

Gacha Beyond the Game: The Precarious Playbour Sustaining *Ensemble Stars!!*

Alyce Wu

Santa Clara University
500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053
(425) 499-4083
awu2@scu.edu

Trisha Nguyen, Katherine Parent, Emily Ramos

Santa Clara University
500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA 95053
(669) 300-5661
tnguyen14.pro@gmail.com, kparent@scu.edu, eramos@scu.edu

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INTRODUCTION

Transnational media flows are no longer dominated by a Western-centered hierarchy (Crane 2016; Fuchs 2010; Waisbord & Mellado 2014), as observable in how global audiences interact with games. In this context, gacha games combine strong affective player investment (Woods 2022) and a constant stream of periodically released content (Dubois 2021) to encourage long-term engagement. Because of this, players must continuously interpret and navigate an ever-growing amount of information, much of which remains fragmented across or buried within the game itself. These conditions make fans of gacha games particularly dependent on fan-organized paratextual materials beyond the game – even more so in transnational contexts – positioning resources created through “playbour” (Kücklich 2005) as critical components of the gaming experience (Consalvo 2017).

This abstract sets up a case study on transnational playbour by analyzing the relationship dynamic between corporate actors and English-speaking fans of long-running gacha-based Japanese franchise *Ensemble Stars!!* (*Enstars*). Originally launched in 2015 as *Ensemble Stars!* (Cacalia Studio 2015), the mobile game quickly hit 1.5 million downloads within its first year of release (Aetas Inc 2016). In 2020, the franchise rebranded as *Ensemble Stars!!* (Cacalia Studio 2019), dividing the game into two separate apps that would move forward releasing the same post-rebrand content: *Basic*, maintaining original gameplay and all pre-rebrand content, and *Music*, a rhythm game omitting pre-rebrand content. Together, they reached 10 million downloads by 2022 (Happy Elements K.K 2022), surpassing over 19 million downloads by October 2024 (@ensemble_stars 2024).

Despite this success, no English version of the game existed until the June 2022 release of *Ensemble Stars!! Music* (@enstarsmusic_EN 2022). Yet long prior to its release, *Enstars* developed a substantial English-speaking fanbase supported through various fan-made resources facilitating accessibility to English speakers. Notably, *The*

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Unofficial Ensemble Stars!! English Wiki (the Wiki) evolved into a scaffolding resource for English-speaking fans, hosting fan-translated content, fan-organized game guides, and varied forms of community activity.

Tensions between the fanbase's playbour-sustained resource networks and corporate oversight were sparked in August 2021 when Happy Elements K.K., the parent company of *Enstars*, made contact with *the Wiki* for the first time to issue a sudden copyright notice. This notice required all story translations be removed from *the Wiki* in anticipation for the yet-to-be-revealed official English localization of *Ensemble Stars!! Music* (@enstarsEng 2021). Paired with the ongoing lack of localization for *Basic* – and by consequence pre-rebrand content – this removal created a significant void in narrative material previously accessible through fan-translations on *the Wiki*, leaving frustration amongst long-term English-speaking fans and sparking initial inquiry for this case study. Added discourse surfaced in January 2025 with the introduction of new character Ibuki Taki, an Okinawan-American character, into AKATSUKI, a unit defined by its three members and traditional Japanese cultural theming (@ensemble_stars 2025a). The change disrupted longstanding character dynamics and raised concerns about cultural representation within the narrative, a conversation that became widespread within the English-speaking community. These concerns challenged the attachments of long-term fans, particularly as it occurred near the franchise's 10-year anniversary (@ensemble_stars 2025b).

Taken together, these events underscore ongoing friction between fan participation and corporate control in transnational media engagement (Jenkins et al. 2013; Johnson 2007), revealing fractures in authority as fans contest the treatment of community-generated paratexts (Consalvo 2017). In this study, we examine how fan and corporate forces co-construct the international existence of *Enstars*, asking:

- What roles do fan labor and informal networks play in shaping engagement dynamics within transnational fandoms?
- How do fan-generated paratexts and infrastructures mediate the global accessibility and spread of *Ensemble Stars!!*, particularly for English-speaking audiences?
- How do interactions between fandom communities and corporate activity impact brand loyalty and perceived boundaries between fandom and franchise?

Building on foundations of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2013), gaming paratexts (Consalvo 2007, 2017), fan translations (O'Hagan 2008, 2009), and fantagonism (Johnson, 2007), we conducted an online ethnography (Dawson, 2019a, 2019b; Hine, 2015a, 2015b) to analyze how fan-created resources and paratexts shape a franchise's accessibility and how corporate interventions may destabilize those efforts. By tracing the perceived relationships between fans and the game's parent company within the English-speaking *Enstars* community, we examine the interplay of corporate-driven action and fan-driven grassroots efforts, highlighting how conflicts over authority in fandom spaces act to reshape community structures, brand loyalty, and long-term sustainability of international fandoms.

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BIO

My name is Alyce Wu, and I am an undergraduate student studying at Santa Clara University. While I have always loved playing gacha games and observing each game's respective fandom communities online, this submission represents a significant step: it is not only my first paper as first author, but also a passion project undertaken alongside my peers. As many of the authors and I are fans ourselves, we were motivated to formally study the English-speaking *Ensemble Stars* community. We hope this paper illuminates the rich history of this dedicated fandom!

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