

ITCH.IO AND THE ONE-DOLLAR-GAME: HOW DISTRIBUTION PLATFORMS  
AFFECT THE ONTOLOGY OF (GAMES AS) A MEDIUM

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# Itch.io and the One-Dollar-Game: How Distribution Platforms Affect the Ontology of (Games as) a Medium

## Abstract

The article at hand outlines formal and media ontological implications of digital distribution by analyzing how independent game publishing platform Itch.io enabled ‘the one-dollar game’ as an emergent form of cultural expression. Production studies, particularly with reference to film, have investigated how new modes of production have shaped emergent genres and forms like chase scenes and location shooting; this article makes a similar case for distribution modalities. For that purpose, studies and creators’ accounts on the distribution of literature (Carr, 2015), film (Meusy, 2002) and music (Anderton 2019) are adapted. Characteristic software affordances of Itch.io are analyzed to determine how the platform frames the selling and advertising of ‘disposable’ games. A corpus of almost 300 one-dollar games was compiled by scraping the Itch.io website. Through a comparative content analysis, several unique microgenres, most of which can only feasibly exist within this product category, as well as performative and simulational aspects of game publishing are studied. The findings are related to ongoing debates about the ontology of (digital) games, thereby connecting the material-semiotic notion of platformization (Helmond, 2015) to cultural production.

## 1 Introduction

The article at hand investigates the formal and media ontological implications of digital distribution by analyzing how the independent game publishing platform Itch.io facilitated and shaped ‘the one-dollar game’ as a product category and emergent form of cultural expression. Distribution has been an important but mostly overlooked aspect of the “media identity”<sup>1</sup> of (digital) games from the beginning. In the early days, playing and (re-)writing games were inherently intertwined. In the 1970s, games like *Colossal Cave Adventures* (1975–1977) were shared between mainframe computers like the PDP-10 at American universities, where they would be continually modified.<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, independent games were still ‘distributed’ as so-called listings, i.e. as printed source code in computer magazines that had to be manually typed in before they could be played.<sup>3</sup> That is, similar to how since the mid-19th century board games were mass-produced as a ‘side product’ of lithography businesses and, thus, at least partially adhered to the logic of print products<sup>4</sup>, the game listings still framed games as a form of ‘text’ that required a corresponding form of literacy to be understood or even run.

Today, distribution platforms like Steam, the console-specific online stores of the PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch as well as the iOS and Android app stores dominate game distribution. Yet, the market still provides niches for smaller and more diverse distribution ecosystems. For instance, in an ideal scenario, crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter can constitute a bridge between self-publishing and finding an institutionalized publisher. Fan websites facilitate the dissemination of new games for long discontinued hardware like the Commodore C64, sometimes even in limited quantities as physical releases.<sup>5</sup> As especially the latter example demonstrates, distribution is not just an economic function but entails creating tightly connected communities around a platform or an individual product. In this context, Itch.io, launched by Leaf Corcoran in March 2013, plays an important role because — despite the anti-corporate stance of its creator<sup>6</sup> — the service partially replicates (or at least evokes) the appearance and ‘platform logic’ of Steam but combines it with unprecedented openness and flexibility as will be elaborated with regard to Itch.io’s design affordances below.

The term ‘one-dollar-game’ requires a bit of context. Games sold at that price can and do exist in all digital stores, often due to temporary sales; yet, by virtue of their abundance on Itch.io, they arguably form a microgenre of their own on that platform. Their symbolic value usually exceeds their financial viability. They can be understood with Sherry Turkle<sup>7</sup> (2007) as “evocative objects,” which are “liminal” because their product launch demarcates the creator’s transition from hobbyist to ‘game-maker,’ i.e. a profound change of their perceived role within the game economy. Chris Anderson<sup>8</sup> refers to the behavioral psychological implications of that price point as the “magic of 99 cents.” Steve Jobs originally advocated it as a unified reference point for all genres of digital music tracks, and the price point became a defining ‘feature’ of the iTunes Music Store when it launched in 2003. In that content, prominent one-dollar-games like *I MAED A GAM3 WITH ZOMBIES!!!* (2009), released on XBOX Live Indie Games (XBLIG), acquired similar connotations as the iconically priced music tracks. *ZOMBIES* makes these aesthetic implications explicit, as it explores what the video-game equivalent of a music video could look like, which would have been all but impossible for a game having to function as a full-price product. Developer James Silva indicated in an interview that he was specifically inspired by the price point, aiming to create “a \$1 experience that delivers.”<sup>9</sup> XBLIG proved to be a short-lived platform, not least because its modus operandi clashed with that of Microsoft itself, but, with its

grassroots approach, it helped usher in the diversification of one-dollar-games we see on Itch.io today.

