

Disentangling Personal Style from Artistic “Expression”: *Hokra*, *Nidhogg*, *Pole Riders*, and the Indie Arcade

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Within the indie games scene, 2011 stands out as a watershed year for co-located multiplayer games designed for public settings. Earlier this year, the Independent Game Festival's prestigious Nuovo Award was awarded to Mark Essen's two-player fencing game, *Nidhogg*. Indie games hub *TIGSource* hosted its own "Versus" compo in early 2011, soliciting a slew of new multiplayer games from the community. And thanks to the emergence and growing popularity of game parties like London's Wild Rumpus, "indie arcades" like New York City's Babycastles, and indie arcade cabinets like Winnipeg's Winnitron, there are now more opportunities than ever to show multiplayer indie games in public.

In this talk, I focus on three particular indie games that have emerged out of this milieu: Ramiro Corbetta's abstract two-on-two ice hockey game, *Hokra* (2011), Bennett Foddy's two-player pole vaulting duel, *Pole Riders* (2011), and the aforementioned *Nidhogg* (2010). Each drawing from a specific sport, all three games could reasonably be labeled as “sports videogames.”¹ But could they also be considered as full-fledged e-sports? All three games are audience-friendly and have thrived at public events. None of the games feature single-player modes, often by deliberate decision.²

Drawing from Henning Eichberg's (2010) theoretical work on sport and festivity, I argue that the three games cannot adequately be understood in terms of only modern “sport,” or even sports videogames. Instead, I describe these games as hybrids between “popular sport” and contemporary art installation.

Eichberg defines “popular sport” as a sport “where people meet in festivals to be active themselves” (p. 102). Unlike “modern sport,” which prioritizes the production of objectified achievements and results, popular sport encourages all participants to get involved. As microcosms of the exhibitions and indie arcades in which they are showcased, *Hokra*, *Pole Riders*, and *Nidhogg* can be framed as festive *events* that strive to “[create] togetherness and [affirm] identity” (p. 103).³ Indeed, this notion of community building is frequently a key goal of such exhibitions. Indie showcases typically encourage casual play and crowd involvement over hardcore tournament play. Players ostensibly play to win, but competitive play is typically overshadowed by the pleasure of camaraderie and *det henrykte nu* (“the delighted now”).⁴ As Eichberg phrases it, popular sports “produce neither records nor heroes” (p. 110).

Yet in another view, this phrasing is not quite accurate, at least in regards to indie games. Positioned within a community that tends to valorize individual creators, all three games are frequently discussed in terms of the people who made them. In some sense, it is the *designers* themselves who are “produced” as the “heroes” of these showcases. Both mechanically and audiovisually, each game flaunts a signature “style.” Foddy's *Pole Riders* game, for instance, is unmistakably a Foddy game. Indie games are

¹ Some of the games were also inspired by canonical games in the genre. The design of *Hokra*, for example, was directly inspired by the *FIFA* series of soccer games (Wilson, 2011b).

² Foddy, for example, chose to *remove* the single-player mode from *Pole Riders* after deciding he was unhappy with it. Similarly, Corbetta insists that AI players or networked play would violate the design ethos behind *Hokra*.

³ In this regard, the three games can also be related to the New Games movement (Fluegelman, 1976) and Bernie DeKoven's (1978) notion of the “Well-Played game” (also see Wilson, 2011a).

⁴ Eichberg, drawing this phrase from Danish philosophy, relates this poetic description to *øjeblikkets politik* (“politics of the instant”) and Henri Lefebvre's philosophy on “the moment.”

inevitably received in relation to their designers' previous work. Compared to big-budget e-sports like *Street Fighter 4* and *Star Craft 2*, or folk games like *Ninja*, indie multiplayer games like *Hokra*, *Pole Riders*, and *Nidhogg* boast a very *personal* sense of style.

My central argument is that this tension – between game as popular sport and game as authored installation – is the defining dynamic of this growing movement of co-located, indie multiplayer games. Looking towards the contemporary art world for precedents, I describe how the work of Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović operates around a very similar tension (Westcott, 2010). I argue that we can account for the designers' personal styles without necessarily resorting to the Romanticist notion of artistic “expression.” *Hokra*, *Pole Riders*, and *Nidhogg* do not primarily ask their players to reflect “about” any particular issue. Rather, the games beckon players to enjoy each other's company. Especially when framed as platforms for public performance, sports and multiplayer games set a stage for “beautiful play” – achieved by players *together* – as its own end (Gumbrecht, 2006; Lowood, 2010).

In an attempt to reconcile this tension between festivity and personal style, I invoke Hannah Arendt's political philosophy (1958). I argue that *Hokra*, *Pole Riders*, and *Nidhogg* can each be viewed as nurturing a kind of “polis.” Appropriating Arendt, we might conceptualize these games – as well as the exhibitions and arcades that showcase them – as “tables,” simultaneously relating and separating the players who gather around. More specifically, Arendt's notion of “plurality” offers a productive way of articulating how these games champion both individual designer *and* player community.

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