# Modern Indie and Hobbyist Video Game Development: A Comprehensive Research Plan

## 1. Defining the Landscape: Modern Indie and Hobbyist Game Development in 2024

Modern indie game development in 2024 represents a significant force within the broader video game industry, characterized primarily by its independence from major publishers. This independence manifests in various forms, including financial autonomy, creative control, and self-directed publishing efforts. Unlike AAA titles, which are typically backed by substantial budgets and large teams, indie games are often crafted by smaller groups or even individuals operating with more limited financial resources. This constraint, however, frequently fosters a culture of innovation and a willingness to experiment with unconventional gameplay mechanics and narratives, leading to unique and memorable gaming experiences. The increasing market share and revenue generated by independent titles in 2024 underscore a growing player appetite for these distinctive creations. This surge in popularity suggests a broader trend where gamers are actively seeking out and valuing the unique qualities often found in indie games, such as innovative gameplay and personal narratives, over the high production values typically associated with AAA releases. This growing demand, in turn, empowers independent developers, strengthening their position and influence within the overall gaming market.

Hobbyist game development, while sharing some similarities with indie development, is primarily distinguished by its motivation. Hobbyist developers are typically driven by passion, personal fulfillment, and the desire to experiment and learn, rather than the pursuit of income. These projects often serve as a creative outlet or a means to develop game development skills, and while they may sometimes evolve into commercial indie games, their initial intent is usually not profit-driven. The distinction between hobbyist and professional indie development can often be fluid, with many individuals starting their game development journey as hobbyists, gradually honing their skills and potentially transitioning to a more professional approach over time.

Key characteristics differentiate indie and hobbyist games from AAA titles. Indie and hobbyist projects often operate with significant resource constraints compared to the substantial budgets of AAA productions. However, this limitation frequently fuels creativity and resourcefulness, leading to innovative gameplay and unique artistic styles. Both indie and hobbyist developers often prioritize innovation and unique gameplay experiences due to their independence from publisher constraints, allowing for greater creative risk-taking compared to AAA studios that may be more risk-averse due to larger financial stakes. This freedom allows them to explore unconventional ideas and experiment with mechanics and narratives that might not be greenlit by larger companies focused on maximizing profit through established formulas.

The market presence and significance of modern indie games in 2024 are substantial. Indie games account for a significant portion of overall game sales and have a notable impact on innovation and genre evolution within the industry. Digital distribution platforms play a crucial role in enabling the global reach and accessibility of indie titles, providing avenues for developers to connect directly with players worldwide. The increasing prominence of indie games is not merely a fleeting trend but rather a significant and ongoing shift in the gaming landscape, propelled by factors such as the democratization of development tools and a growing gamer demand for diverse and unique interactive experiences.

## 2. The Engine Room: Tools and Technologies Powering Indie Games

The technological landscape of modern indie and hobbyist game development is characterized by the accessibility and power of various tools and platforms. Game engines form the backbone of this landscape, with popular choices including Unity, Unreal Engine, Godot, and GameMaker Studio 2. Unity is favored for its versatility, extensive asset store, and relatively gentle learning curve, making it suitable for both 2D and 3D projects across numerous platforms. Unreal Engine, known for its advanced rendering capabilities and visual fidelity, is often preferred for graphically intensive games, although it traditionally has a steeper learning curve. Godot, an open-source engine, has gained popularity for its flexibility and node-based architecture. GameMaker Studio 2 is particularly well-suited for 2D game development with its user-friendly interface and scripting language. Niche engines like RPG Maker cater to specific genres, providing pre-made assets and simplified workflows for creating 2D role-playing games. The availability of these powerful and increasingly user-friendly game engines has significantly lowered the barrier to entry for aspiring indie and hobbyist developers, enabling them to bring their creative visions to life.

Common programming languages in indie game development include C# (primarily used with Unity), C++ (the foundation of Unreal Engine), and GDScript (Godot's custom scripting language). Additionally, visual scripting tools like Blueprints in Unreal Engine offer a more accessible entry point for individuals with less programming experience, allowing them to create game logic through a visual interface. While programming knowledge remains a valuable asset, the rise of visual scripting and intuitive engine interfaces is indeed empowering individuals with limited coding skills to actively participate in game creation.

