

Embodied Fate:
The Character Economy and the Neoliberal Subjectivity in Gacha Games

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Gacha game is a new genre of video game that gained popularity in the 2010s and the 20s. In popular gacha games such as *Genshin Impact*, *Fate/Grand Order*, and *Blue Archive*, like a video game version of lottery, players pay virtual or real currencies to obtain random valuable items or playable characters. In *Embodied Fate*, the author conducts a symptomatic reading of the gacha game: to analyze the desire structure of gacha gaming from the perspectives of media studies, ludology, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies. Numerous theoretical frameworks and critical categories are used for the analysis, including database consumption, character merchandising, psychoanalysis, avatar theory and action theory of ludology, neoliberalism, and precarity. By contextualizing gacha games in the anime media mix, it is shown that the production and consumption of virtual characters are the foundation of gacha games' desire structure. Also, the author purposes that over-possession, the sophisticated dynamics between the player and the character, boost the desire for repetitive gacha gaming. Last, the author puts gacha games in the wider context of late capitalism and shows that neoliberalism creates gacha games and gacha players develop parasociality with characters to resist the insecurity of their precarious lived experience.

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Introduction: Towards Gacha Games



Figure 1: *Genshin Impact* Visual (Source: Epic Games Store)



Figure 2: Intertwined Fate and Acquaint Fate in *Genshin Impact* (screenshot by the author)

In *Genshin Impact*, a video game published in 2020 and also an immediate global

hit, one of its most significant items is “Intertwined Fate.” The icon of an Intertwined Fate looks mysterious and symbolizing: a luminous spherical star, crystal blue, covered in the iridescence, surrounded by four rings converging at the poles and intertwined in heart shape junctions. Although the item icon is a static image, it is almost possible for players to sense its movement, the outer rings with heart shape junctions and six-petal asterisk polar slowly rotating around the star-like core, reminiscent of a minor celestial system. The description for Intertwined Fate read as followed:

A fateful stone that connects dreams. Its glimmers can entwine fates and connect dreams, just as how its glimmer links stars into the shapes of a heart’s desires¹.

Keywords: dreams, desires, and fates. There is another similar item in *Genshin Impact* called “Acquaint Fate” with roughly the same function. When the game’s language setting is Chinese, the game’s development and original language, these two items are respectively called “*jiuchan zhi yuan* (纠缠之缘)” and “*xiangyu zhi yuan* (相遇之缘).” Readers familiar with Chinese characters might be sensitive to the nuances in this choice of words: compared with the English wording of “fate” which roughly refers to an inevitable outcome, a decisive and irresistible result, a prophetic event bound to happen, *yuan*, the counterpart for “fate” in Chinese, bears additionally a layer of mysterious connotation: a transcendental connection bridging the spatiotemporal void and the worldly rupture between, a thread that weaves two otherwise unacquainted

¹ HoYoverse, *Genshin Impact*, 2020.

beings together. A strange and unspeakable entanglement reminds one of the synonymous quantum phenomenon that bounds two separable particles in a symmetrical and mutually affective pair, regardless of space and time in between.

To further illustrate how a Fate works, let us move to other aspects of this game. *Genshin Impact* is a role-playing game, which means players can control playable characters to explore the game's open world. Unlike western role-playing games in which players are allowed and encouraged to customize literally every aspect of their in-game avatar, *Genshin Impact* features a troupe of colorful and attractive preset playable characters that players can recruit into their teams. Every playable character is finely designed to assure that they are attractive and relatable. These characters not only play important roles in *Genshin Impact*'s epic story, players can also play these characters in battles, or even further interact with them in various ways, exploring their unique personalities and background stories, developing friendships and deeper affective connections with them.

Nonetheless, not all the characters are immediately playable: in order to recruit a character into the roster of playable characters, players have to utilize a mechanism called "Wishes." This is where Fates come in. In order to have a chance to "wish" a character, players have to consume a Fate, either an Intertwined Fate or an Acquaint Fate, depending on the character players desire to obtain. One Fate for one Wish. The scene of Wishes is indeed a spectacle visually, acoustically, and affectively: when the

button of “Wish” is clicked, either with the player’s finger on a smartphone’s touchscreen, the bottom on a mouse, or with a console controller, all the elements on the user interface and other redundant information on the screen disappear. Before the player is nothing but an infinite sky with clouds covering the high space. Then come in Fates: usually in ten, the stars of Fates players consume fall from a deep blue sky and slide across clusters of clouds, leaving long glowing tails behind. Falling fates are of different colors: white, purple, and golden, representing the type of each Wish’s result.

This is the moment of anticipation and distress, for not every Fate guarantees a desired and expected result. More often than not, the result of a Wish is an ordinary weapon that can be equipped by characters. Only occasionally, approximately one in ten times, when the falling Fate has a purple or golden tail, the Fate brings the player a random character, hopefully, a new one that the player has not obtained before. However, if players want their wish granted and meet their dream character, there is nothing but *yuan* to count on: a Fate is truly the *fate* embodied².

Genshin Impact is only one of the titles utilizing a lottery-like mechanism to reward players with random items or characters. Generally, this mechanism for random rewards is called “gacha,” a term derived from a popular Japanese toy *gachapon*, and games utilizing similar mechanisms are collectively referred to as “gacha games.”

² The inspiration of considering the gacha mechanism with the conception of fate comes from Lax and Mackenzie 2019.

Though there are variations in their applications of this mechanism, they are all similar to *Genshin Impact* in terms of the gacha mechanism: the player has to pay certain virtual or real currencies to exchange gacha chances, and, like a video game version of lottery, the rewards obtained from the gacha system is random. These games are the research subject of *Embodied Fate*.

At the first glance, gacha as a mechanism rewarding random items seems hardly counted as a proper genre to be studied or even discussed. It is also true that every single gacha game, though sharing in common the gacha mechanism, differs tremendously in other aspects such as gameplay, narratives, aesthetics, and technical specifications. Nonetheless, the gacha mechanism functions as the anchoring point for these heterogeneous games and gives them universality.

Embodied Fate will approach gacha games from various perspectives to capture gacha games' common nature. I will try to present the multi-faceted nature of gacha games as a component in the anime media mix, a game genre of popular culture, a multimedia gateway into the virtual economy of characters, and the reflection of postmodern players' polymorphous desire. This project aims to show that gacha, an often accused and criticized gameplay mechanism for its similarity with gambling and propensity to incite gaming addiction, might be approached from other perspectives. Most importantly, gacha games will be framed in the larger political and cultural framework of late capitalism and presented as a cultural symptom of neoliberalism. In

short, I try to explain why gacha games and the gacha mechanism are the abstraction of the neoliberal paradigm and why this abstraction is the survival strategy of postmodern gacha players living in precarity.

Gacha-pon, Gaming, and Gambling

It is not unusual to utilize randomness in non-digital games. Children are excited about playing games totally dependent on randomness such as guessing the number of the next turned-over card in a deck, and not a few adults patron casinos, lottery, and horse racing, testing their luck and wealth. In ludologist Roger Caillois' classification of play, *alea* is the play of randomness: players surrender to the arbitration of fate, disregarding their gaps in skill, wealth, strength, experience, and other factors (17). Being one of the oldest forms of play, randomness also finds its place in video games. It is common that when the player eliminates an enemy, random items can be collected as rewards. Nonetheless, it is, to some degree, misleading to trace the parent of gacha in the limited realm of video games. There is another direct origin preceding the born of gacha games, a unique culture from Japan.

The etymology of "gacha" is associated with one popular toy vending machine, *gachapon*, which sells blind boxes containing random items. *Gachapon* originated in Japan but gains popularity in Asia following the expansion of the Japanese popular culture. The term *gachapon* both refers to the vending machine and the blind boxes it sells. When

a consumer inserts coins into a *gachapon* machine and bends the hand crank with the sound of “gacha,” a small opaque capsule falls on the collecting tray, producing a rebounding crack of “pon.” The capsule, which contains the purchased item, is such designed that its opacity allows potential buyers to sense that there is something inside the capsule shell but the actual content remains unknown, which will not be revealed until the shell is unscrewed and the capsule opened. Every *gachapon* machine showcases a list of obtainable items, so it is possible to anticipate what is contained in the next capsule. However, the purchaser has no idea exactly which item is contained in a randomly dropped-out capsule before actually opening it. A single *gachapon* vending machine often features a collection of spin-off toys derived from popular anime, manga, or games, but there are also other franchises of *gachapon* machines selling animal figures, tiny food models, or even miniature art reproductions. It is possible for an avid collector to build a mini collection of all the famous classic paintings or a micro-zoo of tiny plastic animals by collecting a large amount of *gachapon*. What makes *gachapon* so popular in Japan and other places in Asia are the abundance of purchasable options, the relative economic cost of a single purchase (a single *gachapon* capsule usually costs 300 to 500 yens, roughly two to four dollars), and, of course, the guilty pleasure of anticipating the desired item in the next capsules dropping out of the machine after the crack of “gacha-pon.”

In the realm of video games, gacha refers to a mechanism identical to *gachapon*.

When talking about “gacha” in video games, this term refers to a specific lottery-like mechanism to trade random items based on a probability distribution of rarity and values. In a typical video game with the gacha system, every obtainable item is assigned a specific dropping probability (“dropping rate”) according to its rarity. While items of less value have relatively high dropping rates, rare items can be extremely difficult to obtain even if players gacha plenty of times. Generally, a chance to gacha can be purchased with virtual currencies. The virtual in-game currencies used to purchase a gacha chance can either be collected in-game as rewards of certain quests such as defeating enemies, solving puzzles, or beating a stage, or, more often than not, directly purchased with real currencies such as yen, dollars, or renminbi³. As a result, for players who wish to obtain their desired items through gacha, it is not unusual to invest a large amount of budget to purchase numerous gacha chances in order to win the highly rare “dream item,” which is usually assigned a dropping rate less than one percent.

For a pure gacha mechanism, there is no way in predicting how many chances are needed for obtaining the desired items. Unsurprisingly, gacha is introduced into the video game industry primarily as a means to drive revenue. As a result of its natural

³. References to “real currencies” and “virtual currencies” are used here according to their circulation spaces, rather than their exchange values. All currencies, regardless of their statuses as in-game currencies or real-world currencies, have exchangeable values that correspond to the abstract labor time consumed in producing them. Practically speaking, a game account with a large number of virtual currencies often also worths a large amount of real currencies. The relationship of virtuality and actuality will be discussed more in Chapter Three.

affinity with transactions, gacha is utilized to generate unceasing revenue by stimulating players' desires to collect more items and win the dream items. The popularity of gacha is closely intertwined with the business mode of free-to-play or freemium (shorthand for "free entry plus premium services"). Unlike other the classical monetizing mode of "once-and-for-all" purchases, by which players permanently possess a physical or digital copy and enjoy all the content without further payments, free-to-play or freemium games allow players to enjoy most content of games without payment in advance. Nonetheless, to better enjoy the fun of a freemium game, players have to pay for additional services through in-game microtransactions. Free play attracts new players who are unwilling to pay in the first place and premium services make potential payers invest in a better gaming experience. Games of gacha are overwhelmingly free-to-play games in which players have access to most of the game content without payment. However, if players want to obtain powerful pieces of equipment, shiny cosmetic items, or desired playable characters, they have to pay for gacha.

It is difficult to confirm which video game is the first one utilizing the gacha mechanism. Some commenter traces the origin of gacha gaming to as early as 1997 in *Monster Rancher* (Temco), a PlayStation game featuring similar gameplay like *Pokémon*, but instead of catching monsters in the wild, the player need to buy random monsters in in-game markets (Paez 2020). Business success might be an easier indicator for tracing the emergence of gacha gaming. In Japan, the advent of the gacha mechanism is directly

related to the proliferation of social network platforms and social games (games based on social platforms such as Facebook). And these games are, more often than not, free-to-play games.

The first phenomenal success of games with a gacha mechanism might be *Dragon Collection* (Konami 2010), a mobile adventure game released on GREE's social networking platform featuring collecting monster cards, challenging quests, and building powerful decks. As an adventure and card-collecting game, players of *Dragon Collection* challenge quests and conquer dungeons by commanding monster cards they collected through the in-game gacha system. Every day a player has several free chances to gacha new monster cards, but more chances for gacha must be purchased with real currency.

This simple mechanism proved to be a tremendous business success. The combination of free-to-play and gacha is so powerful that *Dragon Collection* was adapted into an anime series, marking its business success in Japan. An even more convincing proof of the success of *Dragon Collection* is the enthusiasm of other developers to "clone" this game. In a few years, a number of mobile social games appeared on the market equipped with similar gacha mechanisms, the most prominent of them being *Puzzles & Dragons* (GungHo 2012), a match-three puzzle game also featuring collecting a roster of monsters of various rarities and strengths. *Puzzles & Dragons* is the first mobile game to generate over 1 billion dollars in gross revenue ever. It was only caught up by another

gacha game *Monster Strike* (Mixi 2013) in 2018, a role-playing game also featuring collecting powerful monsters and challenging more and more difficult quests (Jordan 2013; Spannbauer 2018).

Until this point, gacha seems to be a unique Japanese gaming culture and no wonder earlier observers contended that gacha was a unique Japanese phenomenon, rooted in Japanese cultural preference for gambling, which, as it were, was not the taste of western gamers who cannot even tolerate post-purchase microtransaction (Luke 2018). The statement that gacha is and will be only popular among Japanese players with a unique gaming culture distinct from players of other regions was gradually disqualified by the increasing global recognition of notable titles such as *Granblue Fantasy* (Cygames 2014), *Fate/Grand Order* (Lasengle 2015), and *Fire Emblem Heroes* (Intelligent Systems 2017), all of which are embedded with the gacha mechanism and own a huge number of fans in player communities around the world. Despite sharing the gacha mechanism which is extremely profitable, the successes of these titles can also be attributed to the expansion of Japanese anime industry into the global market, a hardly negligible cultural and economic event.

Nonetheless, the most phenomenal global success of gacha games at the beginning of the 2020s is indisputably *Genshin Impact*. An action role-playing game that features an open-world exploring experience, attractive anime-style characters, a real-time action battle system, and, of course, free to play, *Genshin Impact* is available on

multi-platforms including smart phone, personal computer, and gaming console, among which players can switch seamlessly with one account. It is developed by HoYoverse (formerly named miHoYo), a Chinese company based in Shanghai, who have three titles released earlier. HoYoverse specializes in anime-style graphics, and shares a close connection to the Japanese anime culture. Before the release of *Genshin Impact*, HoYoverse is a game developer relatively small in size compared to other Chinese Internet and video game giants such as Tencent and NetEase.

