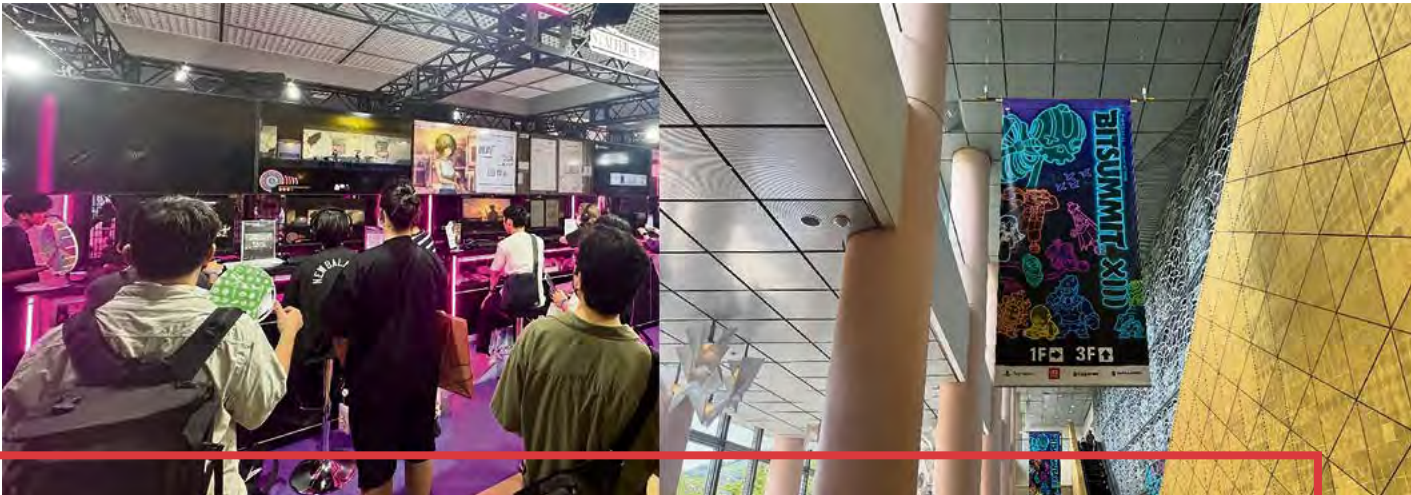




Doing It as Trailblazers!

Indie Game Developers in Japan and South Korea

Jh Shin

In the past decade, several noteworthy games have been released in South Korea and Japan. These include *THE PIA* (The PIA, 2024), which portrays a bomb accident within the South Korean military; *Commentator* (Tebasaki Games, will be released in 2025), which explores the power of media and social issues through the lens of a fictional broadcast station; *30 Days* (The Bricks Games, 2021), which addresses social isolation and the phenomenon of *kodokushi* (solitary death) among youth; and the *Unfolded* series (the first title, *Old Wounds*, was released in 2018 by COSDOTS), which addresses the Jeju 4.3 Uprising in South Korea. Although these titles share the same historical background in addressing the Jeju 4.3 Uprising – a tragic series of events, often described as a genocide, that took place on Jeju Island, South Korea, between 1948 and 1954 – each game’s narrative features a different event in the period.

The emergence of such titles from Japan and South Korea represents several significant shifts in game design, production, and market. Alongside technological transformations such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and the metaverse, new forms of indie games have appeared. These games go beyond narrow pedagogical functions to simulate historical events and lived experiences, particularly from the perspectives of those directly affected. Moreover, these games have fostered connections – among individuals and between individuals and society – serving as platforms for collective reflection and critical dialogue. But why does this matter?

