

Ritualizing the Parasocial: Dream-Girl Practices and Transmedia Intimacy in *Genshin Impact*

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INTRODUCTION

“Dream-girl” (yume-joshi) practices have typically been described as modes of self-insert romantic identification, in which players explicitly imagine themselves as being in intimate relationships with fictional characters (Giard 2022; Andlauer 2019). In this paper, I examine dream-girl practices such as tarot-based “dream divination” and Y/N (Your/Name) second-person fanfiction within *Genshin Impact*’s Chinese female player communities, focusing on how participants ritualize these practices to negotiate the tension between gacha’s transactional mechanics and their desire for affective reciprocity through transmedia practices.

Parasocial relationships have long been theorized in relation to celebrity and idol fandoms (Yano 2004; Song & Fox 2016), but their reconfiguration within game worlds has only recently begun to receive attention. Otome game studies demonstrate how players cultivate attachment through branching romance mechanics, character-driven choice structures, and intensive interpretive community labor (Kim 2009; Ganzon 2019; Tosca & Klastrop 2019). By contrast, non-otome dream-girl practices in gacha games such as *Genshin* pose a different set of questions: how do players navigate emotional surplus in the absence of romance routes, and how do they extend attachments into adjacent ritual and textual spaces? Recent studies of free-to-play games highlight how monetization design, affective reward cycles, and the uncertainty of randomized systems jointly structure player experience (Alha 2020; Nielsen & Grabarczyk 2019; Woods 2021). Blom’s (2023, 2025) observes that *Genshin*’s dynamic characters circulate across multiple media yet remain narratively closed, producing affective cues while limiting relational articulation. Building on this, I treat dream-girl practices as one response to this managed incompleteness, revealing how players creatively negotiate, inhabit, and ritualize the structural limits of non-romance gacha games.

This study draws on three months of digital ethnography (2025) in *Genshin*’s Chinese dream-girl communities. Guided by close reading, I analyzed 7 tarot-divination posts, 7 self-insert Y/N second-person romances, and over 100 Xiaohongshu comment threads to examine how players transform popular male characters (Zhongli, Diluc,

Kamisato Ayato) into intimate presences through ritualized interpretation that stretch beyond the game's formal interface.

My analysis proceeds in two parts. First, I examine tarot-based "dream divination" as an interpretive technology through which players navigate gacha uncertainty and render its probabilistic logics emotionally and metaphysically legible. I read these draws as compact expressions of how players recast opaque computational processes as messages and relational cues. This dynamic can be situated within existing work on user engagements with algorithmic opacity. Bucher's (2018) notion of algorithmic imaginaries describes how people construct culturally meaningful explanations for computational processes, while Seaver's (2019) frames algorithms as rhythms that invite participation rather than as detached manipulative forces. Dream-girl tarot resonates with both views, transforming algorithmic outputs into messages imagined as addressed to the player.

Second-person (Y/N) writing extends this interpretive work into narrative form and into the cadence of everyday life. Rather than producing long, communal fanfiction, many players write brief, intimate scenarios as daily micro-practices of small gestures of care that they offer to and receive from characters, subtly aligning their moods and routines with the imagined rhythms of these virtual others. In these texts, the pronoun "you" functions as a device of invocation, animating characters outside the game's narrative loops and staging a conversational proximity that the game itself never grants. In the absence of romance routes, writing becomes an affective interface through which players sustain proximity to emotionally expressive yet unreachable characters. These textual rituals echo findings in otome studies that repetition and small-scale narrative crafting can operate as practices of emotional maintenance and self-regulation (Andlauer 2018; Kim 2009), but in a context where explicit romance remains unavailable.

Taken together, tarot and Y/N writing approximate what Burton (2020) terms "remixed religion": personalized, syncretic ritual systems emerging within ostensibly secular digital cultures. These ritualized attempts work to summon presence and responsiveness from a system and from characters that, by design, cannot truly reciprocate. Rather than irrational excess, they constitute structured strategies for stabilizing attachment and producing emotional coherence under conditions of algorithmic indifference and can be read as a vernacular form of digital spirituality organized around one-to-one devotion to an algorithmically mediated other.

Finally, the paper situates these findings within broader debates on games of chance, play, and contingency. As critiques have noted, *Genshin* encourages deep emotional investment while withholding relational fulfillment, channeling attachment toward spending (Nielsen & Grabarczyk 2019; Woods 2021). Dream-girl rituals can thus be read more than compensatory practices but also as situated critiques of a system that renders affection itself profitable. By tracing these practices, this study reframes dream-girl engagement as creative negotiation with the emotional architecture of gacha games. *Genshin Impact's* combination of affective abundance and relational closure generates a fertile environment for alternative intimacies, and dream-girl rituals reveal how players extend the game sideways through divination, writing, and interpretive networks to craft recognition and emotional coherence beyond the interface.

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BIO

Siyu Song is an MA student in Asian Studies at University of British Columbia with training in world history and International Relations. Her research draws on feminist science and technology studies and critical theory to explore how contemporary East Asian digital cultures intertwine narrative, spiritual practice, and divination.