Nonetheless, the launching of *Genshin Impact* proves to be a phenomenal commercial success not only in the domestic market but also in the transnational video game arena. In the first year of its release on September 28, 2020, Chinese players grossed 120 million dollars of revenue, which only accounts for 30.5 percent of its total, while Japanese players spent 98 million dollars and the US consumers spent 74 million dollars. According to Sensor Tower, in 2021, *Genshin Impact* ranked the third in top mobile games by worldwide revenue, generating 1.8 billion dollars annually. *Genshin* solely pushed the spending of the US consumer in mobile action games to rise by 69%⁴. On the New Year's Eve in 2022, tourists in New York gathered in Times Square saw the

⁴ See "A Banner Year for Gaming on Twitter in 2021", https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/insights/2021/a-banner-year-for-gaming-on-twitter-in-2021; "Record-Breaking Eight Mobile Games Surpass \$1 Billion in Global Player Spending During 2021", <https://sensortower.com/blog/billion-dollar-mobile-games-2021>; "U.S. Consumer Spending in Mobile Action Games Rose by 69% in 2021, Driven by Genshin Impact", <https://sensortower.com/blog/mobile-game-genre-growth-2021>.

Jumbotron advertisement of *Genshin Impact* showcasing its open-world gameplay and anime-style characters⁵, which flares for 15 seconds every 3 minutes with other multinational brands. With *Genshin's* unprecedented popular *impact*, gacha is undoubtedly a global phenomenon⁶.

Despite the tremendous business success around the globe, games of gacha also encounter not a small amount of criticism from several perspectives. First, criticism that gacha mechanism exploits players' gambling psychology to monetize has never ceased (Alha et al. 2014). On the other hand, there are also opposite opinions that gacha should be categorized as a virtual lottery system rather than gambling because the rewards obtained in-game cannot be directly transformed into real money (Koeder & Tanaka 2017). Although the dispute about whether gacha is equivalent to gambling remains unsettled, protests and criticism around the gacha system finally led to stricter regulatory policies in Japan, China, and countries in Europe⁷. Certain subcategory of gacha, such as "*kompu gacha*" which requires collecting a complete set of randomly

⁵. Icey_Alice. "Guess What I Saw on the Largest Jumbotron in Times Square on New Year's Eve." *R/Genshin_Impact*, 1 Jan. 2022, www.reddit.com/r/Genshin_Impact/comments/rtdxsq/guess_what_i_saw_on_the_largest_jumbotron_in/.

⁶. This brief introduction to *Genshin Impact* is revised from sections of my course essay, "Yuanshen or Genshin: The Tension between Nationality and Transnationality of Genshin Impact," a mixed piece combining cultural studies and game studies in an attempt to understand the debate and negotiation of *Genshin Impact* about nationalism and transnationalism in China.

⁷. It is worth mentioning that in most of the cases the gacha mechanism is not regulated for its gambling-like feature but for games' non-transparency in item dropping rates. For regulatory measures in different countries and discussion whether gacha is (not) gambling, see Koeder and Tanaka 2017.

dropped items before rewarding the ultimate item, is banned in Japan. In addition, it is common for regulatory bodies to request gaming companies publicize the actual dropping rates of gacha items, a move, hopefully, to keep players from overspending.

Be it gambling or not, it is undeniable that the gacha system, like other mechanisms utilized by free-to-play games, risks being exploited in predatory monetization by game companies. In video game industry, developers often adopt the strategy known as “dark patterns,” intentionally creating unpleasant and frustrating gaming experiences which can only be alleviated through additional payments⁸. Players of freemium games are constantly placed in situations that either pay for powerful equipment, weapons, or cards for better experiences, or spend hours grinding for better items and higher character levels so as to beat challenging stages which may be carefully designed in order to hinder non-paying players from easy progression. More than that, clinically, gacha is also associated with pathological situations such as gaming addiction and gambling disorder because its gambling-like feature shows association with a series of pathological behaviors including excessive spending, distress, and problematic gambling and gaming (Drummond et al. 2020). In short, from the perspectives of legislative governance and psychological health, gacha is a legal and psychological problem to be scrutinized, regulated, controlled, and solved.

⁸ For more discussion about dark pattern, see Zagal 2013.

The Birth of Characters

Readers may have noticed that not all the above-mentioned games are called “gacha games,” and this naming is preserved to a limited number of titles such as *Fate/Grand Order* and *Genshin Impact*, whereas for other titles lengthy namings such as “games of gacha” or “games with the gacha mechanism⁹.” This insistence is, of course, not without a reason: I argue that games with the gacha mechanism might be divided into two groups that differ in their design orientation, gameplay mechanism, affective embeddings, and targeted players. These two groups are item gacha and character gacha.

Here, I venture a periodization of these two groups and account for their differences, mainly in their distinct degrees of involvement in the character economy. The first group, represented by *Monster Strike*, *Dragon Collection*, and *Puzzles & Dragons* and having been overwhelmingly popular and successful in the first half of the 2010s, consists of video games utilizing item gacha. This group of games introduce gacha into

⁹ This insistence on guarding the proper territory for gacha games is partly for my research interest, and partly for the unclear classification and taxonomy in the video game discourse. The discursive terrain of video games consists of overlapping concepts, names, references, and jargon. Players, developers, and even researchers often pick up terms without clear boundaries and proceed in discussing. Terms such as social games (games based on social platforms and played mainly by mobile devices or web browsers), mobile games (games played on mobile platforms which often refer to smartphones), freemium games (games free to play with additional services to pay), gambling games (games of gambling-like feature or truly gambling), and, of course, gacha games are often used interchangeably, creating confusion not only epistemologically but also ontologically.

the realm of video games and proved that it is one of the most revenue-generating models in the industry. In this period, games of gacha still roughly follow the pattern of other freemium games. Rewards of gacha are collectible monsters, weapons, equipment, and other items that might either facilitate players' progress, strengthen their characters, or satisfy the desire to show off. This group I call games of gacha, but not *gacha games*, at least in the sense of this project.

Nonetheless, the second group, represented by *Fate/Grand Order* and *Genshin Impact*, which gains preeminence in the second half of the 2010s, are what I call *gacha games*. This group of video games shares the gacha system with the first group (games of gacha) but they are distinct in the fact that the rewards "dropped" from the gacha system are no longer items such as powerful weapons or collectible monster cards. Instead, they are virtual characters. In *Fate/Grand Order*, players are able to summon historical or mythological figures such as King Arthur or Hercules with new aesthetics meeting contemporary players' taste; In the gacha system of *Genshin Impact*, players recruit playable characters with Fates and operate them in battles. These two are only a few among other character gacha games. The group of character gacha is what gacha games usually means discursively when the term circulates on the Internet and in academics, and they are the research object of *Embodied Fate*¹⁰.

¹⁰ It should be noted that this periodization and categorization is rough and descriptive, rather than definite and close. These two groups are not exclusive to each other. Most games of character gacha also

It is not an overstatement that the shift from item gacha to character gacha represents a fundamental paradigm change in the way how the gacha mechanism and the gacha game itself are designed, played, narrated, and how the derivative culture is generated, circulated, transformed, and experienced. In short, it allows gacha games to be incorporated into the so-called anime media mix and the character economy. By this I mean the media convergence of Japanese popular culture consisting of multimedia including but not limited to anime, manga, video games, novels, live-action cinema, radio programs, toys, to list a few.

The association of gacha games and the anime media mix is sometimes misleading: on the internet, a so-called anime game is very like to be a gacha game, and most gacha games have an anime art style. This similarity at the visual level, I argue, represents some deeper mediatic structure concerning the media environment, the narrativity, and the desire pattern of both anime and gacha games. It is easy to point out that both anime and gacha games put emphasis on colorful and engaging characters, it is more crucial to answer why they are produced in such a way and what this paradigm means for these two distinct media, anime and video games.

The otaku culture is a good starting point to solve the puzzle. Otaku is a Japanese

include item gacha (usually, the equipment like weapons and armors of characters can be obtained via gacha). Even in earlier item gacha games collecting monster cards, these virtual creatures can be categorized as characters. However, what I want to highlight here is a trend that qualitatively shifts the cultural landscape of gacha in a way that cannot be neglected or denied.

term for avid anime, video games, and manga consumers with a disparaging nuance of being social withdrawal, isolated, and excessively addicted to virtual worlds. Japanese scholar Hiroki Azuma notices that otaku are enthusiastic about virtual characters and that they often show great intimacy to the characters from anime and manga. As a result, spin-offs of characters from popular manga and anime are extremely popular among the consumers of the Japanese anime culture. Characters of *moe*, the Japanese slang for cuteness, belovedness, and affection, are the key profitability for the cultural industry who relies heavily on the support of anime and manga fans.

I argue that this character fetishism is inherited in gacha games; or, we may say, the gacha game should be located at the natural extension of this character fetishism. The character fetishism of the otaku culture implies a conundrum: if virtual characters are the main affective investment site for fan consumers, then there must be a means for consumers to engage with their objects of desire. There are numerous ways to fulfill this: purchasing spin-offs, engaging in multi-media products of the same franchise, creating fandom content, and participating fan community. On the other hand, while there are multiple means for the consumers to engage with their affective characters, there are no *actual* ways in which they can possess their *moe* characters, or in other words, to *actualize* this parasocial relationship. Gacha games, through the ritualized possession of virtual characters by the means of gacha, which I called *over-possession*, promise the actualization of this parasociality. To risk exaggeration, gacha games condition the birth

of characters.

Azuma's theory on the otaku culture, *moe* characters, and postmodern narrativity will be covered more in Chapter One, which is crucial for contextualizing gacha games in a bigger multi-media environment. Gacha games are video games, but defining gacha games as nothing *but* video games risks ignoring that the gacha game is a multimedia cultural product in the digital economy. One of the goals of *Embodied Fate* is to represent the gacha game in its multi-mediaticity and locate its proper position in the transmedia landscape of East Asian popular culture which starts from Japan, Korea, China and exports to other areas such as North America. This latest wave of East Asian popular culture which takes place in the 2010s and the 2020s including old elements such as anime, manga, toys, and new elements such as k-pop, social networks, streaming video platforms, and video games, cannot be discussed without mentioning digital culture and economy.

Gacha games with multi-national production and transnational consumption receive limited attention from researchers. Furthermore, the limited research about gacha games today overwhelmingly focuses on their business mode, monetization strategy, gambling disputes, and gaming addiction, paying little attention to their status as cultural commodities sharing sophisticated connections to other media forms and the economical structure of the contemporary world. *Embodied Fate* attempts to fill the gap and reexamine gacha games from the perspectives of media studies, narratology,

cultural studies, ludology, and, last but not least, political economy.

The Neoliberal Symptom

The paralleled relationship between video games and our contemporary world is noted by various scholars. Video game, as a type of new digital media emerged along with the advance of information technology and, more importantly, the coming of the digital economy and late capitalism, bears a unique dimension that may qualify it as *the* new medium of our times. Colin Cremin argues that if the twentieth century can be marked as the century for cinema, the twenty-first century can very much be the century for video games¹¹. This statement is echoed by Patrick Jagoda who claims that the birth of video games in information society represents a major turning point in our relationship with the world—a Hegelian metaphysical movement: if, in the era of cinema, the existence of the world's image shifted from *being* to *appearing*, then, in the era of video games, it transforms from *appearing* to *acting* (2020: 15), since the video game is the media form of enactment. In short, what we witness in the shifting in our ontological condition in the world and the way we live, especially our economic, social, and cultural life, can be accounted for by video games.

Gacha games are usually accused of virtual gambling: addicted gacha game

¹¹. See Colin Cremin, "Introduction," *Exploring Videogames with Deleuze and Guattari: Towards an Affective Theory of Form*.

players might spend a large amount of money to obtain their desired items or characters. On the other hand, If the gacha mechanism is a variation of gambling, then we have to assume that players of gacha games are similar to the gambling addicts who are supposed to have no control over their economic well-being, a result of their irrationality which goes against the assumption of “rational men.” Nonetheless, gacha players, whose primary goal in playing gacha games is usually obtaining enough in-game currencies for trading their dream characters or desired items, are overwhelmingly contrary to an outsider’s impression of being improvident and thriftless and spending money lavishly on purchasing gacha chances. In contrast, gacha players are trained to be in command of in-game economic systems and spend wisely. Even if they do spend, it is on a careful balance based on economic rationality: the balance of investments of time and budget. Rather than gambling addicts who lack irrationality of self-control, gacha players are no other than neoliberal subjects who are entrepreneurs of themselves, distributing accessible resources accordingly for their dream items and characters. They are *homo economicus*.

On the other hand, another symptom of late capitalism, in which neoliberalism becomes the dominant political, economic, and cultural pattern, is precarity. The notion of precarity refers to the overall insecurity, fragility, and lack of support and protection in contemporary society. In the neoliberal regime, independence and self-reliance are celebrated as the triumph of the “free” workers who are not restricted by the classical

factory mode in which workers' life are fixed by their relationship with employers, family, and other institutions. The price paid for this neoliberal freedom is an all-encompassing precarity deeply rooted in the existential conditions of contemporary society.

Precarity has been widely discussed by scholars such as Anne Allison who, in her ethnography *Precarious Japan*, accounts for how precarity in neoliberal Japan affects all aspects of Japanese society. One of the aspects of precarity Allison emphasizes is a feeling of lack of social support and affective belonging, a dimension of precarity from which more and more people suffer affectively in the fluidity of neoliberalism. As a result, alternative sociality is searched to compensate for this loss of social security and affective belonging. I claim that gacha games function as a type of virtual parasociality that answers the need of precarious players who are mostly young urban inhabitants with a clear experience of social precarity. The gacha mechanism is the play of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and contingency, when combined with parasociality with virtual characters, paradoxically turns into the play of security and serves as the survival strategy of the socially and affectively precarious residents in postmodern and neoliberal society.

Chapter Outline

Embodied Fate is divided into three chapters, respectively discussing three

keywords concerning gacha games: the narrative economy of *characters*, gacha as the ritual of the over-possessional *desires*, social precarity and neoliberal subjectivity of gacha *players*. Arranging chapters in this way follows the natural epistemological process of the playing experience of gacha gaming: the player initially is attracted by the gacha game for its aesthetics, graphics, story setting, and characters; then s/he starts to play the game, navigating its gameplay and mechanisms, investing fantasy, imagination, and desires in the gacha mechanism; finally, the player is not playing the video game but rather playing *within* oneself: the action of playing comes from nowhere else than the player's inner space. Through the form of gacha gaming, the player answers what is missing in daily life, in the lived experience in the contemporary world.

