The Making of "Mindie" Games in China's In/Formal Network

Ningxi Guo

Centre for China Studies
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
ningxiguo@link.cuhk.edu.hk

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INTRODUCTION

In post-socialist China, small and mid-sized game developers are devising strategies to navigate the landscape shaped by fluctuating government regulations and monopolistic industry platforms. While existing literature has examined the formal impacts of institutions and major corporations upon China's gaming industry (Jiang et al. 2019; Chen et al. 2024; Cao et al. 2008), scant attention has been paid to the informal strategies employed by smaller developers, particularly those operating at the intersection of state power and market constraints. This study conceptualizes these hybrid practices as "mindie" game production, capturing their fluid positioning between mainstream and indie, formality and informality. It aims to investigate how developers sustain creative autonomy and economic viability by strategically negotiating these interlocking forces.

This research draws upon interdisciplinary scholarship from game studies, media studies and political economy. Early scholarly works have construed informal economies as systems of labor, exchange, and production that function outside state-sanctioned regulations and institutional structures. However, recent scholarship on the informal media economy has reframed informality not as a lack of state control, but as a selective and embedded feature of broader governance strategies and neoliberal economy (Agarwala 2020; Chen and Carré 2020). Keogh (2019) extends the concept to game development, highlighting the importance of middle ground between "in/formalised" and suggests that fringe creators (e.g., hobbyists, amateurs, and small studios) operate within a shifting global ecosystem where formal and informal processes are increasingly intermingled. In China, these dynamics are especially pronounced: guanxi-based (关系 guānxì, interpersonal ties)[1] alliances and adaptive gray practices often link private market entities to state institutions in hybrid public–private arrangements under state-permeated capitalism (ten Brink 2019). These perspectives offer a proper theoretical footing for analyzing China's hybrid game production model.

The current landscape of China's video game industry presents a number of structural challenges for smaller developers. Internally, major corporations such as Tencent and NetEase dominate the industry, controlling key market resources and distribution

channels, and collectively they account for over half of the total market share (Wang 2022). Further, government authorities intervene heavily through content censorship and strict licensing control with ambiguous standards (Feng et al., 2023; Zhang, 2012). At a broader infrastructural level, national digital governance frameworks like the Great Firewall Project (Griffiths 2019) also restrict developers' access to essential development tools and global resources.

Relying on ongoing fieldwork, this study explores how small and mid-sized Chinese developers deftly respond to these structural constraints encountered at various stages of production. During the development phase, they create technical workarounds like VPNs to access blocked development tools and resources, including game engines, prefabricated asset stores, and global developer communities and code repository platforms. In the publishing phase, many bypass domestic licensing requirements by releasing games through international platforms like overseas mobile app stores or Steam. Additionally, flexible and informal employment in gaming development and financial practices are prevalent in daily operations, allowing producers reduce costs while increasing labor precarity.

Operating technically within gray areas, these informal practices foster a resilient network transcending simple binary distinctions between legal and illegal, formal and informal. This network comprises actors such as individual developers, underground distributors, publishing agencies, unauthorized online resource providers, international platforms, and even approving local authorities. What renders this system particularly intriguing is the way in which it interacts with and complements formal institutional structures. At the policy level, these developers engage in government-sponsored creative industry initiatives, securing limited funding and tax support from local bureaus and tech incubators. At the industry level, they cultivate complex relationships with major companies. While competing under the shadow of Chinese tech giants, smaller developers also venture into sponsored game jams, indie game festivals, and publishing platforms.

Coined by Doolwind (2010) to describe developers situated between indie and mainstream models, the term "mindie" is reworked here to capture a more nuanced understanding in the Chinese context. The "M" represents a set of multidimensional negotiations throughout the process. Culturally, these developers try to maintain creative autonomy while strategically engaging with commercial trends. In institutional adaptation, they try expanding their flexibility between formal and informal mechanisms. Technically and materially, they build or exchange new tools and workflows to overcome infrastructural limitations. These developers would also present themselves as innovative tech startups to government bodies, as independent creators to global audiences, and as reliable content providers to major companies or platforms. This strategic public positioning allows them to access institutional support while preserving a degree of autonomy. In short, this study advances the concept of "mindie" in the Chinese context to move beyond binary distinctions between indie and mainstream. Echoing Keogh's (2019) insight, the concept illustrates that such boundaries as formal/informal, professional/amateur, and global/local are indeed continuously blurred, contested, and reconfigured within the rapidly evolving landscape of digital creative industries.

Endnotes

1 Guānxì (关系) refers to a culturally embedded system of interpersonal ties in Chinese society, characterized by mutual obligation, trust, and long-term reciprocity.

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