

Character Design in the Natlan and Sumeru Regions of Genshin Impact: A Visual Semiotic Analysis from a Critical Transculturalism Perspective

Sumeng Zhao

King's College London

King's College London, Strand, London, WC2R 2LS, United Kingdom

+86 18625176598

sumeng.zhao@kcl.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, culture never exists in isolation. As Kraidy (2008, p.148) notes, “Every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid.” As a composite of multiple media such as visuals, language, and mythology, video games construct a cultural hybrid “third space” mediated through electronic technology. However, Kraidy (2008) points out that this process is not egalitarian, but rather nested within the logic of global capital expansion. Cultural hybridization in games functions both as a strategy to gain recognition in international markets, evoking resonance through familiar elements and generating novelty through unfamiliar ones (Finkelstein & Rios, 2022; Zhang et al., 2025), and as a culturally asymmetrical process of reconstruction. When cultural symbols are overly simplified or alienated in recontextualization, the originating cultural communities often accuse such practices of cultural appropriation or racism, thereby highlighting the question of who has the authority to define culture.

Genshin Impact (GI) (miHoyo, 2020) exemplifies this very tension. Following the 2024 release of the Sumeru and Natlan regions, the game sparked controversies over whitewashing of skin tones and the use of colonial symbols (Bevan, 2024; Lima, 2024; Yonezawa, 2024), with related petitions on Change.org garnering over 130,000 signatures (Change.org, 2024). This study will employ Barthes’ three-level semiotic approach to deconstruct the visual design of characters from Sumeru and Natlan, and, drawing on critical intercultural theory, explore how *GI* negotiates differences and reconstructs meaning amid cultural hybridization and global circulation.

At the operational level, this study adopts Roland Barthes’ visual semiotics to deconstruct and analyze the design of 24 playable characters from the Sumeru and Natlan regions. By collecting character illustrations, 3D models, and cutscenes, a database of four categories of visual signs was established: bodily signs, clothing signs, accessory signs, and action signs. The analysis is based on Barthes’ three-tiered model, encompassing the denotative, connotative, and mythic levels, ultimately revealing the appropriation of cultural symbols and their ideological functions in visual reconstruction.

At the denotative level, this study distinguishes three types of signs: original signs (directly drawn from cultural sources), hybrid signs (fusing multiple cultures), and fictional signs (with no clear cultural origin). At the connotative level, it analyzes semantic transformations and the meaning shifts that occur when signs are detached from their social context. At the mythic level, a critical transcultural perspective is applied. Through this analytical process, the study aims to reveal the underlying logic and semiotic reconstruction employed in *GI*'s character designs for the "Nation of War" (Natlan) and the "Nation of Wisdom" (Sumeru), as well as to explore how broader social contexts, power discourses, and ideologies profoundly shape the game's representation of foreign cultures.

Based on the semiotic analysis, this study presents three key findings. **1. The Collage Logic and Aesthetic Inertia of ACG Style:** *GI* is heavily influenced by ACG aesthetics, exhibiting a distinctly Japanese anime-style visual design. Its use of cultural elements from Natlan and Sumeru reflects a logicless collage characteristic of ACG aesthetics (Napier, 2005). Approximately 17% of the collected signs do not originate from the prototype cultures but are drawn from German military uniforms, Nordic elf attire, and knight costumes, demonstrating the long-standing de-territorialized aesthetic inertia of ACG culture. However, the integration of marginal cultures simultaneously introduces new cultural resources into the ACG system. **2. The Trap of Technological Utopianism and Intentional Hybridity:** Within *GI*'s cultural system, the development paths of other nations often have real-world prototypes. For instance, Fontaine's use of steam machinery reflects legal-rational principles corresponding to historical France. In contrast, Natlan's design replaces the unique techniques of its prototype culture with motorcycles, pixel art, and electronic dance, exemplifying the "intentional hybridity" described by Kraidy (2008). Although this technological reinterpretation aims to challenge the bias that "original" equals "backward," it falls into a logic of technological utopianism, treating modern industrialization as the sole path to progress while overlooking the value of local knowledge, such as shamanic rituals and herbal medicine. It presupposes that the prosperity and strength of Natlan's prototype nation must be expressed through modern industrial civilization, reflecting a limited imagination regarding social flourishing and civilizational evolution. **3. The Spatial Compression of Civilizations:** In *GI*'s world, nations such as Liyue, Inazuma, and Fontaine correspond to China, Japan, and France, respectively, and possess clear cultural anchors. In contrast, Sumeru and Natlan fuse elements from the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, and Africa, forming a collage-like cultural complex. While this multicultural integration enhances visual diversity, it diminishes cultural depth and historical context (de Wildt & Aupers, 2021). From a critical intercultural perspective, this design reflects an imbalance in cultural representation: dominant cultures are depicted in detail, while marginalized cultures are treated as symbolic, and colonial and religious conflicts are erased, leaving a depoliticized surface-level diversity.

BIO

Sumeng Zhao completed her undergraduate studies in Journalism at Nanjing Normal University and is currently pursuing a master's degree at the Department of Culture, Media & Creative Industries, King's College London. Her research interests focus on intercultural studies, the game industry, critical theory, and semiotics.

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