also be Ontario-based and for-profit. There is also a heavy emphasis on original, proprietary content that does not rely on external copyright holders (2011b). The OMDC states in their documentation that this is a significant issue associated with small and medium sized development studios:

“...interactive digital media companies often live from project to project and are

therefore unable to make significant capital re-investments in their companies. These capital challenges mean that companies have very little negotiating leverage, particularly with international players, when selling their products. In many cases they must sacrifice ownership of their intellectual property – and therefore potential future revenue streams – to ensure that their projects actually reach completion.”

OMDC (2012b)

As a result, the OMDC mandates that when projects that receive funding, 75% of the funds must go to proprietary products, with only 25% to those in joint ventures with foreign-owned IP. The main way in which the IDMF functions to aid videogame developers is to provide up to \$150,000 as a grant, capped at 50% of the total production budget. In terms of expression, the discourse of these documents serve to code the assemblage – it creates a category for what is and is not Canadian, fundable, media, and interactive.

These coded objects then get utilized in all sorts of projects to justify the existence of cultural policy itself, from appeals to nationalism, cultural sovereignty, and economic development. Much as a flower expresses its desire to be pollinated to bees with bright colours and elaborate shapes, organizations like the OMDC signal their flourishing and continued desire to exist with documents and statistics, affects and ideologies. The most likely recipient of these calls is the provincial government itself, no doubt defending its mission and existence from encroaching ideologies of austerity in the years since the 2008 financial crash.

At this point the material role of the OMDC in the Toronto indie game assemblage comes into play. Beyond the expressive rhetoric, the OMDC provides for the maintenance of bodies through its injection of capital. Craig Adams said “we could not have started our project if there wasn’t a way to get part of the costs offset by the OMDC” (Joseph, 2011. p. 69) Basically, blunt material assistance was needed. Because videogame development is capital intensive from the start, the funding injected straight into developers like Adams and Cappybara is often the most important step to begin the process of building an indie game. It is ultimately the relationship with capital, and the materials accessed through capital, that keeps the assemblage moving.

In this neoliberal context, the OMDC is both similar to and very different from Canada's previous constellation of cultural policy organizations such as the National Film Board (NFB) or the Canada Council for the Arts. It is similar in that it functions, in part, as what Miller & Yodice (2002) would describe as an Althusserian “ideological state apparatus” (ISA) – organizations dedicated to managing the bodies and ideologies of state subjects. But the OMDC lacks (or maybe, engages very differently with) a fundamental quality from Miller & Yodice's conception of cultural policy enacted through ISAs: “intellectual incompleteness”. Intellectual incompleteness functions by inscribing a lack in the subject, and suggesting the fulfillment of this lack through service and loyalty to the state. Cultural policy encourages intellectual incompleteness by finding, serving, and nurturing a sense of belonging. Wershler (2011) argues that cultural policy in Canada deals in intellectual incompleteness, in the process of funding culture in the service of representing the state. For example the Canada Council's support for art is entirely premised on supporting Canadian art. Yet the OMDC differs from this in that it is not

supporting art, but rather industry. There is not really any “incompleteness” in the subject that demands them to “tell Canadian stories” or represent Canada. Despite this explicit lack, it is difficult to excise the OMDC from the wider assemblage of cultural policy in Canada, as Adams' commentary illuminates:

“...that’s the kind of thing where maybe we let ourselves off the leash a little bit extra, early on. Then we kind of brought it back to being like a reasonably normal adventure game. But for a good while there, [Capybara] basically just trusted me to just lead them off into the woods on this crazy adventure. So maybe that financial help allowed us to do that. You know, in Toronto, there’s a lot of interesting film, comic and the music scene is pretty incredible. You know, you’ve got the NFB [National Film Board] just down the street which has a long history of making beautiful animated works. And so even though OMDC doesn’t have a curatorial aspect the way that the NFB does, there’s sort of a vibe to some of these Canadian institutions where you kind of want to do right by them.”

