

## Abstract

The video game industry has witnessed a significant growth in independent production practices in the past decade following an increase in access to digital distribution. While most of the successful independent games are Western in origin, the ease of digital access to the global market has had a worldwide impact on video game development fields. This includes an impact on the Japanese video game industry, which traditionally released independent works through so-called *doujin* fields, wherein amateurs release self-financed and self-published works for creative and communal rather than financial purposes. Yet in recent years, a more commercialized independent game production field has been growing in Japan, and *doujin* game developers are seemingly expanding into production practices mostly associated with Western independent development, abbreviated as *indie*, rather than the non-commercial motivations associated with *doujin* culture. Followingly, a variety of independent developers have addressed the ostensible disparities between the terms *doujin* and *indie*, as well as how they position themselves relative to the two terms, through various forms of discourse.

This thesis will therefore firstly aim to examine and contrast how the meanings of the two terms are constructed in contemporary discourse by prominent game developers. Secondly, the thesis aims to problematize the common notion that *doujin* production fields are turning into indies by investigating structural and actor-based changes in the respective fields of *doujin* and Japanese indie game development.

The thesis will consequently utilize discourse analysis as a methodological approach to investigate how game developers construct or reconstruct the meanings of the two terms through communication in digital journalistic media and by communicating through their own productions. Moreover, the thesis will use the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu's practice theory, Fiske's theory of popular culture, and Hichibe & Tanaka's categorical distinctions between hobbyist, indie, and commercial production practices to examine the relative relationships between the various forms of production fields.

Major analytical findings include the four following: Firstly, that *doujin* game production fields emphasize the motivation for community building through creative productions, which are often derivative and collaborative, while financial motivations are still viewed to be contradictory to *doujin* ideals of creative freedom. As a result, *doujin* game developers who release games globally do not showcase major changes to their productive practices or motivations, even though they distribute games globally and show increased discursive engagement with the global market. Secondly, Western indie game discourse tends to include amateur productions as a subcategory of independent game productions while simultaneously highlighting commercially successful indie games, whereas *doujin* game developers usually pose a clear distinction between *doujin* and indie games depending on the degree of financial motivations of the developer, thereby defining indie game productions centrally around financial motivations. Thirdly, the growing indie game production field is facilitated by the involvement of various actors. These primarily include video game publishers and organizations who hold indie game conventions that aim to develop the

Japanese indie game scene at a faster rate, successful commercial developers who have chosen to pursue indie game development rather than working for a company, and successful indie game developers overseas. Fourthly, that the growth of indie game development in Japan is slow, partially caused by language barriers that presents challenges to both localization and marketing potential of Japanese developers and their products.

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# 1 Introduction

Video game development is a relatively new phenomenon in comparison to other mediums such as films and music. Regardless, there have already been major shifts in the field of games in recent years, mainly driven by access to the internet, which allows developers to distribute their games globally more easily through digital rather than physical releases. One such change is an increasing quantity of independent game development practices, often abbreviated as ‘indie games’ across the world, which particularly gained traction after a number of successful releases of independent games in the West after 2008. However, Japan has its own history with independent game development in the form of the so-called ‘doujin’ field, which is a subcultural phenomenon wherein amateurs self-finance and self-publish works, including games, usually with low to no expectations of financial yields.

In the past decade, Japan has seen a shift towards digitalization and global distribution of doujin games as well as an increase in access to indie game development processes, resulting in a changing understanding of what constitutes the term doujin. This shift is most emblematically expressed in the following quote by famous doujin game developer, ZUN:

*"There's been a paradigm shift in how creators see doujin. It's become less and less about making only what you want and enjoying the process. People want to succeed. They want to hit it big. In that way, I think doujin are turning into indies. I don't really know if this is a good thing or a bad thing for doujin"* (Ferrero, 2016, 10:50).

The paradigm shift in the motivations of doujin developers has resulted in a situation where Japanese game developers frequently address their own positions in the game development field and attempt to define the doujin and indie terms in media discourse. As such, the research question is as follows:

*Firstly, the project aims to examine how the terms ‘doujin’ and ‘indie’ games are constructed in contemporary discourse by prominent game developers and contrast the two phenomena. Secondly, the project will aim to investigate and problematize the notion that ‘doujin are turning into indies’ by examining structural and actor-based changes in the respective fields of doujin and Japanese indie game development.*

The thesis will use Bourdieu’s practice theory as a theoretical framework for understanding the relative positionings in the fields involved, including the way in which structures can be constructed to exert behavioural influence over actors in the field, and the way in which different forms of capital can be valued in a field and exchanged to acquire the influence necessary to reconstruct the meaning of the doujin and indie terms. Furthermore, the thesis will use Fiske’s theory of popular culture to analyze the relationship between non-commercial and commercial productions, since both doujin and indie games are, to some extent, defined and positioned relative to commercial productions. Lastly, the thesis will use Hichibe and Tanaka’s theoretical distinction between amateur, indie, and commercial productions to aid in understanding discursive elements that situate indies as an in-between position between financial and creative motivations.

Methodologically, the thesis will use discourse analysis to examine the way in which famous doujin and indie game developers construct the meanings of the terms through discursive elements, such as through interviews and presentations, or by communicating through their productions, about the game industry and their own positions therein.

Section 4 and 5 will begin by exploring the respective terms ‘doujin’ and ‘indie’ by establishing the fields and examining the characteristic properties of both fields that are commonly raised in discourse. Followingly, section 6 will problematize and contrast the similarities and differences between the two fields, as well as problematize cultural discrepancies in defining and understanding ‘indies’. Section 7 will then inspect two perspectives on how ‘doujin are turning into indies’; first, by studying an example of the doujin developer ‘ZUN’, who has increasingly engaged in global distribution and international discursive engagement, and second, by examining structural and actor-based changes that have facilitated a growing indie game development field in Japan. Ultimately, section 8 will note some of the challenges and possibilities that Japanese developers face in distributing and marketing more broadly to a global market.

## 2 Theory

### 2.1 Bourdieu, Structural-Constructivism, and the Forms of Capital

There are numerous theoretical challenges involved in examining the doujin and indie game concepts, the relations between the concepts and the mainstream, commercial games industry, as well as the current changes that the concepts are undergoing. For instance, the concepts could be viewed as static terms with fixed definitions or be viewed as dynamic, ever-changing constructs that are purely dependent upon the subjective interpretations of individual actors. Or the terms could be viewed to merely denote and categorize certain types of game productions and development practices for descriptive purposes, excluding analytical assumptions that the concepts also involve values and prescriptions that can limit the range of likely behaviour exhibited by actors in the field.

The project will use Bourdieu’s concept of structuralist-constructivism, which he defines in the following way:

*“On the one hand, the objective structures that the sociologist constructs [...] form the basis for these [subjective] representations and constitute the structural constraints that bear upon interactions [...]”* (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 15).

In terms applicable to the project, there are ‘objective’ structures involved in the doujin and indie game development fields, which provide constraints upon behaviour and practices and influence the subjective perceptions of actors in the field. For Bourdieu, the objective structures are constituted by an “ensemble of invisible relations” within social spaces in which agents, groups, and institutions are positioned relative to one another with higher or lower degrees of correlation between characteristic traits, such as their preferences,

values, or typical behaviour (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 16). For instance, indie game developers are positioned differently than commercial developers in the social space of the video game industry, and there are various norms related to the development process and characteristic traits of productions etc. depending on which social sphere the developer belongs to. These social norms do not only pose external restrictions on the behaviour of developers but are frequently integrated over time into an unconscious and “embodied” form wherein the norms become internalized (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). Therefore, doujin and indie concepts are not purely descriptive terms denoting a specific type of production but contain within them structural and prescriptive norms that result in mostly predictable behaviour.

Yet the structural elements are not objective in a naturalistic or essentialist sense but are rather constructions based on historical developments and sociocultural circumstances. As Bourdieu summarizes in relation to the construction of social reality:

*“Firstly, that this construction is not carried out in a social vacuum, but subjected to structural constraints. Secondly, that structuring structures, cognitive structures, are themselves socially structured because they have a social genesis; thirdly, that the construction of social reality is not only an individual enterprise, but may also become a collective enterprise”* (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18).

In other words, the structures that impose limitations upon agents are themselves of social origin, even if other structures constrain the possibilities of new constructs. Indeed, both the contemporary doujin and indie game fields are relatively new phenomenon that various agents have attempted to define and shape through their productions and discursive statements, frequently through collective efforts. Additionally, the constructs can be changed over time given sufficient influence over the field involved, even if it is a complicated process: *“To change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced”* (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23). To influence any field, one must seek to alter the structures that define it, leading to the production of a new generation with a different set of values and practices embodied within them. The doujin and indie game concepts are never set-in stone but are always subject to change due to the influence of actors in the fields.

Ultimately, to change structures requires influence over the field, which can only be granted to individuals who have a sufficient amount of valued *capital*, defined by Bourdieu as “accumulated labor” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). The most obvious form of capital is firstly economic capital, which includes both money and material goods that are exchangeable for wealth. A second form is social capital, which involves membership in groups, social networks etc. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Third, cultural capital is acquired over time spent in the field, most frequently as an embodied and internalized knowledge of what constitutes successful behaviour yet can also be expressed in an *objectified state* through objects like books or paintings, or an *institutionalized state* such as a university diplomas (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243-248). Finally, symbolic capital is “nothing other than economic or cultural capital when it is well known and recognized” and is “power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 21-23). The forms of capital can be exchanged for other forms, albeit frequently with a cost

associated, such as using economic capital to purchase a personalized gift to attain social capital, which involves expenditure of time, attention, and care etc. (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 253).

It is important to note that the values of different forms of capital and the ways in which they are exchanged depend upon the context of the individual field. For instance, economic capital does not hold the same value in doujin contexts as it does in indie game contexts, and therefore doujin artists do not look towards gaining economic capital as an end goal, nor is it particularly valuable as an exchangeable capital in doujin contexts. Therefore, the relative values of capitals reveal important information about the particular field that is examined.

## 2.2 John Fiske's Theory of Popular Culture

While there are structural relations between actors in any given industry, there are also macro-level structural relationships between industries in general, for instance between commercial and non-commercial game development fields. It is therefore relevant to include John Fiske's theory of popular culture, which examines the structural relationship between mass cultural commercial industries and non-commercialized popular culture.

Fiske defines mass culture as "cultural 'products' put out by an industrialized, capitalist society" in attempts to "dominate and homogenize" (2010, p. 3). On the other hand, popular culture is defined only relative to the meanings of mass culture as "the ways in which people use, abuse, and subvert these products to produce their own meanings and messages" as a way of rejecting mass culture (2010, p. 4). Since popular culture is definitionally bound to the products of the mass culture that it aims to reject, popular culture is inherently contradictory, resulting in tensions between its dependency on and resistance towards the commercial industries. To complicate matters further, mass culture will often incorporate elements of popular culture that are deemed to be profitable, thereby robbing them of any "oppositional meanings", resulting in a feedback loop dynamic between mass- and popular culture (Fiske, 2010, p. 93).

The main problem in applying Fiske's concept of popular culture to the project is that the theory poses a binary distinction between mass- and popular culture that is not necessarily applicable in a digitalized context. For instance, Fiske's binary distinction makes more sense in relation to television, where mass culture denotes the broadcasting of television programs and popular culture is constituted by the viewer experience. Yet in a digitalized context, the distinction is not clear: For example, a game consumer can live stream their game experience and commentary on websites such as Twitch.tv or YouTube, potentially broadcasting to hundreds of thousands of consumers if they are popular enough and pursue live streaming as their main occupation. It is not clear whether such cases are examples of mass- or popular culture, and there are many nuanced cases in between the two categories.

Regardless, Fiske's hypothesis that there are complex tensions between mass- and popular culture and between dependency and resistance can still be applied to understand the nuances of cases that feature elements of both popular- and mass culture. In-between cases can involve various degrees of resistance and dependency and be incorporated into the mass



cultural industry to varying extents. Therefore, the concepts will be applied examine differences between doujin and indie productions fields in terms of how the fields relate to mass culture.

## 2.3 Hichibe and Tanaka: Craft/Hobbyism, Indie and Commercial

While Fiske's theory suggests posing a distinction between mass- and popular culture, it should be recognized that popular cultural fields are heterogenous and therefore various instances of popular culture ought to be understood differently depending on their individual contexts, without resorting to wide generalizations. By further subcategorizing distinctions in popular cultural productions, particularly in regard to the values and motivations of the authors of the works, it will be possible to better understand the tensions that occur between non-commercial developers in Japan and the subsequent paradigm shift in their attitudes.

To offer further distinctions in the relations between commercial and non-commercial productions, Hichibe and Tanaka propose to sub-divide non-commercial productions into the categories "Craft-Hobby Productions" and "Indie Market Productions" (2016, p 49). While their field of research is mostly related to games, the distinction can arguably be applied to other fields containing non-commercial production practices.

The main distinction between the two categories is that "crafters, hobbyists, and artists are motivated by non-economic desires", including "the desire to enjoy development itself, to interact with other developers and users, to express their personal interests, and to gain reputation", while indie markets are "defined as fields formed by people who are motivated by both non-economic motivation" and economic motivations, i.e. "the desire to make a living" (Hichibe and Tanaka, 2016, p. 49). As such, hobbyist and commercial productions are situated at the tail ends of the spectrum, while indie market productions are positioned in between, featuring some elements of both the hobby and commercial categories. It should be noted that such a categorical distinction between hobbyist and indie productions is not shared among all actors in the field, as hobbyist productions are often included in the category of indie within western discourse, which will be examined in further detail in section 6.3: *Cultural Differences in Understanding Indies*. Rather, the distinction reflects the way doujin and Japanese indie developers frequently understand and define indies, which stresses economic motivations as a defining characteristic of indie games.

		Craft/hobby Culture game production	Indie market game production	Commercial game production (mass commercial)
Consciousness	Purpose and Motivation	Non-economic	Non-economic and Economic	Economic
Production practices	Production and distribution scale	Small-scale	Middle-scale	Large-scale
	Tendency of works	Experimental	Experimental/ Conservative	Conservative
	Variety of works	Large	Middle	Small
Livelihood earnings	Economic sustainability	Non to small	Middle	Large

### Conceptual characteristics of three game production fields

*Source:* Author

*Figure 1: Table summarization of Hichibe & Tanaka's analytical framework position hobbyist, indie, and commercial game productions. Source: (Hichibe & Tanka, 2016, p. 50)*

The table above summarizes the main characteristics of the three categories and a few of the main arguments of the article. For instance, commercial productions are more likely to be conservative rather than experimental in their practices, since higher production costs necessitate higher financial risks, subsequently forcing the degree of variety in commercial works to be smaller, while ultimately generating a larger and more stable amount of revenue for the developers.

Importantly, Hichibe and Tanaka do acknowledge that the table is an “analytical framework for analysing and comparing actual entities” and that “some real developers could not fit in this framework” (2016, p. 50). Therefore, while there may be a statistical correlation between the characteristics of the categories, borderline cases exist where the boundaries become blurred.

This thesis will argue that borderline cases are of particular analytical interest, since they serve to challenge the preconceived notions of where authors are positioned in the production fields, and that such borderline cases are relevant in understanding the paradigm shift occurring within popular cultural productions in Japan. Indie games can in some cases be more experimental in design than doujin productions, for instance if the experimental design can yield promising financial gains due to consumer interests in innovation. Furthermore, indie developers can in some cases showcase low degree of economic consciousness, for example seen in DIY indie games released for free on websites such as Newgrounds. Finally, the Japanese understanding of indie game production does not necessarily reflect the Western understanding, since Japanese developers pose a distinction between doujin and indie games that does not exist in the West.

Lastly, it is important to keep the so-called *Loki's Wager* informal fallacy in mind. The fallacy occurs when a person assumes that there are no distinctions between terms at all

since borderline cases exist that challenge any proposed definition. For instance, exactly how many grains of sand does it take to turn a pile of sand into a mound? While there are no objective answers to such a question, it would be fallacious to say that the term ‘pile’ is equivalent to the term ‘mound’ since a mound is definitionally larger than a pile. Similarly, while various exceptional developers can problematize any given definition of the distinctions between hobbyist, indie and commercial development, this does not entail that the three categories are equivalent or meaningless. As the researcher Latorre states:

*“In any case, as researchers, instead of ‘worrying’ about the high ideological complexity of the indie game phenomenon and its apparent contradictions and ambiguities, we can take advantage of it [...] by adopting the indie game as a very suitable object of study to explore the ideological debates and disputes which are characteristic of our time, the tensions between mainstream culture and alternative culture, and between conservatism and progressivism” (2015, p. 23).*

In summary, Hichibe and Tanaka’s distinctions between craft, indie and commercial production fields can be used as a conceptual framework to examine the changes in values and practices in non-commercial game development fields in Japan, particularly when it comes to increases in distribution and financial gains.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Discourse Analysis

As stated previously, terms such as ‘doujin’, ‘indies’ and ‘commercial’ are not assumed to be static or ontologically ‘real’ concepts but are considered by the author to be modern constructions. One central way that these terms are given meaning is through discourse. In other words, as game developers, journalistic media, and consumers attempt to stress properties of the terms, or narrow the definitions, or subcategorize the terms through language (for instance seen in the term ‘big indies’), the meaning of the terms can change. Yet even though the terms are viewed as social constructs largely shaped by the collective discourse available, they can still hold a real impact on the perceptions of other people exposed. Finally, the way in which people understand the terms can lead to structural restraints on the actors in the field. For instance, when doujin productions are viewed to be non-commercially motivated, it creates a commercial taboo that has led to doujin creators not disclosing their revenue, as will be explored later in the project. In summary, the terms may not be ontologically real or easily definable, yet their socially constructed meanings have an effect on the world that frequently alters the perceptions or behaviour of individual actors.

Of course, the context of the discourse matters. When indie game developers speak about indie in game related media, it should be considered that they are ultimately speaking predominantly to consumers, and are therefore incentivized to portray the industry, or at least their own productions, in as positive a light as possible. Therefore, the naturalistic discourse found in interviews may not represent the private thoughts of game developers. Yet the thesis is not interested in examining the personal, undisclosed opinions of game developers, but

rather in examining their public statements and the way in which those statements construct the meanings of doujin, indie, and commercial game industries. For example, when an indie game developer critiques the commercial industry, it is relevant because their statement has an active effect in distancing the developer and the indie game industry as a whole from mainstream productions and shaping the meaning of indies, whether the statement is made genuinely or for marketing purposes.

Furthermore, game developers do not only communicate through media, but through their games, as well. For example, when the game *Metal Gear Solid 4* opens with the words “War... War has changed”, it arguably ought to be viewed as a discursive response to the famous *Fallout* franchise, which opens every entry with the words “War... War never changes” (dansg08, 2010; HampsterStyleLives, 2008). Furthermore, communication is not only conducted through verbal and written language, but also through sound, visuals, and, in the case of games, game design. For instance, indie game developer Jonathan Blow may make numerous statements in journalistic media about how mainstream games are focusing too much on entertainment and ‘fun’, but his point is equally expressed by a section in his game, *The Witness*, which has the player stand on a slow-moving platform for several minutes with nothing to do but admire the environment. In this example, not only is Blow communicating *through* game design, but also *about* game design by including slow paced sections rarely found in mainstream productions. In other words, indie game developers who subvert game design tropes that are popular among commercial productions communicate a critique of said design tropes, distancing the indie developers from mass culture in the process.