In both Japan and South Korea, many millennial and Gen Z developers have embraced game design as a means of launching their own ventures amid uncertain economic conditions. A growing

number of these young creators identify as independent developers. An indie game refers to a game developed by individuals or small teams without the direct financial backing of large game publishers. Importantly, even when engaging with similar events, indie games vary across cultural contexts in their aims, interpretive frameworks, and representational strategies. These differences are shaped not only by developers’ individual intentions but also by broader sociocultural and political environments. While developers embed their own perspectives into their games, these are deeply informed by the societies in which they live, as well as by transnational currents and globalized patterns of thought. However, the idea of independence presents a fundamental dilemma. As Juul argues, indie games are considered those in which developers must maintain financial, aesthetic (artistic), and

cultural independence.¹ On the other hand, freedom from the artistic limitations imposed by the mainstream gaming industry allows developers to embed their own perspectives on both local and transnational events into their games. These thoughts are inherently informed by the societies in which they live. To analyze the games, it’s essential to first understand the developers. As some of them gain recognition, they begin to receive support from major game companies, publishers, and, in some cases, even government institutions. However, many first entered the field through university assignments or group projects. Rather than striving for professionalism from the beginning, these early projects served as opportunities to experiment with novel concepts and develop foundational skills. As their capabilities evolved, developers continued to produce new titles. Yet some of these works are still considered amateur

productions rather than commercially polished releases. At the same time, many developers grapple with the tension between their identities as indie creators and their aspirations to produce original, innovative content. Indie developers often view games as platforms for learning and artistic exploration – spaces that engage not only players but also academics and individuals with an interest in the medium. These games foster environments where ideas can be exchanged, critical dialogue initiated, and diverse perspectives expressed. Research on indie games has highlighted their emphasis on inclusivity and diversity, offering spaces that welcome a wide range of voices. They also cultivate communities centered on shared interests and experiences, fostering belonging and mutual understanding. Through cooperative gameplay, experimental narratives, and community-driven design, developers emphasize collaboration and empathy.

Games such as *Team Project Simulator*, developed by studio 806, exemplify how cooperative mechanics and community engagement can be harnessed to explore historical or social themes. The game addresses concerns of Gen Z such as the challenges of campus life, and it has sparked extensive debates on student forums about both game play and similar real-life scenarios. Similarly, when it comes to historical themes, indie game developers utilize narrative innovation to make contributions that go beyond entertainment. By basing games on real historical events, they construct sites of discourse, preserve marginalized histories, and challenge prevailing assumptions about what games can achieve. For example, *Unfolded: Camellia Tales*,² which deals with the Jeju 4.3 Uprising, illustrates how games can depict historical events from alternative perspectives. In this game, the player takes on the role of a young boy who loves poetry and literature and experiences the tragic history of the Jeju 4.3 Uprising through his eyes. Although the outcome of the historical event cannot be altered, since it belongs to the past, the game offers a powerful experiential perspective, allowing players to engage with history in a deeply personal way.

As games become more deeply integrated into daily life, increased scholarly and public attention to the indie genre is warranted. While indie developers have already produced groundbreaking work, emerging technologies promise even more dynamic and provocative contributions. As this indie phenomenon continues to evolve, so too will our understanding of the roles indie games play within gaming communities and broader society. Indie games are often associated with creative autonomy and resistance to corporate structures, but they can also be seen as tools of democratization in digital game culture. Unlike mainstream titles shaped by profit-driven models, indie games are frequently produced by small teams or solo developers who challenge the narrative and design monopolies of large AAA studios. From this perspective, the rise of socially engaged indie games represents not only artistic independence, but also a broader redistribution of cultural and expressive power. Having gone beyond entertainment, indie games in both Japan and South Korea are evolving rapidly and have become an increasingly important factor in both the game industry and academic research. It is exciting to see what new kinds of indie games will appear in the next decade.

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Fig. 1 (above): Scenes from an indie game event: BitSummit in Kyoto. It is a well-known global indie game event. (Photo by the author, July 2025)

Fig. 2 (right): Screenshot from *Unfolded: Camellia Tales* (top) and *Commentator* (bottom), notable indie games. (Screenshot by the author, June 2024)



Notes

- Juul, J. (2019). *Handmade pixels: Independent video games and the quest for authenticity*. MIT Press.
- Unfolded: Camellia Tales* is the final game in the *Unfolded* series.