

Independent Game Developers and the Dynamics of Platformisation in China

Samson TANG

Department of Cultural and Religious Studies
The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
samsontang@link.cuhk.edu.hk

Ningxi GUO

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

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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks recourse to the concept of platformisation to examine the dilemma faced by independent game developers in China,¹ and to analyse the strategies adopted by them. The study of platformisation investigates the rise of digital platforms, and the governmental, infrastructural, economic, and social-technical forces involved. The emergence of digital platforms in the past two decades has reconfigured the landscape of the global game industry. Valve's Steam, Google Play Store, and Apple's App Store are prominent platforms that have reshaped the ways in which games are produced, distributed, circulated, and monetised, thus proffering game developers access to a wider audience and removing barriers often associated with traditional physical distribution. The terms platform and platformisation have, however, been subjected to critical scrutiny. It has been noted that platform studies should operate with a nuanced understanding (Apperley and Parikka 2018), digital platforms offer no firm guarantee of democratisation or creative autonomy (Whitson 2019), and there are regional differences in existing platforms (Davis and Xiao 2021). When it comes to publishing on digital platforms in China, independent game developers have struggled with strict licensing requirements, ambiguous censorship rules, and the dominance of huge tech companies.

We organise the discussion of platformisation around three phenomena affecting game developers in China. First, a few tech giants such as Tencent have been gaining a massive advantage by leveraging platformisation to establish market dominance, often making it arduous for small and medium-sized game developers to produce quality works and secure consumer attention. Second, given the intense competition in the Chinese gaming market and governmental regulations, many independent game developers have resorted to publishing on external distribution platforms like Steam, although such a practice may pose potential legal risks.² Third, with the mobile gaming segment experiencing significant growth, effects of platformisation have rippled beyond traditional game distribution platforms. Commercial platforms such as Douyin and TikTok have become creative outlets benefiting independent game developers. The proliferation of *mini-games*³ on these non-gaming platforms has

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transformed the formal elements of games, the monetisation models used by platforms, and the manner in which players gain access to games. Focusing on tensions that concatenate these three phenomena, this paper explores new opportunities and challenges presented to independent game developers in China, through an analysis of games like *Mirror* (Paradise Project 2018), *The Invisible Guardian* (New One Studio 2019) and *OHHH! Sheep* (IF.T studio 2022). The analysis is, too, supplemented by the authors' own fieldwork conducted in China. We conclude that while Chinese game developers benefit from external distribution platforms, they remain vulnerable to other forms of platform governance. Further, releasing mini-games on non-gaming platforms has casualised gaming, but these games show signs of aggressive ad placements, often lack originality, and have a shorter shelf life as they are not as polished as traditional video games, especially in terms of game design.

ENDNOTES

1 Independent game developers, in this paper's context, are understood as small and medium-sized game developers.

2 In 2021, for example, the Game Publishing Committee of the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association 游戏出版工作委员会 and more than 200 companies jointly launched the Anti-addiction and Self-discipline Convention in the Online Game Industry (《网络游戏行业防沉迷自律公约》), stating that they "firmly reject circumventing governmental regulations and using external digital platforms to provide services to Chinese users" (抵制绕过监管机制, 通过境外游戏平台向国内用户提供服务).

3 In China, mini-games are usually called *xiaoyouxi* 小游戏 or *xiaochengxuyouxi* 小程序游戏.

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