The analysis of gacha games in *Embodied Fate* is oriented by the theoretical frameworks I chose. I try to discover a new direction from other similar research on gacha games which put too much emphasis on its business, legal, and psychological ramifications, whereas the dimensions of culture, politics, and media are relatively overlooked. In order to accomplish the research object—to analyze the work of desire, fantasy, and imagination in gacha games—*Embodied Fate* negotiates between ludology, narratology, video game studies, media studies, and critical theories. I played several gacha games myself and read discussions in online communities on Youtube, Twitter, Reddit, Weibo, Douban, Bilibili, and other social media platforms. Quantitative research done by other scholars is cited for understanding the player population, but it is the

gacha gameplay and actual gaming experience that I made much more effort in analyzing.

In the first chapter, I will examine gacha games through the lens of the anime media mix, and show how gacha games participate in the virtual economy of characters through the unique gacha mechanism. I argue that the narrativity of gacha games must be viewed through the wider mediatic context of the anime media mix, including but not limited to anime, manga, light novels, and so on, if we want to solve the puzzle behind the popularity of character gacha. I will start by comparing gacha games with other media forms in the anime media mix and borrow the theory of database consumption from Hiroki Azuma in an attempt to answer the basic question of character gacha: why does the player desire to gacha virtual characters? This chapter paves the foundation for further analysis of gacha game players' desire which is built upon the historical accumulation of the multimedia structure.

By analyzing the character economy of gacha games archaeologically, it is possible to decipher why the gacha mechanism, the lottery-like gameplay of trading characters and items with money and time, is so attractive or addictive. In Chapter Two, I try to illustrate the sophisticated desire paradigm of gacha games and pinpoint the key uniqueness of the gacha game which differentiates it from all other media forms in the anime media mix, including other video games. This chapter introduces what I call *over-possession*, the composite of desires which makes gacha possible. Also, the dynamics of

the character-player relationship under the influence of over-possession are covered to further grasp the gacha games as a whole.

Chapter Three is an attempt to wrap up the discussion in the previous chapters and place gacha games in the political economical structure of the contemporary world. Gacha games are considered symptomatic of our age of late capitalism because their gameplay parallels neoliberalism. In this chapter, I will show how gacha gamers are what I call neoliberal players who are constantly beware of the economy of gacha games and react as self-entrepreneurs. This chapter will not limit its horizon to the gacha mechanism but engage in analyzing other gameplay mechanisms including the housing system and the stamina system which, though having no direct connection to gacha at first glance, are members of a gameplay network augmenting the gacha mechanism. This chapter also covers precarity, the ontological condition in which gacha players play, and their ironic cruel optimism to use gacha games as a survival strategy in a world of insecurity.

Chapter One: Characters

Playing a gacha game does not imply a generalizable gaming experience based on any classical video game genre. A gacha game can be a classical role-playing game similar to *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix) in which the player controls single or multiple playable characters to explore and battle on the world map. It can also be a tactical game like *XCOM* (2K Games) in which units are placed on a battlefield, waiting for the player to give commands to attack enemies or defend the base. A gacha game can also be depicted in the form of a simulation game and the player needs to pay close attention to characters and look after their needs, growth, and all aspects of daily life, just as the once frenzied toy *Tamagotchi*, the portable electronic device that allows the player raises a virtual pet. Reddit is a forum and community website where users post content to discuss their interested topics, and r/gachagaming is a subreddit site in which gacha gamers aggregate to discuss gacha games. In a r/gachagaming user poll ranking the best gacha games in 2022, there are in total of 15 awards for user nominations, including Best SRPG (simulation role-playing game, games that simulate tactical movements on a battlefield), BEST ARPG Gacha (action role-playing game, games that feature real-time action, fighting, and immediate reaction), Best Turnbased Gacha (games progress not in real time but in turn), Best Story Gacha, Best Tower Defense Gacha (games that the player deploys defense-tower to encounter enemies' attacks), Best PvP Gacha (player

versus player), and even Best NSFW Gacha (not safe for work).¹² Gacha games seem to offer quite a variety of gaming experiences satisfying players of all tastes.

On the other hand, gacha games are all similar, if not monotonous, in terms of their gacha mechanism. For example, in *Genshin Impact* (HoYoverse 2020), an open-world role-playing game, the player experiences adventures and epic stories in Teyvat, the fictional world of *Genshin*, and meets multiple in-game characters. Some of these characters are playable, but in order to play them, the player needs to gacha. When the player completes certain quests or makes certain progress, *Genshin* rewards the player with an amount of gacha currency which can be used to summon playable characters from the gacha system. Let us assume that the player is lucky enough to obtain the desired character. However, the new character is not immediately playable: in battle, the low-level character is weak; in social relationships, the new character has limited social interaction with the player. The player needs to spend time and resources to build the character, increasing the character level and the friendship level. A high battling level increases parameters such as attack, defense, and skill performance; and a high friendship level unlocks more social interaction with the player, such as hidden voice records, character stories, or special expressions in photo mode.

A similar gameplay pattern can be seen in other gacha games. In *Blue Archive*

¹² Mayors-Office. "Best of 2022: RESULTS." *R/Gachagaming*, 6 Feb. 2023, www.reddit.com/r/gachagaming/comments/10vgcyn/best_of_2022_results/.

(Nexon Games 2021), a tactic simulation game developed by a Korean company, the player is introduced as a new teacher to the Academy City “Kivotos,” a fantasy metropolis constituting of multiple academies. The player meets new students and is involved in a series of events and crises from conflicts between academies to the invasion of mysterious monsters. *Archive* is completely different in terms of gameplay if compared with *Genshin*. Whereas *Genshin*’s gameplay is very much a real-time action game in which the player press buttons to control the avatar character to move, attack, dodge, or use skills, *Archive* is a tactic simulation game, which means the player builds and commands a team of units, in this case, students, deploys them on independent battle level, and gives tactic commands to beat the level. Despite the differences in gameplay, *Archive* is still a gacha game: students are recruited into the team through a typical gacha system by spending currency either obtained through accomplishing quests or in-game purchases to pull (the action standing for using a gacha chance) new students.

Indeed, gacha games are simultaneously diverse and monotonous: they can be almost any game type and implemented into most gameplay. On the other hand, they share surprisingly the identical game flow: the player meets new characters, obtains currencies in multiple ways, pays special attention to time-limited characters, pulls these characters from the gacha system in the limited time period, and interacts with these characters in the game-type specific way. Characters and the gacha system serve as the

center of the gameplay of all types. It is inclusive in the sense that it can incorporate all game types; it is exclusive in the sense that all gameplay must be incorporated into the gacha system. The player inexhaustibly pulls new characters and builds them in the respective gameplay, nurtures virtual companionships, and looks for more gacha. Risking oversimplification, playing gacha games means pulling characters. What is this mysterious charm of gacha?

This discrepancy between bountifulness and monotonousness is not a unique phenomenon. As Hiroki Azuma argues in terms of the narrativity and genre of light novels, a popular type of youth literature in the anime media mix. Light novels are usually stories targeting young readers with anime-style illustrations depicting characters in the story. Azuma argues that light novels cannot be categorized into any given genre of literature or popular fiction such as science fiction, detective, romance, fantasy, or horror, because light novels have all these elements. But rather, light novels must be considered on a dimension perpendicular to the virtual plane of all these fiction genres, an axis in which one end is the so-called “pure literature” and the other end is light novels¹³. If pure fiction is stories based on the principle of classical realism, then light novels are on the principle of character-centrism. The gacha game should be placed also in the same position: rather than placing the gacha game on the same plane where

¹³. See Hiroki Azuma, *ゲーム的リアリズムの誕生~動物化するポストモダン2*, Koutansha, 2007.

genres like role-playing game, simulation game, and strategic game are located, it should be on the vertical axis. What marks a game as a gacha game is its deep connection to the character economy and, critically, its unique access interface with it: the gacha mechanism.

In this chapter, I try to illustrate the tension and charm of all gacha games, namely, the dynamics between gacha and the character economy: the virtual consumption and production of characters. I propose that the relationship between players and virtual characters should be the first and foremost consideration in the terms of economy rather than narratology or ludology: the production, circulation, and consumption of virtual characters; the possession of characters and players; the ecosystem of virtual characters. In this sense, I call it the character economy.

When the perspective is changed to that of economy, it is possible to raise more accurate questions concerning the character economy of gacha games: What is the character economy and what is the media origin of it? In what type of media and cultural ecosystem are gacha characters produced? How do the narrativity, gameplay, and experiential engagement of gacha games contribute to the circulation of character economy? What is the role of gacha games in the character economy, or, what does the gacha system mean in terms of its economic and ecologic position in the character ecosystem? What is gacha and how characters are consumed and enjoyed by players? To discuss this series of questions, I will shortly turn away from the gacha system itself and

start with the media archaeology of gacha games in light of the anime media mix.

Media Mix Archaeology

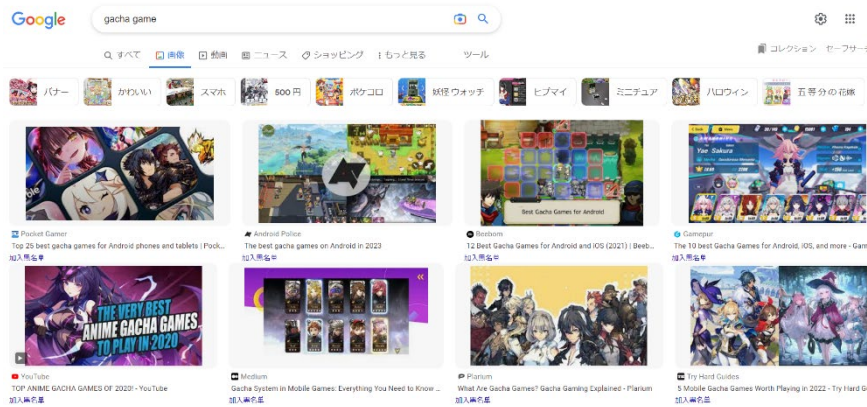


Figure 3: Google Search result of keyword “gacha game.” Screenshot on February 8, 2023.

The border between a gacha game and an “anime game” is blurred and fuzzy. Type “gacha game” in Google and search for images, rather than showing the actual in-game screenshots of gacha games, the result will be a disorienting gallery of anime-style characters: big and shiny eyes, pale skin, sleek and colorful hair, and highly abstract and stylized aesthetics. The opposite direction equally works: searching for “anime game” in a search engine and parsing the result page, despite classical game genres associated with anime such as role-playing games, visual novels, or action games, the result page will contain a high percentage of gacha games. Of course, as mentioned earlier, a video game can simultaneously be a gacha game and a game of other types.

The association between gacha games and anime, if dig deeper, exceeds mere visual similarity. For not a small number of gacha game players, playing gacha games is like watching an anime. Voice acting has been an important part of the anime culture and idolization of voice actors is a common business strategy in the Japanese anime industry. This emphasis on voice acting also applies to gacha games. On the Apple App Store page of *Arknights* (2019), a gacha game produced by Chinese Hypergryph, the showcase screenshots contain a page “celebrity character voices,” listing celebrated names in the anime voice industry¹⁴. Voiced over by Japanese voice actors is one of the keys to the profitability of a gacha game. It is not unusual for an anime enjoyer to notice that characters from a gacha game share a similar voice with another character from an anime, because they have the same voice actors. Player communities also pay special attention to the voice acting of a gacha game. For popular titles such as *Genshin*, its fandom even creates a wiki page solely devoted to list all the news and announcements about *Genshin*'s character voices, and the English wiki page contains over 800 references to voice actors' self announcements and official videos for new voice actors¹⁵.

Characters are not only rendered in the anime style and voiced over by voice actors who have experience in the anime industry, but also often live in worlds and stories that remind the player of anime. In the entry of “anime” from *Merriam-Webster*

¹⁴. “Arknights.” *App Store*, 13 Jan. 2023, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/arknights/id1464872022>.

¹⁵. “Voice Actor.” *Genshin Impact Wiki*, 7 Dec. 2022, https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Voice_Actor.

dictionary, anime is defined as “a style of animation originating in Japan that is characterized by stark colorful graphics depicting vibrant characters in action-filled plots often with fantastic or futuristic themes.”¹⁶ Of course, it will be to overgeneralization to assume that all anime are about fantasy or futurism, but it is true that compared with other visual media, anime’s unique ability in depicting virtuality makes it a media form that affiliates with science fiction, fantasy, and alternative realities. Gacha games also share this uniqueness and follow the path of anime world-building: fantasy with magic and fictional creatures (*Genshin Impact*, *Granblue Fantasy*, *Fire Emblem Heroes*), science fiction with fictional technologies or sciences (*Honkai Impact 3rd*, *Arknights*, *Girls’ Frontline*), fantasy reality in which the real world is re-imagined in an alternative possibility (*Fate/Grand Order*, *Blue Archive*). For players who find anime of certain world-building interesting and pleasurable, there will be no difficulty in switching to a similar gacha game.

If anime and gacha games are so close in their narrative settings, no surprise that there are no difficulties in mutual adaptations between other media forms. *Fate/Grand Order* is a title in a multimedia franchise that includes anime, manga, light novels, and video games of various genres such as visual novels, fighting games, role-play games, and card games. *Genshin* is getting an animated adaptation and it already has a manga

¹⁶. “Anime.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anime>. Accessed 9 Feb. 2023.

spin-off. *Girl's Frontline*, a tactical simulation game produced featuring androids carrying real-world firearms, also has anime and manga adaptations. The consumer of these gacha games often switches positions between viewer, reader, and player, navigating the multimedia landscape at ease.

This facial association is not limited to only anime, but also extends to other media forms often consumed side by side by anime fans. The role-playing game, a type of video game that focuses on playing as virtual characters and experiencing their life and adventure in a fictional world, is the main type of video game associated with anime. It is not surprising that most gacha games can be categorized into role-playing games since interacting and playing with characters are the essential gameplay for gacha games. For a player who has experience playing role-playing games such as *Final Fantasy* or *The Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda Game Studios), the character-building system of the gacha game is familiar to pick up. Needless to repeat every gacha game is different from each other, so their character-building systems are different respectively. On the other hand, they are similar in the gameplay pattern according to which the player usually needs to invest time and effort to increase the character level, obtain level-up resources, and develop skills, or unlocking cosmetic skins. Since characters are put in an essential position of the gacha game, the gameplay often encourages or requires the player to build their characters and understand the mechanism. All this labor into building a character tends to make the player feel more attached to the character.

