

No Room in the Infinite for the Masculine and Queer: How do dress-up pleasures in Infinity Nikki collide with player desire and queer/masculine fashion?

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Keywords

Fashion, aesthetics, dress-up, masculinity, queer, Infinity Nikki, pink game, Chinese Game, Gacha

ABSTRACT

Much has been made in recent years of the success found in the global market by Asian games developed outside of Japan. Many of these are successful live service games with gacha elements such as *Genshin Impact*, *Goddess of Victory: Nikke*, or *Honkai: Star Rail*. Others are considered successful studio debuts into traditional big-budget single-player action games such as *Black Myth: Wukong* or *Stellar Blade*. Yet, what has gone somewhat underreported in this new-wave of Asian-developed games, particularly from China, is the success and appeal of the game *Infinity Nikki*, the latest in the Nikki series of dress-up games. *Infinity Nikki* follows the journey of Nikki, a young and talented stylist, and her friend, the humanoid cat Momo, into the utopian fantasy world of Miraland. An open world action game with extensive dress-up customisation, *Infinity Nikki* is also a gacha game, with the prizes being different pieces of clothing and accessories. The game is known for its attention to detail in outfits which facilitate a highly flexible mix-and-match wardrobe to support player-driven fashion. Compared to criticisms of fashion options in other games (Tran, 2019), *Infinity Nikki* is considered, aesthetically, very strong.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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The lack of academic discussion of *Infinity Nikki* can partially be explained by the stigma and oversight that 'pink games' aimed at a primarily female audience traditionally face (Chess, 2017; Van Reijmersdal, *et al.*, 2013). What little discussion there is is provided by a handful of authors looking at older *Nikki* games in various contexts (Fang, *et al.*, 2023; Purnami and Agus, 2020) with only some examining the content and audience experience of pleasure within them (Chen, 2022; Ki, 2022).

One notable departure from other gacha games in which the avatar's body is foregrounded, is the lack of explicit sexualisation of Nikki herself. Compared to games that rely heavily on titillation via their characters' sex appeal such as *Zenless Zone Zero*, *Goddess of Victory: Nikke*, *Blue Archive*, or *Azur Lane*. Likewise, Nikki's adventure is highly compassionate and avoids relying heavily on combat for its core loop making use of a wide variety of 'ability outfits' to solve problems or simply to enjoy fashion. Nikki and Momo help the various residents of Miraland through the epic and the mundane all while bringing positivity and optimism to the world.

While dressing up is an appeal of the game, pleasures that Nikki's fashion presents are aesthetically limited to mostly traditionally feminine outfits. There is somewhat of a 'misappearance' (to borrow Krzywinska's (2012) term) of the masculine and the queer in *Infinity Nikki*. Overwhelmingly, Nikki's outfits skew towards cute, girly-girl costumes, comfort-focused feminine fashion, or elaborate, flouncy ballgowns. Outfits approaching more modern, gender-neutral, androgynous, or even masculine styles are in the minority or are conspicuously absent from a game which presents the pleasure of fashion as stemming from its infinite variety. The consideration of styles associated with, but not limited to, butch (Minai, 2022), tomboys, androgyny, ouji fashion, drag kings, styles inspired by the Takarazuka revue, or the gender inversion present in British pantomime (e.g., the principal boy) are largely absent. Despite this lack of explicit support from the developer, the game's community do often try to create masculine or boyish outfits using the tools available to them as well as interpreting queer themes and appeals in the game's broader narrative.

Despite the lack of sexualisation associated with a heteronormative male gaze, Nikki's outfit classification system uses five adjectives to describe clothing styles, sorting them into elegant (優雅), cool (帥氣), sweet (甜美), fresh (清新), and sexy (性感). The style 'sexy' or '性感/ *xìng gǎn*' in Chinese, suggests a subjective viewer who might consider Nikki's outfits to have a dimension related, even if only implicitly, to sexuality. However, for and to whom Nikki is gendered via a sexual identity, made object of a gaze, or 'made sexy' is ripe for discussion. Nikki herself could be identified as what Chess (2017) refers to as 'the feminine ideal: white [passing], middle class, heterosexual, cisgendered, and abled'. As a hybrid of authored character and avatar for player expression, Nikki only has one slim body type and three skin tone options, and the full wardrobe, as we argue, is also somewhat limited. However, her actions as a player character are replete with agency. Nikki deposes corrupt governments and brokers peace; cures comas and solves mysteries. Yet, Nikki is often restricted to conventional (though admittedly beautiful) feminine fashion. Nikki as masculine or queer is radical.

Exploring this issue necessitates a discussion of Chinese cultural content restrictions around gender and sexuality, what audiences of Nikki (and games generally) are perceived to want with respect to playing fashion, and what the role of more radical fashion pleasures holds in games, particularly dress-up games. Although many of Nikki's players are likely women, this paper aims to consider players who may not fit

this norm as well, in terms of their desires and motivations to dress up. This paper will explore a multifaceted case study analysis that uses the cultural understanding of fashion's relationship to gender as a lens to perform a textual analysis of Nikki's clothing options, monetisation system, and frame narrative to investigate what pleasures might be absent from *Infinity Nikki's* infinite 'sea of stars'.

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