Below, the case is situated within the emerging field of ‘distribution studies,’ which conceptualizes the role of distribution processes as well as platforms as media, i.e. as intermediaries. Afterwards, the methodology is explained and justified. The actual analysis proceeds in three steps: First, significant software affordances of Itch.io are analyzed to show how the design and ongoing change of platform features frame the games as products and the relation between creators and audiences. Second, patterns of microgenre formation and performative/simulational publishing practices are identified in the corpus. Third and finally, the findings are related to media ontological debates to outline a perspective that allows for comparing Itch.io with other media distribution contexts.

## **2\_From Production to Distribution**

Production studies, mostly in the context of film, have already examined how new modes of production have shaped emergent genres and forms like chase scenes<sup>10</sup> and location shooting.<sup>11</sup> The article at hand makes a similar case for distribution modalities. Literature on media distribution has often had an historical focus,<sup>12</sup> emphasized film-specific modalities such as festivals<sup>13</sup> or ‘marginalized’ economic structures such as media piracy<sup>14</sup> and cosmopolitan/diasporic cinema.<sup>15</sup> Aphra Kerr notably addresses the issue in her book-length study on network structures within the global game industry.<sup>16</sup> Kerr specifically emphasizes the shift from “linear models of cultural production,” i.e. discrete stages like “marketing, publicity and distribution,” towards a more networked understanding, in which aspects like metricization, community management, and user-generated content are interrelated but do not necessarily apply in predefined sequences. This view on distribution is highly relevant but focuses on value creation processes as well as mainstream entertainment games as its primary reference points. For the case at hand, complementary to Kerr’s perspective, work by academics and creators on how distribution (like production above) can tangibly influence media aesthetics will be more important. For instance, American writer Nicholas Carr<sup>17</sup> explored in a blog post how authors would have to ‘optimize’ their own writing for the ‘rules of play’ imposed by per-page monetization as implemented at the time by Amazon for its Kindle e-reader. Accordingly, the ‘optimal’ writing style to take advantage of that particular

monetization scheme would be “to ensure that the reader moves through your pages at a good, crisp, unbroken clip,” i.e. to provide “shallow immersion.” Apart from reducing complexity, Carr adds that “what [writers] most want to avoid is anything that encourages the reader to go back and re-read a passage” as they “only get paid the first time a page gets read.” These reflections suggest a profound (potential) impact of the distribution model on literary practice. More interesting than the rather normative conclusions, though, are the game metaphors Carr uses to characterize the system, arguing e.g. that royalties for Kindle authors are drawn from a fixed pool of funds to “cap the upside” for authors writing long books. This terminology, e.g. in the form of level caps or skill caps, is familiar from digital games, where it describes in-game limitations that curtail the advantages of particular strategies. Carr explicitly argues that per-page monetization turns literature into a “zero-sum game that pits writer against writer.” From that angle, Carr’s perspective is congruent with that of James F. English, who claims that the omnipresence of prizes and awards in literary distribution creates a fixation on “winning the culture game.”<sup>18</sup> While these claims are certainly valid, it is important to acknowledge that the metaphor of play also evokes ambiguity<sup>19</sup> or tension between adhering to the rules (which incentivize competition) but also self-expression and freedom, which comes from exploring and pushing the boundaries demarcated by these rules. Examples from the corpus below show that some developers on Itch.io indeed attempt to define their own goals and rules while still playing the ‘game’ of game publishing. Carr’s account is anecdotal and thus serves rather as a primary source, but it is important to include because it explicates how media creators — often unbeknownst to their audiences — respond to distribution constraints. Thus, Carr’s arguments similarly apply to other forms of media content including games, e.g. how developers modularize game designs to accommodate stretch goals required by crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter.<sup>20</sup>

Focusing on film rather than literature, Meusy<sup>21</sup> provides historical evidence of how distribution affected not only the business but also the aesthetics and perception of cinema. Specifically the shift from selling to renting films during the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century enabled production companies to e.g. “suppress copies of old films which interfered with the introduction of new films” (422), i.e. to redirect the audience’s focus towards novelty and topicality. Moreover, while films earlier “were usually shown in

cafes-concerts and other pre-existing theatres” (422), the rental model made the maintenance of permanent cinemas as the ‘ideal’ sites for distributing films economically viable, thereby communicating the aesthetic autonomy of film e.g. from the accompanying evening entertainment. Consequently, the “broadening and diversifying” of cinema audiences eventually made “increasingly elaborate and 'artistic' scripts” (423) possible. While rental paved the way for longer, multi-reel films, Itch.io and similar grassroots distribution platforms inversely facilitate smaller formats like the one-dollar game as distinct forms of expression but also novel aesthetic experiences, making them commercially viable as products. For instance, in big-budget games, reacting radically differently to player choices has its limitations, for developers (as content creation is becoming rapidly more expensive) but also for players (since it might take them many hours to complete the game, revisit an earlier situation and compare the ramifications of making different decisions). In contrast, small-scale digital-only games like *The Majesty of Colors* (2008) or *City Tuesday* (2012) operate more like poems in that they are intended to be continuously re-played/read and re-interpreted, sometimes multiple times in one session, and players accept them at a low price point, at which they could not have been sold via conventional brick and mortar stores.

