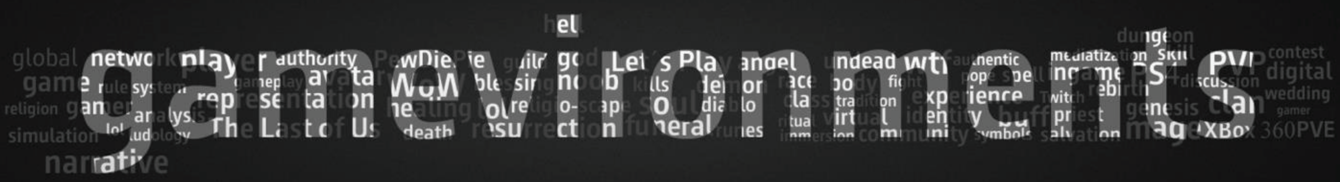

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Indie and Dōjin Games: A Multilayered Cross-Cultural Comparison[i]

Mikhail Fiadotau

Abstract
The article provides a comparative account of two paradigms of independent videogame production: the Japanese dōjin (doujin) games and the increasingly global indie games. Through a multilayered analysis, it expounds the conceptual metaphors associated with indie and dōjin games, traces the two movements' respective histories, situates them in wider media environments, and compares their characteristic traits.

Keywords: Indie games, Dōjin games, Participatory culture, Cultural history, Gaming in Japan, Hobbyist game development, gamevironments

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Introduction

When a study of independent videogame production touches upon the issue of cultural variation, one concept that comes up often is *dōjin gēmu* (alternatively rendered as *doujin geemu* or *doujin soft*): a term denoting the Japanese tradition of hobbyist game making, which is assumed to be either the Japanese equivalent of the predominantly Western phenomenon of indie gaming or at least something comparable to it. In Japan, as well, the term *indīzu* (indie) commonly occurs in conjunction with *dōjin*, though perhaps more often in juxtaposition than in analogy. And yet, recurrent as this conjunction is, there is little consensus or even systematic insight into how exactly indie and dōjin are related.

The simple solution: accepting that indie and dōjin are roughly similar while pertaining to different cultural contexts – does not stand up to closer scrutiny. For one thing, equating the two terms with their respective regions of origin fails to explain why an increasing number of Japanese game developers identify as indie. On a deeper level, the lack of systematic consideration of the concepts' sociocultural underpinnings highlights game studies' struggle as a discipline to overcome its inborn Occidental bias.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the discussion by considering the concepts of indie and dōjin from a perspective combining comparative cultural history and media studies. It will do so by comparing the concepts on four levels: conceptual, historical, (media) ecological, and textual. In the process, it will also outline the connections between videogames and other indie and dōjin media.

Indie and Dōjin: What Have We Already Learned?

In recent years, indie videogames have been the subject of a growing body of scholarly work which, despite the brevity of its existence, is already displaying signs of evolution. Early work on indie games focused primarily on defining the phenomenon and making a case for its inclusion into the domain of game studies, as well as providing practical ideas about indie game design (El-Sattar 2008) and the phenomenon's future potential (Wardle 2006). Consider, for example, the following definition: "Indie games are video games that have a small or non-existent budget and are often primarily available online or through friend-to-friend sharing" (El-Sattar 2008, 123). The straightforwardness of the definition was perhaps dictated by the author's concern that his target audience was not familiar with the phenomenon and his reluctance to allow a more elaborate discussion of the term to detract him from the main thread. However, recent developments in videogaming mean this definition is increasingly problematic, as mainstream videogame publishers are shifting to online distribution and crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and IndieGoGo have enabled indie developers to procure sizeable budgets.

Subsequent research, on the other hand, sought to problematize the concept of indie games, highlighting its complexity and internal heterogeneity and preferring to focus on the contexts of use over clear-cut definitions. Lipkin (2013, 11), while acknowledging that “indie games are in part defined by the reliance on alternative production and distribution structures compared to mainstream game companies”, argued they should also be discussed in terms of politics and values. Martin and Deuze (2009) discussed indie games in terms of audience empowerment and participation and (correctly) predicted increased corporate involvement in indie game production and distribution. O’Donnell brought the artistic intent into the equation, noting that indie games are “often perceived of as innovative, artistic” (2014, 747) and “aim to push the envelope of game design” (2012, 105). Yet, far from painting an idyllic picture of them, he then discussed job precarity and unfair working conditions in the North American indie game scene (ibid.). Many authors (Lipkin 2013, Simon 2014, Parker 2013) pointed out that the concept of indie gaming is nebulous and difficult to define, partly due to its depoliticization and increased entanglement with the mainstream gaming industry and partly due to its being situated at the intersection of the artistic, the political, and the economic. Even these more nuanced accounts of indie games, however, have generally avoided the issue of cultural heterogeneity.

At about the same time as Western scholars started to discuss indie games, researchers in Japan began to turn their attention to the phenomenon of *dōjin gēmu*: games developed by circles of like-minded hobbyists. By contrast to research in the West, this work was not generally grounded in game studies (which has been a somewhat marginal field in Japan), but positioned in the wider context of dōjin and *otaku* culture which also comprises anime, manga, literary works, and so on (Aida 2005, Tagawa 2009), or in the domain of fan labor and fan art (Ishikawa 2007), with videogames often discussed in passing as a single part of larger transmedia landscapes. Subsequently, Hichibe (2009, 2013) turned his attention to dōjin games specifically, examining them from a production perspective.

Somewhere along the way, the terms *indie* and *dōjin* began to regularly occur in conjunction both in English- and Japanese-language scholarship. One of the earliest examples is a paper by Hichibe (2009), which does not, however, aim to directly compare dōjin and indie games: instead, its focus is on game production techniques. In subsequent Western work, dōjin has occasionally been explained as a Japanese version of indie (Picard 2013[ii], Consalvo 2016, 137), but more often, the difference between the two terms has been emphasized. Jacobi (2012), for example, stresses the genre differences between indie and dōjin games, as well as the difference in the ideologies underlying them. Yet in doing so, she provides a strikingly narrow account of dōjin, based on only two typical genres, and her argument contains debatable overgeneralizations such as that dōjin developers have no “artistic aspirations” and that “while the indie scene seeks to move away from [...] ultraviolent AAA-games [...], doujin games remain in a culturally low and obscure position” (ibid., 34). More recently, Vogel (2017) offered a more detailed and nuanced account, but avoided a direct comparison, focusing instead on the umbrella of “Japanese independent game development”.