Art tools play a crucial role in shaping the visual identity of indie games. For 2D art, tools like Aseprite are popular for pixel art creation and animation. In the realm of 3D art, Blender stands out as a free and open-source option offering a comprehensive suite of modeling, sculpting, and animation tools. Industry-standard software like Adobe Photoshop is also frequently used for various art and texturing tasks. Importantly, the accessibility of free and low-cost art tools empowers indie developers with limited budgets to create visually appealing games without incurring significant expenses. Platforms like itch.io, OpenGameArt.org, and Rokoko Motion Library also provide access to a wealth of free assets, further aiding developers in realizing their creative visions without substantial financial investment.

Cross-platform development has become increasingly important in the indie scene. Engines like Unity and Unreal Engine offer robust capabilities for deploying games to multiple platforms, including PC, consoles, mobile devices, and web browsers. This ability to easily develop for multiple platforms through modern game engines significantly expands the potential audience for indie games, allowing developers to reach players on their preferred devices. Digital distribution platforms such as Steam, Epic Games Store, and mobile app stores are essential for reaching these diverse audiences. The mobile gaming market, in particular, continues to grow, presenting a vast audience eager for innovative and engaging experiences from indie developers.

Middleware and asset stores contribute significantly to streamlining the indie development process. Middleware solutions can provide specialized functionalities like networking, analytics, and audio management, allowing developers to focus on core gameplay mechanics. Asset stores, such as the Unity Asset Store and Unreal Marketplace, offer a vast library of pre-made art assets, sound effects, music, and code snippets, which can significantly accelerate development by providing readily available resources. These resources can be particularly valuable for small indie teams with limited time and personnel.

**Table 1: Comparison of Popular Game Engines**

| Engine Name | Primary Programming Language(s) | Licensing Model/Cost | Target Platforms | Strengths | Weaknesses | Typical Game Genres |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unity | C# | Subscription-based | iOS, Android, Windows, macOS, Linux, major consoles, VR/AR platforms | Versatile, large asset store, extensive documentation, strong community support, suitable for 2D and 3D | Can have performance issues if not optimized well | Wide range, including mobile, VR/AR, 2D platformers, 3D action-adventure, simulations |
| Unreal Engine | C++, Blueprints (visual scripting) | Royalty-based | iOS, Android, Windows, macOS, Linux, major consoles, VR/AR platforms | High visual fidelity, powerful rendering capabilities, robust toolset, Blueprint visual scripting system | Steeper learning curve, can be resource-intensive | AAA-quality games, first-person shooters, action-adventure, VR/AR experiences |
| Godot | GDScript, C# | Open Source (MIT) | iOS, Android, Windows, macOS, Linux, web (HTML5) | Free and open-source, flexible node-based architecture, lightweight, active community | Smaller asset library compared to Unity and Unreal | 2D and 3D games, particularly well-suited for stylized graphics |
| GameMaker Studio 2 | GML (GameMaker Language) | One-time purchase/Subscription | Windows, macOS, Linux, web (HTML5), consoles, mobile (via additional licenses) | User-friendly interface, excellent for 2D development, rapid prototyping | Less versatile for complex 3D projects | 2D platformers, puzzle games, arcade-style games |
| RPG Maker | Ruby (RGSS) | One-time purchase | Windows, macOS (limited), can export to other platforms with plugins | Simplifies 2D RPG creation, pre-made assets, focus on storytelling and gameplay | Limited flexibility compared to general-purpose engines, primarily focused on a specific genre | 2D Role-Playing Games (JRPG style) |

## 3. Building the Game: Development Workflows and Team Structures

Indie and hobbyist game development often embrace more flexible and iterative development workflows compared to the structured approaches typically found in larger studios. Agile and lean methodologies, which emphasize iterative development, frequent feedback loops, and adaptability, are commonly adopted by indie teams. Prototyping plays a crucial role in this process, allowing developers to quickly test core mechanics and gameplay concepts early on. This iterative approach enables developers to validate their ideas and make necessary adjustments based on testing and feedback without investing heavily in features that may not resonate with players. The ability to quickly adapt to feedback and changes in vision is paramount for success in the dynamic indie landscape.

Team structures within the indie scene are diverse. Solo developers are prevalent, often taking on the multifaceted role of designer, programmer, artist, and marketer. Small, collaborative teams are also common, with members specializing in different areas such as game design, programming, art, and sound engineering. These teams are frequently formed based on shared passion and a common vision for a project, often originating from online communities or personal connections. The rise of online collaboration tools has facilitated the formation of distributed teams, allowing individuals from different geographical locations to work together seamlessly.

