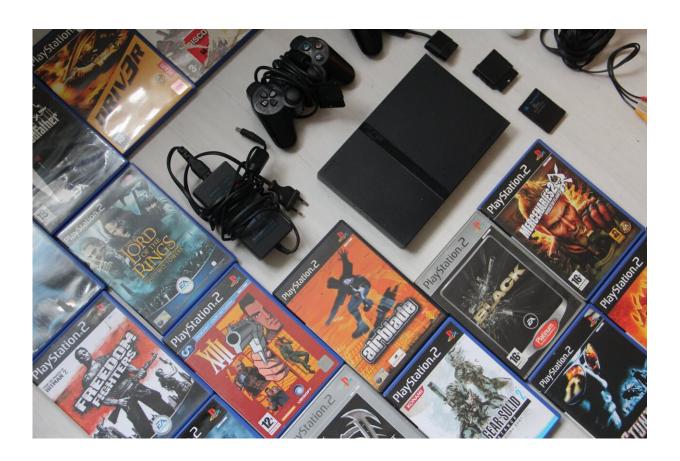# Buying indie video games over the holidays can help make the industry more ethical and fair

December 18 2023, by Sarah Stang

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

[The 2023 Game Awards](#) recently saw accolades doled out to the biggest and most celebrated games of the year—[alongside a few lucky indie](#)

titles—and with the holidays fast approaching, many of those same games are starting to go on sale.

Video game companies often time the release of their most popular titles for the holiday season. The biggest sales of the year happen between Black Friday and Christmas, and since publishers often push hard for new game releases in the last quarter of the year, now is the time to reflect on the political economy of video games and to think carefully about which games to buy and why.

This year has been a tough one for game developers, with massive layoffs resulting from financial mismanagement, overzealous and unsustainable investments and generally unethical business practices, thanks in part to the lack of unions in the game industry.

The biggest cuts often happen in the largest, most successful companies—the ones releasing the big-name titles with massive player bases and raking in the profits. They boast about their sales, profits and record-breaking player bases while laying off employees with little warning or explanation and inadequate severance.

Even industry veterans are not immune to sudden job loss, and many game developers see their careers as unsustainable. Similarly, it tends to be the biggest companies that push their precarious developers the hardest during this time of year as part of the notorious "crunch culture" of video games. These crunch periods see employees working ridiculously long hours and often burning out in an extreme push to get a game released in time for the fourth quarter sales boom, whether it's actually ready for release or not.

Although many large studios are taking steps or at least starting to recognize these issues and address them, every year seems to bring a new issue, controversy or scandal to light. This year it's been the massive

layoffs, and I can only imagine what next year will bring.

[Labor exploitation and job precarity](#) have created an [ongoing push to unionize](#) game studios. But they are not the only problems plaguing the game industry.

Discrimination in gaming

Countless cases of [gender-](#) and [race-based](#) discrimination among game studios have come to light, including accusations of [sexual harassment and abuse](#), in recent years.

For decades, critics have decried the lack of diversity among video game characters and the ongoing issue of stereotypical, problematic and harmful representation in games, especially when it comes to [gender](#), [race](#) and [body size](#).

This is tied to the fact that the [industry is dominated](#) by [white](#) [men](#) who seem to primarily make games for other white men.

For example, [only 18 percent of games](#) showcased at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in 2020 featured a playable female protagonist. Even when women are present, [men have twice as much in-game dialogue as women](#) (an issue that [reflects real life](#)). This is despite the fact that roughly [50 percent of gamers are women](#). In fact, in Canada, [more women than men play games](#).

Yet, this finger-wagging at the industry, for the most part, is directed at what we refer to as the "mainstream"—those corporate studios that produce the big blockbuster titles.

Although they receive considerably less attention at events like The Game Awards, and [the definition of "independent" is a little murky](#),

smaller-scale games produced by indie studios might be a better option for consumers interested in more diverse and progressive content.

That's not to mention their often more innovative and accessible gameplay and lower time commitment than most big-name games. Independent game developers, while sharing some of the same issues as the mainstream industry, might be the place to look when choosing to purchase games in a more conscientious, ethical way.

Supporting indie games

Independent games tend to be made by smaller teams, and are often what might be considered "passion projects." More than 40% of indie developers forego a salary to bring their game to production, and indie studios are often mired in precarity and are more likely to be deeply impacted by game sales—one bad flop could shutter an indie studio.

Unfortunately, mainstream games carry far more weight than independent games do, with much higher sales and far more aggressive marketing campaigns. This means that mainstream games have a far greater cultural impact and continue to be the driving force behind the medium as a whole.

It also means that it's harder for most consumers to find new, more innovative and diverse games to play. While delightful indie games like COCOON or Sea of Stars may shine at The Game Awards, the hundreds, if not thousands, of other beautiful interactive experiences produced each year largely go unnoticed by mainstream media and risk being passed over by consumers.

Gamers should support smaller-scale creators, especially those just starting out, risking it all to bring their artistic vision to life and standing out when it comes to supporting their own and their employees' well-

being. It's an important and ethical thing to do.

If it means giving less money to [large corporations](#) that have shown all they care about is profit, then that's an added bonus. I'm not advocating for boycotting the biggest hits of the year, but I am encouraging consumers to check out the indie scene as well.

Games hosted privately on sites like [itch.io](#) are a great option, as developers receive the majority, if not all, of the profit from sales and you can even give a little extra money to support them if you'd like.

Or, for anyone who needs a little extra guidance, [Humble Bundle](#) curates huge collections of games around specific genres or themes—many of which are indie—and offers them at a very low price while also [raising money for charity](#) and [supporting Black game developers](#).

Developers, critics and scholars tirelessly advocate for and work toward positive change within the [game industry](#), and consumers can help by thinking about the games they buy.

It takes a little research, but by not buying games made under crunch conditions by companies that don't care about diversity and don't protect their employees, and instead buying smaller independent games that support emerging and diverse developers, consumers can make a big difference and help push the industry in more ethical directions.

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