

# Creating Worlds, Becoming Selves: Gender and Indie Game-Making on *itch.io*

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## Keywords

*itch.io*, indie game development, gender-diverse, affordances, gender affirmation

## INTRODUCTION

While big budget “AAA” games dominate public discourse due to their commercial visibility, indie games constitute the vast majority of releases, offering radically different spaces of representation. In 2024, nearly 99% of new titles on Steam were indie releases (VG Insights 2025). Among these alternative creative spaces, *itch.io* has become a particularly prominent hub for creators of marginalised gender identities, with nearly half of its creators identifying as women or gender-diverse. Despite this and its relative popularity, the platform remains critically understudied. This study examines *itch.io* as a site where gender-diverse creators explore and affirm their identities through indie game-making, highlighting how the platform’s affordances and community practices enable forms of cyclical creative labour that challenge both the self and others’ notions of art and gender.

Game studies has made important strides in addressing the field’s intersections with gender, but research remains sparse beyond the cisgender binary and is largely framed from the player’s perspective. While some studies suggest that games enable experimentation with gender through avatars, narratives, or mechanics (Biscop et al. 2019; Morgan et al. 2020), fewer examine how creators themselves use games for identity work. Indie game scholarship often highlights how independent production allows for more nuanced storytelling through practices of countergaming (Galloway 2006), with Chang (2017) extending this to queergaming as a subversion of cisheteronormativity. Salter et al. (2018) further argue that such practices are structurally impossible within AAA production models. Although scholars like Ruberg (2020) have amplified queer indie creators’ voices, the platform-level contexts shaping their work remain underexplored. In particular, *itch.io* – arguably the most significant indie game distribution platform after *Steam* – has received little attention, with only a handful of works engaging it directly (Ho et al. 2022; Werning 2019). Crucially, no existing research examines its role in enabling gender identity exploration among creators, marking a significant gap at the intersection of queer game studies and platform studies.

To address this gap, this study draws on seven semi-structured interviews with gender-diverse indie game developers based in so-called ‘Australia’ who have published games on *itch.io*. Participants were recruited through community-based purposive sampling via online networks, with diversity in gender identities

prioritised, though only one of the seven identified as a person of colour and none with English not as their native language – a limitation this paper encourages future research to address. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, transcribed, and analysed through abductive thematic analysis.

Findings reveal that *itch.io*'s technical and cultural environment enables forms of queer creative practice that resist industry norms. First, participants described an anti-commercial ethos: game-making as personal artistic practice rather than labour, free from AAA's entanglements with profit, gatekeeping, and the tech–military complex. Second, *itch.io*'s accessibility – low barriers to entry, flexible monetisation, and permissive content policies – supports creators whose work would be excluded elsewhere, including sexual or deeply personal narratives. Third, its affordances (e.g., free game publishing, bundles, jams, portfolio-like game pages, etc.) act as identity-building infrastructure, bolstering both expression and discoverability while fostering a participatory culture that encourages game development literacy. Fourth, participants described a feedback loop wherein personal games inspire others to reflect on their own gender identities and experiment with game-making themselves, sustaining a community of iterative queer creativity. It was also repeatedly noted that despite *itch.io*'s merits, the site does not exist in a vacuum and instead best serves as an anchor in a broader ecology of communities, both in-person and on adjacent social platforms like *Discord* and *Bluesky*. Across these themes, game-making functioned not only as individual self-articulation but as queer world-building – creating imagined futures, affective networks, and alternative socialities through shared digital practice.

This research contributes a platform-specific, creator-focused perspective to queer game studies and digital media research. It shifts attention away from AAA-centric narratives, foregrounding how infrastructural and cultural design choices shape creative autonomy, identity work, and community formation. By examining *itch.io* as both a technical platform and a socio-cultural ecosystem, this study demonstrates how marginalised creators navigate, negotiate, and transform digital spaces through their creative labour.

Future research should extend this inquiry by exploring comparative platform studies, cross-cultural samples, and the longitudinal dynamics of player–creator identity cycles in other participatory digital environments. Such work would further illuminate how digital infrastructures enable or constrain the cultural production of queer futures, and how marginalised creators continue to carve out spaces within and beyond the games industry.

## BIO

Nik Tan-Mishra (he/they/他) is a Singaporean undergraduate student at the University of Melbourne writing their Honours thesis that is due for completion at the end of 2025. He has always been intrigued by the intersections between marginalised identities and the formation of digital communities through media – particularly games and fandoms – and is dipping their toes into the vast body that is game studies.

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