Remote work is a common and often necessary model for indie teams, offering benefits such as access to a wider global talent pool and significant cost savings on office space and related expenses. However, this model also presents challenges in terms of communication, coordination, and maintaining team cohesion across different time zones and geographical locations. Effective remote collaboration relies on utilizing various communication platforms, project management tools, and establishing clear communication protocols.

The importance of prototyping and iteration cannot be overstated in indie game development. Creating early prototypes allows developers to quickly test the core fun factor and identify potential issues or areas for improvement. Continuous iteration based on player feedback is crucial for refining gameplay, balancing difficulty, and ensuring the game meets player expectations. This iterative process helps indie developers maximize their limited resources by focusing on the most engaging aspects of their game and avoiding the trap of investing heavily in features that may not be well-received.

## 4. From Passion to Profit: Funding and Monetization Strategies

Funding for indie game development often begins with personal funds and a "bootstrapping" approach, where developers invest their own savings to get their projects off the ground. However, as projects grow in scope, indie developers often explore alternative funding options. Crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and Indiegogo have become significant avenues for securing the necessary capital to complete development and build an early community around a game. These platforms allow developers to pitch their game ideas directly to potential players and raise funds from those who are interested in supporting the project. While less common for very small teams, there is also the possibility of securing grants from organizations that support indie game development or attracting investment from venture capitalists or angel investors.

Indie developers enjoy greater flexibility in choosing monetization models compared to AAA studios, allowing them to tailor their approach to their specific game and target audience. The traditional premium model, involving a one-time purchase of the game, remains a popular choice. However, other models such as free-to-play with optional in-app purchases or advertising, early access, subscription services, and pay-what-you-want options are also utilized. The early access model, in particular, has become a common strategy, allowing developers to release a playable version of their game during development, generate revenue, and gather valuable player feedback to inform further development.

Crowdfunding and early access are not just funding mechanisms but also powerful tools for community building and gaining early validation for an indie game. By involving players early in the development process through these methods, indie developers can foster a sense of ownership and investment in the game, leading to a more loyal fanbase and valuable feedback that can shape the final product. Transparency and consistent communication with backers and early access players are crucial for building trust and managing expectations.

Despite the creative freedom and potential for success, indie game development often involves significant financial risk and requires careful resource management. Many indie developers face financial uncertainties and challenges, and the time commitment required for game development can be substantial, leading to potential burnout. Careful budgeting and a realistic understanding of the market are essential for navigating the financial landscape of indie development.

## 5. Connecting with Players: Marketing and Community Engagement

With limited budgets, indie developers must prioritize creative and cost-effective marketing strategies that leverage online platforms and community engagement. Building a strong online presence through a dedicated website, social media profiles, and presence on relevant online communities is crucial. A compelling visual identity, including a captivating game logo, screenshots, and a well-produced trailer, is essential for grabbing the attention of potential players. Participating in game jams and industry events can also provide valuable exposure and networking opportunities. Emphasizing the unique selling proposition of the game – what makes it stand out from the competition – is key to attracting attention in a crowded market.

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Discord, and Reddit serve as vital tools for indie developers to connect directly with potential players, share announcements and development updates, and foster a sense of community around their games. Consistent communication and transparency about the development process are essential for building trust and engagement with the community.

Actively engaging with players and building a loyal fanbase can significantly contribute to the long-term success of an indie game. Hosting beta tests and actively encouraging player feedback provides valuable insights for improving the game and makes players feel invested in its development. Responding to player comments and reviews, and creating a welcoming and supportive community, can foster a strong sense of loyalty and encourage word-of-mouth marketing.

Collaborating with content creators such as streamers and YouTubers has become a highly effective way for indie developers to reach a large and engaged audience, significantly boosting visibility and sales. These influencers can showcase the game to their followers, providing valuable exposure that might be difficult to achieve through traditional advertising methods, especially with limited budgets.

## 6. Reaching the World: Distribution Platforms and Their Impact

Digital distribution platforms have fundamentally changed how indie games reach players, providing global accessibility that was previously unattainable through traditional retail channels. Major platforms such as Steam, Epic Games Store, Itch.io, and GOG cater primarily to PC gamers, offering various features for game discovery, purchase, and community interaction. Mobile app stores, including the Apple App Store and Google Play Store, provide access to the vast mobile gaming market. Console-specific marketplaces like the PlayStation Store, Xbox Games Store, and Nintendo eShop serve as the primary distribution channels for their respective gaming consoles.

