



Where Indie Developers Exceed the AAA Industry

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From niche hobbies to the multibillion dollar industry that video games are today, the journey has been long and eventful. The colossal market that video games have today makes it an ideal place for large corporations to invest in. This has led to the current AAA gaming industry we know today. Publishers like Ubisoft, EA, Blizzard, Nintendo and such who have 'A' lot of time, 'A' lot of resources and 'A' lot of money were given this term, the 'AAA' developers. As video games kept getting more and more popular these AAA publishers were reeling in more and more revenue. As a result games kept getting more polished and visually stunning than ever thought possible. This drastic growth of the industry brought the attention of large corporations as profit kept flooding in.

However to the fans, video games are not just shares in a company, which it is to the investors. As the investments into the industry increased, so did the stakes. It was make or break for the publishers. The development team couldn't afford to release an underperforming title as the loss would be in numbers far higher than before.

There was no room for mistakes.

This made developers stick to safer development practices. Old IPs kept getting rehashed again and again as new IPs were a risk they were not willing to take. A prime example would be Ubisoft, with their numerous additions to the Assassin's Creed series, Farcry series and so on with only a handful of new IPs like The Division. First person shooters kept being dumbed down for the casual fans. Beloved RPG series like Dragon Age and Fallout stripped themselves of the grittiest parts of the RPG genre and embraced a more action oriented style for the mass market. Apart from a few exceptions like Bandai Namco's sleeper hits in the Souls series, this 'casualisation' has been prevalent throughout.

When there's no room for mistakes, there are no experimentations and without experimentations nothing can evolve and grow. This is where indie games come in like a breath of fresh air. In the past couple of years, indie developers have put in far more creativity into the industry than many established AAA ones have. One example that begs to be brought here is Pillars of Eternity.

Pillars of Eternity was the crowdfunded project of Obsidian Entertainment. It brought back the dying genre of CRPG, something that no AAA developer wanted to do as they did not have faith in the mass crowd to enjoy the complexity of it. But Pillars of Eternity proved them dead wrong as the project raised its fund under the enthusiasm of countless, and went on to become a commercial



success. The game brought CRPG back to life as titles such as Tyranny and Torment: Tides of Numenera were published afterwards being inspired by the success of Pillars.

Platformers, which were one of the first most popular genres in gaming, were mostly overlooked by the AAA industry apart from a few endeavours by Nintendo. Indie games, however, gave a complete new spin to platformers with titles such as Shovel Knight, Inside, Super Meat Boy, Hollow Knight, Owlboy, Ori and the Blind Forest. Action RPG, a genre where the only last AAA endeavor was Diablo III, were kept alive with titles like Grim Dawn, Bastion and Path of Exile.

Perhaps the biggest credit to the indie developers is when they try something that goes beyond a definite genre. Undertale became a cult hit with an out-of-the-box story and distinct gameplay. The entire journey of Undertale was a textbook example of creative experimentation done right. Titles like Paper, please and Stanley Parable also fall to this category of unorthodox yet engaging gaming experience.

Indie developers don't target the general audience as the AAA industry is most likely to dominate due to their strong financial backing. However, they make their own niche with titles and genres that are overlooked by the AAA developers. They turn their financial restriction into an advantage and popularise new styles in gaming. Voxel games, cell shaded graphics, isometric RPGs, dungeon crawlers - these are all products of financial restriction of one form or the other. And yet titles like Minecraft, Darkest Dungeon, and Transistor use it to their complete advantage and have popularised it in the process.

The experimentation and eagerness to do something new to the age old formulas give the indie developers a bigger edge than any financial investment or corporate backing can give to the AAA. And this is why I find myself more intrigued by any new indie releases than the much hyped AAA titles.

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