In Japanese scholarship, Miyake (2011, 63) points out that dōjin games are vastly different from their indie counterparts. Yet he, in turn, overgeneralizes indie games, describing them as either small-scale or created by developers aspiring for a professional career in mainstream gaming. Yet, as O'Donnell (2012) demonstrates, indie gaming is an industry in its own right; and some of the better known indie games, such as *Fez* (2012), *Braid* (2008), and *Super Meat Boy* (2010), have enjoyed mainstream recognition and grossed millions of dollars. Hichibe and Tanaka (2016) provide a more in-depth comparative analysis of dōjin and indies game from a development and marketing perspective. One of their key arguments is that *dōjin gēmu* are best described as *hobbyist* rather than indie games, as most dōjin developers do not try to make a living off making games. However, the authors also cite some very successful dōjin titles such as *Tsukihime* (2000) and *Higurashi-no Naku Koro-ni* (2002-2006), which have grossed considerable revenues and been adapted into mainstream manga and anime. These stories of success may be uncommon, but neither are they unprecedented, seemingly undermining Hichibe and Tanaka's argument. In any case, their assumption that indie developers necessarily pursue a revenue is questionable, as many self-professed indie developers produce free content and the distinction between indie and hobbyist is far from clear-cut. One understanding is that "all hobbyist games are indie games, but not all indie games are hobbyist games" (Heron 2016, 116), but even that is debatable.

What transpires from these works is that there is still little clarity as to whether, and how, dōjin games differ from indie games. The difficulty of answering this question partly stems from the impossibility of clearly defining the terms themselves. To address this, we should perhaps shift our attention from the games themselves to the meanings and practices associated with them, situating these in their respective cultural and historical contexts. In doing so, we need to acknowledge and examine, rather than seek to simplify, the complexity of both indie and dōjin game cultures. Finally, while there has been little sustained conversation between English- and Japanese-language scholarship on the matter (with language barrier a likely reason), such a conversation is necessary in order to consolidate the knowledge accumulated in both traditions.

Methodology: Multilayered Analysis

It is important to remember that any individual videogame, when viewed through a cultural lens, is merely a tip of the iceberg whose base consists of a complex compound of the historical, the sociocultural, the political, and the intertextual. Each of these elements is complex and significant enough to warrant a dedicated study, but due to the scarcity of existing comparative research into indie and dōjin gaming, this paper aims instead to provide a holistic picture of these two gaming cultures, mapping out their connections and divergences on a broad scale. It is nonetheless still necessary to examine indie and dōjin games through a set of lenses, or layers, in order to make sense of the diverse structures, discourses, and practices underlying them. Viewed together, these “different strands [...] provide a rich contextual picture of the landscapes” (Edge and Armstrong 2014) of the phenomena under scrutiny. The set of layers I opted for in this study is as follows:

The *conceptual* layer pertains to the pool of meanings, associations, and connotations evoked by the very concepts of indie and dōjin. Examining this layer attempts to bring out the *embedded rhetoric* of the concepts, shedding light on the ideology and values underlying them.

The *historical* layer traces the origins and development of the phenomena, situating them in a larger sociohistorical context.

The *ecological* layer relates to the role of the phenomena in their respective media environments, focusing on their relations with other media and distribution networks. My use of the ecological metaphor is inspired by the legacy of media ecologists such as McLuhan, Postman, and Nystrom (see Scolari 2012 for an extensive discussion on the origins and scope of media ecology).

The *textual* layer focuses on the games as artifacts in their own right. This includes aesthetic paradigms, genres, and platforms associated with them, the way they approach politics and gender, and so on.

The narrative progression here may seem linear: understanding the concepts; tracing how they came to be; examining how they interact with other media and how they are consumed; analyzing what distinct features are found in actual games. Yet, the four layers do not exist separately and there is no clear boundary between them; they intertwine as they build on each other. The idea behind introducing the layers is to identify several angles of scrutiny that could enable a richer account of the complex and multi-faceted phenomena that indie and dōjin games are. The fourth layer is a culmination, but it cannot function outside of the context provided by the other layers.

The idea of a multi-layered account was inspired by existing works adopting similarly multi-dimensional perspectives to study such diverse cultural phenomena as national character (Yair 2014) and feminist criticism (Hock 2008). In both works, the particular layers were chosen on an ad hoc, contextual basis, allowing to tailor the methodology to the phenomena under study – similarly to the approach used in the present paper.

Conceptual Layer

Etymologically, *indie* is short for *independent*, referring originally to the cultural politics of content production and distribution characterized by opposition to, or at least being located outside of, the corporate-controlled mainstream media industry. The term originated in the British music scene in the 1980s (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 35), spreading since then to other locales and media such as film (Levy 1999) and, since the mid-2000s, videogames. Overtime, indie came to be associated with a certain aesthetic paradigm differing from one medium to another, while its increasing overlap with mainstream media channels of distribution has led to a departure from indie’s original ideological foundation (as well as criticisms of *selling out* and debates over what constitutes *true* indie). The embedded rhetoric of independence has not, however, disappeared; rather, it has morphed and expanded. Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) have demonstrated that, when discussing independent videogames (which is a much broader term than *indie*), people can refer to one or more of three attributes: creative independence, financial independence, and publishing independence. For indie games, it is the creative independence that seems to be emphasized over the other two kinds. Thus, even games released by major publishers can be considered indie if they were developed by an independent studio judged to have exercised full creative control over its work (consider, for example, *World of Goo,* published in 2009 by Microsoft but still recognized as the best indie game of the year by numerous outlets). By stressing creative freedom, indie games are still implicitly contrasted to the market-driven mainstream gaming industry, whose modus operandi is not deemed to accommodate artistic experimentation. This contributes to a perception of indie games as more innovative and, at times, a sense of moral superiority over AAA (mainstream big budget) titles.

This rhetoric of independence is absent from the concept of dōjin. Comprised of the characters 同 (“same”) and 人 (“person”), dōjin translates as “like-minded people, kindred spirits” (Kenkyūsha 2003). On a basic level, the term refers to a group of individuals who share similar tastes and interests. Dōjin production is thus rooted in an ideology of communality and solidarity. Teams of dōjin creators are called sākuru (circles), underscoring their shared interests and passion. Whereas the long-existing tradition of auteurism has led Western audiences to associate successful indie games with the artistic vision of a single creator even if the game was made by a team (consider how Phil Fish is known as the author of Fez [2012] despite working with several collaborators), dōjin creators largely remain anonymous beyond the name of the circle. (Even individual dōjin developers often refer to themselves as circles without disclosing their real names, as is the case of Shanhai Arisu Gengakudan, a.k.a Team Shanghai Alice, the *one-man circle* behind the popular Tōhō Project [1998-2018] game series.) Moreover, since the concept of dōjin entails no independence from, or opposition to, mainstream media and popular culture, it is exactly mainstream literature, anime, manga, games, and film that become the objects of dōjin circles’ shared appreciation. In fact, many dōjin works are niji sōsaku (fan art), leading some to mistakenly conflate the two terms (Azuma 2013).