Each distribution platform offers its own set of advantages and disadvantages for indie developers. While platforms like Steam boast a massive user base, the sheer volume of games released can make discoverability a significant challenge. The Epic Games Store has gained traction by offering a more favorable revenue share to developers and frequently curating its selection. Itch.io provides a more open and flexible platform, allowing developers greater control over their game pages and revenue. Mobile app stores offer access to a huge audience but also present challenges in terms of competition and the prevalence of free-to-play monetization models.

Platform policies and curation processes can significantly influence the visibility and success of indie games. Some platforms have stricter curation processes than others, which can impact the types of games that are featured and promoted. The revenue sharing models adopted by different platforms also directly affect the profitability of indie games. Understanding each platform's specific guidelines, audience demographics, and community features is crucial for indie developers when deciding where to distribute their games.

Beyond the major platforms, indie developers can explore alternative distribution methods to reach niche audiences or build a more direct relationship with their players. Selling games directly through their own websites allows developers to retain a larger share of the revenue and maintain direct communication with their customers. Bundling games with other indie titles can increase visibility and reach a wider audience. Platforms like Patreon offer a way for developers to receive ongoing support from their fans, often in exchange for exclusive content or early access to builds.

## 7. Navigating the Hurdles: Challenges Faced by Indie Developers

Indie and hobbyist game developers encounter a multitude of interconnected challenges throughout the development and publishing process. Securing adequate funding and managing limited financial resources remains a persistent hurdle for many independent creators. In a crowded market with a constant influx of new releases, achieving discoverability and attracting the attention of potential players is another significant obstacle. This challenge is often compounded by the limited budgets available for marketing and promotion, making it difficult to compete with the often substantial marketing campaigns of both AAA and other well-funded indie titles. The intense competition within the gaming industry further exacerbates these difficulties. The sheer time commitment required for game development, especially when undertaken by small teams or individuals, can lead to burnout and negatively impact developer well-being. Furthermore, indie developers often find themselves needing to wear multiple hats, handling various aspects of development, from design and coding to art and marketing, which can be demanding and require a diverse skillset. The inherent resource limitations of indie development can indeed lead to longer development times and increased pressure on individual team members, making it more challenging to compete with the often higher production values of better-funded AAA titles.

These challenges have various causes and effects. Limited funding can directly restrict the scope and overall quality of a game, as well as the reach and effectiveness of marketing efforts. The increasing market saturation on digital distribution platforms makes it progressively harder for new games, particularly those from unknown developers, to gain visibility and attract players. The demanding nature of indie development and the constant pressure to succeed can lead to burnout, impacting developer productivity and overall health.

Successful indie developers often employ various strategies to overcome these hurdles. Creativity and resourcefulness are paramount, allowing developers to find innovative solutions to technical and artistic challenges within their budget constraints. Actively engaging with the community through beta tests, feedback requests, and social media can provide valuable insights, build a loyal following, and generate word-of-mouth marketing. Developing a unique selling proposition that clearly distinguishes the game from others in the market is crucial for attracting attention. Investing in efficient tools early in the development process can significantly improve productivity and save time in the long run. Perseverance and self-motivation are essential qualities for navigating the often-challenging journey of indie game development. Focusing on niche genres and catering to underserved communities can also increase the chances of success by targeting a specific audience with unmet needs. By prioritizing innovation, building strong communities, and employing creative marketing strategies that maximize their limited resources, indie developers can effectively navigate the numerous challenges they face.

## 8. Learning from Success: Case Studies of Notable Modern Indie/Hobbyist Games

Examining successful modern indie games can provide valuable insights and lessons for aspiring developers.

**8.1 Case Study 1: Stardew Valley** Developed primarily by one person, Eric Barone, using C# and the MonoGame framework, *Stardew Valley* exemplifies the success achievable through dedication and a clear vision. Funded initially by Barone's savings, the game's charming pixel art style, relaxing gameplay loop centered around farming and community building, and engaging storytelling resonated with a wide audience. Active engagement with the community throughout development, incorporating player feedback, played a significant role in its success. *Stardew Valley* demonstrates the power of a unique and fulfilling gameplay experience, even with limited resources.

