Understanding Game Monetization in China from a Gameworker Perspective

Tianyi Zhangshao
University of Sydney
A20 John Woolley Building
Camperdown, NSW
tianyi.zhangshao@sydney.edu.au

Ben Egliston, Marcus Carter
University of Sydney
A20 John Woolley Building
Camperdown, NSW
benjamin.egliston@sydney.edu.au, marcus.carter@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

monetisation, video game industries, gameworkers, China, video game regulations

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the games-as-a-service model, monetization design has undergone a significant transformation, particularly through the widespread adoption of microtransactions (Tomić 2017). New monetization 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 workers perceive monetization 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 prioritizing profit maximization. Similarly, Denoo and Patrovskaya (2025) investigate practitioners' principles for implementing monetization systems and identify a general absence of safeguards to mitigate excessive player spending. However, 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 mobile-centric production where aggressive monetization designs such as those described above are especially prevalent (Bao 2022; Davies 2024). Compared to other regions, China has the highest percentage of loot box presence in top-grossing games, indicating the heavy reliance on such mechanisms (Xiao et al., 2024).

This study aims to understand how Chinese gameworkers navigate and negotiate monetization within the intersecting commercial, creative, and institutional logics of contemporary media production. We adopt the term gameworkers (Keogh 2023) to emphasize that monetization is shaped not only by design choices but also by the

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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broader dynamics of game labor. We recruited 24 Chinese gameworkers (of whom 21 had worked on freemium games) across a range of occupations directly involved in monetization decisions, including publishers, designers, developers, investors, and studio owners. Participants were interviewed about their working practices and their reflections on monetization. All interview data were transcribed and coded, and the researchers employed grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) to identify patterns, generate conceptual categories, and develop an inductive account of how monetization is understood and enacted within Chinese game production. Our study contributes to the DiGRA community by offering empirical insights into game production in China and demonstrating how monetization is shaped and interpreted within a mobile-first political economy.

Our analysis revealed three interrelated themes in how participants navigated monetization: the business of games, the design of games, and the dilemmas inherent in monetizing games. These themes collectively reflect how monetization practices in China are shaped by broader industry norms, market pressures, and regulatory conditions. Chinese gameworkers approached monetization 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 legitimized, 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 require companies to obtain government approval before publishing games. This system inadvertently incentivized companies to recover rising development and marketing costs through monetization mechanisms like loot boxes. Based on the findings, we argue that Chinese gameworkers were compelled to adopt a "commercialized production ethos", a term we introduce to describe a mode of production that prioritizes profits in response to the structural conditions of industrial norms, market pressure and regulatory environments, regardless of personal preference. As one of our participants, Chris, a systems designer, put it: "Getting players to spend is the core goal of our design… I don't make AAA titles — I design commercial mobile games." This reflects less an individual attitude and more the broader logic of how the business operates. However, fully embracing this ethos can be problematic, as it shapes how Chinese gameworkers conceptualize 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.

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