Moreover, when consumers experience a plethora of indie games that communicate the same messages, this can impact the common perception of indie games in the same way that linguistic discourse about indie games can. Or when Game Awards ceremonies give an award for “best indie game of the year”, this provides symbolic recognition from a respected institution to that specific indie game. Symbolically recognized indie games can become emblematic of the indie game industry, and in large part help in defining the common perceptions of the industry, perhaps to a larger extent than statements found in individual interviews.

Consequently, the project will comment upon characteristic traits of doujin and indie games as well as contrast the two, focusing on how those traits aid in defining the terms. Of course, what constitutes the most relevant traits is contextual, depending upon the focus of the individual game involved and what it wishes to communicate. However, relevant traits include genres, visuals, narrative structures and themes, and game mechanics.

### 3.2 Statistics

Statistics have been incorporated into the project, not as a main analytical method, but as a way to establish the context of the fields and their surrounding discourse. For instance, statistics sourced from the committee of the doujin convention ‘Comiket’ is referenced to establish the growth and distribution of doujin productions, while the estimated budgetary

costs and sales revenue of indie games is used to examine the potential financial interests of indie game developers.

It is important to note that the cited statistics are rarely exact: For instance, the Comiket Committee can only estimate the exact number of attendees but cannot provide an exact number given that entry to the convention is free. Furthermore, budgetary costs and financial gains of games are generally undisclosed, and therefore has been based on sourced estimations. However, the statistics are still useful regardless of some degree of inaccuracies, for example seen in the case of the quantity of Comiket attendees growing from 700 at the inception of the event to more than half a million attendees in 2019, providing a stark enough difference to sustain the argument regardless of minor imprecisions.

### 3.3 Selection and Exclusion of Material

#### 3.3.1 Focus on Prominent Non-Commercial Game Developers

It is impossible to include an exhaustive analysis of every game developer working within non-commercial production fields given the quantity of doujin and indie game developers alike. It is therefore necessary to select for specific cases of theoretical interest. As previously stated, the thesis project adopts a view where discourse can not only reflect realities, but contribute to the construction of reality as well, particularly when the discourse presents views pertaining to the meaning of terms such as ‘doujin’ and ‘indies’. As such, prominent non-commercial developers who are frequently featured in game related discourse are more relevant to examine than lesser known, small-scale developers, not because prominent developers reflect a ‘truer’ meaning of the terms, but rather because they can have a larger impact in the general discourse.

For instance, the indie game developer Jonathan Blow has not only partaken in presentations that discuss indie gaming and its relation to mainstream games at a meta-level but he has also achieved a relatively large discursive outreach outside of game related media, such as being featured in The Guardian newspaper multiple times (Marsh, 2020; Webber, 2020). The high quantity of symbolic capital that Blow has accrued over time can be used to exert influence over the field of indie gaming specifically through discussing and attempting to define the term across his various presentations and through media outlets. In contrast, less prominent developers get featured in the discourse to a much smaller degree, in some cases never being interviewed and having relatively few followers on social media.

When Japanese non-commercial game developers state that ‘doujin are turning into indies’, they likely refer to the successful indie productions that acquired critical and commercial acclaim rather than relatively unknown small-scale productions. For instance, Japanese indie game developer Ojiro Fumoto states the following: *“It’s possible to survive as an indie developer. Some developers overseas have already succeeded as indies. There’s no reason why we can’t do that, too”* (Ferrero, 2016, 00:10). In other words, the western indie game developers that inspire the Japanese indie game development scene tends to be successful productions with a large media outreach, rather than the less successful projects.

Furthermore, a similar case can be made for doujin productions, wherein the developer ‘ZUN\* is not only exceptionally well-known within the field, but also have the capacity to set restrictions on other developers attempting to make derivative works based on his intellectual property. Consequently, the thesis will limit itself to an examination of prominent non-commercial developers and their productions, where ‘prominent’ for instance refers to developers who have participated in documentaries that examine indie game development, developers who have been interviewed by popular media outlets, and developers who are invited to panel discussions and presentations at conventions, developers who are invited to panel discussions and presentations at conventions, or developers who have won game awards.

The selected discourse is exclusively available online and not in physical publications, since online, free articles have a larger outreach than printed media in relation to games. Furthermore, it is important to note that that journalistic outlets allow developers to communicate to consumers, thereby providing a marketing channel wherein indie game developers have an interest in portraying their games, and to a lesser extent indie games in general, in a positive light. The media portrayal may therefore not provide an ‘accurate’ depiction of the indie game industry, or even of the developer’s own motivations involved in their productions. Nevertheless, their discursive statements still aid in shaping perceptions of what indie games entail, regardless of any hidden motives.

### **3.3.2 Exclusion of the Free-To-Play Mobile Gaming Market**

The invention of smart phones has allowed easy access to games for a wider audience than the PC and console market and roughly 50% of the total revenue gained from video games are estimated to stem from mobile gaming, making it unsurprising that commercial companies such as Konami focus on targeting the mobile market (McConnell, 2020; Spajic, 2020; Kerr, 2020). Given the potential of the mobile market, some indie game developers also opt to develop specifically for mobiles. However, due to the broader target audience, mobile games tend to be noticeably different from games released on other platforms. This is especially true when it comes to their monetization strategies, with only 37.8% of mobile gaming revenue coming from paid apps, as opposed to 14% from ad revenue and a staggering 48.2% coming from in-app purchases (Saleh, 2018). The high popularity of in-app purchases among some users results in many mobile games opting for the so-called ‘free-to-play’ model, where the app is freely downloadable and playable and where users can later pay in the app itself for extra content or easier progress through the game’s challenges. Excluding such indie free-to-play mobile game developers from the analysis could potentially skew the results in favour of the traditional computer and console markets while providing an inaccurate picture of the entire indie game development scene.

Nonetheless, indie developers who primarily focus on releasing games for smart phones will be excluded for the following two reasons.

Firstly, doujin developers traditionally develop games for personal computers (and occasionally consoles), but do not generally develop for smart phones, meaning that they will

more likely develop their games for platforms they are accustomed to, even if they are ‘turning into indies’. Furthermore, given the economic taboos in doujin culture which will be examined over the course of the thesis, it is even more unlikely that doujin developers would turn towards a free-to-play model of financing which is criticized by many for being exploitative (Fahey, 2019; Rose, 2020; Sheridan, 2013). Rather, it seems more common for doujin game developers to distribute their games more broadly to a global market and for Japanese indie developers to develop games that are paid up-front as examples of doujin turning into indies.

Secondly, the free-to-play model seems to be an increasingly less reliable model for indie game developers to pursue, given the dominance of commercial developers on the free-to-play mobile market. For instance, Sensor Tower Intelligence reported that “*1% of mobile games available in the third quarter of 2019 won 93% of the revenues generated on these platforms*” (Luban, 2020). The free-to-play model requires a large marketing budget to outcompete other firms and capture the attention of a large consumer base of which only a small portion will spend money. As more corporations turn towards capitalizing on the free-to-play market, it becomes increasingly unlikely for small indie developers to compete. Furthermore, Japanese developers may face more difficulties than English speaking developers in marketing their products globally due to language barriers or cultural differences in what constitutes effective advertising.

In summary, it seems unlikely that the growing indie game development scene in Japan will pursue the free-to-play model as a major strategy in the future and thus free-to-play indie developers will be excluded from the analysis as a result.

### 3.4 Use of Terminology

Given the difficulties in distinguishing between and defining the categories of doujin, indies, and mainstream productions, it is important to clarify how the terminology is used throughout the thesis.

Firstly, the terms ‘commercial’, ‘mainstream’, and ‘mass-cultural’ are used synonymously and thus interchangeably in the empirical discourse. The terms refer to large-scale game developers and publishers such as EA Games, Ubisoft, and Nintendo as well as to the majority of products they release. The general characteristics of such developers is that they produce so-called “AAA” (triple-A) games such as *Call of Duty* or *The Legend of Zelda*, which, similarly to movie ‘blockbusters’, are characterized by large budgets, production teams often consisting of thousands of people, and frequent instalments in their respective franchises, sometimes released on a yearly or bi-annual basis (Vicente, 2020).

Secondly, to avoid confusion, the terms ‘independent’ and ‘indie’ will denote different meanings over the course of the project. In many uses of the word ‘independent’, the word signifies any non-commercial development and production and therefore includes the categories of doujin and other types of hobbyist works. The central problem that the project examines, i.e. whether ‘doujin are turning into indies’, is meaningless if the term indies already includes the category of doujin by definition (a claim that many doujin

developers would also disagree with). Consequently, the thesis will adopt Vogel's general definition of indie, which refers to "*an ethos and mode of game development that arose in a particular time and place – largely the English-speaking sphere in the mid-2000s*" (Vogel, 2017). The concept will furthermore be examined in more detail in section 5: *Understanding Indies*.

Thirdly, the term 'indie game' has been exported to Japan in recent years and arguably contain more subtle differences in meaning than the term in its original context (which will be further explored in section 7.3). Therefore, Japanese indies and indies belonging to Vogel's abovementioned definition need to be addressed by different terms. While the simple negation 'non-Japanese' may at first seem like an excellent solution, developers from other east Asian countries exhibit development fields that are inspired by or similar to Japan's non-commercial development fields. Therefore, to easily differentiate between Japanese and Vogel's definition of indies, Vogel's definition will be referred to as 'western indies' given that the term predominately arose with the success of North American developers.

## 4 Understanding Doujin

The term 'doujin' is central in the examination of non-commercial productions and their development in Japan, both because the concept has served as a major distribution form of amateur and independent works since its inception in the 1960s and because the concept has influenced perceptions of the role of independent productions in Japan to this day.

The current section will explore the doujin concept and field as well as the historical development of the values and practices of the subculture. Firstly, the concept will be defined and related to the theoretical framework established earlier. Secondly, the thesis will examine the history of doujin culture, particularly focusing on changes in the values and practices of the field and how they relate to mass-culture and commercial works. Finally, the section will examine the doujin game developers ZUN and Type-Moon and their relevance towards changes in doujin culture.

### 4.1 Defining the Doujin Concept

Tamagawa defines doujin as "self-financed, self-published works created by an individual or collaboration between individuals", where the publishing groups are called and hereafter referred to as 'circles' (2012, p. 108). Consequently, while most works are created by amateurs and thus the concept is associated almost exclusively with hobbyism, authors who have previously been professionally published can still publish works through doujin distribution channels, as long as their works are self-financed and self-published for non-commercial purposes (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 108). Furthermore, contemporary doujin works are usually distributed firstly through physical conventions, the largest being *The Comic Market* (hereafter abbreviated *Comiket*), a convention numbering more than half a million attendees on a bi-annual basis. Given the large quantity of attendees and the historical role



that Comiket had in popularizing participation in doujin culture, Comiket's influence on doujin values and practices should not be underestimated (as will be further examined in the following section).

Individuals engaged in doujin culture, whether as consumers or as authors, generally view the term as denoting more than financial, publication and distribution methods. For instance, in a powerpoint presentation, the Comiket Committee describes itself as a "cultural framework" rather than just an event allowing distribution of works (2015, p: 38). In an informational pamphlet, Comiket committee defines doujin ideals in more detail (key thematic words are highlighted in bold for emphasis by the author of this thesis):

*"Namely, an event focused on **individual's personal creations**, **regular attendees supporting and encouraging** such **creative** efforts, a **volunteer** group managing the operation of the event, and all parties involved **doing their best to help each other**"* (Comiket Committee, 2017, p: 40).

*"Doujinshi authors and fans from all over Japan, and some from overseas, converge upon Comiket to **directly intermingle among their peers**, with whom they **share a common** devotion toward a **diverse and unique** range of **cre-ative** [sic] works, made possible by **independence, imagination and self-expression**"* (Comiket Committee, 2017, p: 40).

*"For most doujinshi circles, **earning profits is not the goal of their activities**, but instead they aim to **interact with their fellow participants through their own creations**"* (Comiket Committee, 2017, p: 40).

The quotes above can be summarized as emphasizing three core values: Creativity in works, community building, and anti-commercial motivations.

Firstly, creativity is stressed through the repeated use of the word 'creative' across the informational pamphlet as well as through words such as 'personal' 'self-expression', and 'imagination', signifying that the created works are closely connected to the original authors, rather than works that could have been produced by a variety of other actors. The pamphlet also suggests that distributed works are 'diverse' and 'unique', most likely as a result of a variety of authors producing works that are deeply personal and therefore unlike any other existing works.

Secondly, the quotes highlight community building as a central element of doujin participation through statements such as 'regular attendees supporting and encouraging', 'all parties involved doing their best to help one another', 'directly intermingle among their peers', and 'interact with their fellow participants'. Indeed, even the managing of the event is driven by a volunteer group helped by the support of regular attendees, making the event fully community driven. The 2015 presentation moreover emphasizes anti-hierarchical values in the community: *"There are no 'customers' at Comic Market [...] All participants are of equal standing at Comic Market"* (Comiket Committee, 2015, p: 40). In other words, Comiket values do not pose a distinction in the status between authors and their fans.

In the end, the pamphlet mentions that the goal of participating in doujin circles is not profits, introducing the anti-commercial values frequently expressed in doujin culture. The anti-commercial values will be examined in further detail later in the project.

It is also important to note that the values expressed in the quotes are not presented as isolated ideals but are rather connected to one another. For example, the third quote says that, ‘instead’ of aiming for earning profits, authors aim to ‘interact with their fellow participants’, i.e. participate in a community, suggesting that earning profits and social interactions are mutually exclusive goals. Furthermore, the way that authors interact with their fellow participants is ‘through their own creations’, i.e. their own creative expressions, tying the ideals of creativity and community building together.

Of course, Comiket is not the sole arbiter that unilaterally can define the values and motivations of doujin authors, regardless of the historical relevance of the event in shaping doujin culture. Doujin works have existed both before the inception of Comiket as well as parallel to the existence of the event today. Furthermore, statements of various participants of doujin culture can provide a more varied portrayal of the summarized version offered by the Comiket pamphlet.

The following section will examine the origins of modern doujin culture as well as the primary relevant changes that have occurred since its beginnings.

## 4.2 The History of Doujin and its Relation to Mass Culture

While various forms of doujin existed in Japan even before the second world war, the modern inception of doujin began in 1966 with the first publications of the magazine, ‘COM’, which included a section dedicated to featuring amateur fan-submissions of manga, which inspired manga societies to craft their own manga works across Japan (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 111).

As the COM magazine ended in 1971, lack of distribution possibilities previously offered by the magazine inspired new ways to congregate manga fans and distribute amateur manga through physical conventions, the largest being the “Nihon Manga Taikai” (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 111). While the Nihon Manga Taikai was mostly focused on marketing mass culture to fans through “organized lectures by manga artists and screenings of anime”, the convention also included a “fanzine booth” where amateurs could sell their works, albeit in small numbers of roughly 20 circles (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 111). However, even though the convention included amateur works to a small degree, some circles criticized the event for being “elitist” and for “establishing a hierarchy between the commercial artists and the fans” (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 112). As such, professional manga artists and other representatives of mass-culture were viewed as having an unfair degree of power involved with the organization of the event, ultimately leading to a conflict between the event organizers and some circles that ended up being banned from attending (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 112)

By keeping a clear distinction between professionals and fans in among other things holding interview panels and signing events, conventions such as the Nihon Manga Taikai

represent the view that mass cultural authors create the golden standard which popular cultural amateur works are judged by and ought to strive towards, rather than that amateur works should be judged by their own, separate merits.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the relationship between doujin and mass culture held a complicated relationship with the mass cultural manga industry. On the one hand, many doujin works were highly dependent on the meanings and values produced by mass cultural productions, such as the works of the revered Tezuka Osamu, by directly referencing and appropriating aspects of the original works. Simultaneously, the appropriation of mass cultural works was frequently critical and resistant rather than celebratory. One early participant of doujin fellowship states the following on early doujin culture:

*“Though it manifested in different ways, [during that time, otaku] shared a common goal of to ‘make manga independent’ and ‘liberate manga from the dominance of text’. If they published critique in writing, it would have been viewed in the same light as literature. That’s why meikyu [a prominent doujin circle] used manga to critique manga”* (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 115).

It may seem contradictory that fan-manga of commercial works can display resistance toward their inspirational sources, yet in early doujin culture, creating works that responded directly to the commercial industry was viewed as the best way to resist norms in the mass-cultural manga industry. This leads to an essential theoretical point: It is not necessarily the case that dependency and resistance toward mass-culture are inversely correlated, i.e., that a high degree of dependency upon mass-culture leads to lower degrees of resistance or vice versa.

### 4.3 The Comic Market and the Rise of Derivative Works

One of the circles being banned from the Nihon Manga Taikai was the circle called “Meikyu”, the members of which decided to organize their own event focusing exclusively on the distribution of amateur works and community building between all participants, who were viewed as peers with no hierarchy posed between professionals and fans (Tamagawa, 2012, p. 112).

Since the inception of the event, Comiket participation has increased drastically as displayed by the figure below. The red line indicates the number of participating circles with the number noted on the left y-axis, while the blue line shows the quantity of estimated attendees, noted by the right y-axis in terms of the Japanese numerical ‘*man*’, which means 10.000 (i.e., 50 *man* equals 500.000 participants). The top x-axis notes the year that Comiket was held, while the bottom x-axis notes the exact sequential number of the Comiket event.

