

# Indie and dōjin games: a cross-cultural comparison

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## INTRODUCTION

When a study of indie video games touches upon the issue of cultural variation, one concept that comes up often is “dōjin gēmu” (alternatively romanized as “doujin geemu”): 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 (Picard 2013). In Japan, as well, the term “indīzu” (indie) commonly occurs in conjunction with “dōjin,” though perhaps more often in juxtaposition than in analogy (Miyake 2013). And yet, recurrent as this conjunction is, there is little consensus or even systematic insight into how exactly indie and dōjin are related. Hichibe’s (2016) paper remains perhaps the only in-depth comparative account of dōjin and indie, but it primarily focuses on production over other aspects.

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.

The **conceptual** layer pertains to the pool of meanings, associations, and connotations evoked by the very concepts of indie and dōjin. Whereas the “embedded rhetoric” of indie games is that of independence (whether financial or artistic), “dōjin” literally translates as “same [i.e. like-minded] people” and denotes a shared interest of the creators rather than their ambition for independence. In fact, many dōjin games are “niji sōsaku,” that is, fan games created as homage to a particular group’s favorite mainstream title.

The **genealogical** layer traces the origins and development of the phenomena, situating them in a larger sociohistorical context. While not without its precursors (such as, for games, the 1970s computer club culture), “indie” is a relatively new (late 20th century) movement, whose emergence can be linked to three factors: the increasing accessibility of media production technology, the development of a favorable distribution infrastructure, and the growing gap between mainstream and hobbyist media (Garda and Grabarczyk 2016, Parker 2013). Dōjin culture, on the other hand, is rooted in a very different tradition, tracing its origins back to late Meiji era’s (19th century) dōjin literary

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circles and, closer to its present form, post-WWII dōjinshi manga magazines and the Comiket manga fair.

The **(media) ecological** layer relates to the role of the phenomena in their respective media environments, focusing on their relations with other media and distribution networks. While indie games can be seen as a part of a larger “indie continuum” comprising films, music, etc., the connections between various indie media are somewhat loose, with little cross-media overlap. Dōjin games, on the other hand, interact extensively with dōjin comics and literature, with many stories and characters “migrating” from one medium to another. And since there is no opposition between the dōjin culture and mainstream media industry, many successful dōjin games (such as *Tsukihime* and *Higurashi-no Naku Koro-ni*) have been remade into mainstream anime and live action series. Moreover, the dōjin scene has for a long time been integrated into Japan’s major retail networks: many major bookstores, for example, have dōjinshi corners, and various smaller stores specializing in dōjin exist. Social events such as the Comiket dōjinshi fair, which has existed since 1975, also serve as prominent outlets for dōjin game distribution. The dōjin gaming scene is also notably less competitive than the indie scene, which to a large degree revolves around game jams and awards.

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 politics and gender manifest, and so on. For example, unlike indie games, dōjin games are almost universally apolitical and generally reproduce the medium’s male heteronormative bias, while some indie games seek to challenge it.

While the comparison elucidates a number of profound differences between indie and dōjin gaming, the paper also argues that the two have similar cultural significance in that they provide an alternative outlet for expression, widening the scope of the ludic medium beyond mainstream gaming.

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