

# **Gacha Games in East-Asian Transmedia Franchises**

**Joleen Blom**

Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies  
Kanslerinrinne 1  
33014, Tampere University  
johanna.blom@tuni.fi

## **Keywords**

Gacha games, free-to-play, East-Asia, Games-as-a-Service, transmedia

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper calls attention to the monetization models of *gacha* games from the East-Asian region (here meant as Japan, China and South Korea), which are free-to-play (freemium) games in which players are incentivized “to buy or accumulate in-game currency which can be used to obtain a randomised virtual item that might —to greater or lesser degrees— enhance or progress the game” (Woods 2022, 2). Despite the influence of popular culture from East-Asia on global game cultures, the role of *gacha* games within the marketing schemes of global media franchises is often understudied in Game Studies due to the field’s tendency to concentrate on Euro-American centric phenomena. Yet, freemium games from East-Asia account for the majority of the top grossing mobile games world-wide (Chapple 2022c). For example, the *gacha* game *Genshin Impact* (2020), which is the main product in a larger transmedia franchise by the Chinese developer miHoYo, has generated over 3.7 billion US dollars in the past two years (Chapple 2022b). Overlooking these games risks not only omitting the impact of East-Asian game industries on a global scale, but also undermines a nuanced understanding of how entertainment franchises employ a variety of strategies to channel fan behaviour towards monetary, temporal, and labour investment in freemium games and related products.

In the spirit of the conference’s theme “Limits and Margins of Games”, this paper therefore presents a work-in-process study that aims to supplement our understanding of regional game cultures by examining how *gacha* games from East-Asia are developed and released as part of a transmedia franchise, while it simultaneously explains how these games contribute to digital trends worldwide. The study’s leading research questions are: what role do *gacha* games and their characters play in a transmedia franchise, and how do *gacha* characters encourage consumption and playbour by fans in a transmedia franchise? The study intends to collect theoretical data on *gacha* games and its characters, and empirical data on players to understand the roles of *gacha* games and the characters in encouraging players to invest in the game and its franchise. Additionally, this study adopts the trend of regional game studies within Game Studies that investigates different regional gaming cultures and identifies connections between them (Liboriussen and Martin 2016). It therefore treats East-Asia as a cultural region, which may be understood as a market construction where platforms and media ‘coproduce’ a sense of the regional in their reception, distribution, and production, and draw on a pre-existing set of cultural tendencies within the region (Steinberg 2019, 217). From this regional perspective, transmedia franchises are understood as media mixes, which are strategic practices from the East-Asian region to

**Proceedings of DiGRA 2023**

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

spread character-centred content across different media platforms and related products (Steinberg 2012, viii).

## **FREEMIUM GAMES IN EAST-ASIA**

Freemium games from East-Asia belong to the *Games as a Service* (GaaS) trend, where game studios “indeterminately support and periodically release content incrementally for existing games instead of developing new games or stand-alone sequels” (Dubois and Weststar 2021, 2). In the early 2000s, games were sold as standalone premium products that generated value through the sale of boxed or digital units (Bernevega and Gekker 2021). However, with the rise of GaaS, the monetisation model of games shifted from premium to freemium; that is, the game itself is free-to-play but contains in-game purchases (Nieborg 2015). These purchases come, for example, in the shape of lootboxes, random boxes that offer players an item from a pool of items, which are often found in freemium games from the Euro-American game industries (Macey and Bujić 2022). In contrast, freemium games from East-Asia often contain the *gacha* mechanic, which has its own historical development on the mobile phone in Japan (Matsui 2021). *Gacha* derives from the *gachapon*, capsule machines in Japan that sell balls containing different items. Upon purchasing, consumers may or may not receive the item they want. *Gacha* has been a peripheral but a common appearance in Japanese transmedia franchises, as it does not only appear in games but also appears in the shape of collectibles and playing cards (Ito 2007; Steinberg 2017). Nevertheless, both lootboxes and *gacha* have been criticised by scholars and policy makers for their potential to stimulate gambling disorders, and some types of these mechanics are therefore regulated through industry self-regulations or consumer protection laws (Xiao et al. 2022).

## **GACHA GAMES**

This paper focuses on *gacha* games produced in Japan and/or with Japanese companies that functions as the core text of a transmedia franchise. This paper will provide a close-reading of several *gacha* games, such as *Disney Twisted-Wonderland* (f4samurai 2020) and *Genshin Impact* in conjunction with a close-analysis of their related transmedia franchises (in which the games are produced, and related products are sold) based on a field study in Japan. These games are chosen for the study, because the production and distribution of their content requires international collaboration between East-Asian, and even global, companies to affect a large international audience. For example, *Disney Twisted-Wonderland* is based on the intellectual properties from various transmedia franchises owned by the Disney corporation but developed by the Japanese online game developer f4samurai. The game was initially produced exclusively for Japanese audiences but is now increasingly distributed to global audiences. *Genshin Impact* uses the visual aesthetics associated with Japanese popular culture but is developed by the Chinese developer miHoYo. The game has been distributed to players world-wide from the start, and is highly popular in China, Japan, and the USA (Chapple 2022a). Furthermore, miHoYo collaborates with Ufotable, a Japanese animation studio, to create an animation, thereby expanding their transmedia franchise (Diaz 2022). As such, these case examples might look Japanese at first sight, they demonstrate that the ‘co-production’ of *gacha* games is not confined to a single country, like Japan, or necessarily the East-Asian region.

