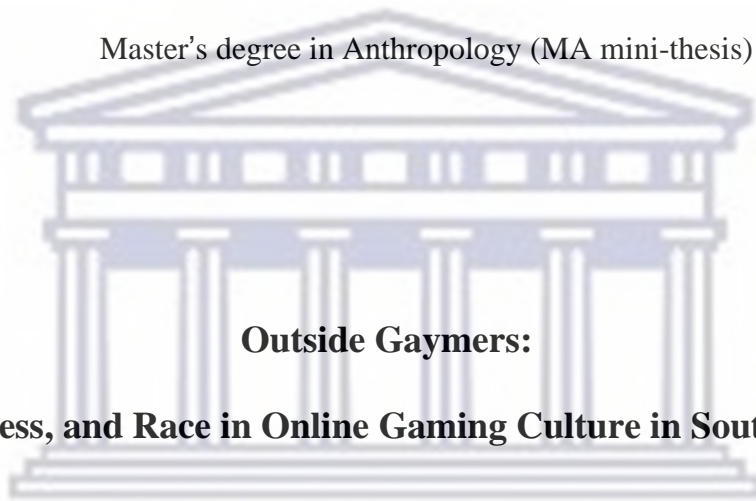


Department of Anthropology

University of the Western Cape

Master's degree in Anthropology (MA mini-thesis)



**Outside Gaymers:**

**Queerness, and Race in Online Gaming Culture in South Africa**

Aneesah Hoosain

3721055

UNIVERSITY *of the*  
WESTERN CAPE

Supervisor: Dr. Jung Ran Annachiara Forte

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## **Abstract**

This research project looks at how virtual worlds can provide a space for queer people of colour to experiment with their identities, sexualities and gender. It therefore focuses on how South African queer youth make use of virtual spaces to explore their identities and gender expressions. I ask what experimentation and expression look like in online worlds with their assumed endless potentiality. I examine how gender is expressed and experimented within virtual gaming spaces that are simultaneously considered "safe" and where cyberviolence against marginalised groups is nonetheless present. As the virtual worlds are typically navigated through avatars, this research looks at how identities are rooted in users' embodied experiences as well as in their offline practices. It explores the roles that gamers' physical and digital bodies play in the construction of virtual subjectivities and identity performances. The main participants to this study are South African, non-white youngsters who identify as queer, between the ages of 18 to 26, with particular focus on Cape Town. The online spaces that are studied are those associated with gaming, specifically the action roleplaying game (ARPG) Genshin Impact. In-game experiences are investigated, as well as gamer experiences on social networking sites connected with the Genshin Impact community, such as the gaming forums on Reddit and Discord. Participant observation in gaming environments, conversations, online chats, and face-to-face interviews give valuable insight into gamers' experiences, their alternative gender representations, creativity and gender expression.

## **Keywords:**

Gender, online gaming, Genshin Impact, virtual spaces, queer identity, gender representations, Cape Town, virtual ethnography, race and racism, transgressive play, queer imagination.

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## Introduction

As technological developments around the world become the subject of scholarly interest, research regarding the involvement of Africa and Africans tends to be ignored or downplayed (Fuchs and Horak, 2008). One of the reasons argued for this erasure is the digital divide. The digital divide refers to the gap existing between those who have affordable access and support to effectively engage online and those who do not; this includes both the technologies required, such as computers or mobile phones, and the access to internet or data connectivity (Siefer, 2021). A study conducted in 2020 found that 28% of people living in Sub-Saharan Africa had full access to the internet, 19% had no access at all, and 53% lived in areas with internet connectivity however they do not utilise internet services (Munga, 2022). Despite 70% of South Africans having access to the internet, only 45,3% of the population are active internet users while 26% are active social media users (Cowling, 2024). The South Africans who do have internet access tend to use it quite avidly, as it was found that the average hours spent online in one day was 9.5 (AfricaNews, 2024).

This digital divide is well represented within the gaming industry; while video games are a part of a global industry, both the production and consumption of games are centred mostly within North America and Japan. When it comes to the global video game market, the USA is firmly in the lead with US\$11.7 billion being added to the U.S. gross domestic profit and generating US\$30.4 billion in revenue. The worldwide gaming industry has also experienced similar growth, with profits being around US\$108.9 billion (Newzoo, 2016). Of this amount, North America and the Asian Pacific region are expected to produce around 71.8% of the revenue and Africa, Europe, and the Middle East are expected to return US\$26.2 billion. One of the video gaming markets that has been seeing a strong rise in recent years has been mobile gaming, in 2017 mobile gaming accounted for 42% of the revenue made by the gaming industry (ESA. 2016).