Historical Layer

One of the challenges of historicizing technological development is avoiding the pervasive "myth of linear progress" (Parikka 2012, 11), which narrativizes technological change as a unidirectional, incremental progression from less to more advanced technology. Yet the history of technology – and, by extension, of culture surrounding it – is full of disruptions, false starts, U-turns, and rediscoveries, which a linear account can hardly accommodate. Thus, when we speak of the "plural histories" (Hjorth 2011, 11) of videogames, this plurality stems not only from the multiplicity of cultural contexts but also from the complexity of processes found within each given context.

The limited scope of this section (and the inevitably linear format of the academic article) does not afford an opportunity to construct an adequately complex account of the histories of indie and dōjin games. The ambition of this section is much more modest: to selectively reflect on some historical influences that have shaped the two game cultures.

As discussed earlier, *indie* is a fairly recent term, dating back to the mid-1980s (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 35), and *indie game* is even more recent, emerging in the mid-2000s (Garda and Grabarczyk 2016) by extension from indie music and film. While the term itself is new, the culture it denotes can be viewed as a successor of the hobbyist and shareware game scenes of the 1990s. The evolution of these cultures into indie gaming has been triggered by a number of changes: the emergence of middleware such as *GameMaker* and *Unity*, which empowered creators with less technical expertise to develop games more quickly (Garda and Grabarczyk 2016); the advent of broadband (ibid.), digital distribution (Parker 2014, 3), and Web 2.0 (De Jong 2013, 10), leading to a more favorable environment for sharing creative works and blurring the line between producer and consumer; and the increasing financial gap between mainstream and non-mainstream gaming due to the exponential economic growth of the former (Parker 2014, 3).

The roots of indie development can perhaps be traced even further back. Arguably, North American bedroom developers of the early 1980s who created commercial and non-commercial games for systems such as Atari 2600 were *proto-indie* in that they, like many indie developers, operated on shoestring or nonexistent budgets, targeted limited audiences, and could not compete with major publishers in terms of production values (Donovan 2010). At the same time, they were very different in that, unlike indie creators, they did not put their work in opposition to mainstream gaming or necessarily emphasize innovation, auterism, or conceptuality. In fact, the flooding of the market by low-quality semi-amateur titles is thought to be one of the major causes of the so-called Atari shock, otherwise known as the 1983 North American videogame crash (ibid., Puvvala and Roy 2013). At the same time, the hacker and homebrew cultures were also taking off, and their members were far more interested in experimenting and expressing themselves through technological ingenuity than in material gain (Sotamaa 2004, 8). Curiously, these two seemingly opposite sensibilities, the longing for commercial success and the desire for self-expression and experimentation, can be argued to coexist in much of today’s indie game culture. After the Atari shock, the culture of bedroom development continued, mostly revolving around the personal computer, especially in Europe and the UK (Izushi and Aoyama 2006), where it eventually fed into the shareware game scene of the 1990s. If we look even further back, hobbyist and experimental game development, of course, preceded the commercial videogame industry. Early computer games such as *Spacewar!* (1962) and *Hamurabi* (1968) were created in American universities’ and technology companies’ labs as distractions and pet projects before the advent of mass-market game consoles and arcades (Donovan 2010). As these early games were developed for massive mainframe computers, the term *bedroom developer* was yet hardly applicable. But, as Haddon (1992) explains, even the arrival of home computing in the West did not mean that coders were literally confined to their homes. Instead, for many computing remained a social activity that revolved around computer clubs where their (predominantly male) members would come together and where many hobbyist games were created and played. The spirit of unity associated with these clubs can be likened somewhat to the values of dōjin circles, except the object of the shared appreciation here was computer technology itself rather than creative works.

Dōjin is a much older term than indie, whose roots can be traced back at least to the late Meiji era (early 20th century) dōjin literary circles (Morishita 1980, 215) and their small-circulation magazines (*dōjin zasshi*, later shortened to *dōjinshi*), which functioned as venues for expressing the groups' shared tastes in literature. These marked the birth of the dōjin sensibility, exhibited even more clearly by postwar manga-centered dōjinshi. But the more immediate prerequisite of the dōjin game movement was the emergence of dōjinshi fairs in the 1970s. The biggest of these, called Comiket, started in 1975 as a response to the country's burgeoning manga industry and has served as the largest venue of dōjin work dissemination (Shōgakukan, 2018). This includes original creations, as well as *niji sōsaku* (fan works), which came to be associated with the dōjin movement. Currently, Comiket takes place twice a year, bringing together hundreds of thousands of attendees who, in addition to buying and selling manga, literature, and games, engage in fan practices such as cosplay. It is thanks to Comiket that the visibility and popularity of dōjin works has greatly increased.

Computer games became part of the dōjin universe in the 1980s, with Teikoku Soft being the first circle both to present a game at Comiket (*Nikoniko Onna-no Ko Pazuru* in 1982) and to refer to their creation as *dōjin soft* (dating simulator *Ningyo-no Namida* in 1984) (Mizukami 2009, Hichibe 2013). In subsequent years, more games followed, until dōjin gēmu joined manga and anime as one of the mainstays at Comiket.