If we expand our horizons and take a look at other media forms that are closely related to anime, there will be more connections discovered between them and gacha games, which makes all these media forms into an inter-referential multimedia ecosystem. The interaction gameplay with characters in gacha games can be traced to other game genres that emerged at an earlier time. For instance, the affinity system (also called friendship, reputation, or favorability) is a frequently appearing gameplay mechanism in role-playing video games and visual novels to evaluate the relationship between the player and an in-game character, utilizing a value to represent to what degree the character is intimate to the player. A visual novel is a game featuring utilizing texts, images, and sounds, by means of which telling an interactive story and allow the player makes choices to decide the flow of the narrative. Visual novels are very popular among anime fans and not a small number of anime are adapted from successful visual novels. In a visual novel, increasing the affinity value with a character might be the key in arriving at certain endings such as the realization of a romantic relationship with the character. This affinity system is also implemented in most popular gacha games as a part of the gameplay representing the virtual relationship developed between the player and the character. In *Genshin*, increasing the friendship level with a playable character will unlock extra stories, voice lines, and in-game interactions. In *Archive*, high affinity with a student unlocks independent episode events and new interactive voice lines.

How is it that gacha games and these anime-related media are so closely

bonded? One answer might be elucidated through a unique aspect of the anime culture: the anime media mix, or the so-called “anime system.” This is a concept often discussed by Japanese culture scholars such as Anne Allison and Marc Steinberg. Steinberg compares the anime media mix, a transmedia and multimedia composite, to the paralleled concept in North America, multimedia convergence, and points out that the media mix strategy in Japan can date back to as early as the 1960s when *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Astro Boy*) was released and its images started to circulate in commodities of multiple media forms like toys, stickers, manga, and anime, as a part of “the anime system” in which “media interconnectivity is one of its principal features” (Steinberg 2012: xi). Allison also notices how images of a character move from one media to another and subsequently morph into different forms. She sees this issue from the perspective of postmodernity and uses the psychoanalytic term “polymorphous perversity” to refer to this transformability, fluidity, boundary-crossing promiscuity, and deterritorialization of character images as a postmodern phenomenon¹⁷. I agree with the points of these two scholars and I will use “the anime media mix” in the following chapter to refer to the transmedia convergence including, but not limited to, anime, manga, video games, figurines, light novels, radio dramas, and so on.

Then, what about attributing this media affiliation between gacha games and

¹⁷. See Anne Allison, “Enchanted Commodities”, *Millennial Monsters*, 2006.

anime to the natural property of the media mix? This answer is acceptable and explains a big number of issues from the content, style, audience, and circulation of some of the mediatic idiosyncrasies around gacha games. Since the gacha game is also a component of the anime media mix, it is unsurprising that it shares so many common points with other media forms. On the other hand, attributing the connection between the gacha game and the character economy to the anime media mix risks ignoring the key aspect of gacha games: the gacha system. Functionally as a gameplay system based on obtaining characters based on probability and currency exchange, how does the gacha system inform gacha games' transmediaticity? If the gacha system is the interface between the gacha game to the character economy, how and why does function in this way? To answer these questions, we may take a step back and examine the keyword: gacha.

Paradoxical Gameplay

What does "gacha" mean? When I was contemplating this project and introduced my research plan to others, this is the most frequent question I was asked. Of course, I could not give them the simplest answer: go play one gacha game, and you will know it! The video game is a media form of action, and even a kid without any education can be in command of a game of complicated rules once the kid starts to play: the acquisition of play might possibly be wired into the human's biological system. On

the other hand, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, there is no a general experience of gacha gaming. If it is true that gacha games promise not a fixed gaming experience, what does it mean to call them in general gacha games?

In the wiki sector of r/gachagaming on Reddit is a post named “What is a Gacha Game?”¹⁸ The author lists a number of frequently appearing gameplay mechanisms one expects to find in gacha games, including: special virtual currencies, tired rarities for characters or items, free to play with microtransactions, etc. But the author also acknowledges that “defining what games can really be called a ‘gacha game’ is a little tricky.” The author does not mention the importance of characters, but notices a critical fact about gacha games:

Despite the numerous differences, there is one common thread throughout all gacha games: summoning in the gacha must be at least one of the primary goals for the player. That is, the game will constantly steer the player to the gacha system.

“Summoning” means obtaining characters from the gacha system, as is usually called in gacha games set in a fantasy world where pulling new characters is explained as the magic of summoning heroes or magical creatures. What is noticeable is the author’s emphasis on the systematic position of the gacha system in the gameplay loop, or, to put it simply, the overall gaming experience of the player. That is, in a gacha game,

¹⁸. Mayor_P. “Whatisagachagame - Gachagaming.” *R/Gachagaming*, 31 Aug. 2021, <https://www.reddit.com/r/gachagaming/wiki/whatisagachagame/>.

most, if not all, gameplay collectively and repetitively is designed for the gacha system. This is understandable from the developer's side: if the gacha system is the main monetization for the game and all players are free to play the game, the developer has to steer the gameplay flow of the play to the gacha system in order to generate profit from it. There are multiple ways of doing it. The player might be constantly reminded of the existence of the gacha system through in-game tutorials, notifications, visual guidance, and gameplay flow control. Also, the developer may encourage players to share their gacha results to the in-game ranking, player community, or social media, which stimulates competition among players. Increasing the difficulty of levels and preventing the player without rare characters or items from progressing easily is also common.

Returning to the topic of what is a gacha game, we may very much satisfied at this point to define a gacha game as a video game in which gacha takes up the main position of play. Like the prototype vending machine *gacha-pon*, obtaining unexpected and rare items from uncertainty is itself playful and joyful, if not addictive. On the other hand, this answer to the question of gacha ignores another important factor we once discussed: the anime media mix. How does the gacha system relate to the anime media mix? What is to be attributed to the shift from item gacha to character gacha, if gacha is nothing but expecting rare droppings and enjoying uncertainty and surprises?

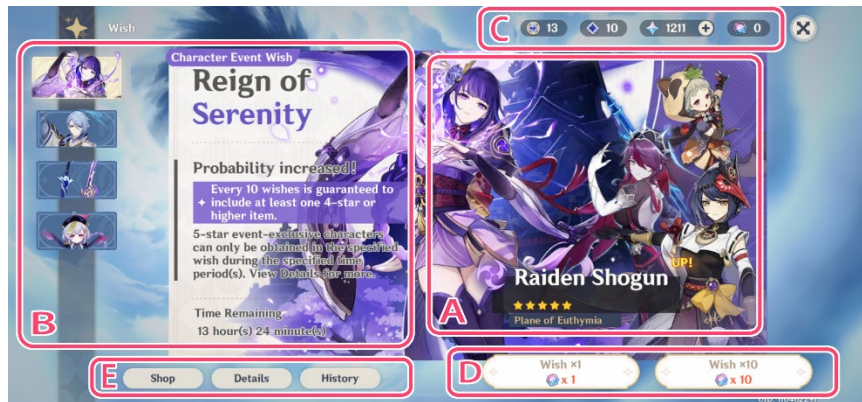


Figure 4: The user interface of the Wish System in *Genshin Impact* (Hoyoverse 2020)

We may take another step back and examine an actual gacha system to see how it functions, in other words, how it is played. I choose the gacha system of *Genshin Impact* for its popularity and its representativity in gacha games. Figure 4 shows a screenshot, taken on January 16, 2023, of the user interface of the Wish system in *Genshin Impact*.

“Wish” is the gacha system in *Genshin Impact*. There is a lot of information displayed on this page and it is divided into five segments for the convenience of discussion: a) character showcase, b) event information, c) currency gauge, d) gacha buttons, and e) miscellaneous. However, I will not go into detail discussing all of them and instead focus on the main part.

The most prominent element in the Wish system is the visual of the female character, Raiden Shogun, who occupies the center position (segment a) and anchors the visual with her color, purple. Without dispute, she has the starring role, whereas the other three characters arranged at her right side are relatively diminished. The reason for her center position and visual significance is understandable if we move to segment

b) event information, which gives the basic information. This segment shows that Raiden Shogun is a 5-star character while the other three are 4-stars. In *Genshin*, playable characters are divided into two ranks: 5-star, and less rare 4-star. Characters of 5-star are considered more valuable than the 4-stars in terms of their specs, designs, and popularity, so they have a lower probability to be obtained. This is the tired rarity in *Genshin*.

Other information in this segment is the list of current gacha events. Commonly, the gacha system of a gacha game is divided into multiple events. A gacha event, also called “banner” because it is visualized as a banner showcasing characters, often features a group of gacha rewards that are either exclusive to this event, or have a higher dropping probability during the period. Therefore, in this event, the player will have different gacha results and some of the rewards can only be obtained from certain events. If an event is time-limited, the player who misses it may lose the chance to obtain event-exclusive characters or items. Event-exclusive characters might be considered the “6-star” characters since they are only obtainable for a limited period.

If the player has accumulated enough currency (Intertwined Fates in segment c) either through the rewards of accomplishing quests, finishing achievements, completing daily missions, or directly exchanging it with real-world currencies, the button of gacha (segment d) is awaiting for pressing. The process of gacha is immediate and unlike a lottery, there is no waiting time for the result to be published. If the player chooses to

draw ten times at once, the results of ten pulls will immediately display in a sequence of visually and audibly impressive animations.

Taking into consideration the rarity and the average cost of a pull, it cost an average of 385 US dollars to obtain an event-exclusive character¹⁹. This is a number far exceeding any other purchases in the video game market, considering the fact that a copy of a commercial non-free-to-play game usually costs around 30 to 60 US dollars, which promises most, if not all, contents playable. However, this is not the end. In *Genshin Impact* and other gacha games, pulling a character does not necessarily mean the ending of gacha. In *Genshin*, a character's full ability will only be unlocked once they are pulled *six times* in total. Even if there are free chances and other means to collect the gacha currency, it still costs a big amount of money to realize a character's full potential. In this sense, free-to-play games are not free at all.

Examining the Wish system of *Genshin* points to an interesting combination, if

¹⁹. According to the probability information page in *Genshin*, the average probability of obtaining an event exclusive character (such as 5 star Raiden Shogun) is 0.6 percent for one gacha. One pull, if directly exchanged with real-world currencies, costs roughly between 1.98 ~ 2.64 US dollars, so the average cost of a 5-start character is 385 US dollars. In practice, because of free gift pulls, discounts, and other rewards, players usually spend less in obtaining an event exclusive character. The exchange rate between virtual currencies and real currencies are tricky since there are multiple ways to obtain gacha currencies and each of this way costs different resources. There are also variations in terms of payment accounting regions. In this case, it is calculated with primogem packages (the currency that bridge real currencies and virtual Fates) sold in the in-game shop with US dollars. Pricing strategy is not the topic of this project but more about resources distribution on the player part will be discussed in Chapter Two. For more player discussions about currency exchange, see "Primogem prices are way too high!!", Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/Genshin_Impact/comments/j9z7li/primogem_prices_are_way_too_high/, accessed on Jan 16, 2023.

not paradoxical. Allison, in her discussion of Japanese play goods such as *tamagotchi* and *Pokémon*, has already noticed such conundrum implicated in these postmodern enjoyment and joys. She mentions that all these frenzied toys have for kids living in the postmodern age, simultaneously, a healing effect and an addictive frenzy. On the one hand, they are addictive in their potentiality of continual and non-stopping transformation, which stimulates the consumer to obtain more; on the other hand, they are healing because they provide virtual companionship and friendship which is exactly what is scarce in postindustrial society. Gacha games also show these two paradoxical effects. The wondrous and paradoxical combinations of consumption and enjoyment, healing and addicting, non-stopping updates and promised companionship render the gacha game a simultaneously unique and commonplace scene in the postindustrial landscape²⁰.

What I am interested in and would like to further illustrate concerns further is some unique qualities of the gacha game, especially its duality as a part of the anime media mix and a type of video game. Why do characters have so many charms in attracting the player to invest time, attention, and money into gacha, and what type of relationship is built between the player and the virtual character? How does gacha games' media form as video games inform its enjoyment and affective value for the

²⁰ For more discussion about Japanese play goods, see Allison, 2006, 22-28.

player? In exactly what ways does the player consume and enjoy gacha and the characters within? How do these idiosyncrasies make characters, these cybernetic and virtual lifeforms, different from the way in which they are produced and consumed in anime, manga, and other video games?

Database Consumption

Genshin's producer HoYoverse' slogan on its official website is "tech otakus save the world."²¹ This may serve as an indicator of how close it is the relationship between gacha games and the otaku culture. The otaku culture, a highly postmodern, informational, virtuality-affiliated, and new media-oriented culture, provides a key to mapping gacha games' lineage and archeology. It is not an easy task to define otaku and it is not my intention here to do this. On the other hand, it is generally believed that otaku is a group of postmodern consumers that enthusiastically enjoys and frequently engage in the consumption, sometimes the production, of anime, manga, video games, light novels, figurines, and other products²². Truly, otaku are not a group of enthusiasts who pay their attention and libido to any single media form, but rather engage in the consumption of multimedia products sharing certain common qualities.

²¹. *MiHoYo - TECH OTAKUS SAVE THE WORLD*. <https://www.mihoyo.com/en/?introtab=intro>. Accessed 17 Feb. 2023.

²². For definition of otaku, see "Otaku tachi no gishi nihon," Azuma 2001; and "Otaku no seishin byouri" Saito 2006.

The condition of postmodernity in developed countries and its proliferation into developing countries create a unified global mass culture centering on Americanism, but it also foregrounds regional idiosyncrasies. The otaku culture in Japan, a culture highly agreeable to virtuality from which the character economy is directly born, is one of these regional cultures. Hiroki Azuma, a Japanese cultural scholar, has been an active critic of the otaku culture. In Azuma's prestigious book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2001), he writes that otaku's common culture, namely, their enthusiasm for anime, manga, and video games, should be considered a sophisticated reaction to postmodernity and its derivative effects. If the postwar period and the following economic bubble brought modernity to Japan in the forms of fast-growing wealth, Americanized mass culture, and the Fordist social structure, then consequently, the destruction of the economic bubble and the continuing breaking down of the traditional familial and corporate structure mean the coming of postmodernity.

Azuma argues that Japan has entered "the age of virtuality" in which "the grand narrative" dysfunctions and disappears, whereas countless "small narratives" replace and segment the society into fragmentation. In Azuma's vocabulary, "the grand narrative" refers to the deeper narrative that supports and sustains small narratives. Examples of grand narratives are general political, cultural, ideological, and social values that unite different social components in a single direction, namely, the common ideal of a powerful state, personal success based on meritocracy, and the political goal of

revolution. This term also refers to lores and world-buildings upon which plural fictional works are created²³. On the other hand, the small narratives are the actual stories and pieces of work that are circulated and consumed. The dysfunction of the grand narrative leads to the massive emergence of alternative small narratives. Without sharing a common grand narrative within a society (which is impossible), the virtuality of small narratives created under the commercial and consumerist principle function as the survival condition of otaku.