In Africa in particular, the rise of mobile gaming and casual gaming has been associated with the widespread use of mobile phones as well as the growth of smartphone ownership (Bayeck, 2017). A report in 2013 by the company Ericsson found that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 38% of mobile users' weekly usage of their phones was dedicated to playing games. The African countries at the forefront of this gaming boom are Ghana, Tanzania, Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, with Kenya's video game market estimated to have increased from US\$63 million in 2017 to US\$118 million in 2022 (Cooper, 2018). The

increased accessibility of mobile phones has also enabled the development of an emergent gaming industry in Africa. Gaming studios on the continent, particularly in Nigeria and Cameroon, have created and adapted games for their home audiences by including folklore familiar to players within the games' storylines or "African" visual designs (Bayeck, 2017).

A study done by Newzoo found that 26.5 million people in South Africa played video games in 2023, roughly 44% of the nation's population, showing a growth of 5.4% since 2020. This accounts for 0.14% of the \$184 billion spent worldwide. Of this revenue, 91% was spent on mobile games, 5% was spent on the PC market and the console market only contributed 4% to this. Of these video game players 85% have played a mobile game within the past six months, while only 15% have played a console title (Batchelor, 2024). According to the report, South Africa is home to 26.5 million gamers. South Africans spend an average of \$25.50 (R480) on games per year which again, aligns with the mobile gaming demographic. Most of this spend is through in-game purchases across mobile games including *Fortnite* (Cocomello, 2024). The largest group, 47%, of gamers in South Africa falls into the 14-28 age group (Ngwenya, 2024).

Discussions around the emergence and prevalence of new media types tend to ignore the Global South, with Africa in particular not receiving much focus (Ephraim, 2013). The limited literature that exists regarding social media and technology in Africa has focused primarily on how these new media forms have been used as tools for activism (Olasina, 2018). Other studies have also focused on new media and accessibility, or how these technologies can be used negatively (Penix-Tadsen, 2019). Issues of race and gender have featured prominently in academic and popular media discussions, while within the contexts of the video gaming industry, research into the racism that is expressed and experienced through virtual worlds, either within or directed at the Global South, has been limited (Olasina, 2014; Penix-Tadsen, 2019). Moreover, researchers have largely overlooked the presence of queer people of colour within virtual worlds (Duran, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Research on how African queer people make use of virtual worlds has slowly been growing, such as, for example, the various studies that focus on LGBT+ Ugandans and their use of social media to form a safe community (Butler and Falzone, 2014) and the research into how virtual worlds help queer people connect safely. This research project intends to contribute to the growing

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "people of colour" to indicate informants who identify as non-white and having multiple belongings in terms of ethnicity, as this is the preferred term by the participants.

body of research on South African virtual worlds by focusing on how queer people of colour use virtual worlds to express and experiment with their gendered identities.

In South Africa the games which an individual plays and the medium on which they play them, such as console, personal computer, or mobile, can all be heavily influenced by an individual's class or race. South Africa is still dealing with the legacies of apartheid and there are still frequent reports of racist incidents. For example, the South African Human Rights Commission investigated a spike of cases involving racism in 2014, with over 500 cases in that year alone. Between 2013 and 2014, 45% of the complaints that the commission dealt with involved racism. These legacies have affected the gaming structures to which individuals have access, as well as the attitudes that are prevalent in gaming and other online communities. The assumed lawless environment of the game has become a space for players where normal social rules, norms, and etiquette do not apply. The realm of Dota 2 and other video games has become a "safe space" for socially unacceptable behaviours like racism and has allowed them to fester.<sup>2</sup> The chatlogs of these games often contain racial slurs and graphic descriptions of gendered violence. These chats would then be reproduced on numerous occasions, on both Facebook and other websites. There have been several incidences of racism, such as in January 2014, a player named RapingNinja, a epithet that clearly illustrates the normalisation of sexual violence by gamers, used several racist insults against another player called Strider, who is black. The only outcome of the incident was that a few writers created opinion pieces in the wake of the event.<sup>3</sup> This event did however lead to discussions of racism within the "DOTA 2 South Africa" Facebook group, with many players sharing their experiences of racism and other problems that they have with the community. Although the discussions were described as productive by some, the discussion thread was deleted by one of the group's administrators, with the justification that "Dota is just a game". The entire discussion was minimised, as it was argued that the offline world is just intrinsically a hostile and offensive place, thus making it futile to expect any other treatment. As many people do not populate or connect their in-game profiles with anything that could identify them in the physical world, it is difficult to prosecute them under anti-racism laws.

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<sup>2</sup> Dota 2 is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) video game, released by Valve in 2013. It is a sequel to the eponymous MOBA mod, Defense of the Ancients (commonly called DotA and released in 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Racism continues in the local Dota 2 scene, CriticalHit by Gavin Mannion (May, 2014).