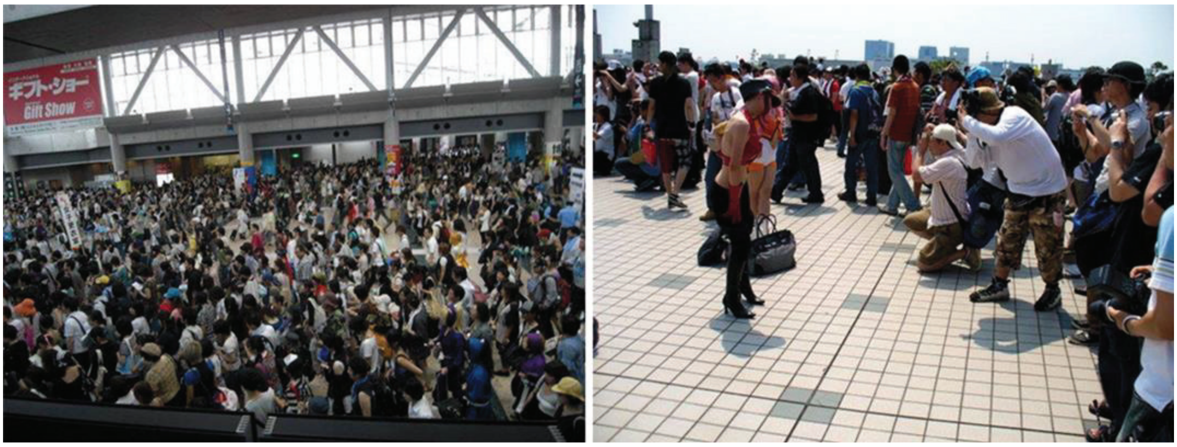

Figure 1. Crowd attending the Summer Comiket in 2009 and cosplay at the Winter Comiket 2006 (photos by Yuhsuke Koyama).

As these selective accounts demonstrate, the sociohistorical backgrounds of indie and dōjin game movements are considerably different, contributing to their different roles in the respective media environments.

Ecological Layer

While both indie and dōjin games are parts of larger traditions, their belonging to these traditions manifests itself very differently. The term *indie* can refer to an ever-increasing variety of media including music, film, comics, as well as digital and analog games, but there is little systematic interaction or cross-media overlap between them. There is no universal, transmedia *indie scene* which brings under one roof music bands such as *Arctic Monkeys*, movies such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and games such as *Braid* (2008). This may be because indie emerged and spread as a paradigm of cultural production, not as an aesthetic or a mode of interacting with media. So when the tag *indie* was adopted by each subsequent medium, it was this implicit rhetoric of creative independence and opposition to the mainstream that was borrowed. What followed was the production of a moral frame around authenticity, leading to a sense of indie's moral superiority, whether it be in music (Fonarow 2006, 28), film (King 2013, 11), or even indie fashion. But the canons and the aesthetic conventions evolved separately for each medium, with the only recurrent trait between them being a vague fondness for lo-fi aesthetics, owing most likely to limited budgets which operating beyond the mainstream often entails. A case in point is that, while the term *indie game* can refer to analog games as well as digital ones, there is little overlap between the indie videogame scene and that of indie tabletop games (hence the lack of attention to the latter in this article).

By contrast, dōjin videogames belong to a much more closely interwoven transmedia continuum which also comprises manga, anime, literature, music, tabletop games, and various otaku-fandom practices such as cosplay (Sousa 2014, Ito et al. 2012). There is a constant and systematic interaction within this continuum, with stories and characters routinely migrating from one medium to another. This mirrors Japan's mainstream media industry, known for its long-established reliance on *media mix* (Steinberg 2012) storytelling. Moreover, as there is no opposition between dōjin culture and mainstream media industry, many successful dōjin games and game series, such as *Tsukihime* (2000), *Higurashi-no Naku Koro-ni* (2002-2006), and *Tōhō Project* (1998-2018) have been adapted into mainstream anime, radio drama, live action series, and so on. Conversely, much of the dōjin scene consists of fan works based on popular manga and anime. Some are actually based on popular Western works such as the *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series (Noppe 2009). Particularly curious among these fan works are cases of established mainstream artists and creators making dōjin content on the side: for example, visual novel writer Urobuchi Gen, known for his work with game studio Nitroplus, also created a dōjin game called *Jōka no Monshō* (2003), which is a fan work based on American action film *Equilibrium* (2002). Further still, Lam (2010, 241) notes that some companies specializing in erotic games "allow their underpaid artists to sell their drafts and sketches as dōjinshi, giving the artists a second wage and the company free promotion." At the same time, numerous fan-made dōjin works are based on original dōjin titles. For example, 07th Expansion, the circle behind *Higurashi-no Naku Koro-ni*, once organized a literary contest for fan-written stories based on their game series, with the anthology of the best works published in three volumes and followed by an audio drama CD. Tellingly, the event was sponsored by major game publisher Square Enix. Thus, the boundary is very permeable between mainstream media and the dōjin scene. This fluidity in not generally found in the indie scene, which asserts itself in opposition to AAA (mainstream) gaming. Neither is it common in Western fandom, which is generally more remote from the publishers of the original works and for which videogames are an untypical medium of expression (Noppe 2009).

An important part of the ecology surrounding indie and dōjin games is their channels of distribution. In this regard, the two movements share one commonality: both indie and dōjin are often distributed online via dedicated game stores and portals. Some examples include itch.io, Humble Bundle, and GOG for indie games, and DLsite, Getchu, and Digiket for dōjin games. The arrival of Steam has also enabled indie developers to digitally distribute their works alongside games by major publishers, and more recently, the platform has seen an increasing number of dōjin titles such as several instalments of the *Tōhō Project* series.

However, while for indie games digital distribution is the primary mode of circulation, dōjin works are often distributed offline. Reasons for this include dōjin culture's historical fondness for analog media (Azuma 2013) and its close entanglement with mainstream media industries, which has led to integration with major retail networks. Most major bookstores in Japan, for example, have *dōjinshi corners*, while many smaller stores specializing in dōjin works, including chains such as Tora-no Ana and Melonbooks, also exist (Hichibe and Tanaka 2015, Vogel 2017).[iii]

An equally important venue (symbolically if not economically) for dōjin game dissemination is Comiket. With an estimated 35,000 dōjin circles participating in 2016's FuyuComi (Winter Comiket) alone, the convention, attended by over half a million visitors, is one of the largest cultural events in Japan. Many smaller local conventions also exist (Lamerichs 2013). And while there are many indie game events too, not least the Independent Game Festival and IndieCade, few, if any, of them share dōjin conventions' continued commitment to distributing games on physical media (CD and DVD). It is perhaps due to this emphasis on the community, real-life events, and physical media, as well as due to their tangible *cultural odor* (Iwabuchi 2002) that dōjin games are generally difficult to find in the West (Vogel 2017).

