

Understanding Transmedia Character-Centric Discourse in Gacha Games: A Social Semiotic Analysis of *Genshin Impact*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Game studies as a discipline has increasingly recognised the necessity of detailed, systematic micro-analysis to understand the complex mechanisms underlying gaming experiences from various perspectives. Based on the author's ongoing PhD research, this study proposes a social semiotic approach for analysing character-centric discourse in gacha games, addressing the gap in multimodal research on how characters function as organising semiotic resources transmedially. Using *Genshin Impact* as the primary case study—an open-world gacha game that has achieved remarkable global success through character-driven monetization—this research aims to shed light on how gacha games systematically deploy characters as both semiotic and commercial organising principles.

Joleen Blom's (2023a) analysis reveals that gacha games operate through dual and transmedia revenue streams: direct monetisation via in-game character purchases and indirect revenue generation through social media advertising of both old and new characters. This dual structure positions characters as central organising elements that bridge the game itself with a broader transmedia context. Within this transmedia context, characters function not merely as gameplay avatars but as semiotic entities that traverse and circulate multiple platforms, establishing what Jenkins (2006) terms transmedia storytelling emphasising narrative coherence and Steinberg's (2012) media mix strategies foregrounding character proliferation. This necessitates examination of how character-centric discourse operates as a distinctive transmedia digital practice of gacha games. Blom's (2023b) dynamic game character theory addresses the transmedia perspective by offering a macro-level ontological framework for understanding character identity and agency, while this study offers a micro-analytical social semiotic investigation into specific digital practices that are led by and centred on characters.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the ongoing PhD research addresses: How do gacha games systematically construct character-centric discourse through multimodal semiotic resources transmedially in a distinctive way? Character-centric discourse is

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conceptualised as the practical arrangement of multimodal semiotic resources around characters as a focal point, distinguishing gacha games from other game genres. The framework integrates Halliday's (2013) systemic functional linguistics with Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2020) multimodal analysis framework based on social semiotic principles, examining meaning-making across visual, spatial, and interactive modes through co-deployment. Drawing on multimodal social semiotics (Kress, 2010) and transmedia character studies (Kunz & Wilde, 2023), social semiotics has the potential to introduce new paradigms for game studies by offering new insights for analyzing micro-level meaning-making regarding characters from a transmedia perspective.

This study positions itself within digital discourse studies (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016). This area investigates sociolinguistic phenomena in digital media contexts. It integrates micro-level linguistic analysis with broader socio-cultural examination. With the shift from manufacture-based to service-driven economics, just like the Games as a Service (GaaS) mode, post-industrial economies have become more and more semiotized (Lash & Urry, 1993). Advertising and corporate design function as semiotic practices characterised by organisational and multimodal complexity; consequently, achieving comprehension of any specific text or genre requires examining multiple discursive components: medium, mode, situation, participants, functions, rhetorical techniques, co-texts, intertexts, and related genres (Cook, 2001). The meaning beyond language is in its situated design, production, and distribution; it is also to be located in the discourses that contextualise and constitute the multimodal text (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Social semiotics, rooted in Michael Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL), provides the analytical foundation for examining meaning-making as socially situated practice (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). This approach prioritises the dynamic negotiation of meaning through semiotic resources shaped by cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). This approach aligns with the core premise that all communication is inherently multimodal, requiring analysis beyond linguistic structures to include visual, gestural, and interactive elements (Jewitt et al., 2025).

Halliday's three metafunctions—ideational (representation of experiences), interpersonal (mediation of social relations), and textual (organisation of coherence)—form the bedrock of social semiotics. These metafunctions were adapted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) into a grammar of visual design, enabling the systematic study of multimodal texts. Social semiotics has demonstrated remarkable analytical versatility, encompassing diverse textual and media forms across multiple domains of human communication. However, analyses in multimodal studies often concentrate on a single medium at a time, rather than considering multiple media together simultaneously. For instance, El Shazly, El Falaky, and Khalil (2024) indicate the underdevelopment of multimodal social semiotic approaches to transmedia analysis by exemplifying the *Game of Thrones* TV series and *Reigns: Game of Thrones* game.

In response to the lack of research, this study adapts two previous core studies: Gunther Kress's (2010) *layout* and Elisabetta Adami's (2015) *website interactivity* model. This integration informs the analysis of both static compositional elements and interactive affordances in this study. Kress (2010) defines layout as the orchestration of semiotic resources in space, where spatial positioning (e.g., centre vs. margins) and modal combinations (e.g., text-image relations) encode ideological and functional priorities. Adami (2015) expands this framework by introducing interactive sites and signs to analyse webpage interactivity—elements that function dually as semiotic

representations and actionable nodes. By integrating these two approaches, this study develops a novel analytical approach for examining character-centric visual hierarchies, focusing on elements that prioritise characters. The analysis will employ systematic visual and interactive analysis of interface elements and social media content curations. To operationalise this integrated analytical framework, the study selects datasets that correspond to both monetisation dimensions as contexts where character-centric discourse operates.

Based on Blom's (2023a) dual revenue mode mentioned in the second paragraph, the dataset draws upon a corpus comprising *Genshin Impact's* character-foregrounding user interfaces (direct revenue dimension) and official-curated social media content (indirect revenue dimension). The former captures character-foregrounding arrangement, while the latter offers patterns from a transmedia perspective. This data selection enables representative analysis of character-centric discourse within gaming contexts and its extension across platform boundaries. Preliminary findings suggest distinct semiotic arrangements that prioritise character visibility and interactivity compared to common RPG design. This research aims to contribute to applied linguistics and game studies by developing a systematic social semiotic approach for analysing character-centric discourse in digital gaming contexts, potentially offering new insights into studies on East Asian gaming cultures and interdisciplinary understanding of transmedia.

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