Joseph, p. 70 (2011)

Certainly there is a tension at play here between the intellectual incompleteness of the welfare state that deploys nationalism in the service of a governable population, and the neoliberal state whose interest is purely in the productivity of its workers.

What the OMDC is striving for, in both its expressive and material roles, is a territorialization of neoliberal high technology capitalism in Toronto. In carrying out this process it similarly territorializes indie games in Toronto through justifying grants in the context of cultural protectionism and economic development. It codes various groups and persons through its grant proposal forms, project assessments, and geographic economic progress reports, rendering the assemblage intelligible and most importantly, justifiable to the wider public.

Urban Geographies: Territorializing Toronto's High Technology Capitalism

In *Empire*, Hardt & Negri (2000) discuss the rise of the global city as the rise of “networked production” – production that no longer requires a specific geographic space in which to operate. They look at the now emblematic North American heavy industrial city as the city that has withered away in the networked age. These “production cities” were inextricably bound to the geographic space in which they were located. Because the mode of production was so closely tied to large material objects, it was, to say the least, difficult for heavy industry to have much in the way of mobility. But as heavy industry became more mobile during deregulation, production cities in the Global North lost their industries. In their wake, Hardt & Negri argue, rises the city of control – a city where “the network of labouring cooperation requires no territorial or physical centre” (p. 295). This new kind of labour is inherently nomadic. Instead of the old vertical model of production, we now have horizontal, networked enterprises. New York, Tokyo and London are oft-cited examples, but Toronto, in the Canadian context, can also suffice. While it is true that networks are key to the functioning of this new kind of city, these cities are still reliant on geography, even if such geographies are networked. Maybe capital is not as free from space and geography as Hardt & Negri argue.

My discussion with Adams revealed a geographic space teeming with activity, filled with artists, organizations, cultures, histories, musicians, and television shows; yet, I need to take a detour into the world of *Sworcery* to see how these things came together. Near the end of the game, the character I am playing as – the Scythian – finds herself in a canyon in the middle of a massive rock concert. There are pixels of light flowing from massive stadium lights, and a motley crowd of onlookers dancing. On the stage is a pixelated version of Jim Guthrie playing a guitar, and in my ears the soundtrack reaches its crescendo. Even though I am playing this game on a small iPad, I have headphones, and the event of the song is very present to me. This scene is only one of many where the game deliberately stimulates the musical, rather than the visual. *Sworcery* is not just about ludic game structures and visual metaphor; it is also very much about music. So how did the music get into the game?

Sworcery's music was written and produced by Jim Guthrie, a Toronto musician associated most readily with the indie music scene of the 1990s and early 2000s, and more recently with the renaissance of indie games⁶. Their collaboration, Adams felt, was due in large part to the simple fact that they were both living in the same city. The substance of this connection is that, yes, it took place in part because of geographic proximity, but also that organizations like the OMDC (2012b) espouse the rhetoric of creative clustering as a driving force in the new creative, post-Fordist economy.

Adams discussed the precedent that other small videogame development studios set for his own work, specifically the development of the videogame *N* by Toronto-based Metanet software in 2003. During this period of time Adams was not yet involved in the videogame industry, but the development of organizations like Metanet outside of the major studio system seemed to offer a new way of making videogames. It is the story of success in Toronto that matters. Here was a person that Adams could talk to, identify with, and recognize as being a part of their shared life-world that seemed to open up new possibilities.

This is a particularly important point to consider in the wider context of Toronto's videogame industry. The very lack of an “established” big-studio system in Toronto appears to have led to incubating a small, almost counter-cultural videogame development movement. In the absence of major studios like Electronic Arts or Ubisoft⁷, those interested in videogame development as a career had to strike out on their own, without the institutional support of an established industry. What studios there were, were a part of the large boxed product industry in the city and considered second-rate – organizations that came for any number of reasons, but were doomed due to lack of vision or sufficient capital.