Under the backdrop of the dysfunctional grand narrative and massive small narratives, Azuma further illustrates the narrative structure, consumption pattern, and world image of the otaku culture, a typical subculture in postmodern Japan. He calls it “the database mode,” which is developed on the basis of Otsuka Eiji’s idea of narrative consumption, theorizing the production and consumption mode of Japanese otaku culture and also postmodern Japan. Azuma calls the classical narrative structure “tree mode,” in which all small narratives are rooted in a single entity of grand narrative, so, on the one hand, authors created small narratives (children) from the root of grand narrative (root), on the other hand, readers/viewers/consumers are expected to reach the

²³. In Azuma’s language, there are actually two types of “grand narratives,” the grand narrative of the reality and the grand narrative of virtuality. The former one refers to the modern narrative of state, society, and nation, while the latter refers to the fictional alternative narrative created by postwar cultural industry. For example, in the famous sci-fi anime series *Gundam*, multiple anime are produced based on a single fictional history in which the humanity creates giant military robots and suffers from catastrophic interstellar wars. The single history narrative line of *Gundam* is an example of the “grand narrative” of virtuality. Azuma often uses this term interchangeably.

grand narrative by consuming small narratives.

Nonetheless, postmodernity introduces the database mode in which there are no more grand narratives, or there is only “nonnarrative” in the form of databases.

Database, a term borrowed from cybernetics and information technology, is an organized collection of fragmented data and is ready to be accessed and reassembled in various ways. Database, the nonnarrative of postmodernity, stores the fragmented and categorized motifs, classes, materials, and elements from which small narratives are initialized, constructed, and produced. Also, fragments of small narratives can be categorized, segmented, and archived into the deeper database in order to be recycled for other small narratives. The main characteristic of the database as nonnarrative is that it carries no prior meaning, representation, or signification whatsoever: there are no stories in the database. That is why it is named “nonnarrative”. Only after assemblage does small narratives with meanings appear from the database.

For Azuma, the main quality of media products enjoyed by otaku is not contained in any single genre, media form, or type. Rather, otaku are attracted to the database mode of consumption. So long as a cultural product can serve as an entry into the nonnarrative/database, otaku will find it pleasurable and consume it with enthusiasm. This is true for a number of works produced in times far earlier than the emergence of otaku culture, even the advance of modernity itself, which are nonetheless recycled and reused in the otaku culture for their value of database consumption.

Mythologies of various origins, Greek, Celtic, Chinese, Japanese, Germanic, and Nordic, have been always popular in the otaku culture. Japanese fans of anime and manga are familiar with exotic and antique names such as Excalibur, Dáinsleif, Gungnir, and Valkyrie, neither for their cultural nor their religious nuances, but for these elements' value in being recognized, archived, recycled, resembled, and reassembled in the database for consumption.

One of the results developed from the database mode of consumption is the emergence of *moe* in the otaku culture. *Moe* is used in referring to the emotion of affection, love, and attraction toward a virtual character. Therefore, certain design elements such as cat ears, maid outfits, school uniforms, and big eyes that can trigger *moe* are adopted in character design en masse. For Azuma, the popularity of *moe* elements and *moe* characters is a typical depiction of the database mode of consumption in which the site of consumption dislocates from small narratives to database: rather than enjoying stories of manga and anime, otaku enjoy the database of *moe*. Single characters cease to live as independent images created by authors for certain aesthetic purposes, but rather, they function as instances, avatars, syntheses, and simulacra of data. As a result of the database consumption, anime and manga with weak, if any, content stories and narrative depths but instead eye-catching and attractive *moe* characters are produced, which are more adaptable to the database consumption because of their readability to be recognized, framed, and categorized in accordance

with the principle of database, and stored, organized, and recycled for the reproduction of new small narratives.

With the database mode of consumption in mind, the aforementioned anime media mix can be better elucidated. The anime media mix, rather than being a convergence of multimedia in which each media form is connected to each other and collectively forms a web-like structure across which character images travel and move, should be considered as a phenomenon of the process of database assemblage. Character images are assembled from the database and it is the form of the assemblage, which may take various forms from anime, manga, video games, etc., that renders a mediascape of convergence.

If database consumption is considered the foundational mode in which the anime media mix produces its big number of narratives for consumption, gacha games are definitely one of its most prominent example. One of the characteristics of the gacha game is that it produces a large number of characters in a high updating rate, satisfying players' desire for new characters of all possible types. Different from classical character merchandising strategy which relies upon a single character with the widest receptivity in the market, the gacha game tends to provide more variations and a sense of freedom to the player: in this massive group of characters, there must be someone the player find attractive and relatable. In order to create this massive number of characters, art styles, personalities, voices, appearances, and other characteristics are assembled to construct

character-commodities for the player-consumer to select.

Merchandise Crossing the Borders

The emergence of the character economy, from this perspective, is the direct result of the database consumption. Of course, there are multiple elements in a media product that can be dissembled into fragments to be archived in the consumption database. As a matter of fact, it is true that the character is not the only component that is reassembled into the database. Narrative structures, world-building, art styles, and other components can also be categorized into the database. Nonetheless, the character, the virtual life with its independent image, avatar, and metanarrative existence is unique in its potentiality of transmedia. A character naturally has the capacity to transcend the borders between different media and travel across different material mediatic vehicles without losing its recognizability and consumability. Visual symbols, auditory marks, and even personality traits can easily be carried with little effort into another media, either in their physical form or without any tangible material. The character is transmedia and ready for the industry.

On the issue of utilizing characters as a device for merchandising, Steinberg has a good account in his book *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (2012). Following the thread of Otsuka and Azuma, Steinberg put much effort into discussing character merchandising, the unique branding strategy of the Japanese

cultural industry centering on the immateriality and materiality of the character.

Steinberg's observation on character merchandising starts from *Tetsuwan Atomu*, or *Astro Boy* as is called in the West, a television manga and anime series produced by prestigious manga artist and animator Osamu Tezuka.

For Steinberg, the success and popularity of *Atomu* in the 1960s and so on marks the very moment that the character starts to function as the anchoring nexus and connective agent in the so-called anime media mix. *Atomu*, the boy robot created by Doctor Tenma who lost his son in a car accident, appears not only in manga and anime series but also printed on toys such as stickers, pens, and erasers, which makes the character break down the borders between different media and penetrating into the everyday life of Japanese children. *Atomu* is not limited to single worlds of anime or manga, but bears the capacity to cross multiple media forms, and, remarkably, serves as the guaranteeing connector and agent of this media mix, the portable and convenient gateway for consumers to enter the next world of franchising commodities.

Atomu's success, according to Steinberg, is based upon a key concept: the duality of the character as immateriality and materiality. Steinberg writes that "the material embodiment of the character is the gateway to its world, much as Ōtsuka suggested the narrative fragment was the gateway to the narrative whole.....On the other hand, it is the immaterial entity of the character as an abstract, circulating element that maintains the consistency of the various worlds or narratives and holds them together" (188). What

Steinberg means by materiality is not something tangible or having material existence in the physical space. Rather, the materiality of the character is the commodity aspect of a character, accessible from various media forms including watching an anime episode, reading a chapter of manga or light novel, or purchasing a figurine. On the other hand, the immateriality of the character refers to its virtual relationality with narrative worlds. In accordance with Azuma and Otsuka, the world is the narrative level between the database and independent stories, paralleled with the usage of “universe” in western comics.

A world is an independent narrative history (the grand narrative in Otsuka’s sense) with multiple characters and, possibly, multiple small narratives or stories. In *Atomu*, two different worlds diverge in the anime version and the manga version: in the anime, Atomu sacrifices himself to save the Earth from a catastrophic sun flare; in the manga, Atomu lives well. Two conflicting narrative worlds exist, but they are maintained and balanced by the existence of Atomu as an immaterial and nonnarrative, or transnarrative entity. Introduced by minor variations in narratives in different media-narrative worlds with the same cast of characters, consumers are stimulated to travel from one world to another, looking for more narratives and more variations to fill the blank gap left in the narrative jigsaw deliberately by the producer.

The success of the character merchandising is clear, if not overwhelming. Like the popularity and fame of characters such as Atomu, Pikachu, and Hello Kitty, the

images of these characters mark the global success of Japanese popular culture after the 1980s. Another scholar Allison, who also touches upon this issue, calls character merchandise “the postmodern currency” (Allison 2006: 14), the abstract equivalent that crosses the virtual and the actual, the fantasy and the reality, the imagination and the perception.

The gacha game’s way in which characters are used as merchandise is, to some degree, more border-crossing than any other media forms mentioned above. The border between the immateriality and the materiality of the character is challenged in the gacha game. I am not talking about the fact that the video game is a media form of virtuality, which does not cancel its materiality at all since play is an activity of materiality and physicality, no matter it is played in the “real world” or the “virtual space.” The materiality and immateriality of a character, in Steinberg’s sense, refers to its duality as both a commodity to be consumed and a symbol to signify. The character in a gacha game is something in between and above: it is consumed as a symbol of multiple signified. On the one hand, the gacha system evaluates the value of a character based on multiple factors including but not limited to its aesthetics, in-game strengths, community popularity, diegetic position, and other costs. On the other hand, the character’s capacity to be a symbol and signifier is only possible through consumption at all levels. The player purchases the character as a community but also plays as the character and customizes the character according to the player’s interpretation and

gaming preference. In the player's daily playing experience, there is a blurring or no absolute border between the materiality and immateriality of a character. The character is, simultaneously, a consumed commodity and an autonomous signifier.

Character Economy

Steinberg's account for character merchandising is useful in analyzing the anime media mix in Japan in general. Also, it is valuable in laying the foundation and leading into the discussion of the gacha game's character economy. Nonetheless, when applied to gacha games, multiple points render it unsatisfactory for analysis, and they are the main reasons I use the phrase "the character economy" rather than "character merchandising." First of all, Steinberg's perspective is merchandising, which means that the analysis is very much conducted on the producer side and, as a result, concerns the business mode of character consumption from the angle of companies, authors, and producers, whereas the angle of viewers, readers, and fans are relatively neglected. This is totally fine in terms of his research subjects, but for this project's subject, the gacha games, it is impossible to neglect the lived experience of the player who, arguably, occupies a much more critical position in the consumption of video games.

Also, Steinberg's analysis paid much attention to the character as an indivisible and autonomous entity, which is satisfactory from the perspective of merchandising and branding. Nonetheless, as Azuma indicates in his discussion of otaku's frenzy for *moe*,

the character economy functions first the foremost on the level of character fragments, components, and narrative motifs, which are the morphemes in the semiotics of characters, rather than on the level of single instances of characters, which are the composites and synergies of these small fragments. We may say that character merchandising is about the character, whereas the character economy is about characteristics. Characters are put together by both the producer and the consumer in their engagements with the character economy and the virtual circuit built with the character database.

Last but not least, in the case of gacha games, what we see is not the branding of a single character across multiple mediaspheres (Atomu as the transmedia border crosser) and its position as the mediator of multiple worlds, but rather, the mass production, consumption, and reproduction of characters in accordance with the principle of desire and fantasy conditioned by neoliberal society. It is not uncommon that a gacha game updates its list of characters in a high frequency and accumulates an astonishingly high number of characters in years: by February 2023, *Fate/Grand Order*, which is released in 2015, has in total 373 servants (playable characters)²⁴; *Girls' Frontline*, released in 2013, has released over 400 characters²⁵; *Genshin Impact*, the relatively new

²⁴ "Servants." *Fate/Grand Order Wiki*, <https://fategrandorder.fandom.com/wiki/Servants>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023.

²⁵ "T-Dolls List." *Girls Frontline GamePress*, 14 Feb. 2020, <https://gamepress.gg/girlsfrontline/t-dolls-list>.

title released in 2019, accumulates 63 playable characters in four years²⁶. The character economy should be considered the conditions for the mass production of characters rather than merely the environment for the popularity and transmediaticity of single characters.

My interest in economy rather than merchandising also concerns the way in which I approach the question: I am more concerned with the dynamic ecosystem of fantasy, imagination, and virtuality, in which the mass production of characters is possible and by which the subjectivity, or the ideology, of the player is produced and reproduced. The character economy should be considered a type of economy of virtuality, or immaterial economy, which emerge en masse in the time of postindustrial and neoliberal society. Materials for its production are fantasy, desire, symbols, imagination, and narratives, and the product of this economy is the character that crosses the borders between the material and the immaterial. Here I follow the thread of scholars like Maurizio Lazzarato and Michael Hardt who lay down the foundation for the discussion of the postindustrial, post-Fordist economy in which production and consumption gradually take place more and more often in the realm of the virtual, the immaterial, the affect, relying on the intellectuality and subjectivity of the worker²⁷.

²⁶. "Character/List." *Genshin Impact Wiki*, <https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Character/List>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023.

²⁷. See Hardt, Michael. "Affective Labor." *Boundary 2*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1999, pp. 89–100; Lazzarato, Maurizio. "Immaterial Labor." *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2006.

More discussion about labor in the character economy will be covered in Chapter Two.

The consumption in the character economy, like all other types of consumption in the immaterial and virtual economy, is first and foremost the consumption of the production condition itself: rather than consuming single characters, the consumer is engaging in the consumption of the character economy as a whole, by which the consumer's subjectivity is reproduced in Lazzarato's sense: "consumption consists not in buying or destroying a service or product as political economy and its critique teaches us, but means first and foremost belonging to a world."²⁸ When the consumer consumes a product (anime, manga, video games, or anything else) in the anime media mix, he or she is made belonging to the character economy.

In the case of the character economy, belonging to a world means a series of activities at all levels in the realm of virtuality: diegetically, the consumer is introduced to the character, familiar with the background story, acknowledging the ever-enlarging fictional worlds, having insights into interrelationships among characters; non-diegetically, the consumer gains more knowledge of the relationships between interrelated fictional worlds, accepting unarticulated limitations of the story, suspending disbelief, and immersing in the stories; metanarratively, the consumer acquires the vocabulary and grammar of the character database, becomes knowledgeable of

²⁸. Lazzarato, *Revolutions du Capitalisme*, 2004. Cited from Steinberg 2012, 184.

characteristics and symbols of characters, and aligns desire and fantasy with these resources in the database; creatively, the consumer engages in the secondary creation and fan content, interpreting and relocating the characteristics of characters. In short, the consumer's subjectivity is produced through the consumption-production in the character economy. In short, consumption taking place in the character economy is an activity of contextualizing. Noticeably, this is also Tamaki Saito's definition of otaku: a group of postmodern consumers who bear a high affinity with the virtual environment. In this sense, the moment one engages in the consumption of the character economy, s/he transforms into a postmodern otaku.