**8.2 Case Study 2: Celeste** Developed by a small team at Extremely OK Games, *Celeste* is a critically acclaimed platformer known for its challenging gameplay and poignant narrative about mental health. Utilizing the MonoGame framework, the game features a distinctive pixel art style and tight controls. Its success can be attributed to its innovative level design, emotionally resonant story, and clear communication of its core appeal. *Celeste* highlights the importance of polished mechanics and a compelling narrative in achieving indie success.

**8.3 Case Study 3: Hades II** Anticipated as a major indie release in 2024, *Hades II* builds upon the success of its predecessor, developed by Supergiant Games. Known for their distinctive art style, compelling narratives, and engaging gameplay, Supergiant Games has cultivated a strong following. Their approach often involves iterative development and close interaction with their community. The success of *Hades II* is expected to stem from its established reputation, innovative roguelike mechanics, and high production values for an indie title.

**8.4 Case Study 4: Palworld** *Palworld*, developed by Pocketpair with a relatively modest budget, achieved phenomenal success in early 2024, surpassing 25 million units sold. Utilizing Unreal Engine, the game blends creature-collecting mechanics with survival and crafting elements, creating a unique and often humorous experience. Its success highlights the potential of innovative gameplay combinations and tapping into existing popular genres with a fresh twist.

**Table 2: Examples of Successful Modern Indie Games and Key Success Factors**

| Game Title | Year of Release | Developer | Genre | Key Success Factors | Estimated Sales/Revenue (if available) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Stardew Valley | 2016 | ConcernedApe | Farming Simulation RPG | Relaxing gameplay, charming art style, strong community engagement | Over 20 million copies |
| Celeste | 2018 | Extremely OK Games | Platformer | Challenging gameplay, poignant narrative, distinctive pixel art | Over 1 million copies |
| Hades II | 2024 (Early Access) | Supergiant Games | Roguelike Action RPG | Established reputation, innovative mechanics, compelling narrative, high production value | N/A |
| Palworld | 2024 (Early Access) | Pocketpair | Creature-Collecting Survival | Innovative gameplay blend, viral marketing, capitalizing on existing genre popularity | Over 25 million units sold |
| Lethal Company | 2023 | Zeekerss | Horror, Co-op | Unique and tense gameplay, strong streamer appeal, low price point | Millions of copies sold |
| Hollow Knight | 2017 | Team Cherry | Metroidvania | Atmospheric world, challenging gameplay, beautiful hand-drawn art | Over 3 million copies |
| Cuphead | 2017 | Studio MDHR | Run and Gun | Unique 1930s cartoon aesthetic, challenging gameplay | Over 6 million copies |
| Among Us | 2018 | Innersloth | Social Deduction | Simple yet engaging gameplay, strong social element, popularity among streamers | Hundreds of millions of players |
| Undertale | 2015 | tobyfox | RPG | Unique combat system, memorable characters, emotionally resonant story | Over 1 million copies |
| Outer Wilds | 2019 | Mobius Digital | Open World Mystery | Innovative time-loop mechanic, compelling exploration, strong sense of discovery | N/A |
| Risk of Rain 2 | 2020 | Hopoo Games | Roguelike Shooter | Fast-paced action, addictive gameplay loop, strong replayability | Over 4 million copies |
| Octodad: Dadliest Catch | 2014 | Young Horses | Physics-based Comedy | Unique and humorous premise, challenging controls | Over 1 million copies |

Successful indie games often distinguish themselves through unique gameplay mechanics, compelling narratives, distinctive art styles, and strong community engagement, even when working with limited resources. Furthermore, many successful indie titles leverage early access platforms or actively solicit and incorporate community feedback to refine their gameplay and build a dedicated audience before their full release.

## Conclusions

The landscape of modern indie and hobbyist video game development in 2024 is vibrant and dynamic. Fueled by accessible technology, a growing player demand for unique experiences, and the passion of independent creators, indie games have established themselves as a significant force within the gaming industry. While facing numerous challenges related to funding, discoverability, and competition, successful indie developers often overcome these hurdles through innovation, community engagement, and a deep understanding of their target audience. The case studies of successful indie games highlight the importance of a clear vision, polished gameplay, and a willingness to take creative risks. As technology continues to evolve and digital distribution platforms expand their reach, the future of indie game development appears promising, with ample opportunities for passionate individuals and small teams to create and share their unique interactive visions with the world.

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