According to Hartzheim (2019), licensed mobile games from Japan function to amplify existing larger entertainment franchises. These games advertise the core texts to various audiences, and actively stimulate player consumption for both in-game purchases and franchise products (234). By examining these games, this paper will supplement Harzheim’s observations, showing that *gacha* games have gradually become the core product of a franchise, and are strategically employed by large conglomerates with world-wide reach. The *gacha* mechanic has come to occupy the forefront of many

entertainment franchises, which extends to franchise products outside of the game. That is, most franchise products contain a randomisation of items from a pool of items so that consumers never really know which item exactly they buy. This is important to consider, because in the larger predatory trend of digital capitalism where consumers are tracked to enhance user productivity and capital accumulation (Fuchs 2017, 117), freemium games are also a part of this trends, because they tend to leverage player data to channel player behaviour towards consumption (Whitson and French 2021). As this paper will point out, the franchise products of freemium games are often not studied in how they channel consumption in- and outside of the game.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bernevega, A., and A. Gekker. 2021. "The Industry of Landlords: Exploring the Assetization of the Triple-A Game." *Games and Culture* 17 (1): 47–69.
- Chapple, C. 2022a. "Genshin Impact Surpasses \$3 Billion on Mobile, Averages \$1 Billion Every Six Months." *SensorTower* (blog). May 2022. <https://sensortower.com/blog/genshin-impact-three-billion-revenue>.
- . 2022b. "Genshin Impact Generates \$3.7 Billion on Mobile in First Two Years." *SensorTower* (blog). September 2022. <https://sensortower.com/blog/genshin-impact-mobile-two-years-analysis>.
- . 2022c. "Top Grossing Mobile Games Worldwide for August 2022." *SensorTower* (blog). September 2022. <https://sensortower.com/blog/top-mobile-games-by-worldwide-revenue-august-2022>.
- Diaz, A. 2022. "Genshin Impact Gets an Anime Series — and a Dramatic Teaser Trailer." *Kotaku* (blog). September 16, 2022. <https://www.polygon.com/23356400/genshin-impact-anime-trailer-lumine-aether-overse-ufotable>.
- Dubois, L-E., and J. Weststar. 2021. "Games-as-a-Service: Conflicted Identities on the New Front-Line of Video Game Development." *New Media & Society* 24 (10): 1–22.
- f4samurai. 2020. *Disney Twisted-Wonderland*. Tokyo: Aniplex.
- Fuchs, C. 2017. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Hartzheim, B.H. 2019. "Transmedia-To-Go: Licensed Mobile Gaming in Japan." In *The Franchise Era: Managing Media in the Digital Economy*, edited by J. Fleury, B.H. Hartzheim, and S. Mamber, 233–55. Traditions in American Cinema. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ito, M. 2007. "'Technologies of the Childhood Imagination: Yugioh, Media Mixes, and Everyday Cultural Production.'" In *Structures of Participation in Digital Culture*, edited by J. Karaganis, 88–111. New York: Social Science Research Council.
- Liboriussen, B., and P. Martin. 2016. "Regional Game Studies." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 16 (1). <http://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/liboriussen>.
- Macey, J., and M. Bujić. 2022. "The Talk of the Town: Community Perspectives on Loot Boxes." In *Modes of Esports Engagement in Overwatch*, edited by M. Ruotsalainen, M. Törhönen, and V-M. Karhulahti, 199–223. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82767-0\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82767-0_11).
- Matsui, H. 2021. "Sōsyarugēmu Toiu Media: Komyunikēsyon to Kyōkōsekai (Social Games as Media: Communication and the Fictional World)." In *Sōsyaru Media*

- Sutadiisu (Social Media Studies)*, edited by H. Matsui and T. Okamoto, 63–70. Tokyo: Hokujiyusyuppan.
- miHoYo. 2020. *Genshin Impact*. Shanghai: miHoYo.
- Nieborg, D. 2015. “From Premium to Freemium: The Political Economy of the App.” In *Social, Casual and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape*, edited by T. Leaver and M. Wilson, 225–40. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Steinberg, M. 2012. *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2017. “Media Mix Mobilization: Social Mobilization and Yo-Kai Watch.” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12 (3): 244–58.
- . 2019. *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Whitson, J., and M. French. 2021. “Productive Play: The Shift from Responsible Consumption to Responsible Production.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 21 (1): 14–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540521993922>.
- Woods, O. 2022. “The Economy of Time, the Rationalisation of Resources: Discipline, Desire and Deferred Value in the Playing of Gacha Games.” *Games and Culture* 17 (7–8): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221077728>.
- Xiao, L.Y., L.L. Henderson, R.K.L. Nielsen, and P.W.S. Newall. 2022. “Regulating Gambling-Like Video Game Loot Boxes: A Public Health Framework Comparing Industry Self-Regulation, Existing National Legal Approaches, and Other Potential Approaches.” *Current Addiction Reports* 9: 163–79.