Not least due to its bottom-up approach, which prioritizes the agency of independent developers over attracting major game franchises, Itch.io itself has not yet received much popular nor scholarly attention. However, precisely because of its unique approach, the distribution service offers a rare alternative take on platformization. In contemporary “platform society,”<sup>22</sup> the logic of technology platforms increasingly encroaches upon all societal domains and discourses, and occasionally threatens the norms and values safeguarding social order. This also applies to media distribution, e.g. to the radical democratization of gatekeeping in literary publishing through companies like Shanda Literature, originally a videogame company that became the largest online publisher in China by crowdsourcing both the writing and reviewing of literature,<sup>23</sup> or the aforementioned Kindle monetization scheme. Both developments fostered an explosion of genre fiction, which both addressed and involved otherwise marginalized audiences, but also ‘endangered’ less popular textual genres and forms of literary expression. The Steam Greenlight program represents a similar attempt at ‘opening up’ the selection of publishable games to the players themselves — part of Steam’s larger rhetorical strategy to epistemically distance the platform from the content — which

fostered the self-regulation of developers to fit the expectations of the system.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, from a platformization standpoint, Itch.io is relevant as one of the very few platforms that explore different paths.

### **3\_Methodological Remarks**

To conceptualize the implication of Itch.io on the ontology and aesthetics of (digital) games, a comparative content analysis<sup>25</sup> of games published on the service for the symbolic amount of one dollar (as of 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2019) was conducted to a) identify the formation and revitalization of distinct microgenres, and b) to demonstrate how the platform fosters game publishing as a performative and simulational cultural practice.

As a first step, the most evocative software affordances<sup>26</sup> will be analyzed to provide the necessary context for how Itch.io rhetorically frames game consumption and creator-player relations. For that purpose, the notion of procedural rhetoric,<sup>27</sup> which has been devised to analyze how games convey persuasive messages and framings through gameplay rather than primarily audiovisual elements, is extended to the design and functionality of the platform itself. Brock and Shepherd apply Bogost's framework to algorithms using the term "procedural enthymeme,"<sup>28</sup> analyzing their rhetoric in terms of how "we convince ourselves that we are actively making decisions about how to participate in a given system when, in reality, we accept options made apparently available to us from a set of constrained possibilities"(21). Below, that perspective is selectively applied to indicate how distribution tools can incentivize particular user perceptions through the deliberate inclusion or exclusion of features.

Second, to analyze the games published on Itch.io, a corpus of almost 300 one-dollar games was compiled by scraping the Itch.io website using Outwit Hub Pro in a two-step process. Since Itch.io does not offer an API, Google Search results for the query '*games + "to download this game you must purchase it at or above the minimum price of \$1 USD" +site:itch.io*' were compiled to extract a list of URLs to the actual game pages. Then, a custom web scraper was applied to all pages in the list, which yielded the game title, description and various metadata such as the number of ratings and target hardware. All games mentioned below are referenced by their title in square brackets; the corresponding titles, descriptions and metadata are available online in a Google Sheet at <http://tiny.cc/itchio>.

With regard to the corpus, defunct platforms like the aforementioned XBLIG have been deliberately excluded; similarly, the mobile app stores are not taken into consideration since most mobile games are monetized using free-to-play schemes, which David Nieborg investigates using the term “connective commodity,”<sup>29</sup> because they depend on a “wider ‘ecosystem of connective media,’” (4) specifically “connective game platforms” (6). Finally, while some of the findings below also apply to free game ecosystems like Newgrounds.com,<sup>30</sup> the symbolic price point of one dollar will play an important role in the analysis at hand. Comparing the metadata already suggests a surprising diversity in that corpus. For instance, the game size varies considerably; several games comprise less than 100 Kilobytes, while two require more than a gigabyte of hard drive space. The size does not directly correlate with the complexity of the games in question, but it already shows that developers take different approaches rather than focusing on text-based or pixelart games, which do not require much hard-drive space. Fewer than 90 of the 293 websites scraped specify the tool(s) used to create the respective game, but even this smaller subsection includes a surprising variety. Apart from the industry-standard game engines Unreal Engine and Unity, several games were developed using Twine and Ren’Py (authoring tools for interactive fiction and visual novels), genre-specific tools like RPG Maker (used to create games in the style of early 1990s Japanese role-playing games) or even quirky game-tool hybrids like Puzzlescript and Pico-8.

