Against All Odds: Desire and Monetisation in Japanese Mobile Games

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ABSTRACT

While Western games grapple with the consequences of 'loot box' monetisation, Japanese games -- particularly mobile games -- have long relied on a similar 'gacha' mechanic to make money. In this model, players can spend real or in-game currency for a chance at 'rolling' a certain character from a randomised pool. Characters are desirable not only for their utility, but the parasocial relationship they share with the player. Acquiring a certain character from gacha marks this relationship as reciprocal: a successful roll proves their love, but if a player fails, they must either accept their loss or keep spending.

Keywords

desire, fan culture, gambling, mobile games, monetisation, parasocial relationships

INTRODUCTION

The most profitable Japanese mobile games have grossed billions worldwide in the last few years, primarily via 'gacha' systems (Clayton 2018). These function similarly to 'loot boxes': gambling systems where the player wins virtual prizes with no real-world value (Klepek 2017). The key difference between Japanese gacha and Western loot boxes is that where most Western games offer cosmetic items as prizes, gacha offers characters, their in-game function dependent on a game's genre but their appeal universally based on the player's desire for them as fictional people; this can be seen in titles such as *Granblue Fantasy* (Cygames 2014), *Ensemble Stars!* (Happy Elements K.K 2015), and this paper's primary focus, *Fate/Grand Order* (Delightworks 2015).

Gaining new characters requires spending in-game currency, either earned slowly through gameplay, or quickly through paying real money. The player can trade this currency for a 'roll' or a 'pull' -- a random character or characters -- with the required currency and the odds of pulling a rare character varying depending on the game. For instance, the

likelihood of pulling a specific *Grand Order* character of the highest rarity is 0.7% at best, and theoretically requires USD $458.60 worth of in-game currency to reliably acquire; in practice, a recent survey of almost a thousand Japanese *Grand Order* players revealed that 20% spent this much to obtain a single character, and even then, a third were unsuccessful (Morrissy 2019). These odds and prices are roughly reflective of the gacha genre as a whole.

Gacha mechanics shape not only the business models of these games, but their gameplay and the culture around them (Giddings and Harvey 2018, 648). As a form of "invest/express" games, common to mobile platforms, gacha games operate on a simple metric: invest time and energy, and reap the rewards of gameplay (Chess 2018, 107). These rewards allow for the customisation of the player's resources, either cosmetically or in terms of gameplay (Harvey 2018, 654). In the case of gacha games, player expression is facilitated by in-game 'friend systems' and metatextual social media communities. Because it is impossible to invest enough resources to maximise every character, players must prioritise among an expansive cast; *Grand Order* allows the player to publicly display nine characters from a cast of over two hundred, and new characters are added every few weeks. Which nine the player chooses has consequences both socially, determining their perception within its fan community (Duffett 2013, 156), and personally, determining the gameplay they experience as they try to fully strengthen their characters.

In this way, desire for a character in a gacha game is not strictly experienced as an absence. Although desire in gacha games may initially be experienced as a lack which needs to be filled (Gortyn 2008, 8), this shifts upon initially acquiring the player's object of desire. From thereon out, desire is both experienced and performed as fundamentally excessive, as a "series of intensities" (Grosz 1995, 287) to be acted upon. As something "in excess of the organism" (Belsey 1994, 34), it cannot be expressed and navigated through language, but only through public pursuit and performance.

A number of factors can draw players to a particular character in a gacha game, many of which are premised on intertextuality, as these games exist within the "anime media mix" (Steinberg 2012, ix) of transmedia and merchandising. Thus, a number of games, including *Love Live! School Idol Festival* (KLabgames 2013) and *Fire Emblem Heroes* (Intelligent Systems 2017), presume player investment in an existing franchise. *Grand Order* bases its characters off famous mythical or historical figures, such as King Arthur and Vlad Dracula, whom players are likely to already have parasocial connections to. Voice acting is also common in gacha games, and both *Grand Order* and *Granblue Fantasy* (among others) use famous Japanese voice actors as an incentive to roll for certain characters. Lastly, a character may be desirable because of their gameplay utility – or, simply for aesthetic reasons. These games thus rely on the monetisation of players forming parasocial relationship with their characters.

By constructing gameplay around performance of excessive parasocial desire for a character to a community, and making that performance largely contingent on spending real money, gacha games have become a particularly effective variant on the 'loot box' strategy of monetisation. Their last, greatest trick is arguably the fact that unlike other

forms of gambling they personify the odds (Veblen 1967, 110), making your success at pulling a desired character representative of that character's opinion toward you. Gacha communities traditionally refer to the acquisition of a desired character as them 'coming home': the character has acknowledged the player's desire and realised where they belong. Against all odds, the parasocial relationship has become reciprocal -- in more than one sense, it's *Fate*. Therefore, the player who does not pull their desired character must keep spending; because worse than being proven unlucky in gambling, they have been proven unlucky in love.

BIO

Gawain Lucian Lax is a recent Honours graduate from the University of Melbourne in Screen and Cultural Studies. His thesis work focused on desire and agency in Japanese dating-simulation games, *otome* games (featuring female protagonists and male leads) in particular, and the way they are ludically constructed to encourage experimentation with desire. His research interests include dating-sim games more broadly, fan studies, Japanese popular media, and the intersection of gender, desire, and affect in games.

Madeleine Mackenzie is an independent narrative game developer, and a Masters graduate from the University of Auckland in Film, Television and Media Studies. Their Masters research was focused on how cultures and communities are approximated in single-player game worlds. Their research interests include worlds and spaces in games, relationships between the player and game characters, player embodiment, and cultural representation in games.

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