Chapter Two: Desires

The character economy is the foundation upon which gacha games are possible. Without the accumulation of work in the anime media mix and the mutual construction of the database and the consumers, the gacha system centering character gacha would be impossible to boost so many gacha games onto the channel of business success and attract so many players to invest their time and money. The character economy provides the key to understanding the paradox of gacha.

Given that the character economy is the condition and the environment in which the gacha game is possible, gacha should be understood in a wider context: rather than simply narrowing gacha to the gambling-like activity of obtaining playable characters or other items for interacting with these characters, gacha is a series of play(s) engaging with the character economy, a unique way to invest and participate into the virtual economy of character database. Gacha game players are gachaing not only when they open the gacha window and press the “summon” button. Instead, in their gaming experience or even in their non-gaming time when they are engaging in the secondary production and fan content, they are incessantly gachaing, so long as they have entered the character economy and continue participating in its production and consumption. A player of gacha games, like an otaku, is often also a reader, a fan, a commenter, and a creator. The player is constantly engaging in all activities relating to the character economy: apart from gaming, the player participates in the community, creating

secondary content, discussing the strength, design, and popularity of a character, predicting the next updating character, sharing gacha result with other players, and, more often than not, looking for other gacha games and joining other character worlds. This is true in many gacha games and their player communities. Players frequently shift from one game to another game, in search of more characters and more stories. Sometimes a player can be a so-called “cloud player” when s/he does not even have gaming experience of a game but is nonetheless engaging in its character economy²⁹. Limiting gacha to the gacha system risks ignoring other critical aspects which are important in identifying the nature of gacha.

Then, what is the difference between gacha and other types of activities and cultures which also in their own ways participate in the character economy? If gacha is only one possible means for the post-modern player-consumer to engage in the character economy, how does gacha develop such idiosyncrasies described above and make it possible to be a profitable monetization strategy?

Ritual of Over-possession

One significant point, though simple enough, is that the gacha game is video

²⁹. For interesting discussion about the player group in China called “cloud player” who experience video gaming via live streaming, see Yue Gu, “Chinese Cloud Players: How Proxy Play Develops From the Game Live Streaming,” 2022.

game. It is commonly agreed that the character in video games is different in many aspects from that of other non-interactive narrative media forms such as literature, drama, cinema, anime, and manga. Different from the detached empathy the reader/viewer bears for the character appearing in a non-interactive media form, a video game player's empathy towards a video game character is often expressed in another word: avatar. The avatariality, or avatarship, of the video game player comes from the fact that a character in the video game is not merely a narrative entity who has influence in the diegetic world, but can also serve as the stand-in, representation, and incarnation of the player in the digital space. The player's actions and interactions with the digital environment are mediated by the avatar, whether it is a full-scale three-dimensional humanoid model of fantasy species in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) or a simple line representing the tennis racket in *Pong* (Atari 1974). There are variations in terms of to what extent the avatariar character embodies the player's self image as a digital stand-in: in a CRPG (computer role-playing game, a term often used to refer to western style RPGs) like *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015), the player enjoys high freedom in customizing every aspect of the avatar, while in a JRPG (Japanese role-playing game) such as *Xenoblade Chronicles* (Monolith Soft 2009), it is more often that characters with a fixed image pre-designed by artists are controlled by the player. Jessica Aldred, a scholar of ludology and character animation, divides characters in video games into these two types and places them on a spectrum of character-avatar. At the

one end of the spectrum, the player fully controls the avatar and in a real sense synchronizes with the digital stand-in; at the other end, the character, though also to some extent performing the function as an avatar, is closer to the classical characters who can be commercialized as merchandise and used in branding (Aldred 2014).

Given that gacha games do not guarantee a common gaming experience, it will be overgeneralization to locate gacha games at a fixed position on this avatar-character spectrum. Nonetheless, the character's avatariality has an impact on the way the gacha game player participates in the character economy. According to research on the motivations of in-game purchases in a gacha game *Onmyoji* (NetEase Games 2016), apart from building stronger characters and competing with peer players, a significant motivation for microtransaction is the identification with virtual characters. Players of *Onmyoji* will pay for their emotional identification with *shikigami* (spirits controlled by an *onmyoji* who has the power to control yin-and-yang) with whom they develop an affective relationship (Cao and Xu 2020, 34). In *Genshin*, the player can operate playable characters as the avatar to explore the open-world map as a JRPG. Furthermore, a *Genshin* player is able to pick the image of a character as the profile image which will be shown to other players in multi-player playing.

Some researcher points out that this identification with a certain in-game character is not limited to the in-game space but also expands to other spaces such as Discord, Twitter, and even the real world, which implies a "conflation of self with the

avatar” (Adams 2022, 196). This might be a bit of an exaggeration, but it speaks to the fact that the gacha game player is engaging with the character economy in a way not so much enjoying the character as becoming the character. Orlando Woods, in his research about gacha games’ affective embeddings, also notices that the gacha game player is engaging in a dual direction movement “projecting the self *into* the game, and the character *beyond* the game” (Woods 2022, 10, *sic.*). In this sense, the relationship between the gacha game player and the gacha character exceeds the simple product-consumption relationship and bears a deeper affective value. One interviewee of Woods, when talking about Mona, a poor astrologist from *Genshin* who refuses to sell her expertise for money, said:

I don’t *want* to see her as a person, but I feel that these characters were designed to be relatable, and when they are relatable, you can’t help but think that you really want to take care of the character. So, if I have her [Mona] in my team, I could give her money, I could give her food . . . you want this character to be happy . . . I can’t help but see that person as a person, that *character* as a person. (Woods 2022, 10, italicized by the original author)

This deep affective relationship built between the player and the virtual character results partly from the time and labor the player invests into the game, which is less prominent in character merchandising of other non-interactive media forms. For a manga reader or an anime watcher, the time and labor invested in a certain character are directly related to the lasting length of the media form, which ranges from a few hours to tens of hours according to the length of the piece of work, if s/he does not directly participate in fan content creation. On the other hand, a video game usually requires

longer time and harder labor on the part of the player. Gacha game players may spend hundreds of hours building up a character and playing this character to conquer quests to quests, stages to stages, and worlds to worlds. This unparalleled investment of time and labor may generate a series of psychological effects that one may experience when raising a real animal or a human kid: as the embodiment of the player's labor, the entity gains life.

Woods also highlights other participating affective embeddings when the player is engaging in the character economy through gacha games. Besides the influence of the anime media mix and the aforementioned character relativeness, the gacha player is affected by an emotion that *gacha-pon* players also share: completeness. Like a stamp collector or a toy collector who desires the complete set of the collection, the gacha game player also desires completeness in the gacha games. This may mean obtaining all released characters, unlocking all friendship voice lines, purchasing all cosmetic skins, or building a character to its strongest (which is called "graduation" among the player community speaking Chinese). Woods purposes that this desire for completeness is "rooted in ownership" and represents characters becomes "a conduit for self-expression and realisation" (2022, 12, *sic.*). Freud would call this *anaclisis*, a reinvestment of libidinal energy into a substitute object bearing resemblance to another traumatic experience³⁰.

³⁰. The idea of *anaclisis* is derived from Allison, "Tamagotchi," *Millennial Monsters*, 2006.

The gacha game player's desire for completeness in other areas and spaces is substituted by the collection in gacha games.

For this mixture of movements of desire and fantasy in the gacha game, as discussed above, I call it *over-possession*. The prefix *-over* should be interpreted in accordance with this affix's abundance in meanings and nuances: above, beyond, across, excess, repetition, superiority, completeness, and thoroughness.³¹ The possession in this context goes both ways: the character is *possessed* by the player as property, playable character, avatar, digital stand-in, emotional identification, virtual companion, the interface with the virtual world, the assemblage of the database, and the means to self-realization; on the other hand, the player is also *possessed* by the character the way in which one is possessed by a fictional or fantastique being, a ghost or a specter, since the player is transformed into the character in the digital world and extends the life of the character to the real world. In short, the player's physicality gives the virtual character realness.

I purpose that over-possession might to some degree sheds light on the charm of gacha. Gacha, the play that mediates among currency, labor, virtuality, fantasy, and uncertainty, might be considered the ritual of over-possession, a representation and symbolization of the overdetermined relationality between the player and the character

³¹. AUTORES, VARIOS. "Over-." Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Sixth Edition, Oxford University Press, 2007.

in gacha games. Compared with classical media forms in the character economy such as anime, manga, light novels, or even other video games, the relationship in gacha games between the consumer and the character is mediated by gacha, a pecuniary activity based on uncertainty which reminds one nothing but the premodern notion of *destiny*. Whereas the consumption of characters in other media forms offers little, if not zero, means for the consumer to develop a feeling of realness and materiality, gacha, paradoxically enough, offers an actualized token for the over-possession between the player and the character: the uncertainty accompanied by spending money on the object of desire only makes this desire more real. In this sense, gacha is experienced as the *embodiment* of over-possession by the means of *fate*.

Coming Home: Parasociality, Patriarchy, and Possession

In the player community of gacha games, if a character is obtained through gacha, it is often passionately called the character “coming home.” A character, when having not yet been secured by the player, is wandering in the middle of nowhere, lost in the virtual desert of cyberspace, and only after a successful time of gacha does the character return to the place to which it originally and supposedly belongs: the player’s virtual household. From this expression, it is enough to see how a large number of affects are embedded in gacha. This metaphor represents a virtual intimacy, which is simultaneously queer, postmodern, cybernetic, and even posthuman; on the other hand,

it also implies a sense of return of familial hierarchy, a kind of patriarchal exclusive ownership of minor members under the cybernetic patriarch, namely, the player.

The potentiality of developing an intimate relationship with a virtual character has been accounted for by not only one scholar. In Allison's anthropology about electronic toys and video games concerning virtual lifeforms such as *tamagotchi* and *Pokémon*, she calls these play goods "enchanted commodities" and "soft electronics," highlighting their common evocative effect on their consumers. Players of *tamagotchi* and *Pokémon* usually develop a deep emotional connection with their virtual pets which exist as one-zero data and are mediated by the electronic output such as a screen. They invest their emotions in these virtual lives and this imagination "harkens to an era preceding modernization" (2001: 24). By this Allison means that playing "soft electronics" resonates with the emotions about family, parenting, mysterious beings such as ghosts and gods, which are gradually cannibalized by postmodern society that negates all these premodern relationships. In the otaku culture, we see a more similar pattern of intimacy building between the player and virtual characters. For players of visual novels such as galgames (visual novels featuring dating girls) and otome games (visual novels featuring dating boys), one of the key goals is to develop intimate relationships with virtual characters, and the accomplishment of the game is marked by the success of the virtual romance. Of course, there is also the famous eye-catching event when a Japanese male announced his marriage with Hatsune Miku, a virtual singer with

turquoise hair and a computer-synthesized voice³².

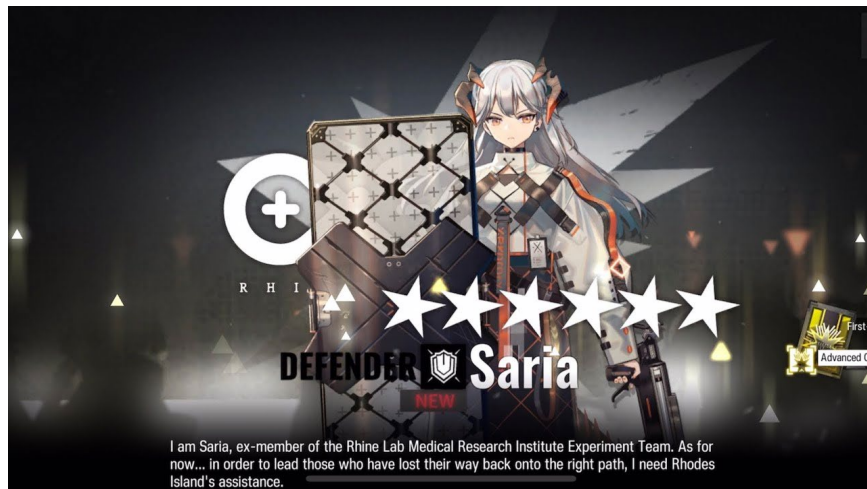


Figure 5: The greeting scene after gaining a character in *Arknights*. Saria introduces herself and asks player's assistance in the future. Screenshot by the author.

The intimacy with virtual characters in gacha games is only augmented with the development of digital technology and, of course, is mediated by the ritual of gacha. For most gacha games, obtaining a character in the gacha system is accompanied by a concise and clear greeting from the character, which often acknowledges and emphasizes the significance of this fateful encounter (since gacha is about uncertainty) and the expectation of developing friendship. There are also other variant systems for the development of virtual intimacy. In *Blue Archive*, students send messages to the player (“teacher” as is called in the game) via a fictional chat application “Momotalk”

³² Ben Dooley and Hisako Ueno, “This Man Married a Fictional Character. He’d Like You to Hear Him Out.” *The New York Times*, 24 Apr. 2022. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/24/business/akihiko-kondo-fictional-character-relationships.html>.

and gradually develop a deeper relationship with the player. A character may have its own position in the game's story, but the player also forms a unique cybernetic parasociality with the character: a parasociality that promises companionship, dailyness, real-timeliness, safety, intimacy, potentiality, and exclusiveness.

Embodied in this parasociality is the potentiality of development because "coming home" usually means not so much an ending but a beginning of a much longer relationship. Welcoming the return of a character is the beginning of further interaction with the character, including but not limited to operating this character, building this character, upgrading this character, customizing the character's appearances and equipment, and unlocking content such as new skins, reward cut scenes, side stories, and voice lines. This potentiality is rooted in the nature of play: for every game, there is a fixed set of rules, but for every player and every round of play, the gaming experience is nonetheless infinitive. In ludologist Patrick Jagoda's words, a video game is "a designed repetition that produces difference" and a "*possibility space*" (2020: 28), a space for the generation of infinite possibilities responding to the player's input.

Noticeably, the potentiality of the virtual parasociality implicates the exclusive ownership of this character, which is one of the dimensions of over-possession. This exclusive ownership derives from the fact that every gacha character is first a digital entity designed and coded by the game developer so it is part of the software and the game content open to the access of every game player. Even before playing the game,

the player is free to view the character introduction to know the character, enjoy the visuals and audio, watch video clips to see what the character looks like, and read other player's comments and discussion for more information, or even directly starts creates fan content of the character. Nonetheless, all these aspects are only the prelude before the actual beginning of the *exclusive* story between the player and the character. Gacha functions like a license or a token, affirming the exclusive ownership of this character, which is missing in other media forms in the character economy.