It should be noted that this article makes use of data scraping techniques but does not pursue a genuine digital methods<sup>31</sup> approach; instead, by combining interpretive methods like content and affordance analysis with a larger corpus, it aims to provide a meso-level perspective on distribution platforms that still acknowledges the idiosyncrasies of individual published games. With its hybrid methodology, the article outlines a material-semiotic perspective on the implications of platformization for cultural production, a process that not only aims to make data ‘platform-ready’ (Helmond 2015), i.e. usable as a resource and currency between platforms, but applies the same logic to cultural products.



#### **4\_Acknowledging the Procedural Rhetoric of Itch.io**

The goal of this first step is to determine how Itch.io rhetorically frames the selling and advertising of ‘disposable’ games by virtue of its design and functionality, e.g. by making the pay-what-you-want model the de facto default. In a recent journalistic piece, Itch.io is described<sup>32</sup> in characteristically evocative terminology as “a digital ecosystem that still inspires wonder in the face of algorithm-driven consumption” or even a “garden of digital possibility, one unburdened by corporate overlords or the growing malaise of loot boxes.” The author elaborates on how Itch.io’s approach is increasingly perceived (but also, one might add, discursively constructed) as the polar opposite of Steam. A seemingly mundane but rhetorically significant design choice is the inclusion of the aforementioned metadata. For instance, incentivizing creators to indicate a game’s development tool helps players become more ‘literate’ in how games are made, e.g. allowing them to potentially notice tool-specific design choices. Because it is unusual to include this, Itch.io all the more emphatically advocates an unusually literate and, thus, empowered ‘ideal user,’ i.e. one who may not only buy but also eventually make/sell games. Moreover, customers are — just as unusually — shown an overview of the files they receive upon purchase. In contrast, Steam, like most digital distributors, only sells access to digital content completely managed internally. Thus, the interface element, including metadata like file size and platform-specific versions, explicitly frames the games as digital data and makes their materiality as “digital objects”<sup>33</sup> more tangible. On a related note, the most obviously missing piece of metadata is the launch date. Contrary to all major distribution platforms, Itch.io does not indicate when a game was added to the platform. This omission also has rhetorical implications, i.e. it frames games as ‘timeless,’ countering the perception of the “game industry as perpetual innovation economy,”<sup>34</sup> in which games become inherently less relevant with every passing month. For the study at hand, it also makes it impossible to chronologically explore the corpus, e.g. to visualize the starting point of particular one-dollar-game microgenres as well as the pace of their development.

Another seemingly marginal but evocative feature is the fact that every creator has their own subdomain. That is, by virtue of the URL nomenclature, developers can symbolically occupy (and relatively freely co-design) their own niche within the Itch.io ecosystem. In an interview, Corcoran confirmed that “the original idea for the site wasn’t a store [but] just a way to quickly create a customized game homepage.”<sup>35</sup> This

approach alters the epistemic status of the service, reframing it as a marketplace (where each seller has a recognizable presence) than a unified store. Finally, since Itch.io's development is managed via Github, developers can transparently voice feature requests and engage in discussions about how game distribution should work and why. These discussions not only address convenience but also features that touch upon vital issues in the political economy of digital games, e.g. allowing for games to be "owned by multiple developers."<sup>36</sup> The feature request requires both game makers and platform owner Corcoran to concretize what ownership 'means.' Itch.io already include the game admin role to let collaborators edit pages of games they do not 'own,' but what developers request is for games they collaborated on to appear in all their profiles, i.e. their 'portfolios' as game-makers. Another user remarked on the same topic that "the URL still begins with the uploader's nickname and the HTML title is 'GameTitle by Uploader'sNickname.'" This demonstrates how interface elements of distribution platforms, both primary and secondary (like the URLs of game pages), tangibly impact concepts like ownership, while the open-source development process affords a productive debate about how an 'ideal' version of (co-)ownership could practically be implemented.

## **5 From Micro Genres to Performative Game Publishing: One-Dollar-Games as Cultural Artifacts**

A cursory investigation of the games in the corpus indicates the emergence of patterns, which can feasibly be conceptualized by adapting the concept of the microgenre originally applied to film, online video or websites.<sup>37</sup> With regard to bullet time videos, a film style/technique that received mainstream recognition through *The Matrix* (1999) and was subsequently explored further in both feature films and online videos, Rehak defines a microgenre as "an unusual, scaled-down class of media objects: aggregates of imagery and meaning that move in cycles of quotation and parody," i.e. an audiovisual phenomenon that exhibits a "life cycle characteristic of genres" and operates "on a compressed and accelerated scale" compared to e.g. film genres that have emerged over years or even decades.<sup>38</sup> With these characteristics, microgenres can serve as "a means to describe the breakdown, resequencing, and replication of visual texts" (43); this claim not apply applies to films or videos that share a particular visual effect but also to the one-dollar games in the corpus. The (so far) only application to games comes