Skotnes-Brown (2017) argues that, while it might be easy to assume that racism is only a result of South Africa's history with colonialism and apartheid, it remains a present-day problem that is heightened by the anonymity that the video game worlds provide. There has been psychological research that validates this interpretation, suggesting that, since the internet is perceived as an anonymous, often lawless and hostile place, it promotes toxic behaviour. For some gamers, the more violent or perverse their behaviour is, the greater the psychological reward they experience (Skotnes-Brown, 2017). Research in psychology also explains racism in online gaming as a result of the general invisibility of black people outside of the player community and limited black visibility within the community. As gaming in South Africa is heavily affected by economic and infrastructural inequality along racial lines, there are necessarily fewer black players in comparison to the number of white players. No research has yet been conducted about these demographics in the case of Dota 2. Still, Walton and Pallitt's 2012 study on video games and inequality in South Africa suggests that by and large, console and computer gaming platforms are primarily accessible in predominantly white, middle-class homes. Although not all video gaming communities have such a serious problem with racism as the Dota 2 community has, Skotnes-Brown proposes that the racism in the Dota 2 community has to do with the inherently colonial tropes that are already present within the design of the game, tropes that may well attract racist fans (Skotnes-Brown, 2017).

This research explores the online world of the video game Genshin Impact through the experiences and discussions of a group of youngsters who identify as South African, non-white, LGBT+ gamers. It aims to understand what kind of experimentation and expression in terms of gender and race are afforded within the contexts of online gaming worlds with their assumed endless potentiality. How can games simultaneously be safe spaces for queer people, yet also constitute sites of violence and exclusion? What forms of expression do these virtual worlds provide that the real world cannot? How do virtual worlds give people the opportunity to scrutinise their identities? What kind of virtuality do online spaces, such as chatrooms, produce? How do virtual worlds engage with the complexity of identity exploration and how do online experiences and virtual subjectivities are mirrored in the "real" world?

Genshin Impact, the game that has been used for this project, was released in October 2020 and achieved instant success and acclaim. Within just three months of its release, it earned over US\$1 billion in revenue and, four years post-release, it still maintains a steady fan base and strong sales. There are various reasons for the game's success. The first reason is

that it was released during the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to an increase in gaming overall. The second reason is that it is an ARPG, action role-playing game, which means that the game allows players to "put themselves in the shoes" of the characters and this is the reason why they play and engage with the game's environment interactively. The third reason is that Genshin Impact offers cross-play, meaning that it is available on different platforms, namely PlayStation 4 and 5 consoles, computers and mobile phones. The game's status as a mobile game is credited as one of the factors that has led to its success, as it can be played anywhere and at any time. Since mobile phones tend to be more affordable than other gaming equipment/platforms, they allow the game to be accessible to a wider variety of players. Being able to play on cell phones further allows players to actively engage with the game in many aspects of their real-world lives—they can play while waiting in queues, when commuting to their jobs or schools, or even while getting a haircut. This mobility lets the game become an active part of people's lives. The game's aesthetic that follows a Japanese anime art style has also contributed to its popularity.

The main plot of Genshin Impact concerns a pair of twins who are separated by an unknown God. The game's action follows the remaining twin who travels through the seven countries in the game's main continent, Teyvat, to find their missing twin. At the beginning of the game, the player is given the choice between a male or female avatar, although afterwards, they can acquire more playable characters. Regardless of the gender of the avatar that is chosen at the beginning of the game, the characters with whom the player interacts may be interpreted as romantic, a feature that makes the game popular with LGBT+ players (Nightingale, 2021). Genshin Impact consists of seven different elements: anemo (air), geo (rocks and earth), electro (lightning), dendro (plants), hydro (water), pyro (fire), and cryo (ice). Players can form a team of up to four characters to make use of throughout the game. These teams can be modified at any point, as long as the player is not actively engaged in combat. The game has a cast of over seventy playable characters, with the vast majority of them being women, another reason why the game has gained popularity amongst queer people. However, these female characters have received criticism, as some players/reviewers believe that their designs are meant to appeal to the male gaze (Nightingale, 2021). Regardless, judging by the game's extraordinary commercial success, many female players enjoy the designs and personalities of these female characters.

In this thesis, I describe the world of Genshin Impact and examine the experiences of several queer players exploring spaces of and for "queer imagination".

Contrary to what it might be expected, LGBT+ gamers are not a new occurrence, but rather communities which have always been present. Players who fall outside white, heterosexual, and cisgender identities, have always existed even if, due to the discrimination which they have faced, they have tended to either remain silent or been sidelined. As social media has allowed people to connect more and more, and those who once might have viewed themselves as solitary have now been able to come into contact with larger communities of LGBT+ and non-white gamers, this has impacted the games market which, while still focused on male players, has created games in which characters are more open to a plurality of interpretations. For instance, often characters of games are understood as being "playersexual"; a term which refers to characters that flirt with the player regardless of the gender of the player's avatar. Queer imagination is a concept which asks how creative works can alter and distort material realities that can in turn be used to build a world that includes alternative ways of being, thinking, and knowing (Brim, 2014; Shaw, 2015). Queer imagination describes the ways in which people from marginal sexual or gender identities can collectively envision alternative political worlds which are more equitable, livable, and desirable. It describes the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed. Queer imagination is however not based exclusively on abstract concepts and instead concerns itself with bringing those possible futures "back" to work on the present and in reality, in order to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today. Queer imagination is also about imagining the present differently too. It speaks of the capacity to imagine and make commonalities with the experiences of other people; it undergirds the capacity to build solidarity across boundaries and borders, real or imagined.