Gacha works like instantiation in computer coding, a cybernetic version of hylomorphism: from a template or class of something, a unique and independent instance or object is created and actualized, ready to be used for other programs. Despite the fact that every character is created by the game developer and designed by the artist, once the player owns the character and starts to interact with the character in the given ways, the input, output, data, experience, and memory of this companionship is responsive, unique, independent, and exclusive. Every *Genshin* player may own Raiden Shogun (so long as s/he is lucky enough or pays enough), but every single *instance* of Raiden Shogun is unique from the plural *class* of Raiden Shogun. Through this instantiation of the character, the player is capable to own an exclusive character in a real sense since their interaction and experience are independent from that of any other player, despite the fact that the character might be owned by tens of thousands of players. Gacha is the ritual of exclusive ownership.

In this sense, the character in gacha games (or video games) is unique from the character in other media forms: the exclusive ownership/possession of a character in gacha games. Over-possession of gacha games therefore is built upon its unique status as video game, character economy media, and actualizing vehicle of uncertainty. Gacha not only gives the player exclusive possession of a character's being ("coming home") but also allows the player to control the character's becoming (the potentiality). If obtaining a character is "coming home," then a gacha player, the master of the virtual household, is put in the position of the premodern patriarch who, on the one hand, controls the family member's physical entity by leveling, upgrading, and customizing them freely, on the other hand, desires affective values from the family members. Digital technology and new media in this way revive the premodern familial hierarchy: on the one hand, it recreates the virtual family consisting of virtual entities; on the other hand, it brings back the patriarchy in an alternative form: over-possession is also the possession of the premodern ghost of patriarchal violence.

Chapter Three: Players

In episode 4 of *Odd Taxi*, a television anime series released in 2021 about anthropomorphic animals living in an alternative version of contemporary Tokyo, a young puma starts to play a mobile gacha game. Things go smoothly at the beginning: Tanaka, the puma, plays a gacha game about capturing animals of various species. However, there is one point that always upsets him: dodo. The dodo is an extinct animal in the real world, so it is not difficult to imagine that in the game Tanaka plays, the dodo is one of the rarest and most difficult to obtain. No matter how many times Tanaka tries, he cannot draw a dodo. Gacha is only about probability and chances, so all he can do is keep trying. He plays the game more and more often to gain the currency for gacha. He plays the game from work to commute to home, and invests a big proportion of his poor salary. His eyes are fixed on the smartphone screen: all for the dodo. Like an addicted gambler, he presses the virtual button on the screen and waits in distress and anticipation for the result of the gacha, hoping that it would be a dodo.

Tanaka's fierce obsession with the dodo is partly the result of childhood trauma: when Tanaka was a kid puma, creative design erasers are popular among the kids, and Tanaka's classmates always show off all kinds of erasers in the class. To secure a rare eraser to show off to his friends, Tanaka stole his father's credit card to purchase a pricey limited version gorilla eraser on an auction website, which, sadly, was noticed by his father. With this childhood traumatic memory in his mind, Tanaka invests all his energy

and attention into the game for the dodo. One day while walking on the street, he finally gets the dodo, but the pleasure of the dream coming true is immediately destroyed by a taxi swerving in front of him, making his smartphone fall on the ground. When he reclaims the phone and enters the game, the dodo is gone: the game data was corrupted in the fall³³.

This story about gacha games is a good starting point for this chapter not simply because it is about a tragedy brought about by harmful gaming and unscrupulous monetization. Of course, it is an allegory about the detrimental effect of video games and how gaming addiction may destroy a young person financially and spiritually. Nonetheless, *Odd Taxi* shows how complicated factors ranging from materiality and immateriality interlace and intertwine together in the work of the virtual economy, how the traumatic experience of the past impacts the present behavior, and how gachaing serves as a double-edged sword which, on the one hand, is utilized as a survival strategy to compensate the traumatic past, cope with the undesired present, and control the unpredictable future, on the other hand, is exactly what Lauren Berlant calls *cruel optimism*: the attachment that one finds most desirable is ironically what impedes one's flourishing (Berlant 2011). Also, there is another dimension I like this allegory about

³³. Interestingly—though not hindering the power of this allegory—this tragedy is impossible because, in reality, gacha results are the most critical data for the game company so it would never be stored solely on the client's device but always be generated, processed, and stored on the server. This is to prevent the client from manipulating gacha result data locally.

gacha: it is a story taking place in the virtuality (a fictional anime about transhuman animals living like postmodern humans), the ever-growing venue in the postmodern and late capitalist society where the economy of gacha works.

In this chapter, I will steer a bit away from the gacha mechanism and take a look at other gameplay, and try to reexamine the gacha player, a group of postmodern consumers who live in constant fluidity, transformation, and dislocation, trying to control the uncertainty through the play of uncertainty. Also, I will try to place gacha games through the lens of neoliberalism to see how gacha gaming might be a symptom of our time, and how the parasociality of gacha characters is (im)possible. We may start with the postmodern media environment and the notion of virtuality(-ies).

Proliferation of the Virtualities

The work of gacha takes place in the realm of virtualities. “Virtual” as a word usually appears in its adjective form: virtual computer, virtual library, virtual learning, and virtual reality. In these cases, it is used to describe something without a physical body and only exists within the space of computer software: something digital, mediated, without a tangible form. As a result, virtual is used as the antonym of real: something nearly real, but not strictly. A simulation, simulacrum, and mimesis. This is very similar to the classical usage of “ideology” in Marxism, which is used to name the false representation of objective reality.

Nonetheless, in this project, I prefer the version Zizek understands ideology: ideology is nothing but the way we frame the world, the framework we give meanings to our environment, and the form of our thoughts. It is not the false consciousness a manipulated illusion of the objective reality, but the reality itself. Following this thread, we may also say that the virtual, or the virtuality, also is not the simulation of reality, but reality itself. In the same vein, the reality of commonsense, the ordinary world, is nothing but also a version of virtuality sustained by dominating ideologies³⁴. Moreover, I prefer using virtualities in the plural form for the fact that the virtualities of our time cannot be counted as a single and inseparable entity. The proliferation of virtualities is both the condition and result of gacha games and the character economy.

The proliferation of virtualities can be noticed in the life cycle of the otaku culture. Tamaki Saito, a psychologist and also a cultural critic, is one of the Japanese scholars who constantly give account for the otaku culture academically. From the perspective of media studies, Saito defines that otaku are a group of postmodern consumers who have a high affinity with virtual contexts (2006: 42). When referring to virtual contexts, Saito is addressing the virtuality created by anime, manga, and other media forms that collectively fabricate a fictional and alternative reality(-ties) that serve(s) as contexts for otaku's fantasy and desire. This argument appears when Saito

³⁴ See Slavoj Zizek, "How did Marx Invent the Symptom?" *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Second Edition, Verso, 2009.

psychoanalyzes why otaku are attracted by *seno bishoujo*, those delicate teenage girls with supreme fighting ability and untraumatized virginity, a frequently appearing motif in the anime media mix.

When his book about *seno bishoujo* was published in 2006, the word “otaku” was still considered an active and living word discursively and it is adopted to refer to a group of people who are enthusiasts—sometimes over-enthusiastic to the point of addiction and frenzy—of anime, manga, video games, and other closely related cultures. Despite this word’s status as both stigmatization and self-ridicule, otaku as a signifier functions quite well and gains significant popularity in many other languages following the expansion of Japanese popular culture. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the 2020s when this project is composed, the term “otaku” gradually lost its liveness, accuracy, and practicality, not only because of the natural life cycle of this term has come to an end or there emerge better terms to replace this signifier. Instead, the signified disappears: it is not the case that otaku disappear, but that the postmodern media environment is turning everyone who has contact with the information culture into otaku, or, in Saito’s words, consumers who have a high affinity with virtual contexts and virtuality.

There is a common misunderstanding that the virtual and the virtuality have no physicality, corporeality, or materiality. It is critical to be aware that, as Lazzarato reminds us, the classical Marxian division of economical foundation and superstructure and their hierarchy is ineffective in analyzing the postmodern condition of

contemporary society³⁵. In the age of postmodern capitalism, consumption and production taking place in the realm of the virtual have become ever significant and notable, which is phenomenal in the exponential increase in the information produced, processed, circulated, consumed, and reproduced on the internet. Or, as Frederic Jameson indicates, “the becoming cultural of the economic, and the becoming economic of the cultural” should be considered the way in which postmodernity functions in the realm of culture and economy³⁶. The culture-economy of virtualities is one of the key characteristics and foundational conditions of our times.

Under this condition, it is not hyperbole to argue that video game is one of the most critical and key media forms in the culture-economy of virtuality. As a matter of fact, video games have always been a constitutive part of the landscape of postindustrial consumer society for two main reasons. One is the massive multiplication of virtualities, and the next is, in Anne Allison and Saito Tamaki’s phrasing, the polymorphous perversity of postmodernity³⁷. If the Fordist society prescribed a single and hegemonic reality for the working class (ironically, which is symmetrically the same in both the capitalist West and the socialist East), the post-Fordist society, represented by the

³⁵. Maurizio Lazzarato, *VideoPhilosophy* (2019), 9.

³⁶. Fredric Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 54 –77. Cited from Leo Ching, “Globalizing the Regional, Regionalizing the Global” (2000), 239.

³⁷. See Anne Allison, “Enchanted Commodities”, *Millennial Monsters*, 2006.

information economy and new media should be grasped as the massive expansion and multiplication of virtualities which build up a semi-autonomous realm of multiple singular virtualities independent from both each other and also once dominant reality. Postindustrial consumers are in this sense free to live in their own virtuality and enjoy their respective reality, free from the intervention of exterior sources.

Information technology allows virtualities to bear new physicality in the form of websites, platforms, online forums, social media, video games, virtual communities, and so on, maintaining a capacity to exchange information and update themselves in real time. This is accompanied by the polymorphous perversity of their desires and fantasies, which are perverse in the sense that they are at odds with the once dominant social norms and practices, and also polymorphous because they are always in transformation, fluidity, changing, and alternating. The multiplication of virtualities promises infinite possibilities in lifestyles, worldviews, subcultures, narratives, ideals, and subjectivities, whereas the polymorphous perversity of virtualities ensures that they are always fresh, interesting, attractive, juicy, addictive, and trendy.

Not surprisingly, the video game, the media form born out of the advance of information technology and expansion of virtualities, is arguably the media form representing the Zeitgeist and the world image of our times. Virtual reality, a paradoxical tautology, is exactly what the video game is. On the one hand, video game is constantly producing virtualities; on the other hand, the abundance of the virtualities

created by video games satisfy the polymorphous perverse desire and fantasy of postmodern consumers. By gamifying the world we are living in with their abundance of virtualities, video games remind us that these autonomous virtualities are as powerful and impactful as the reality we believe to be solid, sole, and superior. And of course—these virtualities can also be as bad as reality.

Time Intense Gaming and Neoliberal Players

A frequent appearing mechanism in gacha games is the stamina system. It also bears other names such as “resin” (*Genshin Impact*), “sanity” (*Arknights*), or “action points” (*Blue Archive* and *Fate/Grand Order*). Despite its variation in naming, the stamina system works like this: every player has certain points of stamina. Most activities in the game will consume a number of stamina points. When the stamina points are used up, the player cannot play anymore or receives no rewards even if keeps playing. Stamina is recharged at a fixed rate as time passes. At first look, the stamina system seems to be a mechanism preventing players from addicted playing and gaming overtime, since it makes players stop gaming when they play too long or too much. Nonetheless, stamina points in gacha games can also be charged directly with real money, which makes it not so much a cordial health protection as another monetization. For game designers, the stamina system is effective in controlling the production of in-game resources and rewards which is needed in the player’s progression. For example, leveling up a

character in *Genshin* requires a certain amount of resources dropped from boss monsters, and the yield of these resource items hinges upon the amounts that stamina allows. Since every day the number of available stamina points is definite, leveling up a character means the careful distribution of daily time: the player must consider how to distribute stamina points wisely if s/he wants to build up a team efficiently. Therefore, for players, stamina is the abstraction of time because it converts the qualitative time of the player's real life directly into a quantitative currency to be exchanged, distributed, and valorized³⁸.

The stamina system is only one aspect of gacha games concerning time. As I noted in previous chapters, the release of characters in gacha games is usually updated with gacha events ("banners"). The rarity of high-value characters is further augmented by time-limited gacha events. Some characters can only be obtained in time-limited events and players who miss the time may forever lose the chance to see these characters "coming home." This means that the best gacha strategy is stocking as much currency as possible and investing it in the desired characters solely in the hope of obtaining this character. This work requires patience and long-term planning. Apart from that, gacha games often offer daily quests for players to finish, which are small but repetitive quests refreshed every day and reward items including the gacha currency. Finishing these

³⁸. For more discussion of stamina from the perspective of monetization, see "Stamina Systems Are Great. This Is Why." *Tech in Asia*, 13 May 2014, <https://www.techinasia.com/stamina-systems-are-great-this-is-why>.

quests daily helps the player stock enough gacha currency without spending real money. The everyday time of the player and the passing by of time are thus incorporated into the gameplay of gacha games.

Orlando Woods in his research about time in gacha games notices that every gacha game player is constantly made aware of a “time-money trade-off”: rather than the common sense of video game players losing the track of time, gacha game players are acutely aware of it and calculate the investment and return of time. The time-money trade-off consists of a number of choices: grinding (repeating some gameplay for its rewards) for a long time in order to level up a character or directly exchanging the rewards with real money; calculating the last date of a time-limited banner and the stamina points needed to obtain enough free gacha currency; planning the usage and stock of the gacha currency periodically according to the prediction of future character banners; making sense of the relation between the yield and the labor of quests and missions; balancing the time spent in the game and the time of every-day life for their relative value. Woods argues that gacha game players develop “hyper-rationality” of the time economy. He suggests that gacha gaming is nothing other than the so-called “playbor,” a kind of affective labor consisting in gameplaying by “extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, even more useful forces”.³⁹

³⁹. More discussion about the time and resources in gacha games, see Woods, Orlando. “The Economy of Time, the Rationalisation of Resources: Discipline, Desire and Deferred Value in the Playing of Gacha

Time is significant in games and plays for various reasons. In racing, the player who spends less time finishing the game wins. Playing games can also change the way the player feels about time: either longer or shorter, depending on the fun and rhythm of the play. Fundamentally, video games are computer software functioning on the basis of microtemporal microelectronic switches. On the other hand, in gacha games, time, with its unique, qualitative, and particular properties according to its scenarios and temporalities, is embodied first and foremost in a quantitative potentiality of valorization: time is resource, currency, and crystallized into labor⁴⁰. Time is reduced to the abstracted common stamina-time and banner-time in the character economy, the measure of the productivity of gacha currencies. From this point, we see how the gameplay of the gacha game is the abstraction of capitalism. In this sense, the temporality of a gacha player is exactly the temporality of a neoliberal worker who manages one's time according to productivity and profitability, and a gacha player is a *neoliberal subject* at its purest.

