"You can be BOTH sexy AND powerful!": Female presentation in video games using Genshin Impact as an example

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of January 5th, 2022, coinciding with the release of version 2.4 of the *Genshin Impact* (hereafter referred to as 'Genshin'), miHoYo announced changes to the visual design of four female characters. These changes, purportedly in response to Chinese governmental censorship, sparked a debate within the Chinese Genshin Community about female representation in the game, subsequently extending to broader video game discourse. This research aims to contribute to the understanding of both the representation and reception of female characters in video games, using *Genshin* as a case study. Our focus includes the alterations in the design of female characters in *Genshin* and the community's reaction, as well as an examination of how the game's lore and narrative construct these characters.

Gender representation, especially female representation, has always been a significant topic in video game studies, with existing research presenting both complementary and contradictory perspectives. For instance, a narrative literature review by Lopez-Fernandez et al. (2019), which analyzed 12 articles, suggests that female characters in video games are not only less frequently featured but are also often exaggeratedly and hyper-sexualized in terms of their attributes (p.10). Concurrently, studies on the 'Lara Phenomenon' (Jansz and Martis, 2007; Genz, 2009; Engelbrecht, 2020) highlight the portrayal of powerful and layered female characters in digital games, particularly in narrative structures. Jansz and Martis' research first observes and coincides the term 'Lara Phenomenon', which is 'the appearance of a competent female character in a dominant position' (p.141). Though Jansz and Martis highlights the sexualization of female characters, Genz's study further reveals the portrayal of a 'post-feminist super girl' in current popular culture, who embodies

passive femininity and active masculinity in diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive ways. Han and Song (2014) argue, using *Lara Croft* as an example, that the female heroine embodies a mix of traits typically associated with heroes, asserting that her strength is an amalgamation of various male protagonists' characteristics (p. 38). Later Engelbrecht (2020) argues for a new Lara Phenomenon, a female protagonist with a version of femininity that is more attainable and reflective of real-world experiences.

These previous studies often fall into a problematic dichotomy, separating, sometimes neglecting physical appearance or character design from narrative roles and gameplay mechanics. This separation creates a dissonance in understanding gender representation by implicitly positioning physical attractiveness and competence as opposing traits in female characters, thus misrepresenting the complexity of gender identity.

Our analysis of the design changes in *Genshin* reveals a reduction in character exposure through added clothing. The community's response to these changes was polarized. A significant portion of players, across various social media platforms, claimed victory[1], attributing the changes to their complaints and reports to the Chinese government. They criticized the original character designs in *Genshin* as overly flirtatious and tailored to appeal sexually to male players. Such argument consists one of the discursive systems echoing with the stereotypical female portray observed by former studies (e.g. Burgess et al.,2007; Martins et al., 2009; Lopez-Fernandez et al, 2019), highlighting the sexualization and male gazing of the female characters. However, another faction argued that this perspective overlooks the fact that *Genshin*'s narrative and gameplay design already depict all female characters as strong and independent. The analysis of the character design and narrative supports both sides of the argument. The female characters in *Genshin*, both pre- and post-change, exhibit a combination of physical attractiveness and personal strength. While the physical design of *Genshin*'s female characters is indeed attractive, with some attributes exaggerated, these characters are also imbued with distinct personalities, strengths, and independence. Hence, they maintain their agency and strength regardless of their physical design or redesigns.

However, what we want to focus is upon the confrontation of these two discursive systems. This clash reveals a deeper ideological divide about how female characters are understood and valued in the gaming landscape. Ultimately, the discourse surrounding female representation in video games reveals a dangerous dichotomy where physical attractiveness and competence are viewed as mutually exclusive traits or lens to understand women. It reveals an exclusiveness within the inclusiveness, and a simplification within complexity. This oversimplification not only limits the complexity of female characters but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes about femininity. This clash perpetuates the misconception that a female character cannot simultaneously embody both attractiveness and competence, thereby diminishing the depth of female representation and risking the reinforcement of restrictive definitions of femininity in gaming.

ENDNOTES
[1] In Douban, there is a discussion group named "Genshin Impact Female-GamersOnly Group". Examples of copywriting on how to report *Genshin Impact* to the
Chinese government, in an effort to force the studio to revise the visual design of the characters, have been shared in the discussion group

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