Queer imagination forms the basis of this research project as it relies on the belief that identity is not something which we are born with and passively partake in but rather a construction that we continually create and curate in our lives. Even concepts such as gender, which can be viewed as static, are heterogeneous, transforming and a continuous performance. In this thesis I argue that queer imagination occupies a central position in gaming and that is produced through creative work, such as fan fiction—fictional works written by fans of a piece of media—, fan art, and transgressive play. Transgressive play is a way of playing within a game or system that is not designed for the user; like fan fiction, it offers the potential for shaping one's own narrative, such as, for example, entering a combat-driven MMO (massively multiplayer online game) and attempting to progress without violence (Salter et al, 2018). Queer gacha game players are seen as against the norm as gacha games are frequently understood as a means for male players to collect female avatars

perceived as attractive. Emergent play describes a form of transgressive play: it expresses the refusal to play games in the ways in which they are written by their designers, and allows for the emergence of queer narratives in otherwise heteronormative gameworlds (Green, 2017). For example, some players craft their own narratives for characters in ways that allow the characters to be read as queer, or within games where the main objectives are to eliminate other opponents, instead players form groups, or guilds for social and conversational purposes (Ruberg, 2015). Transgressive play concerns with queer identity construction and queer becomings beyond the scope of the original game texts. Players create interpretations of thriving queer game worlds within games in which patriarchal and heteronormative logics normally prevails allowing the play to shape the game through people's own actions (Green, 2017). Learning the ways in which the participants have reimagined their characters has been amongst the most enjoyable parts of the project for myself.

This project looks at the mutual relationship between virtual worlds and the real world and how this affects young queer video game players. I argue that virtual worlds are not separate from physical worlds and nor do they exist in a separate reality. Instead, they are rather an extension of the physical world, and they therefore offer unique affordances and subjectivities.

The three chapters of this project discuss different aspects of virtual worlds and Genshin Impact. The first chapter looks at the game's world, Teyvat, and how it utilises an engaging, immersive environment. This environment takes inspiration from physical world environments and is likewise impacted by the same prejudices that exist in the physical world, such as racism and colourism. In this chapter I am looking at the world-building work that characterises Genshin Impact and I examine representations of gender and race in the making of the game. How does these ideas influence player experience and enjoyment of the game? The second chapter focuses on avatars, the characters that are used to navigate the game world, focusing on the relationships that the players form with them and how this impacts their sense of self and the gender work of the gaymers. In this chapter questions of how identity and embodiment are understood and experienced are looked at. I contend that it is in the relationship with the avatar and the plurality of forms it takes, that gaymers explore and experiment with gender in different and at times complementary ways with the "offline" experiences in their daily lives. The third chapter looks at the fans of Genshin Impact and how they come together to form a fandom. This includes discussing the creations that the fans make, namely fan art and fan fiction. I discuss these creative productions that are part of

the gaming experiences of Genshin Impact in terms of transgressive play and alternative world-building that takes place within the game.

With this project, I aim to share how virtual worlds are not just free-standing spaces with no effect on our day-to-day lives. Rather, I argue that they *are* a part of our daily lives and that the interactions and behaviours that occur within these virtual worlds are just as legitimate as those within the physical world.

### 3. Methodology

This research explores gender experimentations and queer imagination within virtual worlds, specifically focusing on the experiences of young South Africans in video games and on social media. It looks at how queer people of colour can make use of these spaces to experiment and explore gender within a relatively safe environment. Moreover, I am interested in investigating the contradictory ways in which video game spaces (and the virtual worlds associated with them) can be seen as safe spaces for gender expression while also being marked by violence against non-normative subjectivities that lie outside subjectivities that are cisgender, male, or white.

