

Gacha Game Collaborations and the Circulation of Affective Resources

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INTRODUCTION

Cross-media collaborations (variously described as tie-ins, collabs, or crossovers) have become increasingly routine in recent years in China's mobile gacha game sector. No longer limited to occasional promotional events, collaborations are now a regularized and expected component of many live-service game operation. Yet beyond their apparent role as marketing strategies, fan service, or supplementary content, the broader cultural and affective work performed by these collaborations remains insufficiently examined. This paper proposes a different perspective: it conceptualizes collaborations as an efficient form of affective infrastructure that enables affect to circulate across domains, be converted into different forms of value, and be reinvested over time.

Drawing on the concept of affective economies (Ahmed 2004), affect is understood here not as a private or purely subjective feeling, but as a relational and circulatory force that attaches to characters, objects, spaces, and practices. Through circulation, affect generates value beyond emotion itself, including economic, cultural, and symbolic forms. Importantly, affect is not exhausted through use, and it can be redirected, accumulated, and reproduced. This framework allows the paper to focus on what affect does as it moves across different collaborative forms.

Mobile gacha games provide an especially effective platform for affective conversion due to several structural features. First, their character-centered monetization models foster strong parasocial attachments, as high-rarity characters function simultaneously as emotional focal points and economic drivers. Second, as continuously operating live-service games, gacha titles cultivate long-term, habitual engagement rather than one-off play experiences, stabilizing affective attachment over time. Third, players are already embedded in these games as part of their everyday routines, which lowers the threshold for mobilization: collaboration events are easily noticed, readily accessed, and framed as extensions of existing play practices. Together, these features make gacha games particularly well suited to hosting collaborations that redirect and intensify affect.

The paper examines three common modes of collaboration through case studies, focusing on the distinct yet interconnected pathways through which affect is oriented toward different endpoints within a shared circulatory system.

The first mode, brand- or retail-oriented co-promotions, channels affect toward consumption. In collaborations with consumer brands such as food, apparel, or retail chains, spending is reframed as affective expression rather than rational economic choice. Characters operate as emotional mediators between players and commodities, while limited editions, commemorative value, and in-game rewards reinforce emotional motivation. Physical spaces such as themed stores and pop-up events further materialize affect, transforming consumption into participatory experience. In this process, affect becomes a resource that facilitates monetization while appearing voluntary, pleasurable, and even meaningful.

The second mode, culture- or state-oriented collaborations, redirects affect toward legitimacy and cultural governance. Through partnerships with museums, heritage initiatives, or public institutions, games mobilize feelings such as admiration, pride, and aesthetic pleasure toward culturally sanctioned symbols. Rather than requiring political persuasion or historical understanding, these collaborations operate through affective alignment as players are invited to like, feel moved by, or feel proud of cultural representations embedded in play. As a result, games gain legitimacy as acceptable and even celebrated cultural media within a social context where digital games have long been viewed as frivolous, harmful, or culturally suspect. At the same time, this form of collaboration operates as a soft mode of cultural governance that relies less on persuasion than on incorporation. With minimal risk of arousing resistance, players' emotional engagement is tacitly folded into dominant cultural frameworks.

The third mode, inter-game and IP crossovers, orients affect toward the reproduction and intensification of affect itself. By collaborating with high-prestige IPs—often well-established Japanese or Western manga, anime, or games—mobile gacha games borrow symbolic qualities such as coolness, prestige, and cultural status. These associations intensify players' emotional attachment to the hosting game, making it feel more desirable, meaningful, and worthy of sustained engagement. The affect generated through such collaborations can then be reinvested and further converted into long-term play habits, consumption, or additional forms of legitimacy. However, cases of controversies surrounding adaptations, such as player resistance to character reinterpretation, demonstrate that these processes are not fully controllable. Players retain a degree of agency in negotiating how affect is translated and whether symbolic associations are accepted or rejected.

By bringing these three modes together, the paper shows how collaborations form a cyclical system of affective circulation and reinvestment that facilitates incorporation and alignment without overt discipline or explicit persuasion. Understanding collaborations as affective infrastructure helps explain why such events have become so prevalent in China's gacha game market, and why affect itself has emerged as an increasingly central, convertible resource in contemporary digital game economies.

BIO

Fanxi Feng is a PhD candidate in the School of Chinese at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include video games, gender, affect, and Chinese popular nationalism. She is currently conducting an interview-based study on how video games mediate emotional attachment and cultural continuity among Chinese international students.

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