In addition to the collaborative nature of the city's videogame development culture, Adams comes back to what kind of role that state sponsored organizations like the OMDC play in fostering such an environment. It appears to Adams that the special mix of Toronto's unique culture *and* the ability of small developers to acquire start-up capital from the government are essential:

“If you go to Jon Mak⁸, you know, I saw him speak at GDC three years ago. People were talking about how to make a game. He just says, “You just make a

game. You don't worry about it. You just kind of sit down and jam on it. Oh, and if you live in Canada, get a grant. That's how I did it." Like, he said that. Sorry if you're not in Canada, but if you're in Canada, there are options. So just fucking put your head down and go and do it. So yeah, and the background on his story, Cappy's story, N+'s, Metanet's story, there are these institutions."

Joseph, p. 75 (2011)

What can be taken away from what Adams says here? Simply, that the city of Toronto – its component parts – allowed Superbrothers, Cappybara, and many of the other independent videogames created in Toronto to build a community of practice. The early successful developers like Jon Mak created a powerful expressive narrative of small-team success. Toronto became a space where a small team – with four or five people working on one game – could hope for economic and critical success, especially in light of worldwide distribution networks enabled by digital services such as Apple's iTunes Music Store. Such success is enmeshed within a citywide culture of collaboration and co-operative production. Toronto is home to a number of game jams⁹, community groups like the Hand Eye Society¹⁰, as well as a thriving independent culture, maybe best summed up the musical collective Broken Social Scene (Berman, 2009).

Toronto's sudden growth in the videogame sector can also be discussed in terms of dependence. Drawing on the research of Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), DeLanda speaks specifically about the relations of dependence that industries develop in different contexts, and the strategies they devise to eliminate it. Dependence occurs when organizations solve the problem of acquisition – the relationship of exteriority with resources outside of itself. One coping strategy is vertical integration, in which an industry forms an unbroken chain from its supply source all the way to the commodity's distribution and sale. This strategy often results in oligopolies, such as the 1970s American car-manufacturing sector, or as I would suggest, the 1990s and early 2000s console videogame sector, most associated with the dominance of Nintendo and Sony, who held massive sway over videogame outlets, developers, distribution networks and the hardware itself. These are organizations that are self- sufficient.

Indie videogames like those developed in Toronto, however, exist in the second coping strategy to eliminate dependence: resource interdependency. As Delanda (2006) explains, these are organizations and networks that, rather than avoiding, benefit from, dependency:

“This strategy yields networks of relatively small firms in which no organization is clearly dominant and in which the lack of economies of scale is compensated for by *economies of agglomeration*; many small firms agglomerated in the same geographical region tend to attract talented people who can find a variety of job opportunities there, producing over time an accumulation of skilled labour that, in turn, tends to expand the number of firms in the region.”

Delanda, p. 78 (2006)

Adams' description of Toronto matches this conception of interdependency. What this means then, is that as an assemblage Toronto's indie game development community is tied up, entangled with the urban geography of Toronto itself. There is no “independent” community

here without a city-sized assemblage capable of fostering close ties between organizations and persons.

Conclusions: Lines of the Assemblage

The image I have sketched out is one that I believe complicates many of the discussions about the functioning of videogames as an industry and as a practice. Toronto is currently undergoing a very intense process of territorialization, coming to grips with its own reality and growth as a culture and a culture industry. While assemblages can have parts taken out of them and remain roughly the same, that does not mean that they are particularly stable. The component parts I have listed above appear to me to be some of the most important, and that means the community is likely dependent upon them. In 2012 the Vancouver videogame development sector suffered a series of mid-level developer closures. Ubisoft Vancouver shut down entirely, and Rockstar Vancouver moved their entire operation to Rockstar Toronto (a previously small satellite campus for Rockstar Games based in Oakville). Videogame developers in Vancouver bemoan the lack of government support for indie games, as well as support through tax breaks for the mid-level studios. They mention the lack of institutional support for business development, and the lack of coherency in the political organizing and lobbying for the community itself (Alexander, 2012). Roughly, Vancouver is everything Toronto is not: highly de-territorialized, and slowly falling apart as people leave the city for more stable employment in Toronto or Montreal. This sectorial failure reflects the new normal in the neoliberal global marketplace, as capital is de-territorialized and freed up to move across borders to geographies, aesthetics, and institutions more amenable to accumulation strategies.