To conduct this research, I have engaged with both “real” and “virtual” worlds. This project is a virtual ethnography based on the following virtual spaces: the video game Genshin Impact, and the social networking sites Reddit and Discord. I have employed an ethnographic approach where fieldwork has been carried out over three months. The two primary methods for data collection were participant observation and interviews. I met participants for this research in the ZA Gayming Discord server. The ZA Gayming Discord is a chatroom made specifically for queer South African gamers, with most of the members coming from Gauteng and the Western Cape. Although an invitation is needed to join, all members are capable of inviting new members to the server. Discord is a social networking site that was created by Jason Citron and Stan Vishnevsky (Robinson, 2022). It enables users to share instant messaging (text and media) and voice communication through voice calls and video calls. Discord users can either communicate privately or in “servers” or virtual communities. The primary goal of the service has been to offer gamers a user-friendly chat room. This is because in-game chats can be difficult to navigate, and they also negatively impact game performance (Morris, 2020). After its initial release in 2015, Discord quickly

went on to attract the attention of gaming subreddits, leading it to make use of the slogan “Chat for Gamers”. The application has since changed, so that there are by now multiple servers which go beyond more topics than just video games. Likewise, although the ZA Gayming server uses gaming as a means to connect queer South Africans, it also offers a space for members to share pictures of themselves, share grievances, or otherwise just communicate with each other. The increased popularity that Discord received during the Covid-19 pandemic outside of gamer circles led to its slogan changing to “Chat for Communities and Friends”. A community in this context is defined as a group of individuals who engage in a collective process of learning and maintaining a common identity that is defined by a shared field of interest or activity (Lave and Wagner, 1991).

Alongside Discord, Reddit has also been used for this study. Reddit is a social networking site that hosts a large amount of user-created communities that allow members to share content in the form of videos, photos, texts, links, and polls (Anderson, 2015). The website, which originated in 2005, has a large user base of over seventy-three million people. This user base has attracted a reputation for being hostile towards women and people of colour (Farrell et al., 2019). According to statistics taken by Websitebuilder in 2021, 69% of Reddit users are male while only 31% are female. It is the most popular with adults aged between the ages of 18 and 29, an age range that constitutes 58% of the user base (Websitebuilder, 2021). Subreddits are communities that are dedicated to specific topics. Genshin Impact has an official subreddit, as well as several unofficial ones made by fans and dedicated to individual, playable game characters. These subreddits are often linked to semi-public Discord servers. I have specifically chosen these two social networking sites because they both form a large part of the social aspect of gaming and because they often share a user base. As the Genshin Impact subreddit is very large—currently having over one million members—I also made contact with members of subreddits that are dedicated to individual game characters in an attempt to ensure that only active Reddit users were contacted. The reason for contacting these groups was to gain insight into the aspects of gaming spaces that might be unique to the Genshin Impact player base.

Although English is the primary language of these social networking sites, there is jargon specific to both the game and the social networking sites with which I had to acquaint myself. The game itself has no African server, although many South Africa players are members of the European or Asian servers. This can make communication in the game quite

difficult due to connectivity issues. Therefore, physical observations occur within the game while communication occurs using secondary services such as Discord.

I have conducted my fieldwork consecutively over the three months by immersing myself in the online community of players. Throughout this process, I made use of participant observation by joining multiplier mode, referred to as co-op mode. My fieldwork was primarily conducted within the game space, as well as through out-of-game meetups that players had with each other. I worked with members of the ZA Gayming Discord server to understand the emergence of culture within the queer gaming spaces of South Africa. My observations were aimed at understanding how participants navigate themselves within online gaming spaces and how they experiment with and experience gender. I have looked at how play can serve as both a means of recreation and a transgressive mode of play. Moreover, through online conversation, I have learnt about the life histories of those within these gaming spaces.

I wanted to engage in face-to-face and online conversations with participants to understand their views of gender within virtual spaces. These interviews also helped me to gain a better understanding of two important questions that I had going into the fieldwork: How do these virtual worlds allow participants to express themselves in ways that are unique to the real world? Is gender experimentation in these spaces really any safer than in the real world? Overall, I wanted to observe and participate in the lived experiences of queer people of colour within these spaces. This included everything from entering the game space itself, interacting with other players—be it with those who are fellow queer players and those who are not—, their experiences and interactions with those outside of the game and still within the game's spaces, and how they express themselves within the real world, such as for example their outward gender presentation. When observing I looked at the different forms of transgressive play that were put in place and how they challenged and subverted playing experiences.

In addition, a minor hashtag ethnography occurred for this project. I examined the official Genshin Impact account on Twitter/X, paying special attention to the comments that fans posted. The posts that were given the most attention were about new character reveals and celebrating character birthdays; not coincidentally, these were also the posts that received the most fan engagement. Before beginning the project in full, I first conducted a brief survey on Reddit to gauge the demographics of some characters' player bases. Reddit can be a

somewhat biased area to collect data from, as the website's user base skews male. Keeping that in mind, I nevertheless noted that female characters tended to have mostly male fan bases and male characters tended to have female ones. There were, however, some female characters that had a large female fan base.

#### 4. Participants

The participants for this study were mostly recruited through the snowball sampling method. They are South African women and trans femme people who range from the ages of nineteen to twenty-four, coming from working-class backgrounds: Will (23), Hana (23), Joni (24), Iris (19), Zihan (20), Luka (20), Lena (23), and Meera (23). One element which all of the participants had in common and shared with me without any prompting was that they were all introduced to gaming through piracy as young children. As video games were quite expensive an older family member, usually their parent or cousins, would gift them pirated games and they would then play them together.