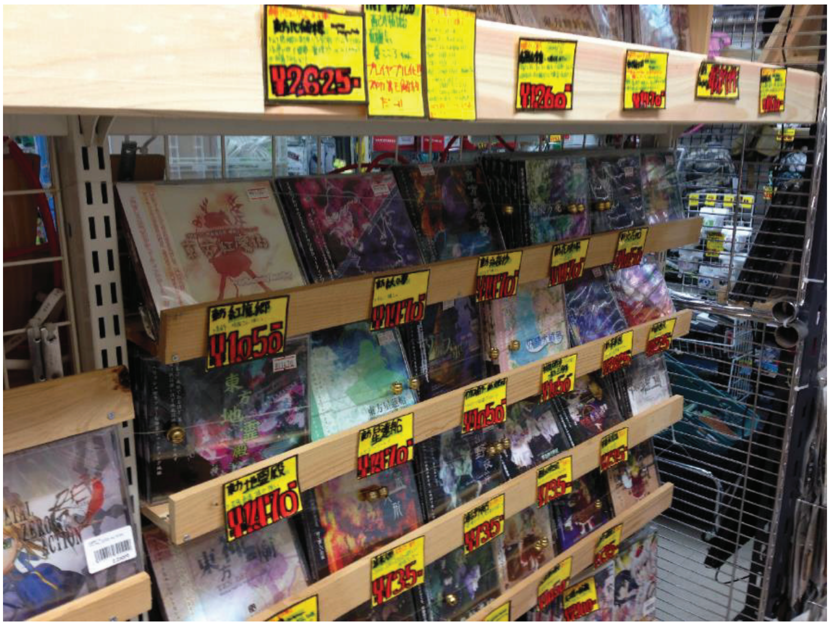

Figure 2. The *Tōhō Project* section in a small dōjin shop (photo by Nobushige Kobayashi).

An important difference between indie and dōjin events, rooted in the two movements' ideological underpinnings, lies in their attitude towards competition. Major indie game festivals and conventions (Independent Games Festival, IndieCade, Game Development World Championship, etc.), as well as various game jams such as the Global Game Jam and LudumDare, have a prominent competitive aspect to them, which typically involves voting on the most popular games and giving out awards and prizes. Dōjin conventions, whether general in scope (Comiket) or dedicated specifically to games (for example, Tokyo's Freedom Game and Osaka's Kansai Dōjin Gēmu Kōryūkai), do not involve formal voting or awards, with the size of the audience a circle is able to attract serving as the metric of its achievement.[iv]

It is also interesting to compare indie and dōjin scenes in terms of gender distribution. While the indie game movement has been increasingly inclusive of female and queer creators, they are still outnumbered by male developers. According to a 2014 survey by the Independent Game Developer Association, men comprised 76% of the game development workforce, while women accounted for 22% and individuals who identified as transgender or *other* made up a further 2% (IGDA 2014). The dōjin movement, on the other hand, appears to involve more women creators than it does men (Azuma 2013). According to a survey conducted by Comiket organizers in 2011, over 65% of participating circle members were women. This statistic, however, is based on the dōjin scene overall, not games specifically. Most female creators participating in Comiket produced manga (70.4%) and/or novels (31.9%), while visual novels and other games accounted for merely a combined 2%. For male creators, too, manga was the most popular medium of choice (58%), followed by illustrated albums (24%), with visual novels and other games being the third most popular medium at 8%.

It also needs to be noted that the coexistence of genders within the dōjin scene does not necessarily mean overlap. In nearly any dōjin shop one will find a *male* and *female* corner (with works in established genres geared towards the respective gender), which are usually located on different sides of the counter. Thus, while the store represents a shared environment for dōjin fans of both sexes, little interaction between them takes place. This is less pronounced at dōjin conventions such as Comiket, where joint activities such as cosplay do bring the two genders together.

A final crucial point here relates to the issue of copyright. As a lot of dōjin works are based on mainstream anime, manga, and videogames, selling them technically constitutes a copyright violation. Yet, unlike in the West, copyright holders are generally much more tolerant of these practices, choosing not to exercise their right to prevent their distribution (Noppe 2014). The term *parody* is often used to distinguish commercially available dōjin works from the originals they are based on, as both may end up on the shelves of the same store. Some Western activists have advocated for a similar model to be adopted in Europe and North America, where the practice of legal action against fan works by copyright holders is thought to stifle the development of open culture (ibid.).

Textual Layer

The textual layer is the most complex one, as it comprises a multiplicity of sub-dimensions related to the aesthetic, narrative, and technological aspects of games. Let us start by addressing the last dimension.

One notable similarity between indie and dōjin gaming is that both movements originated in the personal computer scene. This is particularly interesting given that the PC is not the platform of choice for mainstream gamers in Japan. While personal computers such as NEC PC-88, MSX, and Fujitsu’s FM-7 were once highly influential in Japan’s gaming scene, since the success of the Famicom (known abroad as Nintendo Entertainment System) in the mid-1980s, mainstream gaming in Japan has largely reoriented towards game consoles (Picard 2013). However, hobbyist game development was unable to follow the same trajectory for both technical and legal reasons. Nintendo, learning from Atari’s costly failure to prevent unauthorized third-party game production for their console, utilized copy-protected cartridges as storage media for the Famicom and held a monopoly on their production (Haddon 1999, Arnone 2010), going as far as to punish magazines that advertised unlicensed titles on hacked cartridges (Johnson 2013, 154). Similarly draconian steps were also taken by Nintendo’s competitor Sega, leading O’Donnell (2009) to conclude that these companies’ policies constituted the birth of modern DRM (digital rights management) systems. While this did not deter some hackers from producing their own games for Nintendo’s and Sega’s consoles, the vast majority of dōjin developers chose to stick with developing for personal computers. To this day, despite the occasional console port of a particularly successful title (e.g. *Narcissu* for PlayStation Portable [2010] and some *Tōhō Project* games for PlayStation 4), Windows remains their platform of choice (Picard 2013, Hichibe and Tanaka 2016).

By contrast, it did not take indie games long to step beyond the territory of PC gaming, with dozens of ported and original titles appearing for consoles in the PlayStation and Xbox families. These include such iconic games as *Braid* (2008), *Limbo* (2010), and *Fez* (2012). Compared to its competitors Sony and Microsoft, Nintendo, with its traditional focus on exclusive titles (Derdenger 2009, Altice 2015, 148), initially appeared reluctant to embrace indie games. That changed with its newest console, Nintendo Switch, a large part of whose ecosystem consists of older and established (*Minecraft* [2011], *Super Meat Boy* [2010], *Terraria* [2011]), as well as newer (*TumbleSeed* [2017], *Battle Chef Brigade* [2017], *Celeste* [2018]) indie games.