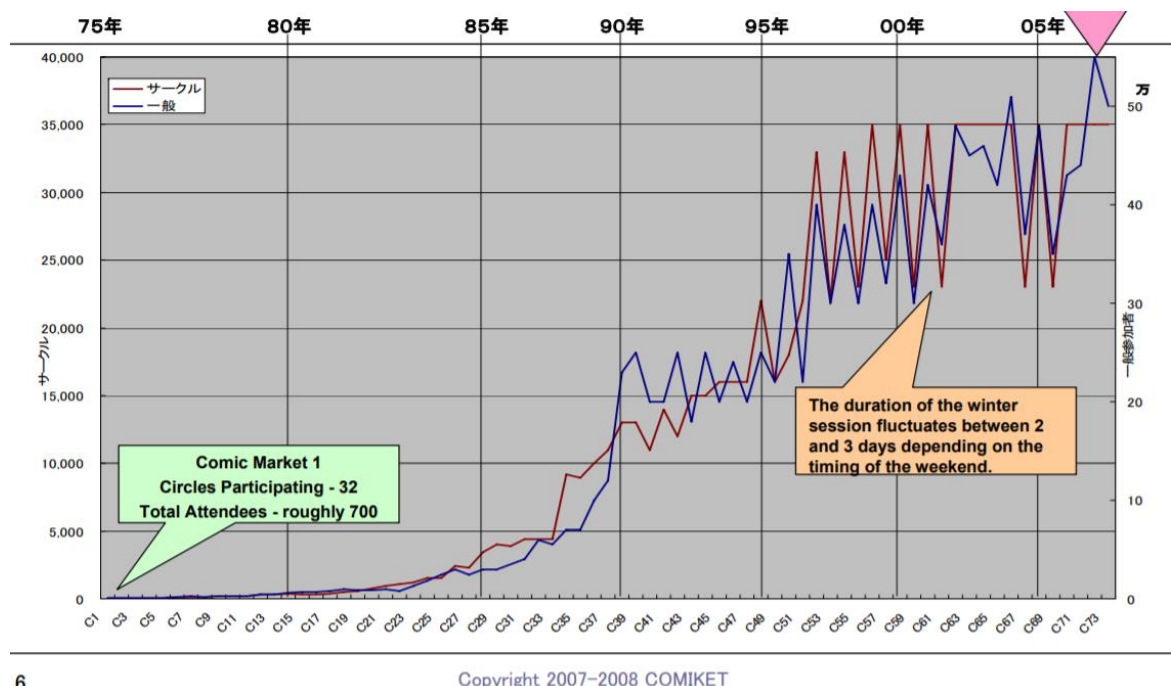


Figure 2: Figure showing the growing quantity of participating Comiket circles and attendees since the inception of the event. Source: (Comiket Committee, 2008, p. 6)

The figure shows a noticeable increase in Comiket participation in the mid-80s, a period during which so-called ‘parody manga’ surged in popularity, with 49.9% of materials sold at Comiket being constituted by parody manga in 1989 (Kinsella, 1998, p. 301). The majority of parody manga in the 1980s were derivative works of commercially published manga and predominately belonged to the genre called *Yaoi*, a genre predominately crafted by women that depicts romantic, and sometimes sexual and pornographic, relationships between male characters (Kinsella, 1998, p.301). The yaoi genre was a stark contrast to the oppositional and counter-cultural works that predominated doujin ideology before, exemplified by the etymology of the word Yaoi: An anagram of *Yama Nashi, Ochi Nashi, Imi Nashi*, which translates into “no build-up, no foreclosure, no meaning” (Kinsella, 1998, p. 301). In other words, the genre was and is not concerned with crafting compelling narratives or plots, but rather in depicting stories centred on characters and their relationships with no greater meaning or message, thereby showing a low degree of subversion or critique of the mass cultural manga industry.

Given the thesis’ focus on digital and global distribution, it is important to mention the specific Japanese legal context that permits distribution of derivative works based on commercial franchises. While Japanese copyright holders are legally able to sue doujin creators for copyright infringements, they often choose to avoid filing lawsuits. As Arai and Kanakawa claim, “*ignoring copyright infringement by a derivative creator can be optimal for the copyright holder based on an economic model that incorporates both positive and negative externalities of derivative work[s]*” (2014, p. 131-132).

The positive externalities firstly include that “*doujinshi markets provide a possible source of talented creators*” and that doujin works can “*produce new styles and ideas that can be incorporated in commercial manga and anime*” (Arai & Kanakawa, 2014, p. 132).

Viewed from Fiske's theory of popular culture, copyright holders are more lenient toward doujin creators since their innovations can be incorporated into mass culture if such innovations are deemed to be financially profitable. This is further supported empirically by the presence of talent scouts which various publishers send to Comiket to search for promising artists to invest in, as well as the history of doujin artists who have transitioned into commercial publications (Kinsella, 1998, p. 298). Moreover, Arai and Kanakawa argue that doujin works can "*serve to promote the sales of the original works*" (2014, p. 132). In other words, the proliferation of doujin works can be used as a form of marketing rather than be viewed as hostile competition, particularly given that many derivative works rework the characters and settings into other mediums or genres, and thus do not provide an alternative to the original works. Of course, commercial marketing strategies that utilize doujin channels is only a viable strategy provided that the brand image of the original production is not devalued in the doujin work, such as "*if the proliferation of the characters of the original work causes confusion, tarnishing of the original images, or boredom*", for instance through depicting "*the characters of the original work pornographically*" (Arai & Kanakawa, 2014, p. 133). Whether or not doujin depictions devalue the original work is highly dependent on the context of the target audience. For instance, publishers who release franchises targeted toward children are unlikely to accept pornographic doujin depictions, whereas commercial series aimed at adults that already feature erotic imagery can (and do) allow pornographic portrayals in doujin works. Finally, Arai and Kanakawa argue that the benefits of litigation against doujin artists is small given the state of Japan's legal environment, which is characterized by "*a scarcity of lawyers, prolonged litigation, and inadequate compensation*", particularly given the lack of profits. (2014, p. 132-133).

Finally, it should be mentioned that copyright holders are more likely to accept doujin derivative works because distribution of such works is limited to specialized doujin distribution channels and are therefore only available to a sub-section of the population. For instance, if doujin works were distributed through the same channels as commercial works, such as through general bookstores, doujin works would be more likely to be viewed as unlawful competition by copyright holders. If doujin game development is truly transitioning into indie game development, including digital and global distribution, copyright holders could potentially be more likely to limit the releases of derivative game works.

#### 4.4 Contemporary Doujin Culture

In contemporary doujin culture, derivative works have remained popular, with only 8% original and 20% derivative manga works published at Comiket 2015 relatively to all doujin productions, as displayed in the figure below. However, doujin productions today are not limited to manga, but includes other mediums, including music and games.

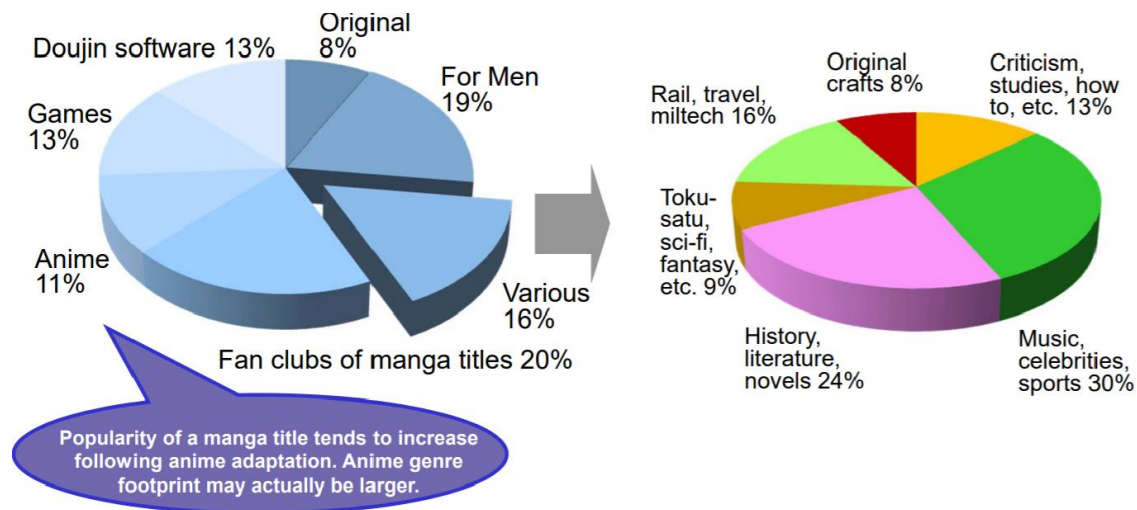


Figure 3: Breakdown of genre categories released at summer comiket 2015. Source: (Comiket, 2015, p: 21)

Furthermore, the franchises that usually inspire the crafting of derivative works are no longer commercial manga series or anime, but are rather video game franchises, including doujin games. The chart below displays derivative franchises by the quantity of circles producing works based on the given series during the summer Comiket 2019. The top five most popular franchises to make derivative works based on are, in order of popularity, *Fate Series*, *Kantai Collection*, *Idol Master*, *Touhou Project*, and *Touken Ranbu* (the colours of the bars indicate the predominant gender of the target audience, where blue means male, red means female, and purple means a mixed gender audience. The grey bars below indicate the number of participating circles during the previous Comiket). All five of the most popular franchises are originally video games. Moreover, while *Kantai Collection*, *Idol Master*, and *Touken Ranbu* represent commercial game franchises, *Fate Series* had its origins in doujin creations and *Touhou Project* remains a doujin series to this day. Non-video game derivative productions only occur from the sixth most popular spot onwards with the entry *Baacharu Youtuber*, which is based on an animated Youtube character wearing a horse head mask.

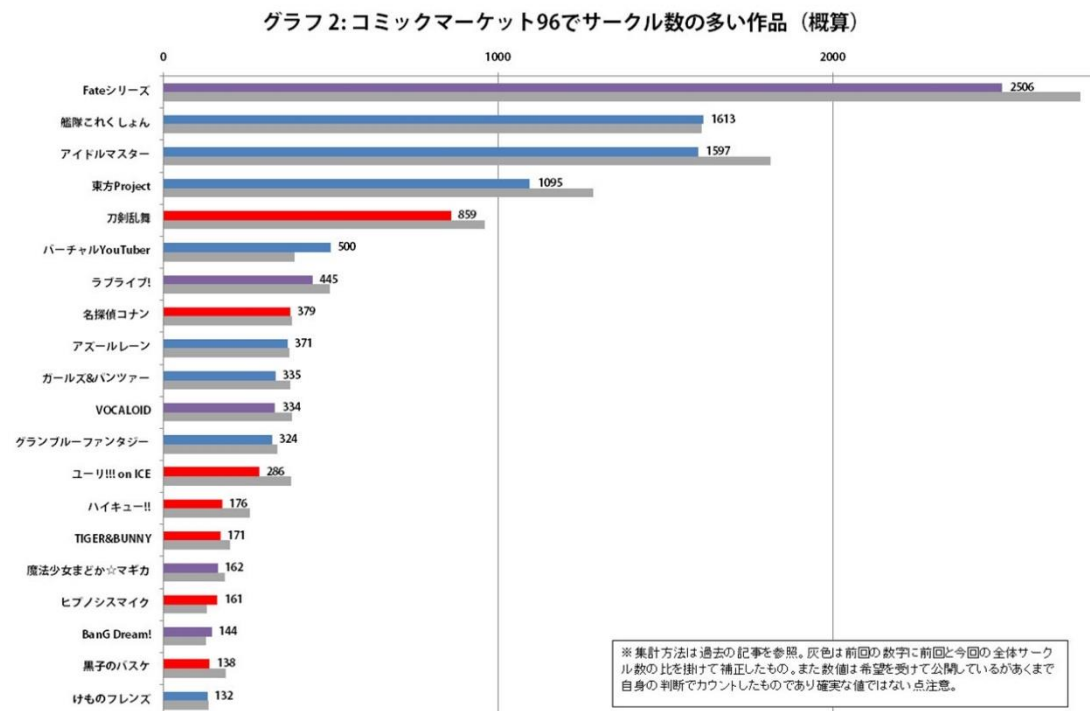


Figure 4: The most popular derivative series released through Comiket by number of participating circles during summer Comiket 2019. Source: (<https://ascii.jp/elem/000/001/906/1906677/img.html>)

Even though the most popular franchises are originally video games, the resulting derivative works span a wide variety of mediums and genres, including manga and anime, music arrangements, novels, and various forms of merchandise. Nevertheless, the fact that video games have risen to prominence in doujin culture is relevant, since it alters the context that doujin game developers engage it. In other words, doujin game developers must account for the role that derivative works play in the reception of their games, which will be examined in further detail in the following section.

A second relevant aspect of contemporary doujin worth mentioning is the anti-commercial values and economic taboos that were mentioned in relation to Comiket's informational pamphlet. A survey conducted of doujin authors who applied to Summer Comiket 2010 reported that 70% of doujin circles lose money based on their doujin activities out of which upwards of 20% lose roughly \$500 or more, and only 15% break even (Comiket Committee, 2014, p. 20).

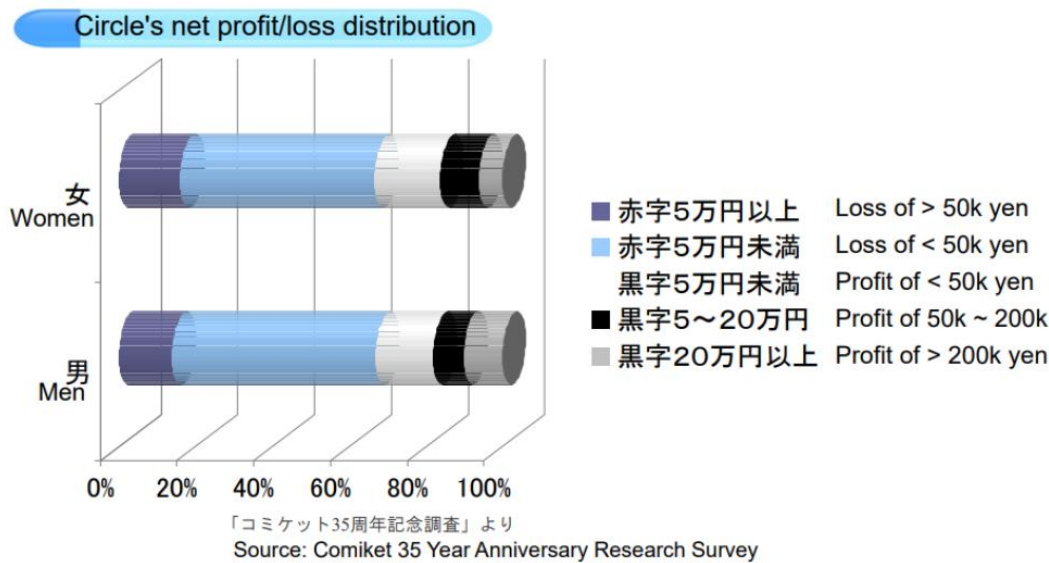


Figure 5: Graph depicting the net profits and losses of doujin authors, answered anonymously by circles during their applications for Summer Comiket 2010. Source: (Comiket Committee, 2014, p. 20.)

Additionally, most doujin authors do not state financial gains as a primary motivation for producing doujin (an unsurprising fact given the low expectations of financial returns). In a survey conducted by Hichibe in 2010, only 0.8% of doujin circles answered, “because I can make a profit” as their primary motivation for participating as a circle in comparison to 49.8% of circles answering, “because the act of producing works is enjoyable in itself” and 27.1% answering “because other people can see my works” (Hichibe, 2010, p. 23).

However, the financial status and stated non-economic motivations of doujin authors give rise to values in the field that essentially stigmatizes authors whose products are openly shown to be profitable. Hichibe and Tanaka state: “*Doujin members often criticise those who aim for economic rewards as anomalies. Therefore, most creators do not disclose how much they sell*” (2016, p. 71). Specifically, one anonymous author who Hichibe interviewed in 2010 claimed abusive responses by consumers and other circles if he said he was doing well financially, forcing him to lie about his financial state, which made other doujin participants act more kind towards him (Hichibe, 2010, p. 26).

In summary, aiming for or attaining economic capital is viewed as a taboo in doujin culture, meaning that doujin authors who acquire cultural capital in the field over time learn to navigate around the commercial taboo. Given the view that indie games are, to some extent, economically motivated, this poses a dilemma for doujin authors who wish to pursue indie game distribution and practices.

#### 4.5 Contemporary Doujin Games, ZUN, and the Touhou Project

The doujin game developer Jun’ya Ota (pen-named and hereafter referred to as ZUN) is one of the most famous doujin game developers and doujin artists in general. The popularity of his series, *Touhou Project*, is for instance evidenced by the fact that it was the most popular



series for derivative works for roughly a decade until it was overtaken by Kantai Collection in 2014. The popularity of the series even allowed the creation of its own spin-off convention titled *Reitaisai*, which is dedicated exclusively to the distribution of Touhou fan-works. The first Reitaisai convened in 2004 and the convention has continued on an annual (and bi-annual since 2014) basis ever since (with the exception of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic).

The high status and recognition of ZUN in doujin culture allows him a high degree of symbolic capital, which can be used to exert influence over other doujin game developers (and in some cases, general doujin authors) in the field. However, the symbolic recognition of ZUN may seem incongruent with the anti-hierarchical values expressed by the Comiket organization wherein all participants are viewed as being of equal standing, regardless of whether they are creators or general attendees, theoretically making high status impossible in the field. As such, the question of whether the anti-hierarchical values of Comiket only provide a false narrative with no relation to the actual practices of doujin culture can be raised. In support of the notion that anti-hierarchical values are enacted in practice, one could argue that ZUN often engages with his consumers as peers, for instance drinking and eating with them rather than only appearing during signing events and panel shows. Furthermore, ZUN's fanbase often teases him or makes ironic memes on the internet, which lowers the social distance between him as a creator and his fans.



Figure 6: One of a long line of online memes by Touhou fans making fun of ZUN's profinity for beer. Source: ([https://www.reddit.com/r/touhou/comments/agz3w0/thats\\_how\\_zun\\_works/](https://www.reddit.com/r/touhou/comments/agz3w0/thats_how_zun_works/))

Regardless, there should be no doubt that ZUN holds high symbolic recognition and social capital, which can be used to influence other actors in doujin culture. For instance, 11 popular music circles who make derivative arrangement works based on the soundtrack of

ZUN's games held a live music performance during summer Reitaisai 2012 in celebration of ZUN's wedding with lyrics thanking him for the “wonderful world” he had provided them with (Kakuni, 2012). Additionally, the fact that so many circles choose to create derivative works based on ZUN's intellectual property subjects all these authors to ZUN's creative and distributive guidelines, leading him ZUN higher more power in negotiating the meaning of the doujin term in discourse.

#### 4.6 The Touhou Project Game Series and Derivative Works

The original Touhou Project game series belongs to the so-called *danmaku* or *bullethell* genre, wherein the player is tasked with dodging waves of hundreds of ‘bullets’ shaped in a variety of visual patterns. The genre is often considered “*a quintessentially Japanese genre*” and “*an extremely difficult game format that will only appeal to small crowds of players*” (Johnson, 2016, p. 17). The genre originated in Japanese arcade cabinets with the most prominent commercial developer, *Cave*, producing bullethell arcade games consistently between 1995 and 2012. While Cave has since stopped production of bullethell games, the genre lives on in the doujin and indie scene on PCs and home consoles through Japanese entries like *Touhou Project* and *Crimzon Clover* as well as some Western entries like *Jamestown*. As such, the Touhou Project franchise does not exhibit experimental and innovative game design at a fundamental mechanical game design level by for instance inventing new genres, but rather represents the continual release and alteration of a genre that is no longer deemed to be commercially profitable in the mainstream.



Figure 7: Screenshot of the 15th Entry in the Touhou Franchise. Source: (Steam )

However, the setting of Touhou Project is a far cry from the usual giant mechs and spaceship settings that otherwise dominate the bullethell genre. The narratives of the games are filled with references to Japanese religions (chiefly Shintoism and Buddhism) and

folklore and are interpreted through the so-called ‘magical girls’ genre of female oriented manga that was popular among a subsection of female doujin authors in the 1960s and early 70s. The game series has established over a hundred characters over time, few of which are deeply characterized given that the dialogue between characters frequently only lasts for a few lines. Arguably, the combination of a large cast of loosely described characters is a significant factor in the success of the franchise: Firstly, it is a characteristic that is shared with the other popular series in doujin culture. Secondly, it allows other doujin authors to easily rework the meanings of the original franchise into their own works by crafting more detailed personalities that fit into the narratives of their own works while retaining aspects of recognizable imagery from the original series.