Patrick Jagoda in *Experimental Games* argues that the video game is both the representation and facilitator of neoliberalism for three reasons. I find it useful to look at each of them in order to have a clearer idea of the gacha player's subjectivation and

Games," 2022.

⁴⁰. The account for the association of video games, time, and neoliberalism is revised from my coursework for Professor Luciana Parisi's Media Philosophy, "Playing Time: Actionability and Time Production in Video Games."

neoliberalism. These three points are: competition, action, and worldmaking. First, Jagoda highlights how neoliberalism makes competition a “game that must be instituted, and continually maintained and sustained” (2020: 22). A good worker is simultaneously a successful competitor. A person’s value is realized not in the competition of contingency but rather in the perpetual formal competition which is the condition of one’s value whatsoever. Gacha players’ competitiveness is embodied in their community activities of sharing gacha results. A good gacha result means not only one’s good fortune but also proves the player’s understanding of gameplay, command of battling strategy, the attention and time invested in gaining enough gacha currency, or simply the real-world money invested.

Action is the next point to be noted. From the late half of the twentieth century, rather than performing as mere components on an assembly line, a worker is constantly required to be the entrepreneur of oneself and behave actively in the work, because of the post-Fordist production mode of the neoliberal regime. Video games are also a media form that requires players to be active. When playing a video game, players frequently make all kinds of decisions and act accordingly from the tactic level like move, fight, or flight, to the strategic level such as goal decision, resource management, and option evaluation. Meeting these requirements is critical to having a fun and quality gaming experience and remaining individual competitiveness in the neoliberal economy.

For gacha players, the importance of action, decision, and planning is further intensified than in any other video game. A gacha player is prompted to make decisions and take actions: quest decision, yield calculation, character build planning, gacha banner predication, gacha currency management, and all of these tasks require the player to be knowledgeable about the return and cost ratio, thus nurturing hyper-rationality of the time-money trade-off. Gacha gaming is so successful in abstracting time that it produces a new temporality for the player—a gacha temporality—that directly inserts itself into the player’s subjectivation, the production of subjectivity. It is worth mentioning that most gacha games are mobile games, which made them accessible anytime, anywhere. Gachaing has no limitation in time and space, the same as neoliberalism in which the border between work and leisure is blurred and employment and unemployment lose their distinction.

Last but not the least, Jagoda argues that video games are a worldmaking media that need players to adapt to new environments and new challenges at all times, paralleling the constructivism effort of neoliberalism which requires a free market maintained and adjusted to fulfill the need for capital valorization. Briefly speaking, unlike classical liberalism which holds the *laissez-faire* attitude and condemns governmental intervention, neoliberalism sees states and nongovernmental entities such as the World Bank becomes active builders of the neoliberal regime and produces new structures for the maintenance of the economy.

As I noted in previous parts, the fundamental structure of gacha games, the character economy, works by producing worlds to which the player-consumer belongs and maintains these worlds by reproducing characters. Furthermore, the character economy in gacha games is supported and augmented by a gameplay system devoted to exploiting over-possession so as to valorize the player's time and labor. Gacha game developers are familiar with updating game content and offering new gameplay every month. The non-diegetic world of a gacha game, the world of rules consisting of quests, missions, challenges, rewards, bosses, character building, time-limited events, and the sophisticated currency exchange system, is frequently updated and constructed to maintain the player's attachment.

For these three parallels between video games and neoliberalism, I would like to add one point, that is, the virtual economy. The virtual economy is one important section of post-Fordism and neoliberalism. This is pointed out by not only one scholar such as Michael Hardt and Maurizio Lazzarato. In the Fordist regime, the soul of the assembly line worker is the main site upon which the capital tries to discipline. On the other hand, the post-Fordist regime takes a step further and turns the soul itself into the capital for production and reproduction. Affective labor or immaterial labor, the labor that takes place in the realm of the virtualities, gradually becomes prominent in the twenty-first century when information technology and the digital economy make it possible that the investment of the consumers' attention and affects can be directly

valorized. Video games are one important site in the valorization of virtualities.

Gacha games' effect on the subjectivation of the player is similar to that of all other video games, but it develops to a new height paralleling neoliberalism in various aspects, from time, competition, action, worldmaking, and virtualization. That said, it would be a mistake to assume that gacha players know nothing of all these aspects. A gacha gamer will be able to calculate the time and money for obtaining a character, even if s/he knows crystal clear what dark design and manipulation are involved in the gacha system—the player gachas nonetheless. How do we understand this?

Parasociality and Precarity

In *Genshin*, players can customize a personal virtual space named “Serenitea Pot.” Serenitea Pot provides the player high freedom in customizing the terrain, natural environment, buildings, decorations, and furnishings to create a unique virtual homeland. Also, playable characters can be accommodated in this space as if they are living in the player's home. They behave as if they are the player's cohabitants, greet the player every morning and say good night when the virtual sun sets. When the friendship between the player and a character deepens, the character talks more intimately, expressing worries and happiness, and sharing personal stories.

Similar housing systems can also be found in other gacha games with names such as “dorm,” “cafe,” or “base,” providing a customizable virtual space to actualize

the daily companionship with the characters. These housing systems often feature similar gameplay: customizing decorations and furnishings, accommodating virtual characters, interacting with the inhabitants, and enjoying their reactions. In some cases, housing systems might be crucial in developing the friendship with characters and be incorporated into the narrative gameplay. Players are encouraged to share their personal housing spaces with the online community and discuss their own homelands, as parents proudly share the videos of their homes and children within.

Accommodating characters in a customized virtual space and developing intimacy with them offer an annotation to Allison's observation years before the birth of gacha games: postmodern consumers are looking for a space for safely releasing their desire of taking care⁴¹. Once there were kids playing *tamagotchi* and raising virtual pets; now in gacha games, young adults create a household of virtual characters and reimagine the form of the post-Fordist family: a family whose basic linkage is built upon fantasy, virtualities, and imagination.

The imagination of human society is always connected with certain locations, which is the way humans create communities according to their common living space. On the other hand, postmodernity with its dislocation and deterritorialization destroys this traditional pattern of location-imagination connection and unroots the traditional

⁴¹. See Allison, "Tamagotchi," *Millennial Monsters*, 2006.

way of living. The breaking down of the biological family, the classical living and reproduction unit is a prominent phenomenon of the postmodern world. On the other hand, what is repressed in the conscious, the desire for biological/affective union, always returns in another way translated by the hidden unconscious, which is the symptomatic pattern of desire. This return is obvious in many aspects of contemporary life, and most obvious in the realm of fantasy, virtualities, and imagination. The video game, with its doubling nature offering the second reality/alternative reality, becomes the perfect space for the nostalgia of family, parenting, and all other premodern specters. This is why we see the virtual household of characters and players is possible in the gacha games and the housing system accommodating the player's nostalgia for family is so popular and effective, even if the new intimacy produced within it is something totally queer and posthuman, a new parasociality called "intimate virtuality" by Anne Allison⁴².

Parasociality has been used to refer to the unilateral social relationship between the television watcher and the broadcaster or the actor in the television shows. In the digital and virtual age, the social relationship between a human and a virtual entity in the digital machine represents a new possibility of parasociality without interaction between real subjects. This lack of inter-subjectivity is exactly how the parasociality of gacha games is possible: a rupture that on the one hand, reminds the player of the

⁴² See Allison, "Gotta Catch 'Em All," *Millennial Monsters*, 2006, p. 266.

irremediable loss in the postmodernity, on the other hand, serves as its true charm and attraction to the player who looks for a virtual mobile household without bearing the responsibility and labor necessary for keeping a household.

Precarity is the other side of the coin of neoliberalism. In Judith Butler's language, precariousness—the parent category of precarity—registers the ontological vulnerable and precarious condition of all life⁴³. On the other hand, precarity discursively is used to refer to the contemporary notion related to a sense of insecurity in our time. Anne Allison sees precarity as the loss of secure employment status, social contract, identity network, and lifestyle norm⁴⁴; Guy Standing connects precarity to the emergence of informal economy and the making of a group of workers without labor security and occupational identity. Butler describes precarity as a life with “no sense of a secure future, no sense of continuing political belonging, living a sense of damaged life as a part of the daily experience of neoliberalism.”⁴⁵

This insecurity, in the section of work represented by the insecurity of employment, and in the section of sociality represented by remoteness, uprootedness, lack of belonging, and the breaking down of the traditional social network such as

⁴³. See Judith Butler, “Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect,” *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso Books, 2016.

⁴⁴. See Allison, *Precarious Japan*, 2013, 5.

⁴⁵. Judith Butler, *Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 2016, 201. Cited from Clara Han, *Precarity, Precariousness, and Vulnerability*. 1 Oct. 2018. *Social Science Research Network*.

school, family, corporate, and ethnicity, calls for remedy and alternative, which, ironically, are offered by gacha games in its neoliberal paradigm. As a result, gacha game players, as a group of consumers living in an age of digital economy, globalism, urbanization, and migration, who see sociality with uncertainty and vulnerability, are attracted to gacha games⁴⁶. They look for parasociality with virtual characters mediated by the gacha system. This paradoxical gameplay in the character economy promises perpetuity and absoluteness with the play of uncertainty because of the fact that *controllable insecurity* is the only real way toward *security*. Through the gacha mechanism, players experience the ritualized over-possession of characters in controllable indeterminacy, thereby in a limited time are liberated from the distress of precarity, before, once again, the desire reproduces and the next chance for gacha is desired. This is the survival strategy for the postmodern players of gacha games in precarity.

Cruel optimism at its purest: the parasociality of foreverness does not provide any real sense of perpetuity, which is crystal clear in the fact that it solely relies on the game company providing the game service stably. Nonetheless, there are not a small number of cases in which game companies stop providing game services so players cannot log in

⁴⁶. I found no good research on the population of gacha game players. The best I can have is the interviewees of Cao and Xu (2020) who are Chinese *Onmyoji* players and overwhelming young adults with higher education. Here I have to assume that gacha game players are mostly urban young adults who is familiar with the anime media mix, which matches my own observation.

to their accounts anymore and lose contact with their data and, of course, without any means whatsoever to bid farewell to virtual but real characters with virtual but real companionship built upon the cost of countless time, labor, effort, expectation, distress, relief, and love, which is lost and disappears in the digital desert of shutting down servers like the dissipating specters on the morning.



Figure 6: The Twitter announcement for ending service of Nintendo's gacha game *Dragalia Lost* on November 30, 2022. (Twitter: @Dragalia Lost).

Conclusion: Embodiments

I hope *Embodied Fate* should not be seen as another cliché accusation of the gacha game. Yes, gacha game players fall in love with virtual characters, dispute fiercely for the gain and loss of free Primogems (one of the gacha currencies circulated in *Genshin*), invest excessive time and energy into the fictional world, and play the famous “as-if” game that “I know very well that these characters come home only because I pay, but I choose to believe that as if they truly love me unconditionally...” Let us be frank: gacha games are commodities for making money, and developers try every means to make the player pay willingly. On the other hand, to accuse gacha games of unethical and stop players from gacha gaming are like telling a patient suffering from nightmares to simply stop thinking about those bad ideas: gacha games are the symptom of our time and contemporary world, the dream that manifests on the surface of the conscious which is nothing more than the translation work of some common-place desire by the hidden unconscious which is, in this case, late capitalism *per se*.

In *Embodied Fate*, my goal is to conduct a symptomatic reading of the gacha game: from its history and media archaeology, to analyze its desire structure in which it reproduces itself. By contextualizing gacha games in the anime media mix, the work of the character economy is depicted to illustrate why the character is so important for gacha games and how these characters are produced massively; then, the gacha mechanism is analyzed to see how the sophisticated structure of over-possession helps

the desire of gacha reproduces, and in what ways this structure influences the interaction between the player and the character; last, I show why it is exactly the neoliberal regime of our age creates gacha games and how gacha players enjoy neoliberalism playfully via gachaing.

There are, of course, some concerns that I have to address. First, the player population of gacha games has, as mentioned in previous chapters, grown into a diverse group consisting of players from various countries, cultures, and regions, with various backgrounds and languages. Although I try to be inclusive in the research, I am still limited to the languages I have command of, namely, Chinese, Japanese, and English, and among them, player communities using simplified Chinese are the most referenced in this research. Further, considering the time for this research, I have to limit the discussion to the games I have direct gaming experience of or am familiar with. This choice means that a number of games such as otome gacha games, female-oriented gacha games, and gacha games produced by western developers are not fully addressed. Of course, more at stake is the positionality of the author: a Chinese male with an academic background in literature. This positionality determines that there are areas and perspectives that I did not cover in this project and underlying prejudices I failed to avoid.

There are plenty of dimensions unaddressed in *Embodied Fate*. For example: the sexuality of players, including how gender and sexual orientation influence the design

of the gacha gameplay and how gacha games represent sexuality(-ties); the representation (or lack thereof) of multiculturalism, races, and nations in gacha games; the narrativity of gacha games in terms of the character economy; the association between gacha and gambling; gacha games and the latest global wave of East Asian popular culture considering the digital culture and platform economy, so on and so forth.

Before wrapping up *Embodied Fate*, let us take a final glance at Primogem, another currency in *Genshin Impact*. While Intertwined Fate and Acquaint Fate are the currencies representing gacha chances, Primogem embodies something more fundamental: it can be used to exchange Fates or recharge stamina points, and can be obtained from grinding or converted from real-world currencies. HoYoverse also sends free Primogems to players on all occasions: festivals, time-limited events, server maintenance, or public relation crises. It is even alleged that HoYoverse bribed its player community with free Primogems so as to win the “Best Mobile Game” in The Game Awards.⁴⁷ The in-game description of Primogem reads as followed:

A primordial crystalline gem that’s beyond the mundane world. Shines with the condensed hopes and dreams of universes that once were. (*Genshin Impact*, HoYoverse 2020)

Perhaps this text can also be the annotation for gacha game itself: the nostalgia of

⁴⁷. See Sisi Jiang, “Sonic Frontiers Fans Are Convinced Genshin Impact Is Bribing Its Community For TGA Votes.” *Kotaku*, 2 Dec. 2022, <https://kotaku.com/genshin-impact-tga-sonic-frontiers-geoff-keighley-1849848710>.

permanent loss or primordial lack; the real abstraction of time, hopes, and desires;
countless fictional worlds of fantasy and dreams of *the* world once was—or never has
been.

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