While Toronto's own industry grows, it remains in flux. 2011 was a year marked by the OMDC and the Toronto International Film Festival's partnership in the Difference Engine Initiative (DEI). Detailed by Stephanie Fisher and Alison Harvey elsewhere in this special issue, the goal of the initiative was to introduce women to the process of videogame development, injecting more gender diversity into a community previously overwhelmingly made up of white men. This is itself a de-territorializing manoeuvre, and the DEI certainly appeared to shake-up the community's sense of identity and coherency. Initiatives like the DEI, and the community contestation of identity and practice, signal the shift and movement of the component parts of this assemblage.

By using assemblage theory, one gets a view of a moving target best imagined through metaphor. An assemblage is more like a sandbox videogame, a procedurally built world in a state of flux. Imagine zooming through space and time through the different parts, the different scales, shooting some things to move, signalling at others. You are the game itself, in this case *Sworcery*, finding its way through a slew of components, trying to go from a dream to reality. Some of the things you interact with make you stable; others, seemingly solid, shift and mutate as they are touched. The level starts with a geographic space where you will play: Toronto. You start by finding unstable people, and making them come together. It helps that they are both close by. Adams meets Jim Guthrie and begins collaboration with him and Capybara, whose offices are located at Spadina and Queen in the heart of the Queen West neighbourhood. The line continues down the road to the OMDC, enmeshed in relationships with the government and global capital while defending its mandate and relying on the continuing growth of Toronto's high technology capitalism to gain access to funds to support projects like *Sworcery*. These

funds, collected through taxes, are sent out into the world as capital for production of a videogame. As it happens this is a game created outside of the major production houses, but still just as much a part of the global marketplace. The game's very makeup is intertwined with the motives and reasons of Craig Adams; he chooses and deliberates about the affects that arise from the coding of aesthetics. These aesthetics flow from wider cultural currents, technologies, and platforms. The line continues to the publication of *Sworcery* – as it begins to accrue capital – expressing to the OMDC the success of their economic intervention, maybe leading towards more funding in the future. The line continues to a kind of strange offshoot of our sandbox world, one hinted at in the narrative, in the massive server farms where Apple hosts its online store.

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¹ Latour, B. (1995). *Aramis or The Love of Technology*

² “Indie” here is being used loosely, while acknowledging how contested and contingent the term is. I elaborate on the distinction further below, describing indie as a category existing on a continuum. Please see the complimentary articles in the rest of this special issue of *Loading* for elaborations, disagreements, and contestations of the term.

³ See Dyer-Witthof & Klein, 2003; Dyer-Witthof & Sharman, 2005.

⁴ See DeLanda (2006) and Latour (1994; 2007) for a more detailed explanation and critique on the nature of Hegel's totality. In short, Hegel's ontology necessitates objects that are inward-facing wholes. If one component of the mixture is removed or shifted, the object is irrevocably changed, creating a new object. It is this reorganization of components that undergirds Hegel's conception of dialectical movement. DeLanda's critique (which I share) is that objects end up disconnected with the outside world, incapable of re-articulating themselves when they are brought into new relations without the creation of an entirely new object. Similarly this results in a condition where civil society itself *has no outside* – and thus is completely dependent on that which is already present in the already existing whole.

⁵ <http://ngen-niagara.com/en/newsletter/123/html/>

⁶ Guthrie also composed the soundtrack to 2012's *Indie Game: The Movie*.

⁷ Ubisoft did open a studio in Toronto in 2009, but it is a smaller satellite of their larger studios in Montreal. Its opening marks the first major videogame developer in the city.

⁸ Jon Mak is the founder of Toronto-based Queasy Games, which developed *Everyday Shooter* (2008) and *Soundshapes* (2012).

⁹ Games jams are short-term (often two to three days long) events where a team makes one videogame, from conception to completion. The biggest in Toronto is ToJam, organized by George Brown College.

¹⁰ The Hand Eye Society is a locally organized indie videogame collective / community. For more see handeyesociety.com and (Joseph, 2011).