Derivative works based on the franchise span a variety mediums and genres beyond games alone, predominantly music and manga. For instance, doujin circles that make arrangements of the soundtracks of Touhou Project exist, with the community build Touhou Wikipedia listing 640 doujin circles that at some point have made arrangement CDs of Touhou music (“Doujin Circle/Arrangement,” n.d). Additionally, 1465 Touhou Project music albums available on the online doujin retailer, *Melonbooks*, which is close to the 1624 available original doujin music albums (Melonbooks, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Touhou Project arrangement circles are not uninfluential in general doujin culture, either. For example, the band *Unlucky Morpheus* has not only been successful enough to conduct live concerts, but the lead vocalist, *Fuyiki Tenge*, has launched a successful commercial career in bands such as *Doll\$box* apart from her activities in doujin culture, attracting further attention to her original doujin circle (Unlucky Morpheus, n.d.; King Records, 2013)



Figure 8: Live Performance by Unlucky Morpheus of their metal arrangement of the Touhou song, 'Border of Life'. Source: ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7W9DcUKY\\_U&list=PLgM5QqCyINNS5xjpYquOQDntWtpFXqbn9&index=3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7W9DcUKY_U&list=PLgM5QqCyINNS5xjpYquOQDntWtpFXqbn9&index=3))





Figure 9: A digital recording of the orchestral arrangement medley of the soundtrack of Touhou 8, performed by the doujin group 'Active NEETs'. Source: ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpz4G-qgH\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpz4G-qgH_8))

The collaborative nature of derivative works extends to manga, as well. For instance, the video manga series *Osana Reimu* is created as a collaboration between the doujin manga artist *Joyful* and a series of Touhou arrangement circles who provide the music and is later subbed and dubbed into both English and Japanese by fans (Kurai ChanZ, 2015).

The main point to be drawn from Touhou Project derivative works is that game development in doujin culture is not exclusively related to the medium of games. In other words, when ZUN develops new games, the market appeal in doujin culture is not centred on the games themselves, but rather on new material such as characters and music that can be incorporated into the mythology of Touhou Project doujin works by other authors. The result is a highly community process fuelled not only by amateur artists spanning different mediums, but also by collaborative efforts between doujin circles.

In terms of games, Touhou Project derivative works constitute not only a significant quantity of doujin games but have also initiated the first wave of digitalization and globalization of doujin works, which will be examined in more detail later in the project. A community made list of Touhou Project fangames notes a total number of 419 Touhou Project fangames released, with the most popular genre being bullethell games with 106 games, followed by platformers at 69 games, and role-playing games with 54 games published ("Fangames," n.d.).

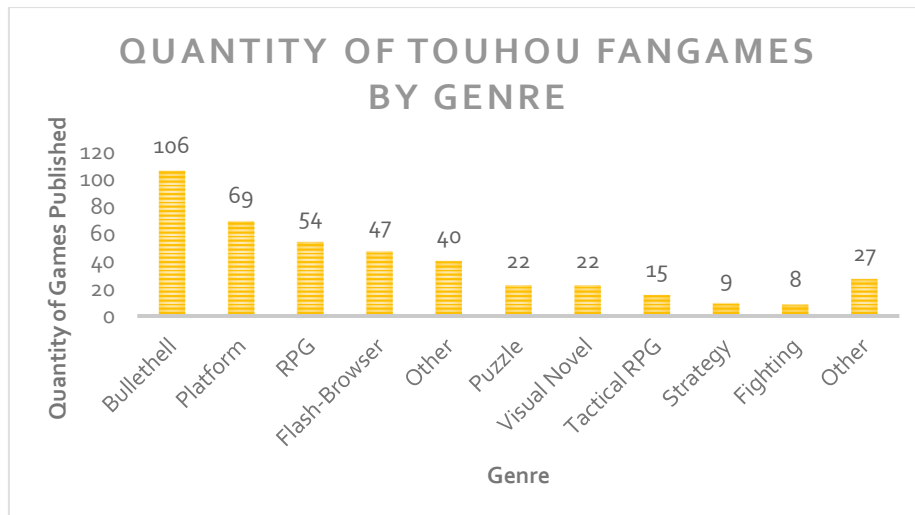


Figure 10: Quantity of Touhou Fangames by Genre. Source: ("Fangames," n.d.).

As such, Touhou Project fangames are not experimental in terms of strict genre innovation, since the largest categories belong to established commercially published genres. However, it is important to note that the binning of genre categories ignores cross-over genres that are popular among doujin game developers: For instance, the game *Touhou Luna Nights* combines platforming with bullethell traits, and the game *Koumajou Densetsu* combines the Touhou universe with aesthetic, thematic, and game mechanical style of the commercial game *Castlevania*. By combining different genre elements, new types of game experiences are crafted, showing a degree of experimental game design and innovation.

Prominent doujin games that are not Touhou derivative works generally follow a similar line. Indeed, doujin games that are successful enough to get localized into English are predominantly bullethell works such as *Crimzon Clover* and *Astebreed* or visual novel games like *Tsukihime* and *When They Cry*, rather than a broad variety of genres. Such games do involve unique aspects at a game mechanical or narrative level, for instance seen in *Astebreed* mixture between 2d and 3d action, yet rarely subvert aspects of or critique the commercial game industry.

Lastly, it was earlier mentioned that the most popular series in doujin culture to make derivative works based on is the *Fate Series*. The franchise is owned by *Type-Moon*, a past doujin circle who have since transitioned into the commercial sphere. The group's first game, *Tsukihime*, was first distributed for free during Comiket 1999, yet has since been adapted into a manga series running from 2003 to 2010 in a commercial magazine as well as been converted into an anime broadcast on Japanese TV, with a remake planned for release in the future (Vogel, 2016, p. 23). Since the success of *Tsukihime*, the group went fully commercial with the *Fate Series*, and the company has currently developed or published 14 games, 11 anime series, 34 books, and various merchandise, with some of the productions being outsourced to other companies such as the anime studio, *Studio Deen* ("TYPE-MOON Official Web Site," n.d.; ("劇場版 Fate/stay night UNLIMITED BLADE WORKS," 2016). Additionally, the series began to be localized into English in 2007 (Koulikov, 2007).

The way that Type-Moon has changed from a doujin circle into a successful commercial developer with global distribution exemplifies the way in which popular doujin circles can convert their cultural, social, and symbolic capital into economic capital by choosing to go commercial. While sales statistics for doujin and Type-Moon productions do not exist publicly, it seems likely that the prolific Fate series can attain higher profits by outsourcing productions to other developers than the series could attain merely by ‘going indie’ and distributing their existing games digitally. While unpopular doujin artists do not have the option to go commercial, since going commercial requires capital investments and social recognition, doujin game developers who are already popular can likely leverage their various forms of capital to pursue commercial rather than indie development, increasing their profits beyond the scope of most indie games.

In summary, derivative works are prevalent amongst doujin games just like they are prevalent in doujin manga, resulting in community driven productions that span across multiple mediums and genres. The result is that doujin games are not always focused exclusively on the games in themselves but are rather focused on productions that can connect with other artists and consumers who share an interest in a specific franchise. Finally, the derivative game productions do not seem to showcase any high degree of resistance towards mainstream productions, and are even sometimes integrated into mass culture, as in the case of Type-Moon.

## 5 Understanding Indies

The term ‘indies’ usually denotes a large degree of financial and creative independence from commercial interests such as publishers. However, when it comes to how the term is used in practice, many actors involved in indie productions interpret the term in different, and sometimes mutually exclusive, ways.

It is important to note that the modern understanding of the term ‘indie game’ is a new construct that arose with the rise of popularity of indie games released within the past decade, in particular after a surge of successful Western indie games released around 2008. Several of the characteristic elements of indie game development examined below were part of status quo commercial game development through the 80s and early 90s when commercial games were produced by smaller teams with low budgets and when major video game genres had not been properly established, resulting in a need to innovate and experiment with game mechanics. In further support of this argument, commercial video game developers from the 80s and early 90s are frequently positioned as indie developers today, such as *Ron Gilbert* or *Keiji Inafune*.

This section will outline and compare a few of the main ways to define the indie development practices and products, mainly through the following four characteristics: Indie as financially independent works, indie as a genre category, indie as a medium for personal and creative expressions, and finally indie as a marketable narrative.

## 5.1 Indie as Financially Independent, Commercially Motivated Works

The central defining characteristic of indie games may be that they are financially independent and made without the help of a publisher, resulting in limited budgets but also creative independence (Ruffino, 2013, p. 111). However, such a definition does not correspond to the reality that many game development projects which are commonly recognized as indie hold complicated relationships with publishers. For instance, Latorre notes that the game *Journey*, a supposed indie production that has even won game awards in the category “best indie game”, was developed by a large team of 14 people, held a budget of millions of dollars, and was published by Sony (2016, p. 18). Furthermore, De Jong argues that famous self-published indie games such as *Super Meat Boy* and *Braid* were distributed via platforms like the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3, in other words, consoles owned by major publishers who can impose some degree of restrictions and creative control (Latorre, 2016, p. 18). Finally, it can be argued that any game which receives funding from third parties cannot truly be called indie since their respective intellectual properties (abbreviated IPs) are (frequently) owned by the sponsor, who consequently maintain creative control for future developments (Martin & Deuze, 2009, p. 283). However, whether the publisher owns the IPs of their investment depends upon the individual context and contract between developer and publisher, meaning that developers who have a higher degree of negotiating power can maintain their creative license in some circumstances (Martin & Deuze, 2009, p. 284). For instance, developers who have generated high consumer interest in prior game projects will have a higher degree of negotiating power to maintain their IP rights given the greater value of their brand. Regardless, legal issues concerning IP rights and potential, publicly unknown creative restrictions from publishers are a central concern that problematizes the definition of indies as fully creatively independent productions.

A second financial characteristic of indie game productions is that they usually contain ambitions of achieving commercial success. For instance, Vogel argues that “indie game developers have commercial aspirations akin to those of AAA games” and that “indie games are global commodities, and their developers seek the broadest possible audience” (2017, p. 18). However, the similarities between commercial and indie games should not be overstated since both types of productions employ different strategies in generating revenue, which can be clearly shown by comparing the production costs and retail price of commercial and indie games.

It should be noted that the exact products costs and revenue generated by games are not revealed publicly and are therefore based on analytic estimations. Regardless, the difference between commercial and indie games is stark: AAA games are estimated to cost between 60 and 80 million dollars on average in development alone (Juegostudio, 2020). Additionally, the marketing and distribution costs frequently exceed the development costs, meaning that the tail end of AAA budgets costs several million dollars, with the most expensive game, *Destiny*, estimated to cost roughly \$500 million (Levy, 2014). In contrast, mid-sized indie games on mobile platforms are expected to range between 100-500 thousand dollars in development, which includes potential outsourcing of PR management (Lovato, 2020).

The usual retail price for a AAA game is \$60, whereas high-end indie games usually retail at \$20. Therefore, a AAA game with an estimated budget of \$200 million need to make roughly 3 1/3 million sales to recover the investments, whereas an expensively produced indie game with an estimated budget of \$1.5 million need to make only 75,000 sales to begin to turn a profit, which is only 2.25% of the required sales of the AAA game.

There are three major conclusions that can be drawn from the comparison.

Firstly, the large production costs of AAA games make it difficult for indie games to compete in the market if they attempt to produce games that are overly similar to mainstream games, meaning that their productions must somehow stand out in the market to be commercially successful.

Secondly, the smaller quantity of required sales for indie games to turn a profit means that indie game developers have a greater capacity to appeal to niche market interests to recover their funds, which is usually deemed too financially risky for AAA game producers. In other words, while indie game developers indeed “seek the broadest audience possible” in the sense that they wish to garner as many sales as they can, the best strategy for indie game developers to increase their sales is often to target their productions towards specific types of consumers, rather than seeking to attract broad consumer groups (Vogel, 2017, p. 18).

Finally, the large marketing budgets of AAA titles mean that indie game developers cannot promote their products in spaces that are predominantly occupied by commercial marketing, such as through YouTube ads or website banners. Instead, indie game developers must rely on other ways to promote their products, for instance through social media presence and connections to online influencers in the game space or through positive mentions in relevant media outlets.

In summary, while the term ‘indie’ is derived from the word ‘independent’, common usages of the term do not denote complete financial independence, but rather denotes an unspecified degree of financial independence, which excludes reliance on the largest existing game publishers. Indie game developers commonly exhibit economic motivations through their desire to make a living off their productions. However, the quantitative disparity in the budgetary constraints between commercial and indie productions result in differences between their respective approaches to development and marketing, specifically in terms of the degree to which they target niche audiences.

## 5.2 Indie as a Genre Category

Large digital game distribution platforms such as *Steam* and the *Nintendo Switch Game Store* allows developers to tag their released games with the genre ‘indie’ alongside other genres, such as action, strategy, or sports. As of the current date (end on 2020), there are roughly 34 thousand indie games released through Steam.



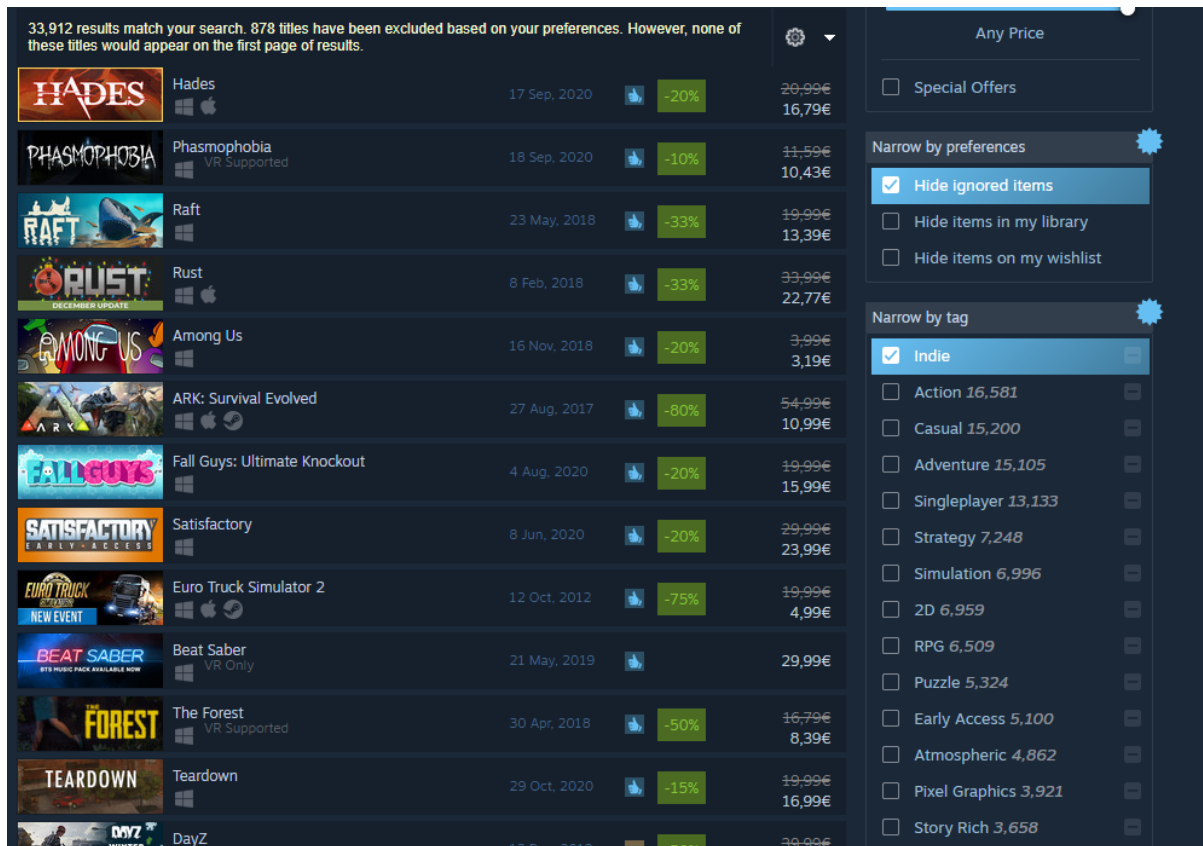


Figure 11: Quantity of indie games released through Steam as of the 27th November. Source: (<https://store.steampowered.com/search/?tags=492&category1=998>)

The indie genre category as currently established in digital game distribution suggests that there are certain definable traits contained within the released products that constitute the indie term, rather than the view that indie is purely related to the mode of production or the attitude towards development. By including indie as a genre, consumers who are interested in indie games can browse the indie catalogue and discover new products that ostensibly contain certain indie qualities that match their preferences. However, unlike several of the other genres listed such as *racing* and *sports*, the exact game characteristics and qualities of indie products are difficult to define. For instance, other genre categories of the listed indie games range from platformers such as *Celeste*, music games such as *Beat Saber*, and driving games such as *American Truck Simulator*. Similarly, while it may be tempting to associate indie games with aesthetic styles such as pixel art, which seeks to mimic the graphics of games released in the 90s, many prominent indie games such as *Cuphead* and *Darkest Dungeon* contain distinct art styles.

In the end, some may argue that the qualities of indie products are not primarily related to gameplay characteristics or to aesthetics but are rather defined by their opposition to the qualities of mass market products, particularly in the form of radical innovation and creativity. For instance, Ruffino comments on indie game discourse in the magazine *Edge*, summarizing that indie games are portrayed as “groundbreaking and beyond what is proposed in the mainstream industry” while Latorre comments that much of indie game discourse allude to the games “having a higher aesthetic and experiential value beyond videogames as mere entertainment” (Latorre, 2016, p: 20). However, since innovation and aesthetic value

are based on subjective judgments, it becomes difficult to categorize indie games on the basis of such qualities alone. Latorre therefore suggest that the perceived high-cultural value of indie games is derived from “anti-capitalist fun”, wherein indie games frequently contain traits that are antithetical to capitalist orientation, such as a “principle of lack of empowerment”, that “notions of ‘victory’ and ‘defeat’ are eliminated”, as well as “no possibility of evolution regarding the character’s action abilities” (2016, p: 27-28).