Zihan is currently an accounting student. My time with her was quite limited, as we could only communicate during the school holidays (a brief three-week period). This was because she still lived with her parents, who did not allow her to play video games during the school year. Zihan's main medium of play is her mobile phone, and she does not consider herself a "gamer" because, in her view, gamers are people who play hardcore video games on either a console or a computer, in contrast to the more casual games that she plays on her phone. I met her on a Reddit forum dedicated to Genshin Impact where she frequently advises less experienced players. She agreed to participate in this project as she enjoys taking the opportunity to talk about her favourite characters. She identifies as a cisgender bisexual woman.

Luka is also a student and an aspiring writer. She became interested in Genshin Impact because she enjoys the game's large cast and uses them as a means to practise her craft by writing stories about them, referred to as *fan fiction*, a term that will be expanded upon later. As a result, she likes the characters far more than the game, although she does play at least twice a week. When it comes to interacting with her fellow players, Luka prefers to keep interactions to a minimum. Gender is not something that holds particular importance for her, so she alternates between referring to herself as a woman and agender.

Iris is one of the first people I contacted regarding this project. She frequently finds herself to be misgendered, although she does not mind and is fine with any pronouns. Like Luka, what originally attracted her to the characters was the interaction dynamics that they have with each other. She describes the characters as having “tropes” that she normally finds herself enjoying in the media she consumes.

Hana is a 23-year-old student who identifies as a “dyke”, both in terms of her gender and sexuality. As a student she usually finds herself playing the game at odd hours of the day, usually late at night or in the early hours of the morning. As a self-described night owl myself, these were usually the hours when the two of us would communicate.

Joni was introduced to me through Hana. They frequently played together so that, at many times, I would find myself within one of their game worlds and with the other one already present. Joni is a very reserved and cautious person, currently pursuing a BCom degree. They identify as lesbian and are experimenting with their identity and use they/them pronouns online but she/her offline.

Will is a 23-year-old trans femme and uses they/them pronouns. Despite being an avid video game player since they were a child, they are reluctant to use the term “gamer” for themselves due to the bullying they received as a child. Genshin Impact is a demanding game when it comes to internet connectivity. Because of the spotty internet connection at their home, they have had to be creative to access the internet by, for example, visiting coffee shops to use their free Wi-fi or using their sister’s laptop to play and saying that it’s for university assignments. Unlike most of the other participants, they are no stranger to LGBT+ spaces. In the real world, Will has frequented ball nights in Stellenbosch, particularly when they were a student.

Lena was introduced to me through Will and the two are friends offline as well. She currently works as a graphic designer although, when she was still studying, her honours project was in visual media design, focusing particularly on the design choices made for video games. As a result, she is very familiar with internet and media terminologies, as well as with character design conventions. She frequently plays and discusses the game with her friends in the real world.

Like Lena, Meera was introduced to me through Will as they too are friends in the real world. She is quite well acquainted with the tropes that are popular within Chinese media because she is half-Chinese and spent a portion of her childhood growing up in China. Meera

works as a web designer. The facet of Genshin Impact that first attracted her to the game was the elaborate designs not only of the game's environment but also of its characters.

## Chapter 1

### The Wonderful World of Teyvat

#### 1.1 The Land of Wind and Song

My introduction to the world of Genshin Impact began with me bundled up in several blankets in my bed. After opening the application on my phone and experiencing a pretty long loading screen, I was finally inside the game and its world. The length of the wait was partly because Africa has no server of its own; rather, African players use the European (EU), North American (NA), or Asian servers. In South Africa, the European server tends to be the most popular. However, for this project, I had to make accounts on all the different servers as the participants were scattered amongst them. The game began with a cutscene which showed how “I”,<sup>4</sup> in the form of my avatar, had landed in the game’s world in the first place. A mysterious God separated me from my twin and now I needed to find them. The cutscene paused in the middle to allow players to choose which twin—the male or female—they would like to play throughout the game. I found myself choosing the female twin by accident since I assumed that it was a “tap anywhere to continue” style menu, which is incredibly popular in mobile phone applications. After this, I was introduced to Paimon, a *beloved* pixie companion who explains the workings of the Genshin Impact world to the main character. This beginning stage provides players with a tutorial. It was here that I learnt important gameplay actions like how to run, move, and use my sword, the weapon used by the default avatar, although also one of the five weapon types that are available to use in the game. At this early stage of the game, walking and running are the only forms of movement. While, at times, it can be frustratingly slow due to how large the map is, this initial limitation helped me to take in and absorb the environment. The fact that I got lost probably helped as well. As I moved away from the beach and promptly left the forest, I finally encountered Teyvat’s first city, Mondstadt.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cutscenes are short scenes shown to game players at specific points in the gameplay, such as at the game’s beginning, at the end of a level when an important goal is achieved, when an opponent is beaten, or when the player’s character loses or wins the game overall.