from Ian Bryce Jones,<sup>39</sup> who interprets the “rise of the comedic video game,” specifically with reference to games with exaggerated physics-based movement reminiscent of physical comedy and slapstick like *QWOP* (2008) and *Octodad* (2010), through the lens of the microgenre concept. Jones explicitly mentions that these games initially “depended upon free, browser-based distribution as a way of finding an audience for their jokey premise” (92), i.e. to demonstrate their continued appeal to a specific target demographic, which would eventually come up with a unique label (“fumblecore,” 86) to refer to ‘their’ genre but also to express their own identity as fans of that genre. Specifically, the -core suffix is inspired by similar microgenre labeling in the context of music, e.g. Grindcore in the mid-1980s or, more recently, Kawaii-core.<sup>40</sup> Yet, Jones’ analysis of fumblecore games also demonstrates that these labels are more than just convenient groupings, i.e. they accumulate attention on particular aesthetics commonalities and thereby facilitate a deeper interpretive engagement with the respective mechanics. In the case of games like *QWOP*, “players begin to appreciate these flailing masses of ragdoll limbs not as surrogates but as aesthetic objects in their own right” (91). These observations will provide basic orientation to make sense of the games in the corpus below and also help determine their implications for digital games as an expressive medium from a longer perspective.

## **6\_Autobiographical and Highly Idiosyncratic Games**

Before delving into individual microgenres and corresponding conceptual issues, it is useful to briefly acknowledge a few patterns that, while repeating, are too marginal to be microgenres. First, within the limited scope of a game sold for one dollar, one would expect extensive worldbuilding to play a minor role; yet, a surprising amount of games actually explore detailed narrative scenarios such as a haunted hotel [the-chills], a few even a complete fantasy world [rpg-the-land-of-dasthir]. Some games use the format to productively adapt literary (or other) genres to games, similar e.g. to the category of game poems, which Ian Bogost explored with his *A Slow Year* (2010) but did not develop further.<sup>41</sup> For instance, [unfamiliar] is one of several story-driven games with small, self-contained scenarios that resemble short stories, developing towards a particular narrative moment or twist. Finally, the corpus includes several games with unique requirements and/or severe constraints. For instance, [color-slice] invariably requires a controller to play, [the-4th-wall] is an experimental game that is reported to be

falsely recognized by many anti-virus tools as malware (and thus may even require to be run in Administrator Mode on some computers), and [counterweight-kate] is distributed as just a Commodore C64 disk image, which requires an emulator to be run on Windows PCs.

The first actual microgenre are autobiographical and/or highly idiosyncratic games. Rather than emphasizing production value, the goal of these games is to establish connectedness by tapping into either shared or very personal and thus, for the intended audience, relatable experiences. For instance, [dilating-destiny] is a piece of interactive fiction based on a particular period of the author's life, "weav[ing] together language from the [AAA multiplayer action] game *Destiny* with the experience of recovering from Genital Reassignment Surgery, during the Baltimore Uprising." The interactive narrative [kates-crush] is presented in a similarly eclectic manner as tackling issues such as "lesbian sex, succubus, BDSM, anger issues, pumpkin spice latte, and sidecuts." Both games are not descriptively autobiographic but aim to reflect the ontological uncertainty of gender performance through the lens of non-linear narrative. [Sins] is one of several titles developed by younger developers using the aesthetics of the medium they grew up with to process anxieties but also hopes. It is self-reflexively framed as "a surreal, horrifying look into the realizations of young adulthood." The chosen approach is similarly eclectic, i.e. allegedly "inspired by Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and personal experiences." One game, [dan-kwarai], aims to communicate broader cultural rather than personal sensibilities; its creators describes it as "an educationnal game in hausa that helps you discover the nigerien culture [sic]."

The ongoing crystallization of this particular microgenre emphasizes the performative quality of game-making and makes it more apparent to the creators themselves. The process of making and publishing these games effectuates a feeling of connectedness by elevating the creator's personal experiences to a generalizable type of sign, a process that Umberto Eco called ostension. These experiences are often highly specific but, therefore, also recognizable and relatable. For instance, [3am] is described to be "about the stillness of being awake at 3AM"; similarly, the creator of [cellar] asks users to "remember when as a little child you were sent to fetch something from the cellar and you were always afraid that something's lurking there in the darkness." These games are more performative than representational, a form of "phatic communion"<sup>42</sup>

in that they are not primarily aimed at conveying information but at establishing a sense of community or bond. Making and distributing them constitutes form of “affection” as defined by Shouse,<sup>43</sup> i.e. a “process whereby affect is transmitted between bodies.” Shouse mentions music as “perhaps the clearest example” of how affective intensity can be transmitted between bodies but, albeit asynchronously and mediated through Itch.io as ‘interface,’ these games — contrary to many big-budget titles — fulfill a similar purpose.

