

Gacha Game Collaborations and the Circulation of Affective Value

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Cross-media collaborations (variously described as tie-ins, collabs, or crossovers) have become increasingly routine in China's mobile gacha game sector. Games now frequently collaborate not only with anime and other game franchises, but also with food brands, retail chains, museums, heritage projects, and public institutions. Rather than treating these collaborations simply as marketing strategies, fan service, or supplementary content, this paper argues that they perform a broader cultural and affective function. I propose that collaborations in China's gacha game ecosystem operate as a form of affective infrastructure through which emotions circulate across domains and are converted into different forms of value.

The paper draws on Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies, which understands affect not as something residing inside individuals, but as something that gains force and produces effects through circulation. Affect attaches to characters, commodities, spaces, institutions, and practices, and through this movement it generates economic, cultural, and symbolic value. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing collaborations because such events depend precisely on the movement and redirection of existing emotional attachments.

Three common modes of collaboration in mainland China are examined through case studies and close readings of official promotional materials, event narratives, character design, and player discussions on social media. The analysis focuses on how collaborations organize affective circulation toward different endpoints.

The first mode, brand- or retail-oriented co-promotions, channels affect toward consumption. In collaborations with food brands, apparel companies, or retail chains, players encounter familiar characters attached to commodities, themed spaces, and limited-edition merchandise. I use the 2024 collaboration between the romance game *Love and Deepspace* and KFC China as a representative example to show how consumption is transformed into something pleasurable, meaningful, and socially performative through collaborative design.

The second mode, culture- or state-oriented collaborations, redirects affect toward legitimacy and cultural governance. The analysis is based on a close reading of the mechanisms and materials in *Genshin Impact*'s 2023 collaboration with the Sanxingdui Museum in Sichuan Province. This collaboration exemplifies how game worldbuilding, popular characters, themed rewards, and online-offline participation are mobilized together within a coordinated affective framework. Such collaborations do not require

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players to engage with explicit political messages or detailed historical knowledge. Instead, through aesthetic design, character-centered storytelling, and affective alignment, players are invited to feel admiration, pleasure, and pride toward officially sanctioned cultural symbols. This process produces a reciprocal relationship in which games gain symbolic legitimacy while collaborative institutions extend their cultural influence through forms of affective participation embedded in popular digital media.

The third mode, inter-game and IP crossovers, channels affect back into the hosting game itself. The example used here is *Reverse: 1999's 2025* collaboration with the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. Through a major in-game update, iconic *Assassin's Creed* characters such as Ezio and Kassandra were introduced as playable gacha characters alongside a dedicated crossover storyline. Crossovers bring together fan attachments, memories, and symbolic associations from previously separate franchises, making the hosting game feel more attractive, meaningful, and worthy of long-term engagement. In this way, collaborations do not simply mobilize existing attachment, but extend its lifespan and convertibility across contexts. At the same time, this event triggered a player backlash surrounding the perceived "weakening" of a female character design, which demonstrates that these processes are not fully controllable by companies. In collaborative events, players retain a degree of agency in determining whether symbolic associations are accepted, negotiated, or rejected.

By bringing these three modes together, the paper argues that collaborations in China's gacha game industry form a broader system of affective circulation and reinvestment. While the analysis focuses specifically on the Chinese gacha game market, the framework proposed here may also offer useful insights for understanding collaborative events in other media and cultural contexts. Collaborations significantly expand the scope and mobility of affect generated within games, allowing it to travel across commercial, cultural, and institutional domains while remaining tied to pleasurable and seemingly voluntary forms of participation. Understanding collaborations as affective infrastructure therefore helps explain both the prevalence of collaborative events in contemporary gacha games and the growing centrality of affect itself as a convertible resource within digital game economies.

The paper focuses specifically on mobile gacha games because they provide especially effective conditions for affective circulation. First, their character-centered monetization systems encourage strong parasocial attachment, as desirable characters function simultaneously as emotional focal points and monetized commodities. Second, as live-service games structured around continual updates and limited-time events, gacha games cultivate long-term habitual engagement rather than one-off play experiences. Third, collaboration events are integrated into players' everyday gaming routines and therefore encounter relatively low thresholds of participation. In this sense, gacha collaborations differ from many traditional media tie-ins because they are embedded within ongoing affective systems that continuously sustain, intensify, and redirect player attachment.

This study contributes to discussions of affect, digital capitalism, and game culture by examining how contemporary Chinese gacha games intersect simultaneously with consumer capitalism, platformized entertainment, and state-endorsed cultural politics. In this sense, the paper offers an affect-based lens through which to understand not only China's gacha game industry, but also the broader cultural politics shaping contemporary digital play.

Keywords

gacha games, mobile games, cross-media collaboration, affect, digital capitalism

REFERENCES

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