<sup>5</sup> Mondstadt is the German word for Moon City.

Teyvat consists of seven different countries, each corresponding to real-world locations. The first destination that the player encounters is Mondstadt, a city based in Germany during the Middle Ages. Mondstadt is referred to as “the land of wind and song” since its centre is filled with bards and impenetrable wind walls blocking off the areas that cannot yet be explored. Imagery that is commonly found in the fantasy genre —tall towers, cobblestone floors, quaint market stalls, buildings, and fountains— makes up a large portion of the architecture in the city and the surrounding landscape. The grandest building is the cathedral, known as the Favonius Cathedral (dedicated to the “God of Anemo”, the absent God who rules over Mondstadt), which is inspired by the Regensburg Cathedral in Germany.



*Figure 1: Regensberg Cathedral*



*Figure 2: Favonius Cathedral*

Religious symbolism that is vaguely inspired by Catholic effigies is common within this region: nuns wear black dresses and veils, although the dresses are knee-length and have cutouts that show off their breasts, and crosses appear frequently, being worn by several of the religious characters in the game. All of this can be somewhat mystifying as Christianity does not even exist within this world. In addition, the natural landscape of the nation also

makes Mondstadt unique: the city is surrounded by large emerald-green hills and valleys with large imposing mountains that the player can climb, and the flora and fauna are a mixture of real-world examples and fantasy creations.

As I walked through the landscape, it felt as though I was fully immersed in the game itself. This sense of immersion was through more than just the game's physical environment created by interactive design elements as well. Following the 40-second rule of game design, which states that for an open-world game to be immersive it needs to have a point of interest every 40 seconds, characters continuously encounter random enemies, wildlife or collectables and interact with non-playable characters (NPCs) (Kraft, et al., 2023). A study done on Genshin Impact (Kraft et al., 2023) found that, when the player traverses the game, it usually has points of interest every 12 seconds. Flowers and berries, many of which the player can collect, are scattered around the nation. The small coast is rich in metals that can be mined and fish and crabs that can be caught. Enemies are also spread around the world, but they only attack the player if the player comes within their line of sight. When I got lost, I encountered a small group of enemies and found myself satisfied with how, even with my very under-levelled skills, I could defeat them easily.

Because Genshin Impact is a role-playing game (RPG), its highly immersive environment serves a practical purpose as well. RPGs are games in which the player takes on the role of a character who interacts within the game's imaginary world. Many RPGs are set in fantasy or science-fiction environments (Westberg and Siliuite, 2023). One of the main elements that sets RPGs apart from other video games, is the level of activity players can have with the worlds that exist within these games. In many other types of video games, fighting games, for example, players play one particular level or stage and, upon its completion, they either move immediately to the game's next level or are taken to the game's home screen. However, in RPGs, players can explore the game's environment and are often capable of moving around at their discretion and exploring to their heart's content. This is conventionally referred to as an "open world".

In Genshin Impact, players are capable of completing quests at their own pace. Once a quest is completed, or even while it is still active, players can move about or explore the game however they see fit. The act of choosing to engage with one virtual world over another is already a significant existential decision and has the potential to constitute an act of self-fashioning (Gualeni and Vella, 2019). The participants in my research chose Genshin Impact because of its light-heartedness and bright colours, whereas most Western RPGs tend to take place in dark, post-apocalyptic settings.

Gacha games typically have JPEG pictures as the game's characters.<sup>6</sup> Genshin Impact, on the other hand, makes use of avatars that the player can control and that appeal to gamers because of their anime styling. There are several different subgenres of RPGs, such as action, sandbox, MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), and roguelike. Genshin Impact falls under the genre that is called an action role-playing game (ARPG). This means that the game emphasises real-time combat where the player has direct control over the characters, as opposed to turn-based or menu-based combat, while still focusing on the character's stats to determine relative strength and abilities. Genshin Impact also has similarities with the Japanese RPG sub-genre, in which the games concentrate on narrative and battle systems and tell a linear story, unlike the Western RPGs that usually have open-ended gameplay with a "go anywhere, do anything" approach to gameplay that gives the player free rein into the game's world (Wada, 2017). Despite these significant differences between Japanese and Western fantasy genres, there are also several similarities. One example is Mondstadt's generic "Medieval fantasy" design. Mondstadt might appear most like the Western-inspired fantasy worlds that appear in the works of European writers, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* novels or C.S Lewis's *Narnia* novels. But this region's inspiration instead lies in the Japanese fantasy genre. What differentiates Japanese fantasy from Western fantasy is that its inspiration comes primarily from video games and tabletop roleplaying games as opposed to literature (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2008). When Genshin Impact was first released, many players thought that it was a Japanese game due to its anime art style. Visually and mechanically, it also drew much of its inspiration from the Nintendo game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.