## **7\_Self-Reflexive and Media-Reflexive Games**

Creators publish one-dollar games not just to reflect on themselves but also on game-making as a cultural practice. For instance, [bundle-clicker] adapts the distinct mechanics and genre-specific procedural rhetoric of idle games to make a point about game distribution. More specifically, it frames selling game bundles in terms of a logic of escalation and hypercapitalism inherent in earlier ‘idle games’ like *Cookie Clicker* (2013) or *Clicker Heroes* (2014). While [bundle-clicker] remains on the level of representation, games like [0space] and [moneyrun] are extended version of successful game jam entries with extra content. Thus, the implied possibility of selling a successful prototype becomes ingrained in the game jam as a cultural format,<sup>44</sup> and these monetization experiments constitute a site of reflexive engagement with the rules of the games industry. The creator of [digitys-dream] hints at the ambiguity of this process, arguing half-jokingly that the game “was made for fun, and so I can make a quick buck and show my parents that game design can be a career for me.” By affording the publication of these games, Ich.io not only fosters “game-media literacy,” i.e. creating and playing as an analogon to writing and reading,<sup>45</sup> but arguably also media industry literacy.<sup>46</sup> For example, the creator of [sam-and-dan-floaty-flatmates] experiments with using Itch.io and Steam in conjunction, distributing via Steam for free to increase outreach and using the Itch.io page to accept one-dollar donations.

In that context, one dollar operates as a symbolic price that affirms the performativity of game publishing. In most cases, it will not lead to a financially viable and sustainable profession. However, selling a game for one dollar allows for performing a particular ‘ideal’ form of game-making and a corresponding creator identity. In the case of [rocksmash-a-year-in-the-neighborhood], this involves maximum attention to detail;

the developer emphasizes that the game was “developed over 4 years, so it's been polished to a furious shine” and “includes lots of features to make it accessible to all players [like] options for color-blind and low-vision players, Deaf [sic] players, and those with mobility impairments.” The short duration of the games is rhetorically positioned as complementary or, more often, in explicit opposition to the aesthetics and economics of AAA games. For instance, the creator of [cellar] argues that the game is “enough for a refreshing break from all those well-known, repetitive AAA titles.” In contrast, developer sohrabhamza claims his game [a-dream] lasts 30–60 minutes depending on player skill, “with absolutely no fillers or useless cutscenes,” a clear rejection of how many games artificially extend replayability through repetition at the risk of becoming a chore. By publishing these small games, developers like sohrabhamza can act out their creator identity and express their views on the game industry in a non-verbal way.

## **8\_ ‘Simulating’ the Arcade Game as a Contemporary Format**

The usually ‘economical’ approach to one-dollar game design often focuses on a simple but effective core loop and replayability, which Chris Crawford described as “process intensity.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, many games in the corpus revitalize the structure of early 1980s arcade games, fostering the ‘perfect run’ as a narrative trope and promoting two types of rhetoric of play.<sup>48</sup> With a focus on self-improvement, as evidenced e.g. by the description of [bullet-candy-perfect], they link Sutton-Smith’s “rhetoric of play as progress” with that of “play as identity,” whereas more mainstream examples like [timberman], which turn expressly ‘physical’ practices (like chopping wood) into repeatable gameplay, link progress to the “rhetoric of the self” and accordingly emphasize “the intrinsic or the aesthetic satisfaction of the play performances”(305).

Low-friction distribution via platforms like Itch.io afford an unprecedented abundance of games, often focusing on a few popular genres similar to the explosion of genre fiction discussed by Carr.<sup>49</sup> This condensing arguably turns game-making and publishing into a process of simulation; with every published game, creators effectively test hypotheses and, collectively, ‘simulate’ aesthetic parameters of familiar genres and themes. Jay Bolter uses the term “digital plenitude”<sup>50</sup> to argue that abundance in the context of media has qualitative rather than just quantitative implications, e.g. gradually making cultural hierarchies obsolete or even appear as a remnant of earlier media logic.

Adding to Bolter's claim, I argue that platforms like Itch.io that facilitate digital plenitude deconstruct and simulate these established categories like genre in a simulational process, which requires but also produces new forms of game literacy. In abundant genres like role-playing games (RPGs), this process is particularly obvious as smaller developers playfully explore the boundaries of defining characteristics including spatial exploration (*The Linear RPG*), epic narrative scope (*Half-Minute Hero*), numerical representation, repetition and scaling (Nekogames' *Parameters*), character archetypes (*A Healer Only Lives Twice*), moral choices (*Darkest Dungeon*), self-referentiality (*Hyperdimension Neptunia* series), and even genre mash-ups (*Crypt of the Necrodancer*). This simulation process adheres to the logic of collective intelligence, which — after Jenkins' reading of Pierre Levy — is often referenced using the term “hive mind.”<sup>51</sup> This metaphor implies that no individual developer has a complete overview of the whole situation, but Itch.io as a shared platform allows for discovering and sharing information to facilitate a semi-coordinated effort. For instance, the corpus includes numerous marginally different small-scale space action games reminiscent of early arcade titles like *Space Invaders*, *Galaga* or *Defender*. These games like [battle-galaxy], [starfighters], [cosmic-dual] or [alienstar] are marginally relevant in themselves but, understood as part of a simulation process, they are attempts at experimentally testing the boundaries of the genre and determining how it may be reconciled with the exigencies of contemporary tastes and markets.