Why is it that, while Western and Japanese console manufacturers alike have sought to include indie titles into their ecosystems, dōjin games are, by and large, only available to PC gamers? One could point to the Atari 2600/5200 market, saturated with games from smaller-scale developers, as a precedent for independent console game development that existed in the West, but less so in Japan. More tangibly, dōjin games' unresolved copyright status has presented an obstacle for their distribution on consoles. Whereas the lack of centralized oversight over PC games means that so-called parody games, made by fans based on copyrighted intellectual property, can be distributed without much hindrance, console publishers control – and thus take responsibility – for the content they publish. Even choosing to distribute an original dōjin game could pose a risk to a publisher's reputation, should legal trouble arise involving other work of the same dōjin circle (as many circles create both original and parody games).

An even greater challenge is the dōjin scene's reputation for sexual and violent content (Noppe 2014, Vogel 2017, Watabe 2013), which, while not definitive of all dōjin works, is prominent in many. Much of the content one will discover in a dōjin shop in Japan will include graphic depictions of hetero- and homosexual intercourse, at times involving extreme fetishes and themes. Indeed, certain dōjin circles, such as Magical☆Girl, Bakery, and Pink Pencil infamously specialize in games that combine tentacle sex, bestiality, rape, and pedophilia. Historically, this type of content can be linked to *ero-guro-nansensu* ("erotic grotesque nonsense"), a subversive artistic movement in pre-WWII Japan which "devoted itself to explorations of the deviant, the bizarre, and the ridiculous" (Reichert 2001, 114).

This prominence of the erotic and the grotesque in dōjin games could also have been reinforced by mainstream console publishers' exclusion of explicit content from their platforms. Nintendo was particularly known for this, forbidding explicit imagery and waging war on Hacker International, a small company that released unlicensed pornographic games for the Famicom and distributed them on hacked cartridges (Sheff 1999). This policy had the effect of making personal computers the main platform for gory and pornographic games (DeWinter 2016, 244)[v]. Coupled with the dōjin scene's historic openness to sexual themes and imagery, this earned dōjin games notoriety which console publishers, conscious of their public image, would want to distance themselves from.

This is not to suggest that indie games do not contain sexual content. On the contrary, many indie titles have sought to address the issues of gender and sexuality in ways that counter the normative representations in mainstream videogames. Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012), for example, is an autobiographical reflection on the author's experience of undergoing hormone replacement therapy, while Tell of Tales'

The Path (2009) is a metaphorical exploration of femininity, addressing such extreme themes as rape (Ensslin 2014, 147). Neither subject matter is something one would often see in mainstream gaming, which, while gradually evolving, still tends to cater to the heteronormative male gaze (Vitali 2010). In fact, the indie game movement has been open to a diverse range of perspectives on and depictions of gender identity, sexuality, and sex.

This diversity is exactly what sets indie gaming apart from the dōjin scene, where depictions of sexuality tend to fit into one of a handful of established niches, including male- (*bishōjo*) and female-oriented (*otome*) heterosexual, male (*yaoi*) and female (*yuri*) homoerotic, and transgender (*futanari*). While seemingly diverse in range, these depictions typically follow rigid narrative and visual conventions, catering to a fixed set of *imaginary audiences* (Ong 1975) instead of promoting complex gender representations. Even the ostensibly queer content does not necessarily target LGBTQ audiences or attempt to depict them faithfully. For example, despite the long-established and well-documented cultural history of homoerotic relationships between young men in Japan (see, for example, Maekawa 2011), *Boy's Love* or *yaoi* dōjin manga and games such as *Luckydog1* (2009) are mainly produced by and aimed at heterosexual female audiences (Nagaike 2003). For these audiences, portrayals of effeminate, homosexual men in romantic relationships represent a fantasy of "overcoming and critiquing heterosexist gender norms" (Vincent 2007, 73) in the patriarchal society that is Japan. In particular, the *fujoshi* (lit. "rotten women") subculture, revolving around young women's defiant, conspicuous consumption of yaoi, can be seen as a "counterpublic" (Annett 2014, 178) and a "minor rebellion" (Kee 2008, 15) against society in an attempt to "rewrite masculinity" (ibid., 18). At the same time, actual homosexual men's attitude towards the genre is ambiguous: many like yaoi even as they recognize its portrayals as unrealistic and exaggerated (McLelland

2000, 49-50), but others feel that yaoi "abus[es] male homosexuality for the sexual gratification of women" (Lunsing 1997, 274) and in fact reinforces stereotypes and biases related to homosexuality (Gibney 2004).[vi]

At the other end, a large part of erotic dōjin works are aimed at male gamers and are unrepentantly sexist, portraying women as objects of romantic and sexual conquest with little agency of their own (Kinsella 1998). Sometimes, as in the case of *mahō shōjo* ("magical girl") games produced by circles such as Mahō Shōjo Kurabu, oversexualized female characters do possess considerable strength and display agency, resulting in portrayal which is paradoxically sexist and liberating at the same time (Allison 2006, 137). In either case, rigid gender conventions (at least in terms of visual representation and character traits) are immediately visible in most female characters. This is reflective of the wider otaku culture that dōjin games draw on, which is characterized by stereotypical gender representation, based on a "database" of ready-made tropes and character traits (Azuma 2009). It is fair to say, then, that unlike indie games, dōjin works seek less to challenge and subvert mainstream media than to extend them into the realm of erotic fantasy.

On a wider scale, the fact that dōjin works do not seek to subvert existing gender representations in mainstream media and otaku culture testifies to their apoliticism (Thorn 2004). Unlike the indie movement, whose ideological foundations already imply a political stance with regard to cultural production, dōjin does not, in and of itself, advocate or resist anything. Few dōjin works directly and explicitly address contemporaneous sociopolitical issues. By contrast, the indie game movement has provided plenty of political commentary on issues ranging from immigration (*Papers Please* [2013]) to warfare (*This War of Mine* [2014]) to corruption (*Political Animals*

[2016]). Indie games can advocate for particular interpretations of historic events (*1979 Revolution: Black Friday* [2016]) and lampoon current political regimes (*Mr.President!* [2016]), things dōjin creators by and large have little interest in.[vii]

It is worth noting, however, that although their origins and underpinnings give indie games a *capacity* to be political, the majority of current indie titles do not act upon it. While initially hailed for its potential to counterbalance mainstream games' refusal to make political statements, the indie game movement has overtime integrated into same fabric it had set out to challenge, shifting from an ideological frame to an aesthetic sensibility (Fiadotau 2018). As of April 2018, only one out of Steam's 20 best-selling indie games explicitly addressed gender issues (*Stardew Valley,* which depending on the player's actions may involve portrayal of homosexual romance) and none appeared to engage with real-life political issues.