Another example of subversions of mainstream characteristic game design can be found in the 2019 released indie role-playing game, *Disco Elysium*, which has collectively won seven game awards from BAFTA and The Game Awards (IMDB, n.d.). Many traditional mainstream role-playing games permit the player to role-play as increasingly powerful characters, such as *Baldur’s Gate* wherein you roleplay as a demi-god coming to terms with their power or *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, wherein the protagonist uniquely acquires a hand that permits them to close rifts into the demon realm, providing them the central role in saving the world. On the other hand, *Disco Elysium* partially allows character progression through the ‘thought cabinet’, a game mechanic wherein the protagonist works through mental problems pertaining to their thoughts, beliefs, behaviour patterns and prejudices. One such problem in the thought cabinet is called ‘rigorous self-critique’, and the final solution offered to the problem is given the following description:

*“Here it is. Hard facts from the man you are. [...] You held a young woman by the arm and kept her in your apartment for 20 minutes against her will. That's right, these are not flights of fancy. These are \*real deeds\*, Harry, emerging from the darkness of your past. [...] And above all, you let life defeat you. All the gifts your parents gave you, all the love and patience of your friends, you drowned in a neurotoxin. You let misery win. And it will keep on winning till you die -- or overcome it”* (“Rigorous Self-Critique,” n.d.)



Figure 12: Visual abstract representation of the thoughts in *Disco Elysium*'s Thought Cabinet. Source: (<https://se7en.ws/disco-elysium-thought-cabinet-the-thoughts-system-explained/?lang=en>)

Rather than making the player role-play as a hero and saviour of the world, *Disco Elysium* forces you to play as an anti-hero, as a character who can barely save himself from his own misery. Many of the challenges and threats in the game do not stem from external sources but are rather internal threats from the character's own mind as the player can lose the game if the protagonist loses morale and has a nervous breakdown. In terms of mechanics, it is possible to increase the character's statistics over the course of the game, yet the stat increases exclusively reflect growth in 24 personality traits, rather than increases in physical abilities and skills. While such stat increases can be helpful, such as the encyclopaedia skill aiding in augmenting your general knowledge, they are also a frequent hindrance. For instance, the 'electrochemistry' stat can try to pressure the character into resuming alcohol and drug abuse, and the 'authority stat' can lead the character to pursue unnecessary conflicts that turn out to be detrimental to the protagonist's mental or physical health. The subversion of role-playing power fantasy tropes in *Disco Elysium* illustrates several of Latorre's proposed indie game traits, for instance lack of empowerment, or how the evolution of the protagonist is not inherently positive, along with how the game "deals with universal or existential themes" (Latorre, 2016, p: 20).

Latorre's concept of anti-capitalist fun should not be interpreted as an exhaustive or necessary list of indie game traits, but rather as a conceptual framework for analysing traits that frequently, yet not always, occur in prominent indie games. A possible reason for the subversion of mainstream tropes and game mechanics in indie games is that their lower production budgets renders it difficult to compete in the market against expensive commercial games. Therefore, indie games can win more attention by offering new types of experiences not found in mainstream productions. However, following Fiske's theory which views popular culture as both dependent upon and in opposition to mass culture, it is impossible for indie developers to completely separate themselves from the historical context of prior released mainstream games. In other words, indie developers will necessarily draw inspiration from mainstream productions, for instance copying elements of existing commercial genres and game mechanics. Indie games can still generally be categorized according to genres such as platformers and role-playing games, they still frequently contain some form of narrative progression and rise in difficulty, and they frequently reference the mainstream products from which they draw inspiration, such as Edmund McMillen's 'Binding of Isaac', which explicitly draws inspiration from Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda* (McMillen, 2019). However, indie developers can resist and distinguish themselves and their productions from mass culture by subverting traits found in mass cultural productions, thereby implicitly rebuking individual elements of mainstream productions in the process.

Since indie games often attempt to appeal to different consumers than mainstream games, indie game developers will often distinguish themselves from the commercial industry as a marketing strategy by emphasizing their unique qualities and by extensively criticizing mainstream games. A further examination of this will be provided in section 6.3.3: "Indie as a Marketable Narrative".

### 5.2.1 Trends in Indie Games

Indie games frequently take inspiration from mainstream games and other indie games alike, resulting in trends that can be associated with the indie category. For instance, the indie games ‘Spelunky’ and ‘The Binding of Isaac’ helped popularize the so-called *Hybrid Roguelike* genre, which has since become popular among indie games illustrated by entries released between 2012 and 2020 such as ‘FTL: Faster than Light’, ‘Slay the Spire’, ‘Risk of Rain’, ‘Darkest Dungeon’, ‘Dead Cells’ and ‘Hades’, among many others. While not all indie games are hybrid roguelikes, almost all hybrid roguelikes are indie games, creating a clear association between the genre and the indie field.

A second frequent indie game characteristic includes steep difficulty curves. Prominent indie games such as ‘Super Meat Boy’, ‘La Mulana’ and ‘Baba is You’ all receive consumer responses commenting upon their high difficulty (Dealessandri, 2019; Lockdown, 2016; Ponce, 2012). Furthermore, the hybrid roguelike genre mentioned above is characterized by the so-called ‘permadeath’ feature, forcing the player to restart the game from the beginning of a new, randomized experience every time they die. In other words, indie games containing steep difficulty curves are not overly concerned with losing the player’s attention caused by difficult progression.

Thirdly, many indie games create new game experiences by combining elements of existing genres in new ways similarly to the approach of doujin game developers. For instance, the indie game Dicey Dungeons combine Yahtzee dice mechanics with the hybrid roguelike genre, whereas *Baba is You* combines puzzles mechanics from programming puzzle games and the Japanese puzzle game, *Sokoban*.

Finally, many indie games draw inspiration from a variety of games released in the 90s. This is particularly relevant to the thesis since many classic 90s games originate in Japan. For instance, the Australian game “Hollow Knight” is inspired by the semi-open worlds and gradual character progression encountered in the Japanese franchises Castlevania and Super Metroid, usually classified as so-called *metroidvania* games (Chowdhury, 2020). Moreover, the Binding of Isaac is influenced by the over-the-top perspective, dungeon crawling experiences of The Legend of Zelda (Schreier, 2017).

There are many other trends seen globally in indie games, which can be subjected to examination. However, the high difficulty and the 90s game inspired mechanics are of particular interest since both these trends are frequent in Japanese games. As such, it may be possible for Japanese indie developers to leverage such qualities when producing and marketing their products towards the global market, as will be explored further in section 9: “Transnational Difficulties and Possibilities of Japanese Indies”.

In this section, the thesis has problematized the view of indie games purely as a genre category, particularly due to the lack of clearly definable traits that apply universally to indie games. However, the section has also argued that specific subversions of game mechanics and narrative themes are more likely to be found in indie games than mainstream games,

since it is difficult for indie games with low production budgets to compete with mainstream productions if they share the same target audience and product qualities.

### 5.3 Indie as Authorial, Creative Expressions

A different way to view indie games is the creative involvement of the developers, which is frequently marketed as a central brand quality, as opposed to mainstream productions wherein the game product itself rather than the developers tend to be emphasized in the marketing material and the discourse surrounding the productions. The main way that authors involve themselves is through creatively involving themselves in their productions, sometimes in provocative ways that can potentially alienate segments of otherwise interested consumers.

#### 5.3.1 Provocative Messages in Indie Games

The emphasis on creative expressions that are closely linked to the individual authors can lead to provocative product traits that are unlikely to appear in mainstream productions. For instance, Edmund McMillen's indie game, "*The Binding of Isaac*", is based on the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, but here the conceit is that the mom of the protagonist, 'Isaac', receives a message from 'above' requesting that her son must be sacrificed to prove her devotion (Ash Swoon, 2014). As Isaac flees from his mom into the basement, he delves deeper into increasingly hellish landscapes while fighting devils and angels alike using his tears as a weapon. The aesthetics are frequently based on various taboos, such as the locales being littered with excrements, items titled things such as 'rotten baby', and enemies that open vagina shaped holes in their stomachs to shoot red lasers reminiscent of blood streams. In Edmund McMillen's own words: "A lot of the content in Isaac is extremely dark and adult. It touches on aspects of child abuse, gender identity, infanticide, neglect, suicide, abortion, and how religion might negatively affect a child, which are topics most games would avoid" (Papes, 2015).

The themes and choice of provocative aesthetics presented in the game are partially based on Edmund McMillen's own experiences growing up in a Christian household, of which he states the following:

*"My dad's side of the family, they're all born-again Christians [...] And with that came very little Biblical talk, but a lot of more stereotypical Christianity - the really negative aspects. Everybody's going to Hell. [...] and you're chastised for every little thing. Which is kind of ironic, because it's coming from these born-again Christians who lived the most horrible sinful lives possible before they became Christians and saved. They were all recovering alcoholics, drug addicts, everything else. [...] When I got a response that upset somebody that was close to me, especially, it was a huge motivator to push it. That's how I learned to fight back. I never put up physical fights, but I could fight back with my work very easily because I could put it out there and say, 'You deal with it.'" (Grayson, 2012).*

Due to the game's themes of religion and taboos, the game was the subject of controversy, leading to Nintendo rejecting the release of the game on their gaming system, the *Nintendo 3Ds*, on account of the "questionable religious content", and the game received a 16+ rating in Germany due to "blasphemy" (Groen, 2012). It is not surprising that a provocative game such as the Binding of Isaac would be rated 16+, nor that Nintendo wished to keep their family friendly brand image. However, compared to mainstream titles and brands that generally wish to maintain their appeal to as large a consumer base as possible, The Binding of Isaac can capitalize on the fact that indie titles can instead appeal to particular niche markets, in this case targeting consumers that accept, or even connect with, the provocative aspects of the product. It therefore seems highly unlikely that big game publishers such as EA Games or Ubisoft would accept funding and publishing such controversial games, since these publishing practices would involve heavy risks of alienating segments of their consumer base, which subsequently could reflect negatively on their brand and ultimately result in brand avoidance.

In terms of independent, personal, and creative expression, the close connection between "The Binding of Isaac" and Edmund McMillen as an author is apparent, ranging from the themes stemming from his personal life to his distinct, hand-drawn art style. The prevalence of the author within his works furthermore allows him to build a brand that does not only pertain to the products themselves, but also to his own personal style. The consumer interest in his prior game, *Super Meat Boy*, may furthermore have aided in brand loyalty connected to his particular style of productions. In the case of The Binding of Isaac, creative expression seems to provide the central motivation for the provocative nature of the game and the Edmund McMillen brand.

Another example of author involvement and provocative creative expressions can be seen in the indie game, 'Disco Elysium', and which is thematically concerned with political topics. The developer, ZA/UM, comments upon the political themes in an interview on the website *PCGames*:

*"Zaum are very aware that other developers have tried to distance themselves from real-world politics in the past. 'They shy away from it', Kurvitz says. [...] They want to explore these issues by covering themselves with the fig leaf of high fantasy – so [they're] not talking about black people, [they're] talking about elves. We don't have that fig leaf and I don't want that fig leaf either"* (Purslow, 2020).

The developer's attitude towards commenting upon politics through the gaming medium is clearly visible in the context of the game. For instance, the game contains four primary political alignments: Communism, Fascism, Ultraliberalism (representing capitalism), and Moralism (representing centrism). Each ideology becomes satirized and critiqued over the course of the game through dialogue with other characters as well as through the thoughts and reflections of the protagonist, particularly when the ideology is expressing a uniform and one-sided way to view the world. Therefore, consumers adhering to a wide spectrum of political orientations will likely disagree with some topics covered by the game, or even draw offense to specific sequences. However, the game also criticizes the centrist notion that every opinion deserves equal critique, as emphasized in its description of

moralism: “[...] in this world there is also a sensible ideology for people who simply want to do good by everyone. How? By looking at the options on the table and saying: no. I don't want any of those associated with me” (“Political alignment,” n.d.). The political stance of the developer is evidenced across multiple issues, such as homophobia, which is addressed by the prescriptive solution:

*“Maybe you should \*stop\* obsessing about your own -- and other people's -- sexuality?”, or the depiction of nationalism in the description of fascism: “This is the baddest of all the ideologies, so no one admits they're a fascist. Rather, they're ‘traditionalists’. Or ‘nationalists’, a term they get really angry [with] if you associate [it] with fascism. (No one wants leprosy on their brand)” (“Homo-Sexual Underground,” n.d.); “Political alignment,” n.d.).*

In other words, the developers are not afraid to express political statements that could lead to controversy or brand avoidance among some consumers, even though political statements may be highly controversial in the context of video games given the widespread discussion among gaming communities regarding whether political topics ought to be kept out of video games as a medium (Errant Signal, 2013; penguinz0, 2019; TheQuartering, 2019). The provocative traits displayed in both *The Binding of Isaac* and *Disco Elysium* are not likely to occur in mainstream productions, since they entail too heavy risks of alienating otherwise interested consumer segments. This is of course less of an issue for indie developers appealing to niche markets, where buyers are up front attracted to the unique political or artistic brand of the specific developer.

### 5.3.2 Emotional and Thematic Connections with Consumers

While indie games such as *The Binding of Isaac* and *Disco Elysium* capitalize on the ability of indie games to appeal to niche markets in order to express provocative messages, other indie game developers use the medium to communicate emotionally and thematically to consumers in less provocative ways. For instance, the indie game developer Jay Tholen offers the following comment on his game *Dropsy*: *“Let’s say that one person ever bought my game, you know, and that would suck for me, but it’s like I made this just for them [...] I really like the idea that what I’m doing could encourage or help someone”* (Gamestar Arts, 2020, 1:07:36-1:08:16). Similar to statements found amongst doujin developers, Jay Tholen emphasizes creative expression through games as a means of connecting with consumers. While financial incentives are still acknowledged through stating that it “would suck” if only one person bought the game, the value of creative expression is stated as a separate goal that would generate value for the developer, even if the game were to perform poorly in terms of sales.

Another example is indie game developer Jonathan Blow, who comments upon how he was depressed for months after the highly successful release of his indie game, *Braid*:

*“[...] there’s a hope that people are going to understand, you know, the things that you did, and that you’ll have some line of communication with your audience [...] Some of the*



*actually most demoralizing things were actually positive reviews of the game. [...] they'd say what's good about the game and in many cases, it would be just a very surface understanding [...] that didn't even see what I thought was most special about it. I'd visualize that I was gonna have some kind of connection with people [...]" (Swirsky & Pajot, 2012, 56:37).*

Despite the success of *Braid*, financially as well as in reviews, Jonathan Blow still states that he became depressed since consumers and critics lacked understanding of the messages the game was attempting to communicate, indicating that the goal of successful creative expression was of the greatest importance to his production. Furthermore, Jonathan Blow would frequently engage in online discussions with critical consumers following the release of the game arguing that they did not properly understand the game, which helped in propagating the idea among consumers that Blow is pretentious and unable to take criticism, qualities that hardly aid in increasing the perceived value of his brand (Swirsky & Pajot, 2012, 55:40). As such, emphasis on creative expression in indie games should not always be viewed as a marketing strategy to increase profits based on consumer interests, given that Jonathan Blow likely caused financially detrimental controversy due to his desires to be understood correctly.

As a final example of emotional and thematic connections with players, the indie game *Celeste* portrays mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and panic attacks, issues that the developers themselves suffers from. In an interview addressing the game's depiction of mental health issues, the lead developer Matt Thorson stresses the importance of personal expression:

*"Our top priorities were to tell a story that meant something to us and explore these topics from a [sic] individual perspective [...] Our intention going in wasn't to represent mental illness in general, or to make a 'how to deal with depression' guide, and we didn't think to consult professionals on the topic" (Grayson, 2018).*

Additionally, Thorson's other statements in the interview note the way in which making the game was a "great creative outlet", how he was learning to deal with anxiety through and by the development process, and how he implemented lessons he has learned into the narrative structure (Grayson, 2018). The result is hardly a feel-good experience or power fantasy: Depression and anxiety are viewed as problems that cannot be conquered or fixed, but rather as problems that should be accepted as an on-going, iterative, and never-ending struggle and process.

Nonetheless, the game's portrayal of mental health issues garnered positive responses from consumers and critical media alike. Thorson himself states: "It's a message that's resonated with players in a big way. *Celeste*'s composer, Lena Raine, told me that a player even reached out to say that the game helped them cope with suicidal thoughts" (Grayson, 2018). Furthermore, various journalistic gaming outlets have praised the game for its depiction of mental health issues, and YouTube authors have dedicated videos to examining how anxiety is portrayed in the game's mechanics, music, and narrative structure (Griffin, 2018; Ramée, 2018; Stanley, 2018).



The case of Celeste showcases that personal and creative expressions in indie games which seek to connect with consumers at an emotional or thematic level are not necessarily contradictory with attainment of economic gains. The developers have used their personal knowledge in dealing with anxiety as a form of cultural capital to connect with consumers dealing with or having an interest in the same issues, thereby increasing their symbolic capital in the form of media recognition and brand support, which ultimately is exchangeable for economic capital.

As a final statement, it is important to note that an emphasis on creative expression is not a necessary condition for indie development in all definitions of the term. For instance, the indie game, “*American Truck Simulator*”, which simply aims to simulate a truck driving experience as accurately as possible, is unlikely to be intended as creative expressions by the developer. However, this section has presented arguments relating to how certain forms of creative expression, such as Edmund McMillen’s provocative themes, are unlikely to occur in mainstream game productions due to the associated financial risks. As such, consumers who are looking for products that ‘connect’ directly to authors are more likely to find such products among the indie category.

#### 5.4 Indie as a Marketable Narrative

Indie should not only be viewed as a product category or as an attitude towards development, but also as a narrative that potentially can be marketed towards interested consumers. Most noticeably, the 2012 release of the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie* depicts the struggles of four famous indie game developers. According to Latorre, the documentary has been “instrumental in mobilizing affects toward the indie game as a cultural phenomenon and to its heroes, those young videogame creators”, particularly through its depiction of the developers as “lone, talented creators facing a giant industry, who sacrifice their personal lives to pursue a childhood/adolescent dream and an artistic ideal” (2016, p. 22). Yet amidst the documentary’s portrayal of struggling and lonely artists, the documentary simultaneously represents only commercially successful indie developers who have already achieved media attention and positive critical reception. In that way, Latorre also views the documentary’s portrayal of the developers as a depiction of the “neoliberal subject”, as “lone entrepreneurs” who express “autonomous individualism”, “hard work”, and “talent” rather than relying upon luck or benefactors (Latorre, 2016, p. 22).

Since the release of *Indie Game: The Movie*, the portrayal of indie game developers has become less straight-forward. For instance, the documentary “*Surviving Indies*” released in 2020 includes truly struggling indie game developers who have been unable to attain commercial success with their products, or even been able to get hired within commercial game development. Furthermore, game developer Kellee Santiago comments on the meaning of success in the indie game sphere: “*It’s not if you fail or not, it’s how you handle those failures. I think if you look at any indie who might be the model of indie success [visuals show a clip of the developers of Super Meat Boy taken from Indie Game: The Movie], you look at their history, and they’ve worked on a number of failed projects before they got to that one that was really successful*” (Gamestar Arts, 2020, 00:02:48). Thereby the

documentary *Surviving Indies* provides a counter-narrative to the portrayal of the successful and talented entrepreneur depicted in *Indie Game: The Movie*, instead stressing the view of indie game developers as flawed artists who can only achieve success by learning from their mistakes. Regardless, both forms of narratives can be levied as a marketing tool to construct an affective relationship with the developers involved, irrespective of whether the narratives are tragic or uplifting.