### **9\_Blurring the Boundary Between Playing and Making**

Apart from enabling game publishing as a performative practice, one-dollar games contribute to breaking down epistemic barriers between players and creators. As more and more games incorporate tools for content creation, this alleged boundary becomes increasingly permeable. Malaby points out this shift with reference to *Second Life*, which offers a “set of tools [that] owes a great deal to games.”<sup>52</sup> Referring to Boellstorff's notion of “creationist capitalist,” Malaby also addresses the epistemic implications of increasing player agency, arguing that “the prosumer has become a kind of minor god” (100). The one-dollar-game also constitutes a site to renegotiate player/creator identities but focuses on creating and publishing original games, opening up the entire game (as a ‘product’) to co-creation.

For instance, the game [zak] includes the digital prototype, which was allegedly “made in just a week.” Games like [tower-dense] essentially implement the bare minimum of a particular (micro)genre and are clearly byproducts of design and development exercises such as learning the Blender Game Engine “for the last year by myself,” as the developer of [digipat] elaborates. A unique way to connect players and creators is by selling the source code and/or materials for otherwise freely distributed games. For instance, [tinyplatformer] comprises the source code for a project created in Pico-8, a virtual “fantasy console”<sup>53</sup> that offers a low-threshold entry point into game design. The game itself, which is playable for free online, is thus essentially a vehicle to demonstrate the technical implementation of features like “ledge grabs, wall jumps, moving platforms” and more. [robot-horse] applies the same game to interactive fiction, offering the Twine project files for an otherwise freely accessible game.

In these contexts, the one dollar is a symbolic fee and paying it constitutes a ‘rite of passage,’ a performance of ‘earnestness,’ and epistemically connects creator and player. The developer of [virgil], which uses a similar monetization scheme, substantiates that point, calling it “the format of my productions: the game for free, and the source for a fee,” in order to “ensure that only those who have real interest will download the source.” Purchasing games is reframed here as a form of valorizing communication and affirmation rather than simply an economic transaction, a short signal that “becomes part of a mediated phatic sociability necessary to maintain a connected presence”<sup>54</sup> and, combined with many similar signals, constitutes a “phatic culture” (396). Thus, while Nieborg argues that, with the much more prominent F2P games, “players become a player commodity”<sup>55</sup> and are ‘redistributed’ as a resource, the one-dollar model envisions the player as interlocutor with considerably more agency. The artificial ‘exclusivity’ of the source code aims to counteract the ongoing devaluation of digital games fostered not least by free-to-play monetization schemes. While reversing this process seems all but impossible, developers aim to ‘elevate’ the source code, not just as product but also as a cultural artifact, through the symbolic pricing.

## **10\_Digital Distribution and the Ontology of Games**

One-dollar games not only epistemically readjust digital games as argued above but, more profoundly, affect the ontology of games as a medium, i.e. common perception of what a (digital) game ‘is’ or can be. According to Aarseth, the goal of an “ontology



of games” is to “show how the things we call games can be different from each other in a number of different ways.”<sup>56</sup> The ontologies Aarseth himself summarizes (56–57) are rather medium-immanent, distinguishing game elements such as actors, rules, goals or perspectives. Instead, as distribution is a medium-agnostic concept, the goal here is instead to identify ontological categories that allow for re-thinking (digital) games in relation to other media or even other forms and products of human practice. For that purpose, the four pertinent ontologies identified by Ian Bogost,<sup>57</sup> which can be paraphrased as games-as-narratives (i.e. defined by plot and characters), games-as-systems (i.e. defined by rules), games-as-experiences (i.e. defined by players) and games-as-software (i.e. defined by/as technology), are more useful. The four categories are evidently not neatly distinguishable, but they are useful as ‘lenses’ that highlight different aspects of games as complex techno-cultural phenomena. In a blog post, Bogost<sup>58</sup> provides a useful analogy by likening game bundles to cereal fun packs, which Werning,<sup>59</sup> following the logic of that distinction, elaborated into a fifth ontological category, games-as-products (i.e. defined by economic rationales). Cereal fun packs shift the emphasis away from nutritional properties to more subjective aspects such as the joy of discovery and personalization, and game bundles arguably do the same for games.

