

Player plans, RNGesus laughs: Dark Patterns and Commodification of Play in Gacha Games

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary gaming ecosystem has seen a pronounced shift from traditional retail revenue in favour of free-to-play models which rely heavily on microtransactions. This emerging trend suggests a gaming landscape where player agency is compromised by intentional design tactics which transform the virtual realm into a controlled environment for monetization through the incorporation of deceptive design elements, or ‘dark patterns’.

Coined by Harry Brignull in 2010¹, dark patterns – in the context of videogames - are essentially understood as “something that is deliberately added to a game to cause an unwanted negative experience for the player with a positive outcome for the game developer.”²

The recent transition from ‘game as a product’ to ‘game as a service’ has sparked debates that address the range of such deceptive design practices that could be potentially woven within the warp and weft of user interface and gameplay mechanics (Yi 2024).

This concern, however, is further amplified in systems of chance and randomized rewards with established risk-based paradigms that are specifically designed to manoeuvre player decisions and exploit cognitive biases.

With roots in the late 20th century, the term ‘gacha’ is derived from Japanese ‘gachapon’ capsule vending machines and refers to a system of randomized item distribution (Marie 2024). While *MapleStory* (Wizet) first adapted this concept for the digital world in 2003 (Fujihara and Shibuya 2020), the mechanic subsequently became a staple in titles such as *Dragon Collection* (Konami 2010), *Fate/Grand Order* (DelightWorks 2015), and *Fire Emblem Heroes* (Intelligent Systems 2017). Following the explosive reception of *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020), today gacha has cemented itself among one of the most popular genres in gaming economy.

Despite its vibrant (and loyal) fan community that is manifest in an extensive array of literary, critical, and artistic reinventions of respective gacha play, the pronounced psycho-manipulative attributes associated with digital gacha narratives today have understandably drawn substantial scrutiny on questions connected to ethical gaming, gambling, addiction, microtransactions, and age restrictions, among others (Zendle and Cairns 2018).

At its core, gacha gameplay is a currency exchange model which relies on players accumulating and ‘pulling’ for digital assets by spending premium currencies to acquire characters, skins, and weapons, among other things. The more time and resources players dedicate to the game, the better the digital outturn. Each unlock further grants access to specific character backgrounds, stories, quests, and ‘lore drops’. The narrative primarily follows a time-bound event-driven gameplay which

urges players to complete quests in a given timeframe in order to collect optimal rewards. ‘Grinding’ is encouraged, daily check-ins are rewarded, and inviting more players to join the game is incentivised.

Clearly, gacha games constitute a unique and critical frontier for understanding the nuances in dark pattern designs. By extending analysis beyond conventional emphasis on 2D interface layouts and corresponding non-diegetic elements, examining such complex and coercive ecosystems can not only bring attention to unassessed design strategies in ergodic digital spaces but also inform ongoing conversations on player consumption practices and digital regulation.

Accordingly, with focus on popular miHoYo titles, namely *Genshin Impact* (2020), *Honkai: Star Rail* (2023), and *Zenless Zone Zero* (2024), this inquiry aims to understand the nature and role of dark patterns in system design, and subsequent consumer practices in gacha-based videogames. By analyzing the many ways in which miHoYo influences player behaviour and decision-making across temporal, monetary, social, psychological as well as privacy design parameters (Zagal et al. 2013; Bösch et al. 2016), this inquiry examines how gacha systems manage to dictate the domain of digital play beyond standard gameplay boundaries.

BIO

Amitoj Kaur Chandi holds a PhD in Humanities and Social Sciences from Indian Institute of Science Education and Research Mohali. A researcher, illustrator, and an avid videogamer, Amitoj incorporates a research-oriented practice using sequential art to comically critique and contextualize fan practices associated with digital play.

Amitoj’s research on Punjabi literary periodicals has been published as a chapter titled “Print, Publications, and Punjabi Literary Periodicals” in *Routledge Handbook of Punjab Studies* (2026).

Literary historiographical critique and digital humanities are among Amitoj’s main research interests.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

¹ Sellam, “What Are Dark Patterns?”

² DarkPattern.games, “Helping You Find Healthy Mobile Games.”

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