A second way in which indie game developers can construct a marketable narrative is by positioning themselves clearly as distinct from mass cultural productions in the discourse. For instance, many indie developers do not only talk about their products or their artistic visions, but also provide meta-commentary concerning the role of indies in general.

A frequent aspect of this narrative is commentary on the structural relationship between indies and the mainstream as indie developers extensively critique mass cultural productions in various ways. In other words, indie developers often define themselves not through characteristic ‘indie’ traits, but rather as an antithesis to the mainstream. For example, Jonathan Blow states the following in a 2010 presentation titled *Video Games and the Human Condition*:

*“We [indie designers] feel like games currently tend to be temporary diversions, right, something I do for a little bit but I don’t really care about [...] so the operative question for me is: Can games become a medium deeply important to people?”* (rubbermuck, 2011, 05:32).

In trying to establish indie games as a medium to advance gaming in a more serious direction that “speaks to the human condition”, Blow simultaneously critiques mainstream games for being absent of those same qualities. The quote and general presentation thereby pose a structural relationship between commercial and indie games, wherein indie games are in the position of an underdog industry that lacks economic capital yet pushes for innovation. The use of the word ‘we’ stresses indie designers as a homogenous group that shares the same critique, namely that the general gaming industry provides shallow experiences, thus emphasizing the contrast between indie and mainstream games.

Other indie game developers are more direct in their critiques of the mainstream. For instance, Tommy Refenes, co-developer of *Super Meat Boy*, says “if people want to buy *Modern Warfare* or *Halo: Reach* that’s fine, because I think those games are shit. If that’s what people want, then they don’t want my games, because I don’t make shit games ” (Swirsky & Pajot, 2012, 11:42). Commercial games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* are thereby viewed as being devoid of any quality and merit, and Refenes own indie production is offered as an appealing alternative.

In summary, indie game developers who critique commercial games provide a narrative in which commercial productions are devalued and where indie productions offer an alternative that aims at mending the failures of mass culture. The narrative can be useful as a marketing strategy by painting indie games as unique sources of innovation that alleviates any frustrations which consumers may bear toward AAA games.

## 6 Problematising the Distinctions between Doujin and Western Indie Productions

The first two sections have examined distinguishing traits associated with Japanese doujin and western indie productions. While doujin and indies share some characteristics, such as emphasizing creative freedom in the development process, differences remain between the two terms. In summary, doujin productions are generally viewed as expressing no economic motivations and are usually completely self-financed and self-published, whereas indie productions generally contain some degree of financial incentives and are frequently forced to rely on funding and publishing assistance from third parties. Furthermore, while both terms emphasize the central role of the author in the development, doujin discourse additionally accentuates the role of community in doujin culture and anti-hierarchical views on the relationship between authors and “fans”.

This section will aim to problematize the distinctions between Japanese doujin and Western indie productions by examining Western indies that exhibit traits normally associated with doujin culture. Despite the apparent similarities, the thesis will maintain the position that relevant differences remain between the two categories. Furthermore, the thesis will argue that the concept of indies is understood differently in the west and in Japan since amateur productions are categorized as indie productions in the west and since the term ‘indie’ is a newly imported loanword and term in Japan.

### 6.1 Financial Motivations and Funding

Firstly, many indie game developers showcase low degrees of economic motivations involved in the productions of indie games. For instance, indie game developer Rami Ismail states the following: “[...] you have to be a little bit out of your mind to work in the game space. You could earn three times the amount of money [...] for an industry that is not video games [...] There’s no other reason to go into video games but passion” (Gamestar Arts, 2020, 02:22). Moreover, game developer Richard James Cook expresses how he has tried to get into the games industry for 13 years without giving up, despite the lack of financial successes (Gamestar Arts, 2020, 05:09). As such, commercial motivations characteristic of the Western definition of indie should not be overly emphasized when applied to a Japanese context.

Secondly, self-financed and self-published amateur productions similar to doujin games are generally categorized as indie games in the West, even if they are published for free. For instance, Edmund McMillen had released numerous games for free on the website *Newgrounds* prior to releasing his first commercial game, *Super Meat Boy*, some of which were since rereleased commercially on Steam in *The Basement Collection* under the indie category. In other words, the western indie term is broader than the Japanese view on indies since Japanese developers distinguish between amateur and independent works while both fall under the indie category in the west. Another example is Jonathan Blow, who comments on his decision to self-finance his second commercial game *The Witness* using the funds

acquired from his prior game *Braid*, despite warnings given by people “more experienced in the industry” concerning the risks of self-financing:

*“It became very clear to me that I just wasn’t going to be able to make what I wanted if I took anyone’s money at all [...] Even just the structure of the deals offered – under what terms I would be getting money and what kind of control I’d have – it became clear: they did not understand the concept of a reality in which a developer would come to them who wasn’t desperate for their money [...] I would have to pay for it myself in order to do what I’m doing”* (Marsh, 2020).

While *The Witness* is noticeably dissimilar to doujin games given the estimated production costs of 6 million dollars and six team members working on the game for seven years, it rejected both funding and publishing assistance from third parties in order to limit creative and financial restrictions (Machkovech, 2016; Webber, 2020). The doujin values of taking financial risks or accepting losses to retain creative freedom are expressed in the attitude towards development, even though *The Witness* cannot be considered an amateur production and even though the ultimate revenue generated by the game must have been substantial, given the 5 million dollars in revenue from sales in the first week after release.

Ultimately, financial motivations are to some degree a taboo among American indie game development culture, similar to the economic taboos surrounding doujin culture. For instance, indie game developer Richard James Cook comments on monetary stigmas in the industry:

*“It’s kind of the elephant in the room for a lot of us, is money. And I think it’s a funny stigma, I think it’s a weird thing, honestly, because it’s almost, like, shunned to think about, “Oh, you want money for your work, like, you’re supposed to be an artist, you’re supposed to be a passionate game developer who wants to make great games, you know, you shouldn’t care about money”* (Gamestar Arts, 2020, 49:15).

Regardless of the similarities, many indie game productions express financial motivations and dependencies that would exclude them from being labelled as doujin within Japan since such developers often pursue game development as a primary occupation. As Cook subsequently says: *“clearly all of us know, like, you, you have to make a living somehow”* (Gamestar Arts, 2020, 49:44). Edmund McMillen states:

*“Super Meat Boy is the closest thing I’ve done to selling out that I’ve ever done, but it’s not. But it is safe. [...] And I knew it was safe going in, and I was playing it safe because I was risking so much. [...] I don’t want to risk my whole f\*\*\*ing career and my future on something that is uncertain [...]”* (Latorre, 2016, p: 23).

Unlike doujin artists who produce works on the side of their primary occupation, indie developers who wish to pursue game development as a full-time job are dependent upon the financial success of their productions. Furthermore, this can potentially limit the scope of creativity in non-amateur indie productions given that they necessarily must appeal to a sufficient market segment to cover their investments. ‘Safer’ productions such as *Super Meat Boy* that mostly rely on established mechanics found in the mainstream platforming genre are

therefore often more feasible for developers than productions aiming to be entirely innovative and ground-breaking, particularly if the developer has not already established brand support from previously released games (as Edmund McMillen had in his subsequent release, *The Binding of Isaac*). In other words, game developers who wish to pursue game development as their main occupation can be viewed as being more dependent upon implementing features from other games that have already proven to be popular in the market, whereas doujin productions are not subjected to the same limitations.

Regardless, one key distinction remains between the categories of doujin and indies: Indies generally view creative freedom in the development process as a form of cultural capital that can be exchanged for economic capital (given that the creative freedom expressed has a niche appeal in the consumer market). As expressed in the documentary *Surviving Indies*, a frequent view in indie philosophy is how indie developers succeed not despite their prior failures, but particularly because of the experiences gained from less successful projects. In such a view, staying true to your creative vision (perhaps with minor alterations in the product to fit with market demands, such as in the case of *Super Meat Boy*) can eventually lead to commercial success. However, in the classical doujin view, economic motivations are mutually exclusive with ideals of creative freedom since economic motivations entail major creative concessions in order to make the products appeal to consumers. Therefore, creative freedom can never serve as a method to achieve capital gains under doujin philosophy, and developers hoping to earn a living off of their products can never be categorized as doujin developers.

## 6.2 The Role of Communities

While the role of communities is stressed in doujin production environments, Western indie game discourse rarely mentions the role of communities, but rather emphasizes the unique qualities of the authors involved. However, communities play a central role in some Western indie game developer environments, both internally among developers and between developers and consumers.

In an interview related to cultural differences in the indie game development scene, Jonathan Blow answered the question: “*Ideas of community can be a little different, though. From a cultural approach, here [in Singapore], it’s about working towards a greater goal or collective*”, to which he responds:

*“I was trying to bring this point up in response to this specific Western indie game community that I saw developing [...] For certain people, it became much more about the image and concept of being an indie game developer, rather than doing the hard work that it actually takes [...] And what I was seeing was all these people just wanting to feel good about being in the game development community. [...] But the job isn’t to be in a community; the job is to make a good game”* (Ong, 2019).

Since Blow does not specify which ‘specific’ indie game community he is speaking of, it is difficult to examine his claims above. Nevertheless, communities of indie game

developers do form both physically and digitally (Bratuskins, 2019; Meetup, n.d.). A thorough examination of such communities is not feasible in the scope of this thesis, but it is important to note that many digital game developer groups are not primarily focused on ‘feeling good’ about being part of the community. For instance, the Reddit group *r/gamedevs* features posts concerning tutorials on how to use various game engines, how to optimize the game in various ways, and supporting developers asking for specific advice. As such, it seems that indie game communities also emphasize game improvement and technical advice in addition to the moral encouragement and identity building, all of which is likely a part of many communities.

Furthermore, Western indie games often involve fostering a community with the player base. For instance, Rami Ismael livestreamed parts of the development of their game *Nuclear Throne* on the streaming website *Twitch*, noting some of the benefits:

*“[...] playtesting, ideas and trust from loyal players because of the transparent development process, the ability to build a community that will defend you as time goes on, the ability to turn the game’s development into the game’s marketing and simply in team motivation because of the focus that comes with people watching” (Leone, 2014).*

While streaming of development processes are rare for indie games, many are released as early access titles, meaning that consumers can purchase the title before it is fully finished and provide feedback to the developers that will (ostensibly) be addressed in the final release. Out of 1,182 early access games released on Steam, Lin et. al conclude that 88% of these are classified by the developers as indie games (2017; p. 783). Additionally, 81% of early access games have an equal or higher activity rate on discussion forums in the early access stage of development, with a twice as high median number of discussion posts per owner compared to when the games leave the early access phase (Lin et. al; 2017, p. 788). Discussions on the early access forums allow the developer to more actively interact with their consumers based on the feedback provided.

Regardless of the fostering of communities in Western indie game productions, it is important to note that inciting community engagement can be used as a marketing strategy and thus to some degree can be related to profit motives. In Ismael’s statement on livestreaming the development of *Nuclear Throne* quoted above, he mentions “turning the game’s development into the game’s marketing” as well as building “a community that will defend you as time goes on”, thereby using community engagement as a means of marketing and building brand support, rather than as an end in itself. Furthermore, Lin et. al conclude that 88% of early access games receive a higher rate of positive reviews during the early access phase with a median positive rating of 88% as compared to the median positive rating of 69% after leaving early access, possibly due to early access users “being more tolerant of the unfinished status of a game” (2017, p: 791). As such, developers can use the early access model to garner a more positive reception following the early release of their games, which can potentially translate into higher quantities of sales.

In summary, it is difficult to verify community building as a non-economic motivation among indie game developers, since engagement with communities also serves as

marketing and in general promotes brand support. On the other hand, doujin developers, who continue to engage in doujin communities despite suffering financial losses, are clearly not motivated by potential financial gains, and the community building involved in doujin culture is therefore more likely to be a goal separated from economic incentives.

Furthermore, indie game developers do not typically engage with their fan communities in similar ways to doujin developers. For instance, there are distinctions to be drawn between the author/community focused creative expressions in doujin production discourse and the primarily author focused creative expressions emphasized in indie game discourse. Indie games such as *Dropsy* and *Braid* focus primarily on one-way communication between the author and their consumers. In the case of Jonathan Blow, the developer even goes as far as to argue with consumers about the ‘correct’ interpretation of his game, signifying authorial intent as central to the understanding of the product. On the other hand, many of the creative expressions found amongst doujin production stem from derivative works wherein the doujin community collectively and directly appropriate the works of one another to rework their meanings and craft something new. In that way, creative expression in doujin culture rarely takes the form of one-way communication between authors and fans, but rather through a community driven process where the boundaries between authors and consumers become blurred. In some ways, this process seems more reminiscent of online game modding communities, where amateurs modify the core content of existing games, than it seems similar to the typical development processes of the indie game production field.

### 6.3 Cultural Differences in Understanding Indies

Comparing doujin and indie productions in Japan is faced with the challenge that the term ‘doujin’ does not exist natively outside of Japan, while the term ‘indie’ is a recently imported Western loan word in the Japanese context (Vogel, 2017, p: 20). While indies in Japan generally include the “*ethos and mode of development*” originating from the Western term, the Japanese understanding labels productions that are developed with non-economic motivations as doujin, particularly if they are self-financed and self-published, a distinction that does not exist in the west (Vogel, 2017, p: 17). For instance, the Japanese game ‘Ib’, which was released online for free in 2012, is labelled an indie game in western journalistic discourse, whereas it is noted as freeware in Japan (James, 2014; “*狂気に満ちた...*”, 2012). As such, freeware and doujin productions are viewed as subcategories of indie productions in western discourse (albeit a subcategory that receives little media attention), whereas freeware and doujin productions are viewed as a category that is entirely separated from indie game productions in Japan.

Both the Japanese and Western understandings of indies note the comparatively low degree of financial motivations relative to mainstream productions, particularly through appealing to niche markets rather than to the broadest target audience possible and through creative expressions that risk financial losses. However, the Japanese understanding of indies frequently emphasizes their comparatively high degree of financial motivations relative to doujin productions, which are exclusively viewed as hobbyist in nature (Ferrero, 2016). As

such, whether economic motivations are present is often central to discussions pertaining to indies in Japan.

#### 6.4 Degree of Experimental Production Practices

According to Hichibe and Tanaka's analytical framework mentioned in the theory section, doujin games show a higher degree of 'experimental' rather than 'conservative' production practices, resulting in "*more diversified content and expressions*" than commercially motivated productions, which includes indie games to some degree (Hichibe & Tanaka, 2016, p. 63). In the terms of Fiske's theory of popular culture, this view can be translated as follows: Doujin games are less dependent upon and more resistant towards mass culture, whereas indie games are more dependent upon and less resistant towards mass culture. This section will contrast doujin and indie games to examine their relative degrees of dependence and resistance towards commercial productions.

First of all, the main ways that doujin games appear to be resistant towards mass culture is by crafting new genres (mostly through new combinations of existing genres), through adopting existing game genres that used to be produced commercially but are no longer deemed to be commercially viable, and through creating personal expressions that are not limited by commercial motivations. However, a similar case can be made for indie games: New genres are crafted by combining game mechanics such as Hybrid-Roguelikes with other. Similarly, section 4.3: "Indie as Authorial, Creative Expressions" argued that personal expressions in indie games can serve as a form of cultural capital that ultimately can be exchanged for economic capital through appealing to specific niche markets, meaning that economic and personal motivations are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, even though doujin developers generally do not strive for economic gains, they still must strike a balance between crafting personal, authorially focused productions and crafting productions that effectively communicate with users, which can potentially limit the creativity in productions. For instance, an anonymous doujin game developer in Hichibe and Tanaka's research project states the following on balancing the relationship between authors and users: "I think we and the people who buy our games tend to like similar things. We try to look for the sort of things that we're all going to enjoy" (2016, p. 60). In other words, doujin developers can aim to produce games that are equally enjoyable to consumers and the author in a similar way to how indie game developers can seek to produce games that are simultaneously personal and profitable.

Next, Western indie game developers are often pointed in their critiques of commercial game productions and development practices, as was examined in section 6.4: "Indie as a Marketable Narrative", which is a form of resistance towards mass culture that is mostly absent in contemporary doujin game development. Instead, doujin developers criticize mass commercial development mostly for its production practices rather than its productions. For instance, doujin developer *Nan states*: "I would rather stand on my own than be part of some large company. To be honest, working for a big company is just no fun. Bureaucracy, meetings, staff... A lot gets between you and your work" (Ferrero, 2016, 00:31). The elements of commercial game productions that are brought under critique is thus the working



conditions of the companies rather than the lack of innovation in the produced games. I have found no examples in the discourse of doujin developers who critique mainstream productions themselves through the discursive analysis. One possible reason for the absence of such critique is that doujin productions are viewed as a separate field from mainstream productions rather than as a field in competition with the commercial industry. After all, doujin derivative works that are based on commercial franchises only exist at the discretion of mainstream copyright holders, and doujin works are traditionally only distributed through specialized doujin channels. On the other hand, indie games are generally distributed through the same channels as commercial games and are financially reliant upon attracting consumer segments that would normally purchase commercial products. The result is that indie game developers frequently show direct resistance towards mass cultural productions in both the discourse and the game features of their productions, despite being financially reliant on being commercially successful.

In conclusion, it is difficult to view doujin game productions as being inherently more experimental than indie games without relying on post-hoc rationalizing definitions of the term ‘experimental’ to support the argument. Therefore, when examining the question of whether doujin are turning into indies, it is less relevant to analyse changes from experimental to conservative types of productions since neither category is tied to either the doujin or the indie concept.

## 7 Are doujin turning into indies?

While doujin conventions and doujin game productions remain in Japan, there are several ways in which there is a noticeable shift towards indie game development, particularly in terms of productions targeting a global rather than a domestic market. Firstly, prominent doujin game developers have increasingly begun to distribute their doujin games globally and release their games at multiple game consoles in addition to participating in indie game conventions such as BitSummit. Secondly, an increasing number of Japanese game developers are beginning to pursue the distribution methods of indie game development rather than distributing through doujin conventions. This section will seek to examine how the indie development field has expanded in Japan firstly by examining the case of digital and global distribution of Touhou Project works, and secondly by examining the growing indie game development scene in Japan.

### 7.1 ZUN and Touhou Project turning towards Indie

#### 7.1.1 Digital and Global Distribution

The doujin game developer ZUN, mentioned previously in section 5: “Understanding Doujin”, has not only been increasingly involved in the indie game development sphere, but has also served as a gatekeeper for other doujin authors producing derivative works based on his franchise. When doujin game authors previously crafted Touhou Project derivative works, they were restricted by ZUN’s prior guidelines, which in practice prohibited distribution of

their works to the digital global market in addition to turning down assistance from publishers. In recent years, ZUN has loosened his guidelines, a move which has exerted a large influence on the doujin game production field given the high quantity of Touhou Project inspired game works.

