# The Empowering Playground: The Rise of Feminist Ideology in Female-Leading Indie Game Community

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, video game studies have observed an increasing enchantment with indie games, which serve as a cultural, societal, and ideological counterpoint to mainstream and commercial compositions (Lipkin, 2012). Felan Parker's claim in 2013 that the historical research concerning amateurs, enthusiasts, hobbyists, fans, and shareware, constitutes the least developed facet of indie game studies (p. 3). This gap, however, has seen amelioration in recent years as scholars have begun to construct the global indie game mosaic through regional (Pelletier, 2022; Zeiler & Mukherjee, 2022), community (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011), engine (Fiadotau, 2019; Hurel, 2016), and ethnographic (Pelletier, 2022) studies. However, discussions regarding female hobbyists and communities still need to be expanded.

While academia still regards female creators as a rapidly expanding, yet emergent minority in indie game creation in particular (Westecott, 2012) and the game development industry in general, ironically, it is observed that the female-leading indie game community represented by *Chengguang Games*[1] has become, by the numbers only, the world's largest indie game community, boasting over 1.6 million titles – quadrupling the volume of *itch.io* (Isabella Jiangcheng, 2022). In fact, female creators, especially in visual novel communities, have commanded a significant lead in terms of creation and influence since 2013.

The indie game development is intimately tied to programming, technology, hardcore, and otaku cultures which is often considered a male-dominated domain. Female creators' roles and aspirations are, therefore, often stereotypically overlooked, let alone sustained attention to their evolving aesthetics, worldviews, and feminist ideologies. Research on *Chengguang Games* have predominantly focused on business models and marketing strategies (see Wang, 2018; Cheng & Mao, 2019; Zhou, 2019; Cao, 2020; Xiong, 2022), or on specific game titles (see Dong, 2016; Qiu, 2016; Wang & Ye, 2021), with few exceptions such as Sun Jing's study on players and the platform (2017). This research adopts an alternative

approach by scrutinizing the game paratext, specifically, the creators' statements and commentaries on the meaning and emotional resonance of their work. This research believes that such paratexts are direct, credible articulations of the creators' ambitions, offering an authentic reflection of their emotional design considerations, and aims to explore the evolving feminist ideology, value system, and aesthetic dynamics as reflected in contemporary Chinese female-oriented indie games.

**FINDINGS**

The preliminary phase of this research defragmented 37 titles from the *2022 Hall of Fame Works*[2]. By analyzing genres, settings, endings, authorial statements, and comments, four major findings emerge:

First, the indie game subcultural community is evolving into a unique playground and "magic circle" for female prosumers, where they can safely explore (sexual) fantasies that may appear less virtuous in real life. This phenomenon can be commonly observed in mainstream otome games that allow for simultaneous romantic interactions with multiple characters. However, recent female-oriented indie games show an increasing diversity in the number and a decreasing constraint in the gender of romanceable characters, as evidenced by *Ni Neng Huo Dao Di Ji Ji* ("How Long Can You Survive?", Haoguniang Gongzuoshi, 2022), which features over 34 interactive characters (both male and female), ensuring that each character is a viable "romantic option" with respective narrative endings. Furthermore, the community facilitates a safe refuge to place their deviant part of identities. It fosters a cultural ethos characterized by a robust tolerance and support for nonconformist expressions, as manifested in jargon such as 双不洁[3] ("mutual impurity") and 逆后宫[4] ("reverse harem").

Second, the players' cameos as NPCs have become a prevalent interactive storytelling strategy. Active players engage through in-game purchases or donations, leaving extensive feedback, or writing fan fiction, and are selected to cast as NPCs using their chosen IDs and portraits (sometimes customizable or provided by the player), enhancing the sense of immersion with a "part of the storyworld" experience. The number of cameo roles ranges from five to forty. In particularly popular games such as *Meishaonv, Chong Ya!* ("Go, Pretty Girl!", Ou Yang Meng, 2022), the scarcity of roles has prompted the creation of an in-game magazine to showcase the participants. This interaction has become instrumental in augmenting player engagement and fostering a metaverse-like subcultural identity.

Third, there is an enhancement of the (female) avatar's persona. Contrasting mainstream commercial and early indie otome games that presented a vague avatar to cater to broader audiences, recent indie games feature avatars with distinct, impressive personalities, making decisions with clear, strong value inclinations – even if they diverge from player expectations. Such authorial control is seen as constraining player choice but also reflects their deliberate effort to embed specific ideologies and values within the narration.

Finally, building upon the third finding, there is an escalating trend in female characters' aspirations for authority and autonomy. This trend is exemplified by the diversification of game endings, notably the increase of normal endings (NE), special endings (SE) and true endings (TE), which transcend the traditional dichotomy of

happy or bad endings tied to romantic conquests. Instead, avatar-centric stories highlight personal development and achievement of ideal life status. *Meishaonv, Chong Ya!,* for instance, presents seven romantic endings and thirty-two occupational endings without a scoring system, conveying the idea that "romance is definitely not the only choice, and every life chosen by oneself is the best ending." The gameplay shifts of replacing the affection system with the self-attribute investment system indicates a feminist awareness from the pursuit of external appreciation to a focus on self-achievement.

## DISCUSSION

In sum, this research illuminates four significant shifts in Chinese female-oriented indie games, underscoring a movement toward narrative autonomy, feminist ideologies, and player engagement. The transformation from vague avatars to characters with distinct personalities and from traditional romantic conquests to diverse lifestyles represents an empowering framework for female players. The engagement strategies, including player cameos and self-directed attribute systems, further reflect a growing feminist consciousness. These trends redefine player agency and herald a broader cultural shift within the gaming community, celebrating the evolution of this empowerment playground and its rich, nuanced contributions to the feminist expression in the indie game landscape.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Chengguang Games is a China-based, female-led visual novel indie game community and distribution platform. It is also referred to as *66RPG* or *Orange Light Games* in the English academia. This paper avoids such translations to prevent confusion with the original *66RPG* forum (a male-dominated indie game community that existed from 2005 to 2017) and because "Orange Light Games" is a literal translation not officially endorsed. See the official introduction for more information: https://www.66rpg.com/redirect/us.

[2] *Hall of Fame Works* is an annual selection by *Chengguang Games*, listing the year's most popular games that have also received official recommendations. This list has been available since 2015. Further analysis will encompass works from 2015 to 2023 to chart the evolution. For more information, please visit: https://www.66rpg.com/classic.

[3] "Mutual impurity" refers to a situation where both the male and female protagonists have had romantic and sexual relationships with other characters within the storyworld.

[4] "Reverse Harem" refers to a plot device where a single female character is the object of affection for multiple male characters. This setup is the antithesis of the traditional harem scenario, which typically features a male protagonist surrounded by several female love interests. The reverse harem highlights the female character's central role amidst various potential romantic suitors.