

# Owning the Unownable: Legal and Social Perceptions of Virtual Property in *Genshin Impact*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020) has evolved into a global cultural phenomenon, attracting millions of players and fostering a sophisticated virtual economy driven by gacha mechanics. Players invest substantial time, money, and emotional energy in acquiring in-game characters, weapons, and cosmetic items. However, the game's End-User License Agreement (EULA) explicitly negates any ownership rights over these assets, granting users merely a revocable license. This contradiction—between players' emotional and economic investment in virtual assets and the legal non-ownership stipulated by EULAs—exemplifies the growing tension between platform governance and player autonomy in virtual spaces. Against this backdrop, this study explores a core research question: How do *Genshin Impact* players perceive ownership of their in-game assets within the legal framework of EULAs?

To address this question, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach. Theoretically, the study draws on the psychological ownership framework developed by Pierce, Kostova, and Dirks, which was originally formulated for organizational contexts<sup>1</sup>. Crucially, the theory is not treated as directly transferable to virtual gaming environments. Instead, it is adapted to focus on three core dimensions: feelings of possession (“this is mine”), identity extension, and perceived control. This adaptation is justified by EULA game spaces' unique legal constraints: players lack core property rights, making legal ownership irrelevant. Instead, the three dimensions capture use-, investment- and identity-based “ownership-like experiences”—a viable basis for studying non-ownable virtual assets.

Empirically, the study relies on two primary data sources: an online survey (N=300) and twenty semi-structured interviews with players from China, the EU, and America. The three dimensions of psychological ownership guided the deductive coding of interview data, while inductive coding was employed to capture platform-specific practices and narratives not covered by the original organizational framework. This dual coding strategy ensured that the analysis both adhered to theoretical anchors and remained responsive to the unique context of *Genshin Impact*.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierce, J. L., Kostova, T., & Dirks, K. T. (2001). Toward a Theory of Psychological Ownership in Organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 298–310.

Complementing the empirical research, a comparative doctrinal analysis was conducted. The analysis revealed a consistent pattern of contractual dominance by the developer: all EULA versions retain absolute authority to modify or delete player assets, regardless of the player's monetary investment<sup>2</sup>. Conflict between players' psychological ownership and the legal reality of non-ownership aligns with Cifrino's concept of the "contractual governance" of virtual worlds, wherein user relationships are defined entirely by adhesion contracts rather than property or consumer protection law<sup>3</sup>.

By situating Genshin Impact within global regulatory contexts, this paper contributes to ongoing debates about the legal nature of virtual property and its social implications. While copyright law and contract doctrine currently support total developer control, emerging scholarship suggests the need for hybrid approaches recognizing limited user rights or consumer interests<sup>4</sup>. Such recognition would better reflect the real-world investment of time, labor, and capital that players contribute to digital worlds. Recognizing the interplay between emotional attachment, economic value, and legal status may also inform policymaking, particularly as regulators in jurisdictions such as South Korea and the EU explore digital consumer protections.

The study is not without limitations. Its sample is not statistically representative, as it is shaped by self-selection and online recruitment methods. Nevertheless, the findings offer valuable qualitative insight into how legally non-ownable digital goods acquire social and emotional meaning—a phenomenon that remains understudied in legal and media scholarship.

Ultimately, Genshin Impact illustrates that virtual property exists at the intersection of code, contract, and culture. Legal systems must evolve to address the affective realities of ownership in online environments, where the boundaries between play and property are increasingly indistinct.

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<sup>2</sup> Li, C., & Joo, Y. J. (2023). The Mediating Effect of Psychological Ownership on the Relationship between Value Co-creation and the In-App Purchasing Intention of Mobile Games Players. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(3), 205.

<sup>3</sup>Cifrino, C. J. (2014). Virtual Property, Virtual Rights: Why Contract Law, Not Property Law, Must Be the Governing Paradigm in the Law of Virtual Worlds. *Boston College Law Review*, 55(3), 1045–1092.

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**BIO**

I am a law student with a strong research interest in games, virtual economies, and the legal frameworks that shape player experiences. I am also involved in research on AI and intellectual property.