In 2011, ZUN added an addendum to the guidelines on his blog, specifying the rules for distribution of derivative works; In here he states: *“Recently, the number of derivative works have steadily been increasing as commercial works are released”* (ZUN, 2011). Most noticeably, the guidelines included restriction on “sales that exceed the distribution reach of the original works (typically the reach of doujin distribution channels, for instance download sales sites primarily aimed at the foreign market”, with examples such as the Xbox 360 indie store and mobile app stores, although the restrictions also applied to Steam (ZUN, 2011). In 2015, ZUN collaborated with the publisher Playism to digitally release his 14<sup>th</sup> mainline title in the Touhou franchise, for the first-time distributing works for global consumption since the inception of the series in 1996. In 2019, the game was released on Steam, with additional publishing of the following instalments up till the newest release, Touhou 17. Following the Steam releases, ZUN greenlit the option for other authors to publish Touhou Project derivative works digitally in an interview with IGN, saying that “if I’ve [published works through Steam], it’s probably not a problem for other people to do it too, so I think they can” (Imai, 2018). Since ZUN greenlit digital publication of Touhou derivative works, doujin circles have published their Touhou related games on Steam (see figure below). Furthermore, some doujin developers distribute their games with the help of the publishers such as Playism, and in 2016, Sony collaborated with ZUN to distribute Touhou derivative works as well as other doujin titles through their *Play, Doujin!* distribution service (Burleson, 2016)

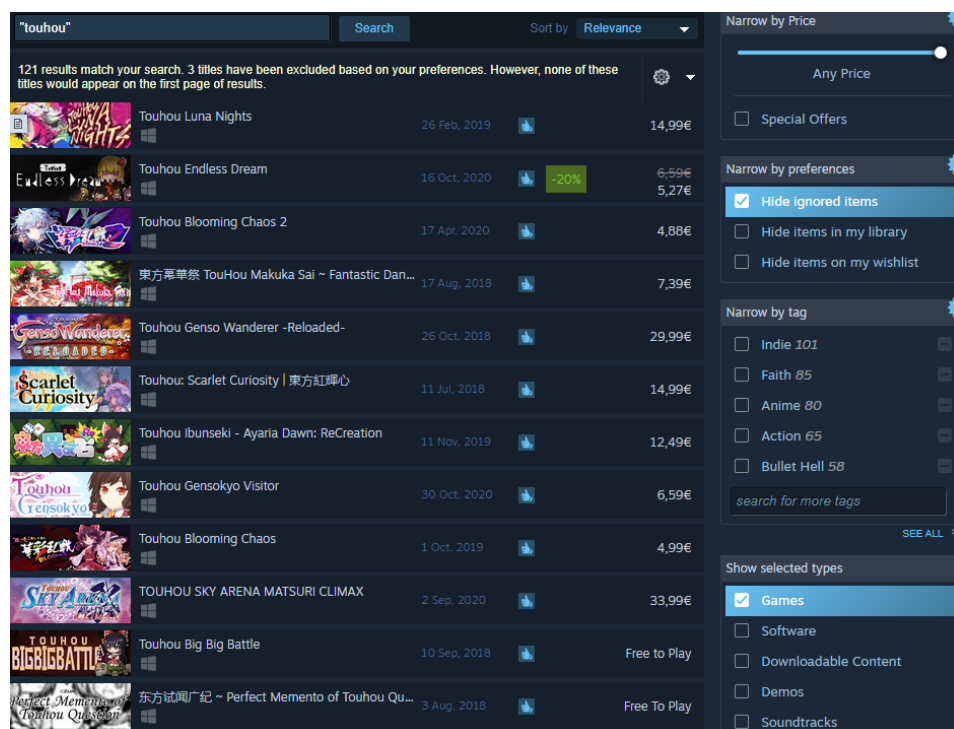


Figure 23: Results of a search on "Touhou" on Steam, showcasing the high quantity of Touhou derivative works released digitally since ZUN greenlit digital distribution. SOURCE: ([https://store.steampowered.com/search/?sort\\_by=\\_ASC&term=%22touhou%22&category1=998](https://store.steampowered.com/search/?sort_by=_ASC&term=%22touhou%22&category1=998))

It should be noted that ZUN still maintains some restrictions on Touhou derivative works, particularly when it comes to financing. In 2015, the developer *From Soy Sauce* attempted to crowdfund the money to produce a Touhou game. Afterwards the crowdfunding project was shut down and ZUN's copyright representative provided the following reason: *"Though it is not technically written in policy, [...] crowd funding is not recognized as a valid means to support a project because it is an investment and those investment methods are not tolerated"* (Knight, 2015). In other words, ZUN currently allows increased access to digital distribution channels and assistance from publishers yet maintains that doujin works based on his intellectual property must be completely self-financed, even to the extent that crowdfunding is not allowed. Regardless, the global market has easier access to Touhou derivative games than ever before through wider distribution channels, and doujin Touhou game developers can therefore more easily profit off the global market.

The increase in distribution of Touhou works raises the question of why ZUN changed his stance on digital distribution to begin with. ZUN himself rejects the notion that the shift in his attitude towards digital distribution is caused by a personal change by stating the following:

*"Well, I don't think I have changed very much myself. If I had to give a reason, I think the surrounding environment has changed and I have had to adapt to it. In particular, even if you buy CDs, you are not guaranteed that computers have CD drives attached anymore, right? [...] Until now I've kept talking about doujin distribution exclusively, but now I don't know what doujin distribution is anymore. So as long as the distribution format is within my capabilities to manage, I think anything goes"* (Imai, 2018).

The quote above stresses a structural shift in his surrounding environment rather than a change in his personal values or views on doujin. From ZUN's perspective, the structural shift is centred on evolution of technology, noting that physical distribution via CDs is becoming increasingly less viable which, of course, has a substantial impact on doujin game developers who traditionally have relied on physical distribution. Doujin developers are now gradually being pushed towards releasing their games digitally, even if they hold no interest in global distribution and only wish to distribute their games to their existing doujin player-bases. In other words, to maintain the existing scale of distribution (however small), doujin developers must adapt to technological advancements, even if such adaptations entail expanding distribution to a global market rather than purely releasing within doujin culture.

However, from ZUN's perspective, the ways in which doujin is turning into indies is not only technological in nature. In a different interview, ZUN states: *"When the indie wave came into this world, I guess, doujin was able to jump on this indie wave and bandwagon into a more mainstream audience"* (Mackey, 2016). When using the words 'indie wave', it seems likely that ZUN is referencing the surge of popular western indie games released from 2008 onwards from developers such as Edmund McMillen and Jonathan Blow. Therefore, the change in doujin is stimulated by the commercial and critical success of Western developers who have popularized the indie concept in the Japanese game development scene.

### 7.1.2 Discursive Engagement with the Global Market

ZUN's engagement with the global market is not purely limited to digital distribution but is also expressed in the way in which he has participated in international contexts in recent years. For example, in July 2016, ZUN visited the *Anime Expo* convention held in Los Angeles along with a few other doujin developers, for the first time meeting his American audience outside of Japan (NISAmerica, 2016). In an interview in August the same year, he expressed difficulty in believing his popularity abroad:

*"I never expected it, even to this day, I don't understand why there are so many fans. Even though my games are set in Japan, often it's difficult for Japanese speakers to understand. This makes it even harder for me to understand how I have so many non-Japanese fans"*  
(Lopez, 2016).

Indeed, ZUN's expectation that non-Japanese consumers would be unable to understand the series is reasonable, given that the setting of the franchise is steeped in references to Japanese folklore, Shintoism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Nonetheless, ZUN likely underestimated the popular appeal of anime and manga culture abroad as well as the marketing potential of Touhou derivative works such as the viral spread of music arrangements on YouTube.

Since ZUN's change in stance towards global distribution, he has actively engaged with other Japanese and Western indie game developers, for instance through interviews with indie developers in game related media and through presentations and panel discussions at events such as BitSummit (Conditt, 2014; Denfaminicogamer, 2018). Featuring in presentations with topics such as "Is it possible to spread our indie game to the world", ZUN positions himself as an indie developer in contexts related to global distribution, while simultaneously maintaining his position as a doujin author and affirming the distinction between doujin and indie works in other contexts.

### 7.1.3 Prioritizing Users over the Developer?

One of the most frequently stated difference between doujin and indie games that is stressed in doujin discourse is that doujin developers can, or even must, prioritize themselves over users, whereas indie game developers always must prioritize users to increase sales and revenue (Hichibe & Tanaka, 2016, p.60). Based on ZUN's own statements, he seems to agree with this distinction: In an interview where he was asked about the difficulties in transitioning from doujin to indies, ZUN responded:

*"Since doujin is more free-form, people can do [things] exactly the way they want, but, [when it comes to] the gaming industry, there's rules that they have to follow. So, they can't do the things that they always want to do, and sometimes they're forced to do things that they don't want to do"* (Mackey, 2016).

Therefore, it should be questioned whether the increases global distribution of doujin games influences the game developers to prioritize users over their own creative vision, resulting in changes in game design traits.

In the case of ZUN's own productions, there have been no noticeable changes to the franchise since the 14<sup>th</sup> entry of the series was released through Playism, even to the extent that the global releases have not been localized into other languages (therefore requiring free downloadable fan-made patches for non-Japanese speakers to understand). The franchise retains its focus on the bullet-hell genre, highly difficult gameplay, and narratives rooted in Japanese cultural references. In terms of globally released derivative games based on ZUN's productions, a mostly similar case can be made. For example, the visual novel genre, a genre predominantly popular within Japan and rarely used in western indie games, is still mostly used to convey the narratives, for instance seen in the Touhou game *Genso Wanderer*. The main change to Touhou derivative works made after their global releases is arguably their localization into other languages, a process not conducted by the developers themselves, but by publishers such as Playism. Yet it is hard to argue that localization alone constitutes a significant change to the core production. In summary, the doujin games that have been subjected to digital distribution do not exhibit any indications that the developers have prioritized global users over their creative visions by changing their productions to match a different target audience.

## 7.2 The Growing Japanese Indie Scene

The statement 'doujin are turning into indie' does not necessarily apply to prior doujin developers who target their games at global audiences. Rather, it can refer to a growing Japanese indie field that allows developers to follow indie production values and practices as an alternative to producing doujin works.

For instance, the Japanese games *Cave Story* and *La-Mulana* are currently categorized as indie games. However, they were released in the years 2004 and 2005 respectively, prior to the western indie boom in 2008 and to the inception of Japanese indie game conventions such as BitSummit. Their release also came prior to the general popularity of the term "indie game", either in Japan or the west., and the games were not released for commercial consumption, but rather as free online downloads and therefore used to be categorized as so-called 'freeware' productions during a time when the term indie had not gained much traction. Yet despite the lack of commercial motivations exhibited by the developers at the time, the games were not doujin either: Even though they were self-funded, self-published and developed by singular developers, they were not released through doujin distribution channels.

Today, both *Cave Story* and *La-Mulana* have seen commercial remakes and rereleases on both PC and consoles with the help of the respective publishers *Nicolas* and *Playism*. Both developers have continued to produce games for commercial consumption with the entry *La-Mulana 2* opting for the modern crowdfunding financing method, which did not exist during the release of the first game.

The cases of Cave Story and La-Mulana shows the changes in independent game development practices that have occurred since the mid-2000s, a time before the 2008 indie game boom during which digital, commercial distribution only existed to a limited extent and during which indie games received limited market attention. Of course, physical distribution of games is more costly than digital distribution, meaning that small-scale games like La-Mulana were unprofitable commercial investments for publishers. As access to digital distribution has grown and indie games have received more attention among consumers, commercializing independent games has become a viable strategy, even to the extent that games which used to be freeware have become commercialized.

Beyond the commercialization of older freeware games, Japanese indie games have received more attention in Western discourse through an indie section at the *Tokyo Game Show* convention, as well as the convention *BitSummit*, which is dedicated exclusively to indie games. However, the notion of a growing Japanese indie game field and its success on the global market should not be exaggerated, since Japanese indie games generally receive little global attention. For instance, an English Wikipedia entry that lists ‘notable’ indie game developers only features four developers from Japan, two of which are ZUN and the creator of Cave Story. In comparison, the list notes 78 notable developers from the United States, 23 from the UK, 16 from Canada, 13 from Sweden and 12 from the Czech Republic (“List of indie game developers,” n.d.). Even though the list is merely a community made Wikipedia article with a likely bias slanted towards English speaking developers, the list showcases the way in which Japanese indie game developers are not receiving a large amount of attention from the English-speaking consumer market. Furthermore, Western media discourse on the indie game field in Japan often include Western expat developers living in Japan rather than exclusively on Japanese developers (Bailey, 2020; Ferrero, 2016).

Therefore, when the growing indie game development field in Japan is mentioned in the discourse, it is recommendable to view it more as a gradual evolution than a radical shift. In other words, the North American ‘indie game boom’ from 2008 that brought media and commercial attention to indie games and their developers has not occurred in Japan.

Nevertheless, a growing number of native indie game developers do exist in Japan. For instance, Ojiro Fumoto’s hybrid-roguelight game *Downwell* has received a user reception on Steam summarized as ‘overwhelmingly positive’ and a critical score average of 81% on the review aggregate website *Metacritic* (“Downwell,” 2015). The game’s design fits well into the design philosophy of Western indie game productions, notably by belonging to the hybrid-roguelike genre, featuring an emphasis on difficulty and a nostalgic, pixel art return to the 8-bit visual style of games from the 80s, and finally is designed around minimalism wherein the core mechanics are taught purely through experimentation.

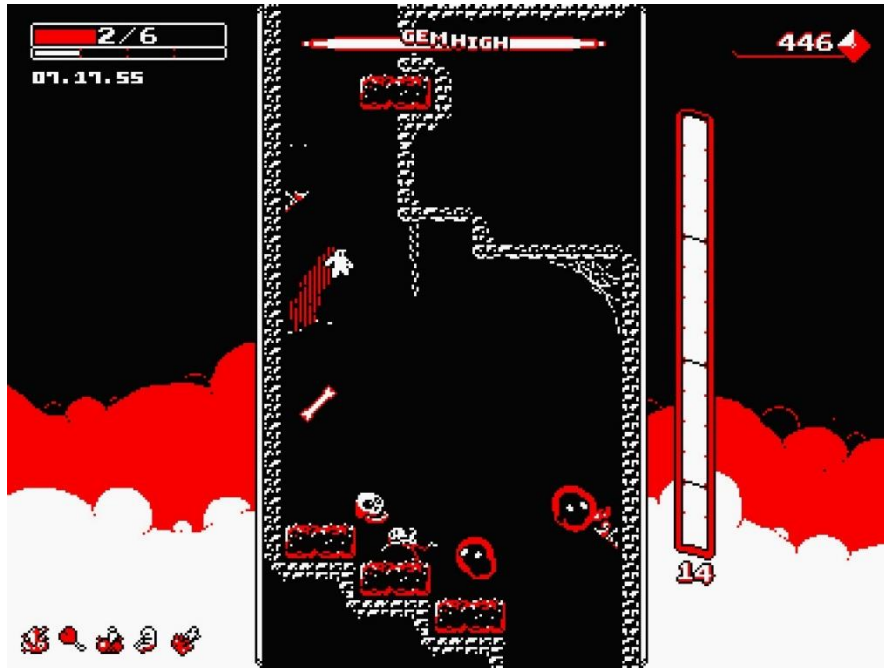


Figure 14: Screenshot of Fumoto's Downwell. Source: (Steam Store)

Conventions such as BitSummit and the success of individual indie games like Downwell can inspire other developers to follow suit. For instance, an article from the media website *Variety* based on an interview with commercial game developer *Shinnosuke Ohashi* states that he was “*enamored by the atmosphere and excitement of the indie game community in Japan*” during BitSummit 2015, by then knowing that “*he had to become a member of the slowly growing community of Japanese indie game developers*”, and that Downwell in particular inspired him to pursue a career in indie games (Garst, 2018).

While the growth of Japanese indie games is slow and gradual, the field is nevertheless expanding. As Ohashi states: “*I’ve talked to more programming students and I’ve started to notice a change [...] Several of them have told me that they want to be indie developers now*”, whereas before “*joining a company like Nintendo has always been their end game*” (Garst, 2018). Considering Bourdieu’s point regarding how changing the world requires changing the “*vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced*”, it seems like the structures are slowly but surely changing, producing new Japanese actors that are more open-minded about the possibilities of pursuing indie game development than ever before.

### 7.3 Changes that Enable the Japanese Indie Game Field

The construction and expansion of the indie game development field is not an automatic or random process but is rather a dynamic shift that logically follows from structural changes and influences from various actors in the field. This section will aim to briefly examine key influencing factors that have had an impact on the development of Japanese indie game development, including the role of publishers and convention events, and how the commercial category of ‘big indies’ can inspire aspiring indie game developers.

### 7.3.1 Indie Game Conventions and Publishers

The recent growth of a Japanese indie game development field has been enabled by commercial actors, in particular publishers and conventions. For instance, the publisher *Playism* describe their goals in the following way:

*“So we basically help Japanese indie developers get their games localized and released in the west, and we also work with western indie developers to get their games localized and released in Japan [...] We saw how successful indie games were overseas, and we saw that in Japan it was a completely different situation. They were still struggling, going to Comic Market and trying to sell games over the counter [...] and we saw that if we could help them expand into the West, that would just help the gaming industry in general in Japan”* (Ferrero, 2016, 19:00).

The quote from Playism is unfortunate given the apparent lack of understanding of the doujin developers they help publish, for instance exemplified by the fact that some of the doujin developers they have helped publish in the West such as *Aquastyle* are still ‘struggling’ by selling games over the counter at Comiket, despite being ‘helped’ by Playism. Indeed, the quote exemplifies the modern ‘Western ethos’ and developmental attitude of indies where the primary metric of success is commercial gains, which is directly antithetical to traditional doujin values. Regardless, publishers like Playism have capitalized on what has otherwise been a lack of interest in Japanese indie games, providing a space for Japanese indie developers to attain commercial success that generally cannot be acquired from the largely uninterested domestic Japanese market.

A second noteworthy organization that garners attention from the Japanese indie game field is the inception of Japanese conventions that provide a space for Japanese developers to showcase their games, most noteworthy the *BitSummit* event established by the American *James Mielke*. BitSummit describes its own goal of globalizing Japanese indie games clearly in the following description of the event:

*“Established in late-2012, BitSummit was founded with the goal of giving Japanese independent game makers a chance to show their games to the world, and we succeeded, growing from a small, industry-only event for around 200 people in 2013, to a groundbreaking festival that held court to over 11,000 people in 2018* (BitSummit, n.d.).

The BitSummit convention is especially noteworthy because it has attracted the attention of “leading industry companies” including Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo, and claims to be “covered by every leading gaming website around the world” (BitSummit, n.d.). However, the description of the event is also misleading, as made apparent in the following quote:

*“A survey of the games featured at BitSummit reveals that most of the developers are not from Japan, but in his GDC talk in 2014, Mielke made it clear that a priority of BitSummit is to educate Japanese developers to be as globally aware and as economically and artistically ambitious as Western indies. Rather than being a space for Japanese developers to showcase*



*their work, it is a space for Western indies to show the Japanese how it's done*" (Vogel, 2017, p. 36).

