

Game Monetisation in China: A Gameworker's Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the games-as-a-service model, monetisation design has undergone a significant transformation, particularly through the widespread adoption of microtransactions (Tomić 2017). New monetisation designs based on microtransactions, such as loot boxes, have generated considerable controversy due to their proximity to gambling-like practices (Zendle et al. 2019), prompting increasing regulatory scrutiny worldwide (Xiao 2024). Scholars have sought to understand how game producers perceive monetisation design primarily from an ethical standpoint. For example, Karlsen (2022) argues that developers' ethical positions vary according to their scale and business model, noting that freemium-oriented studios often downplay their ethical responsibilities by prioritising profit maximisation. Similarly, Denoo and Patrovskaya (2025) investigate practitioners' principles for implementing monetisation systems and identify a general absence of safeguards to mitigate excessive player spending. Although prior research has explored how developers understand monetisation, this work has largely focused on Western contexts. China, by contrast, offers a distinct setting due to the unique developmental trajectory of its game industry (Lu and Liu 2025), and its current landscape of being mobile-centric production alongside a growing indie development culture (Bao 2022; Davies 2024).

This study aims to understand how Chinese gameworkers navigate and negotiate monetisation within the intersecting commercial, creative, and institutional logics of contemporary media production. We adopt the term gameworkers (Keogh 2023) to emphasise that monetisation is shaped not only by design decisions but by the broader dynamics of game work. We recruited 24 Chinese gameworkers across a range of occupations directly involved in monetisation decisions, including publishers, designers, developers, investors, and studio owners. While the study was not specifically focused on freemium games, 21 participants had experience working on freemium projects. Participants were interviewed about their working practices and their reflections on monetisation. All interview data were transcribed and coded, and the researchers employed grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006) to identify patterns, generate conceptual categories, and develop an inductive account of how monetisation is understood and enacted within Chinese game production.

Our analysis revealed that monetisation was navigated across three interrelated levels: the business of games, the design of games, and the dilemmas inherent in monetising

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games. Monetisation practices in China were strongly influenced by industry norms, market pressures, and the regulatory environment. Chinese gameworkers approached monetisation primarily through the lens of game category, an industrial classification based on market, platform, and business considerations, rather than game genre, which is more closely tied to gameplay and content. Within these highly competitive markets, gambling-like designs such as loot boxes were often legitimised, as gameworkers perceived them to enhance their chances of commercial survival. This anxiety over survival was further amplified by the regulatory environment, particularly the numerous licensing systems, which inadvertently incentivised companies to recover rising development and marketing costs through monetisation mechanisms like loot boxes. Based on the findings, we argue that Chinese gameworkers were compelled to adopt a “commercialised production ethos” that prioritises profits in response to the structural conditions of industrial norms, market pressure and regulatory environments, regardless of personal preference. However, fully embracing this ethos can be problematic, as it shapes how Chinese gameworkers conceptualise creativity and ethical design. We recommend increasing transparency in regulations that affect game production and fostering closer collaboration among industry, academia, and government, to enable developers to better balance commercial viability with ethical and creative considerations.

BIO

Tianyi ZhangShao is a PhD candidate from the University of Sydney. His doctoral work seeks to understand the video game monetisation landscape in China. He completed his masters in USYD, where he explored the appeal of the Nintendo Switch and articulated the notion of hybrid gaming.

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