Indie games' experimental, subversive mindset is perhaps more visible in their formal and ludic aspects. Many successful indie titles have introduced innovative mechanics (*Braid* [2008]*, Superhot* [2016], *Fez* [2012]) or combined existing mechanics in an innovative way (e.g. the rhythm-roguelike *Crypt of the Necrodancer* [2015]); experimented with narrative conventions (*Stanley Parable* [2011]) and aesthetic presentation (*Journey* [2012], *Limbo* [2010]). Even if some genres, such as walking simulators, enjoy disproportionate popularity in the indie scene, creators often try to approach the conventions of these genres playfully and experimentally (Grabarczyk 2016).

The dōjin scene appears to be less concerned with formal innovation, and most dōjin games fall under one of a handful of traditional genres: visual novels (*Tsukihime* [2000], *Higurashi-no Naku Koro-ni* [2002-2006]), vertical shooters (*Tōhō Project* series

[2008-2018]), platformers (*Meido-san-o Migi-ni* [2004]), RPGs (*Lost Memory* [1997], *Fortune Summoners* [2008]), and fighting games (*Eternal Fighter Zero* [2001], *Queen of Heart* [1998-2000]). Again, this is in part connected with the wider dōjin ideology, which, rather than subvert existing media, celebrates and expands on them. But the limited genre palette may also have to do with with historical availability of tools and resources. For example, the emergence of *RPG Tsukūru* (RPG Maker), a series of beginner-friendly toolkits which even bundle with ready-to-use assets, has helped many game enthusiasts create their own role-playing games (Ito 2005); while the availability of freeware scripting engines such as *NScripter* and *KiriKiri* has likely contributed to the proliferation of visual novels in the community (Miyake 2011, 61). The role of such consumer-grade game engines and tools appears to be particularly important given that the dōjin scene demonstrates less of the hacking spirit sometimes exhibited by its indie counterpart[viii].

An interesting convergence point is that, despite their differing relationships to mainstream games, both dōjin and indie scenes share a fondness for retro-style graphics. While by no means a definitive feature of either movement, a large number of both dōjin and indie games use 2D pixelated graphics visually alluding to classic games of the late 1980s and early 1990s. On the one hand, this tendency may be attributed to the relative easiness of producing this type of assets compared to realistic 3D graphics, and the limited resources at the developers’ disposal. However, the use of retro aesthetics is also important in that it connects contemporary games to the *golden age* of gaming, constructing a discourse of authenticity (Juul 2014). For indie games, this discourse extends further to create an implicit opposition to contemporary mainstream gaming and its constant pursuit of photorealistic 3D graphics (Thibault 2016). Yet in fact, as Juul (2015) has pointed out, many indie games feature aesthetics that evoke nostalgia without replicating any particular visual style that actually existed in older games. Examples of this include the blocky 3D style of *Minecraft* (2011) and the ultra-lo-fi pixellated graphics of *Pathways* (2009) (no classic videogame had a screen resolution that was so low while featuring a full-color palette).

Dōjin games on the whole appear to be more respectful of retro conventions, with fewer attempts being made to reimagine them or make them even more minimalist. The use of game creation tools such as *RPG Maker*, which have a fixed display resolution and bundle with ready-to-use assets, likely reinforces this. At the same time, many dōjin games use manga aesthetics, sometimes in combination with retro graphics (e.g. *Meido-san-o Migi-ni*). This, once again, highlights the strong ties that dōjin games share with manga and anime, of both dōjin and mainstream kinds.

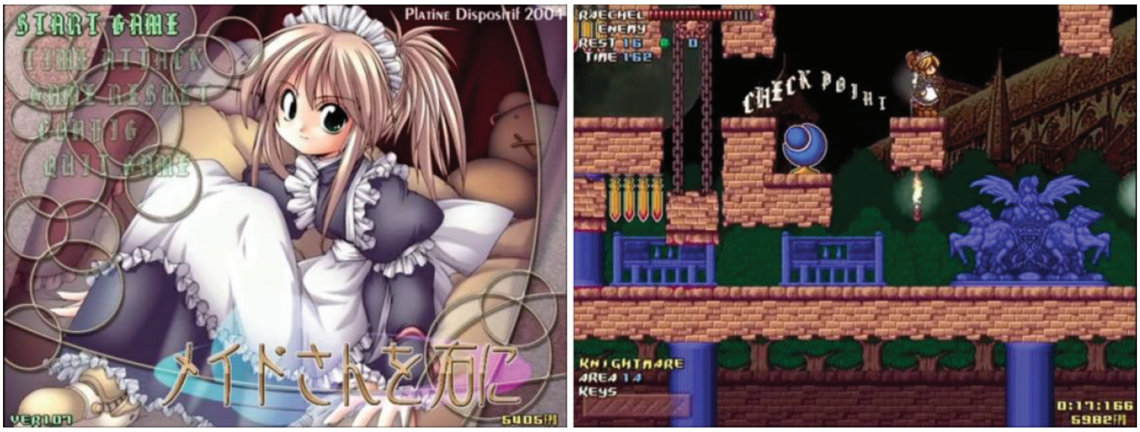
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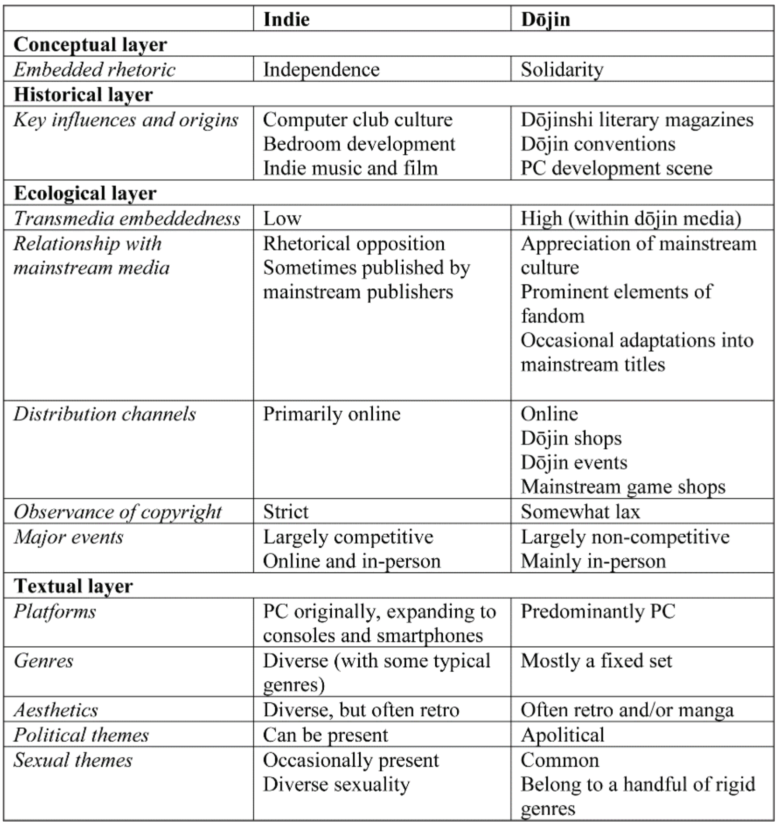
Figure 3. Like many dōjin games, *Meido-san-o Migi-ni* combines anime and retro game asthetics.