As evidenced above, in the case at hand, the evocative nature of pricing<sup>60</sup> needs to be regarded as part of the procedural rhetoric of both the distribution platform and the game-as-product. For instance, the “Because We May” sale in 2012<sup>61</sup> marked a radical departure from the ‘imperative’ to optimize prices for maximum profit, allowing game developers, for a limited time, to experiment with pricing by radically and repeatedly changing the prices of their products. It was both intended to assert the developers’ interest in being able to actually control the pricing for their games, but to re-claim the ‘expressive’ potential of pricing. The epistemic dimension of relative price points is already an established factor in the economic theory of media distribution, e.g. in the context of differential pricing as a driver of the distribution value of any media product, along with other factors such as exclusivity or immediacy of access.<sup>62</sup> Differential pricing refers to selling at different prices depending on the type of audience or situation, i.e. the flexible price point hereby connotes the purchasing context. With one-dollar games, the fixed price ontologically links digital games to other forms of culture. For example, the re-release of popular games in low-budget Game of the Year editions mimicked the culturally established convention of creating cheaper paperbacks after

the original hardcover release of a book proved successful. Now, at one or two dollars per game, digital games as a medium become epistemically linked to consumable goods. The creator of [burgerwave] consequently summarizes their game as “fast-food entertainment for the price of something off the dollar menu”. The pricing reflects an alleged transition towards “snack culture,”<sup>63</sup> in which games compare to fast food in terms of pricing and, thus, are often ‘consumed’ in a similar manner, e.g. as throwaway experiences, triggered by a spontaneous impulse or on-the-go. Similar to fast food, games and other media like downloadable music tracks are increasingly purchased out of a specific mood or situation and viewed as part of an ongoing cultural practice rather than individual products. Distribution-specific features like the Steam Curators program enable users to create collections (i.e. themed lists) of games tied to their accounts that can be shared and communicated, performing similar functions, e.g. in terms of identity performance, as playlists, compilations or mixtapes of music tracks.<sup>64</sup>

The analysis at hand can always only represent a contingent snapshot since both Itch.io’s affordances, more recently e.g. the inclusion of seasonal bundles,<sup>65</sup> and the corpus of one-dollar games are constantly changing. Thus, the methodological focus was chosen to provide a ‘blueprint’ that can be applied and expanded upon in follow-up research. For example, with its media-comparative approach towards game ontology, the analysis is also productively applicable to non-game distribution contexts and platforms, especially those that, similar to Itch.io, characteristically deemphasize gate-keeping and facilitate new aesthetic experiences in domains like music (e.g. Bandcamp) or literature (e.g. Wattpad). In a forthcoming article, Hesmondhalgh, Jones, and Rauh<sup>66</sup> specifically discuss Bandcamp in comparison with its competitor SoundCloud as different takes on the platformization of music distribution. A comparative content analysis informed by concepts like microgenre formation and performative as well as simulational aspects of media publishing as outlined above could add valuable insights into these platform dynamics.

While most one-dollar games discussed above are necessarily pragmatic in nature, i.e. their social relevance stems from quantity rather than ‘quality’ or, rather, aesthetic ambition, a few developers actually use the small ‘product form’ to convey big ideas. The game [heres-your-change] addresses the complexity of urban transformations but, inspired by the limited scope, pursues a bottom-up approach of “simulat[ing] the expe-

rience of a cashier at a liquor store.” The developer elaborates that “as the game progresses, the player's world changes to mimic the process of gentrification[,i.e.] customers, store, and items gradually change to cater to and reflect the newer, more affluent population as what was familiar to the player gets pushed out.” The game emulates and further develops the premise of *Papers Please* (2013), which similarly constrains the player’s perspective and agency to convey the subjective experience of a dictatorial bureaucracy. Thereby, it arguably contributes to turning the iconic *Papers Please* in a microgenre of its own. Rather than evoking any specific game, [mech-romancer-charity-bundle-1], a “Trans-humanist Dating Sim,” adapts the dating simulation microgenre itself to playfully explore LGBT+ sensibilities. In this case, genre appropriation constitutes a deliberately performative gesture since the microgenre is only recently being systematically leveraged as a format to explore sexual identities and orientations.<sup>67</sup> For games like these, Itch.io constitutes an invaluable ecosystem and the fact that the platform still exists and even thrives, despite its comparatively smaller user base, makes a powerful statement about the future of the games industry as a whole. As indicated by using the term procedural rhetoric to conceptualize Itch.io’s affordances, distribution platforms — like games — are interactive systems with a rhetoric of their own that users experience through ongoing interaction. Thus, with all its flaws and imperfections, Itch.io can serve as a role model for designing evocative distribution environments that, in turn, can cultivate similarly evocative digital game experiences.

## Endnotes

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