In large part, a central focus of the BitSummit convention is to allow Western indie game developers or commercial companies like *Valve* who own the digital distribution platform *Steam* to hold presentations that outline the best ways to reach commercial and global success on the indie scene. Nonetheless, commercial companies like Nintendo and Sony likely do not choose to sponsor the event and engage in educational presentations to be charitable, but rather because they hope that their investments will eventually turn a profit once Japanese developers more frequently make commercially successful games (which of course will be distributed through Nintendo and Sony's consoles). Moreover, the BitSummit event does ultimately provide more media attention unto Japanese indie game titles and provides a free source of marketing to the developers featured at the event, which can aid the commercial success of Japanese indie developers in the future.

### 7.3.2 Big Indies

'Big indies' is a category that challenges the ideas that indie developers must exhibit low production values and small development teams, and that traits associated with indie games, such as critique of mainstream games and a focus on creative expressions by developers, must stem from non-commercial games. In terms of Hichibe and Tanaka's framework, each game that I categorize as big indies contain some of the traits of both indie and commercial games. For instance, they can be games with relatively large production and distribution scales that simultaneously are experimental, innovative, or critique the mainstream market as a central element of their promotional materials.

While big indies are theoretically interesting because they challenge the distinctions between indies and mainstream productions, they are also capable of impacting the development of the indie production field in Japan by encouraging other aspiring game developers to pursue indie development. Firstly, the developers responsible for big indie titles are often famous game developers who have previously achieved critical acclaim in the commercial industry only to later quit their jobs, ostensibly in pursuit of creative freedom. In other words, they are high-status individuals with a substantial degree of symbolic capital, who not only frequently critique mainstream game development in words, but also through their actions by refusing to work commercially. New, aspiring game developers who admire these big indie developers, sometimes even having grown up with their 90s commercially released productions, are arguably more likely to pursue indie game development, since even their icons have seemingly rejected the mainstream. Secondly, the large scale of production, distribution, and in some cases, marketing allows these developers a sizable outreach compared to smaller production teams.

The following section will briefly examine two cases that can arguably be categorized as big indies, albeit in very different ways: Firstly, Hidetaka Miyazaki's *Demon Souls*, a commercial game made with a large degree of creative freedom as it was expected to be a commercial failure. Secondly, Koji Igarashi's *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, a hugely

successful crowdfunded project which was based on a concept that his company, *Konami*, rejected. And finally, Koji Igarashi's *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, a hugely successful crowdfunded project which was based on a concept that his company, *Konami*, rejected.

### 7.3.2.1 Igarashi, Kickstarter, and *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*

In 2014, the Japanese game producer, *Koji Igarashi*, most famous for his contributions to the *Castlevania* series in the 1990s and 2000s, left the company *Konami*, stating "*I've decided to break out on my own to have the freedom to make the kind of games I really want to make – the same kind I think fans of my past games want as well*" (Ashcraft, 2014). In 2015, Igarashi launched a campaign on the website *Kickstarter*, wherein consumers can crowdfund projects before they get to the production phase. His *Kickstarter* project, *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, required an amount of \$500,000 to be successfully funded, but managed to receive more than 5.5 million dollars in funding, thereby taking the record for the most successfully funded game on *Kickstarter* at the time (GameCentral, 2015).

Igarashi's *Kickstarter* project illustrates an interesting case of an indie game production that is technically financially independent from publishers and large corporations alike, yet achieves funds that far exceed those typically allocated to the average indie development team. Nevertheless, the project was still dependent upon the financial backers who had funded the project and it was thus also obligated to fulfil the various pledge promises of the campaign. For instance, consumers who had pledged \$1,500 or more would have digitally painted portraits of them appear in the game, and consumers who had pledged \$3,500 or more would have their pets converted into enemies in the game, which are game elements that unlikely would have appeared if the game had not been funded through *Kickstarter* (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/iga/bloodstained-ritual-of-the-night>). Furthermore, the project's success was likely partially caused by nostalgia towards Igarashi's earlier produced games such as *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. *Bloodstained* mimics several aspects of Igarashi's earlier *Castlevania* products, such as the 2D metroidvania gameplay (where you infiltrate a Gothic castle), the ongoing progression through levelling with item collection, and the general patterns of enemy behaviour.

Such financial dependence upon *Kickstarter* backers can produce limitations on the creative scope of products, as developers are only able to produce works that are likely to be funded and because a variety of *Kickstarter* goals that reward financial benefactors will risk altering the product away from developer creative intentions. As Igarashi states himself:

*"My current game, Bloodstained, is of course the game I want to make, but I'm thinking about the users while I make it. How to make them, my fans, happy. I often wonder if making something for the players is really indie. Based on that, I don't know if I'm indie or not"*  
(Ferrero, 2016, 1:10:23).

On the other hand, the highly successful funding through *Kickstarter* provided the necessary funds for Igarashi to increase the scope of the game in accordance with his vision, for instance by including extra content such as new bosses, a second and third playable

character, and a higher difficulty mode. The massive funding also allowed Igarashi to outsource aspects of the development to other companies, such as *Wayforward* and *DICO* that helped create assets and level design as well as polish the game, while *Inti Creates* crafted the retro inspired prequel to *Bloodstained* that was promised as a Kickstarter reward (Grubb, 2018; Meister, 2017). Given his larger scale of production than the average indie developer, Igarashi himself comments the following on his own position between the mainstream and indie:

*“Now, when I think about where I’m situated in the indie scene [...] I think it’d be disrespectful to those working hard in the indie scene to say that I was an indie developer. If I’m not indie or mainstream, then I guess I’m somewhere in the middle. Talking to someone from overseas, they introduced me to the idea of Big Indies. So if that exists as a category, then I guess I’m in it”* (Ferrero, 2016, 1:09:28).

Even though Igarashi does not position himself fully as an indie developer, he seems to fit the definition according to most characteristics of the term, as he ‘self-funded’ the development through crowdfunding, maintained creative rights over the production, and released a type of game that was rejected by mainstream commercial developers. Of course, it is likely that Igarashi’s financial achievement was contingent upon his prior fame, a condition that does not apply to the far majority of indie game developers. Yet simultaneously, the fact that Igarashi is a well-known and respected name in the game industry also promoted the story of *Bloodstained* in news outlets, spreading a narrative of successful crowdfunding that can provide an inspirational tale for aspiring Japanese indie game developers.

### 7.3.2.2 *Hidetaka Miyazaki and Demon Souls*

The commercial game, ‘*Demon Souls*’, provides an example of a commercial game published by Sony which features traits associated with indie games. During early development, the studio *FromSoftware* lost sight of what to do with the project. Consequently, graduate coder *Hidetaka Miyazaki* was allowed complete creative control of the project since the game was considered a commercial failure before it was fully produced. As Miyazaki states: *“I figured if I could find a way to take control of the game, I could turn it into anything I wanted. Best of all, if my ideas failed, nobody would care – it was already a failure”* (Parkin, 2020). The result of his influence provided a stark contrast to many tropes found in mainstream games: The normally explicit, clear storytelling of roleplaying games with a goal of saving the world is replaced by a narrative with only implicit and subtle references to lore, with no clear indication of the player’s ultimate goal. Moreover, the power fantasy trope is rejected by the game’s difficulty, which provides a gruelling experience that heavily penalizes mistakes, a *“design at odds with the industry-wide trend for simplification”* (Parkin, 2020). As expected, the game was a commercial failure at first, with only 20 thousand copies sold in the first week (Parkin, 2020). Yet as players acclimatized to the experience, the popularity of the game grew. Its sequel, *Dark Souls*, outsold *Demon Souls* within a week, and Miyazaki was soon after promoted to president of the studio (Parkin, 2020).

The case of Miyazaki and *Demon Souls* is relevant for three main reasons: Firstly, it exemplifies how commercial, large-scale game productions can contain few creative restrictions if certain requirements are met, in this case that the game was considered a failure early in development. In contrast, the small-scale indie game like *Super Meat Boy* was made as a ‘safer’ project with more restrictions, since the developer was financially reliant upon the success of the game, showcasing that the initial budgetary costs are not always indicators of the degree of creative freedom that developers hold. Secondly, the case of Miyazaki can constitute an inspiring narrative: A boy who grew up in semi-poverty, who switched careers toward video game development at the age of 29, and who was promoted to president of the company within 10 years due to the popularity of his unique, creative vision, eventually reaching global acclaim even to the extent of receiving a Game of the Year awards (Parkin, 2020). For aspiring video game developers, the narrative of Miyazaki can represent the ultimate story of success in the video game industry. Thirdly, Miyazaki’s franchise shares many characteristics with indie games, for instance seen in the emphasis on difficulty or in the use of metroidvania style exploration. Therefore, commercial, successful game franchises like *Demon Souls* can help popularize characteristics that are prominent among indie games, thereby increasing consumer interests in indie games.

## 8 Transnational Difficulties and Possibilities of Japanese Indies

### 8.1 Challenges to the Rise of Japanese Indie Games

Many Japanese indie game developers find it necessary to expand to the global market given that indie games are a new and largely unrecognized phenomenon within Japan and are therefore unlikely to succeed domestically. For instance, game developer Yoshiro Kimura says that “[there] aren’t many Japanese people who want to play indie games yet. That’s why I think we have to be more international. Look abroad” (Ferrero, 2016, 1:17:10). Similarly, developer *Keiji Inafune* states the following:

*“I hope that [Japanese] society will evolve to better acknowledge talent. Right now I think we value entrepreneurs and those who make it big the most. People who make amazing movies, or anime, or games... I don’t think Japan values those people that much right now. I mean, they’re more appreciated abroad”* (Ferrero, 2016, 36:42)

In other words, Japanese indie game developers must engage in global distribution not because they can be more profitable by expanding their target audience to the global market, but because they do not have a sufficiently large target audience domestically, which necessitates global distribution to cover their investments and make any profits.

Expanding distribution to the global market presents Japanese indie game developers with one central challenge that English-speaking developers are unimpeded by, namely the crossing of language barriers. As Japanese developer Nan says: “*If we all had a perfect grasp of English, then we’d happily look abroad*”, implying that the lack of English proficiency prohibits Japanese developers from global expansion (Ferrero, 2016, 1:12:00). The issue manifests itself in two ways: Firstly, Japanese indie games must be localized into English

(and potentially other languages) to be commercially successful globally. Secondly, Japanese developers may find it more difficult to advertise themselves and their productions in the English-speaking market, particularly given the need for continual social media presence and networking prominent in the marketing approach of Western indie game developers.

Localization can pose varying degrees of challenges depending on the product to be localized. For instance, minimalist games such as *Downwell* contain no narrative or dialogue, thus making the only aspects of the game that require translation the game navigation and tutorials, causing the expected localization costs to be negligible. On the other hand, a single Japanese visual novel games can sometimes contain a Japanese word count equivalent to multiple book novels, making localization costs unfeasible for developers with small budgets.

As for marketing, this is a more universal language issue independent of which game genre is produced. For example, it is likely not a coincidence that out of all the Japanese indie game developers featured in the documentary *Branching Paths*, the one who has received the most attention in the West is the developer of *Downwell*, *Ojiro Fumoto*, who has lived in New Zealand for five years and speaks fluent English (Vogel, 2017, p. 41). Indeed, Fumoto has actively used his English language proficiency to market not only his game, but also himself as a developer, to the global market in similar ways as seen with Western indie game developers, for instance by holding presentations pertaining to game design (GDC, 2016). In an increasingly saturated digital indie game marketplace that stresses the promotion of the author as well as the products, it will be difficult for Japanese designers to stand out merely by marketing themselves through visual material such as game trailers and screenshots or by outsourcing marketing to publishers. While conventions as BitSummit help in the promotion of Japanese indie games, such events are still held in a predominantly Japanese context, thereby losing the attention of Western audiences that largely focus on Western game conventions such as Pax.

A second, non-linguistic issue that Japanese doujin game developers may face when distributing their games globally is the issue of copyright brought up in section 4.3: *The Comic Market and the Rise of Derivative Works*. For instance, if doujin developers distribute their games globally through the help of a publisher, and if the terms of contract require creative and IP rights transferred to the publisher, the publisher may restrict other doujin derivative works that are based on the franchise against the interests of the original developer. This scenario is more likely, given the nature of global distribution: Since doujin works are generally distributed domestically within Japan, they do not provide the positive externality as an efficient marketing tool to the same degree that they do domestically. Yet doujin works still carry the negative externality concerning loss of creative control by the publisher, potentially leading to digitally distributed imagery that can tarnish the value of not only specific products, but the publishing brand as a whole. The result is a potential conflict of interests between community driven doujin values and the financial interests of publishers, where doujin game developers consequently must position themselves firmly as either doujin or indie developers.

## 8.2 Potential of Japanese Indie Games

While there are many challenges to be overcome for Japanese indie games to reach commercial success on the global market, there are also advantages that Japanese developers can capitalize on. Firstly, many popular western indie games draw inspiration from Japanese game titles and have appropriated elements of their associated game traits, indicating that there already exists a western target audience for the types of products that certain types of Japanese indie developers wish to release. Secondly, the global popularity of Japanese manga and anime culture means that audiences exist who specifically search for Japanese popular cultural productions, which can generate interest in indie games.

In section 7.2: *The Growing Japanese Indie Scene*, the Japanese games *Cave Story* and *La-Mulana* were mentioned as examples of Japanese games that were both popular and influential in the West. The two games share characteristics with (and likely helped to popularize) contemporary Western indie game traits including among other things: A nostalgic return to the 2d style of games popular in the 90s, difficult gameplay, metroidvania style exploration, integration of puzzles into the platform genre, and pixel art aesthetics. When compared to Western indie games that share many similar traits, such as the games *Hollow Knight* and *Ori and the Blind Forest*, it becomes readily apparent that there are overlaps between Western and Japanese popular indie game traits as both game markets have drawn inspiration from one another. Consequently, subsections of Japanese indie games already have an established target audience overseas, which can potentially be translated into commercial gains provided that Japanese indie games receive greater attention in the West.

Another example of a popular Japanese game trait being incorporated into Western indie games is the appropriation of the Japanese originating bullet-hell genre into a variety of Western produced indie games, including *The Binding of Isaac*, *Nuclear Throne*, *Enter the Gungeon*, *Just Shapes and Beats*, and *Beat Hazard*. None of the successful western games mentioned above are true bullet-hell games mechanically: The first three combine bullet-hell game mechanic with hybrid roguelike mechanics, and the final two are music games wherein the density and speed of the bullet patterns are determined by the intensity of the music, thereby merging bullet hell with other Western popular game genres. Moreover, none of the games are centred around anime- or manga art styles – the first three games are to some degree based on *Pixel Art*, and the final two are visually abstract. As such, none of the games exclude target audiences who find anime and manga art styles unappealing. Given the prevalence of Japanese indie games such as *Downwell* that are also visually built around either pixel or abstract art, Japanese indie game developers can possibly combine genres such as bullet-hell with visual art styles that hold wider global appeal.

A second way in which Japanese game developers can receive global success is to capitalize on Western interests in Japanese manga and anime culture. Indeed, even Western indie game developers have in some cases capitalized on manga styles with titles such as *Doki Doki Literature Club* and *Momodora: Reverie under the Moonlight*, showcasing the globalized popularity of the visual approach. Some Japanese doujin and indie games with manga styles have already proven to be successful overseas, including *Touhou Project*, *Astebreed*, and *Corpse Party*. In the future, more may follow as manga, anime and game fans

overseas look to the country with the most saturated quantity of manga style titles to satiate their interests. However, doujin artists who have already acquired symbolic recognition based on productions such as *Tsukihime* that are easily convertible into anime or manga series may instead attain larger financial success by choosing the commercial route rather than pursuing indie games.

## 9 Conclusion

Two primary characteristics of traditional doujin game development culture was identified in the examination of the discourse surrounding and concerning the field: Firstly, the stress on community building through communication by creative works, and secondly an emphasis on the lack of financial motivations involved in their productions. The stress on community is particularly accentuated by the prevalence of derivative works, notably of the franchises *Tsukihime* and *Touhou Project*, a characteristic that is mostly absent in indie game productions. The lack of financial motivations is expressed in the way in which such motivations are viewed as antithetical to creative expression and freedom in doujin culture. Yet despite the anti-commercial nature of doujin ideology, doujin game discourse and productions do not seem to exhibit major resistance or critique of mainstream productions.

On the other hand, contemporary Western indie game discourse does not pose a clear delineation between hobbyist and indie production practices, but rather includes hobbyist productions as a subcategory of indies. Regardless, the Western discourse on indies does stress financially successful developers and the general ambition of pursuing game development as a main occupation. Western indie game discourse and productions also emphasize critique of the commercial industry, either through statements by the developers or through game design that subverts characteristics generally found in mainstream productions, thereby showcasing a direct form of resistance towards the meanings found in mass culture. Many of these forms of critique include authorial meaning in the production, particular through various forms of creative expressions or provocative messages. However, those mass cultural critiques are not necessarily anti-commercial in nature since they can be used to appeal to niche audiences and can therefore be exchanged for economic capital.

The proposition that doujin are turning into indies can be viewed in two ways: First, doujin game developers are turning towards indie production practices in their doujin activities. Moreover, there are growing opportunities for Japanese indie game developers, resulting in a higher quantity of developers choosing indie productions over doujin practices.

The notion that doujin developers are adopting more indie game development practices generally holds true in two ways: Firstly, the use globalized, digital distribution has led to an increasing number of doujin works being commercially released for global consumption. Secondly, doujin developers such as ZUN position themselves as indie developers in specific contexts such as the convention BitSummit. However, such developers are still active in doujin game development with no major changes to their productions beyond localization, meaning that globalization of their productions is not mutually exclusive with their doujin activities.

The growing opportunities for Japanese indie game developers is clearly seen in cases such as *La-Mulana* and *Cave Story*, games published for free in the mid-2000s that are now released commercially as indie products. Indeed, conventions such as BitSummit and publishers such as Playism are helping to promote the Japanese indie game market, both overseas to global consumers and to help convince Japanese game developers to pursue the indie market. Furthermore, prominent Japanese game developers who used to make famous commercial titles have chosen to quit their professional jobs in recent years in order to pursue indie game development, pushing the narrative that producing indie games is preferable to a job in the commercial industry. Yet despite the growing Japanese indie game market, the change is a slow rather than radical change with few successes at the level of the Western market.

One reason for the slow change is arguably language barriers, which poses issues both in regard to localization and digital marketing for Japanese developers, a challenge which English-speaking developers are unimpeded by. While the use of publishers or outsourcing localization and marketing to other companies can help to alleviate such issues, both options often come at a price, both literally in terms of economic investments and figuratively in terms of restrictions on creativity and disputes over intellectual property rights.

Yet there is also potential hope to be found in the Japanese indie game production field: Due to the cross-cultural inspirations between Japanese and Western games since the 90s, Japanese games often contain characteristic traits that are popular among Western consumers and which have already been appropriated into the Western indie game market, most of which do not involve language that have to be translated. Furthermore, there is already an established interest in Japanese anime and manga culture among a subsection of Western consumers, which may be leveraged for further economic gains among Japanese indie game developers in the future.



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