Conclusion: Commonalities, Disruption, Hybridities

The discussion above has addressed the differences, as well as the commonalities, between indie and dōjin games. For the reader's convenience, the most important of these differences and commonalities are presented in a simplified form in Table 1. It is evident that, for all their similarities, indie and dōjin games represent very different gaming cultures, characterized by different genealogies, cultural substrata, and historical trajectories.

It is crucial to stress, however, that neither indie nor dōjin gaming is internally heterogeneous. There are, as discussed by Hichibe and Tanaka (2016), developers who identify as indie and for whom the primary driver of creativity is the alluring, if often elusive, prospect of commercial success. There are also indie developers who prioritize self-expression over revenue and release their works for free. Many dōjin game creators produce pornographic fan works. Others create original games with no explicit imagery or sexual themes. There is, in short, more to both the dōjin and the indie movement than a fixed set of conventions.



	Indie	**Dōjin**
Conceptual layer		
Embedded rhetoric	Independence	Solidarity
Historical layer		
Key influences and origins	Computer club culture Bedroom development Indie music and film	Dōjinshi literary magazines Dōjin conventions PC development scene
Ecological layer		
Transmedia embeddedness	Low	High (within dōjin media)
Relationship with mainstream media	Rhetorical opposition Sometimes published by mainstream publishers	Appreciation of mainstream culture Prominent elements of fandom Occasional adaptations into mainstream titles
Distribution channels	Primarily online	Online Dōjin shops Dōjin events Mainstream game shops
Observance of copyright	Strict	Somewhat lax
Major events	Largely competitive Online and in-person	Largely non-competitive Mainly in-person
Textual layer		
Platforms	PC originally, expanding to consoles and smartphones	Predominantly PC
Genres	Diverse (with some typical genres)	Mostly a fixed set
Aesthetics	Diverse, but often retro	Often retro and/or manga
Political themes	Can be present	Apolitical
Sexual themes	Occasionally present Diverse sexuality	Common Belong to a handful of rigid genres

Table 1. A comparison between indie and dōjin games.

Furthermore, the boundaries between indie and dōjin games are not always clear. Recently, some dōjin creators have increasingly sought to find an international audience (Hichibe and Tanaka 2016), and several original dōjin titles popular enough to be translated into English have been marketed internationally as indie. Examples of this include *Mitsurugi Kamui Hikae* (2016) and the *fault - milestone* series (2012-2015), which have both also been ported from PC to consoles, transending both geocultural and technological boundaries associated with dōjin gaming. At the same time, in line with the wider trend of "indieglobalization" (Wallach 2014), an increasing number of game developers across the globe, including Japan, identify as indie. There are game conventions in Japan, such as Tokyo Sandbox and Gargantua, that focus on indie games, and online distribution platforms such as Playism specifically dedicated to Japanese indie games. Playism in particular has the dual purpose of distributing indie games locally but also promoting Japanese independent titles abroad. (Interestingly, although a handful of games on the Japanese version of the site are tagged as *dōjin*, this tag is absent from the English version.)

On the other hand, several dōjin games, such as the *Higurashi* series, have achieved some popularity in the West and have inspired parodies and fan works, thus extending the reach of the dōjin movement beyond Japan and even East Asia. This indicates we should not essentialize indie and dōjin games as respectively *Western* and *Japanese* or equate their cultural presence with their locales of origin. Ultimately, both indie and dōjin games represent a more general shift in cultural production: a move to participatory culture, a mode of cultural production characterized by low entry barriers into content creation, peer mentoring and collaboration, the emergence of favorable infrastructures for disseminating creative work, and a relative immediacy of media interacting with (and responding to) other media (Jenkins 2006).

As two examples of this process, indie and dōjin games are important reminders that no cultural transformation is so global as to leave no room for heterogeneity. This heterogeneity, it needs to be noted, extends beyond the idea of the glocal (Hemer and Tufte 2005): in an era of hybridity and interconnectivity, distinct idiocultures and communities of practice may not be easy to localize. It is perhaps wiser, then, to speak of plural *participatory cultures* than a single, unified one.

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[ii] In personal communication, the author clarified that it was not his intention to equate the two concepts, but he chose to approximate "dōjin soft" as the Japanese counterpart to indie games given that the former term was only mentioned briefly and was likely unfamiliar to some readers.

[iii] Hichibe and Tanaka (2016), however, do point out that the shift to digital distribution (and the fact some newer computers do not even have a CD/DVD-ROM drive) has been a threat to smaller stores specializing in dōjin games, which risk going out of business due to declining sales.

[iv] This is not to say that the indie scene is all about competition. As Consalvo & Paul (2017) demonstrate, there is a significant amount of cooperation, support, and knowledge-sharing among indie developers. At the same time, an informal competitive element is visible in the dōjin and otaku scenes, with creators vying for audiences' attention and collectors competing for rare items (Ito et al. 2012).

[v] Pornographic content is not exclusive to dōjin games in Japan. There are many companies that specialize in *eroge* (erotic games) for personal computers. Some of these, such as Feng and AKABEiSOFT, started out as dōjin circles before going commercial.

[vi] Aida (2013, 215), building on the work of Maekawa (2011), points out that *yaoi* involves two parallel discriminatory processes in Japanese society: those targeting homosexual men and those aimed at fujoshi themselves.

[vii] Even the few dōjin games that ostensibly focus on politics are typically disengaged from real events. Curiosist's *Ozawa-no Yabō* (2014) is a notable example, being set in the future and involving beautiful young women competing to become President of Japan. (Present-day Japan does not have a president.)

[viii] One exception lies at the overlap between dōjin and homebrew games. Despite the PC being by far the most popular platform for dōjin developers, some titles are released for game consoles. These games, owing to the technical difficulty of developing for proprietary platforms, display the same strong do-it-yourself spirit as the rest of the homebrew scene.