## 1.2 The Culture of Liyue

Although Genshin Impact has a main overarching storyline, its open world allows players to move between nations regardless of where they are within the game's story. Through these wanderings, I roamed past Mondstadt's winery and followed a river which ended in a marsh in the game's second region, Liyue. This is another nation that was included in the game's initial launch and is based on Genshin Impact's home country, China.

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<sup>6</sup> A "gacha game" is a type of video game with a monetisation model where players use their real-world money to buy in-game currency, drawing items or rewards that are used in gameplay. This gaming concept is explained in more detail in Chapter Two.

As a harbour town and an economic and trade hub, Liyue's most striking geographical landmarks are the mountains that surround it. These thin, almost needle-like mountains are modelled after the karsts of the Zhangjiajie National Forest Park. The mountains in the area give Liyue an intimidating and ethereal appearance. Some of these mountains serve as homes to the region's exclusive minor gods and illuminated beasts that are referred to as the adepti.<sup>7</sup>



*Figure 3 Zhangjiajie National Forest Park*



*Figure 4: Jueyun Karst, "abode of the Gods"*

In addition to these distinctive mountains, Liyue's landscape is characterised by swamps, ruins of ancient buildings, and two abandoned and haunted villages, one of which neighbours a village of mostly elderly residents with several rice terraces and the other occupied by a large mine. Many players regard Liyue as their favourite region of the game. While Mondstadt is well-liked because of how the player feels a part of the region, Liyue stands out because the region's well-written history and immersive soundtrack create an experience of incredible

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<sup>7</sup> adeptus (singular); adepti (plural).

depth. The soundtrack makes use of Chinese instruments like the guzheng and the dizi to transport the player into the game's environment and establish the atmosphere. At times, it almost feels as if you can smell the sea at the harbour. Wuwang Hill, the allegedly haunted and abandoned shrine, has a noticeable eerie sound while the bustling commerce district has a cheerful, bouncy tune that is fitting for an active city centre.

This care that is given to portray the region's intricate lore, history, and general atmosphere is one of the biggest reasons why Liyue is so well-loved by this study's participants. Iris explains: "Liyue is so gorgeous, I love seeing the ruins when walking through it and I like how well thought out and interconnected everything is".<sup>8</sup> She enjoys walking through the harbour or amongst the mountains. It does not feel as if she is taking a stroll through a random location but like a real place with its own story and history. Many of the compliments given to the nation's design stem from it being the game designer's home country. In this regard, Lena made the following observation: "I think that because the region is Chinese, and it's a Chinese company, they probably put the most effort into the region".<sup>9</sup>

Despite the many aspects that immerse players in the environment, the dialogues are an element that, at times, is at odds with other game elements. Genshin Impact was originally in Mandarin Chinese but has since been translated into several international languages to cater to its different markets. The dialogues are available in Korean, Japanese, or English and are subtitled in various additional languages. As the game is translated into several different languages, at many points of the narrative the story either gets lost in translation or has purposefully been edited to make it more accessible to a wider audience. This causes some of the cultural references to be missed in the process. As an example of these problems of translation, Zhongli (the character who is meant to be the God of Liyue) has had several references to Chinese Taoist philosophy removed from his combat dialogue (Liu, 2023). Characters from the regions outside of Liyue make numerous cultural references. Kaeya, who is from Mondstadt, has had his idle dialogue changed from the Chinese proverb "if we continue to stand around we'll grow mushrooms" to the more generic "we should move on, we're not frozen in place, are we?". This alteration in dialogue has removed any reference to traditional Chinese speech, with which speakers of English will probably be unfamiliar. The dialogue now becomes a pun, as Kaeya's dialogue references the ice element while still keeping the playful and light-hearted attitude of the original Chinese. Some players remark that the dub has "lost the taste of China" (Wang, 2023). However, many

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<sup>8</sup> Iris, February 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

<sup>9</sup> Lena, April 2023, online interview, Stellenbosch.

of the participants are unaware of the changes to the dialogue. Instead, they find that the game's visual elements tend to be far more important than what is spoken by the characters, especially since the nation is visibly different from the architecture or landscapes that they see every day in South Africa.

### 1.3 Otakus Save the World

With the introduction of games as commodities, the local customs and cultural concepts of Japan and the United States have spread to consumers all around the world. Likewise, video games like Genshin Impact have been used as a means to promote and disseminate Chinese culture throughout the rest of the world (Chang et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). Video games consequently serve as a means of cultural exchange and understanding and have become a vital part of China's international communication strategy – a powerful communication instrument that is tasked with projecting its cultural values and heritage to the global community. Highly successful games like Genshin Impact allow Chinese culture to be experienced and seen by a very large audience.

Genshin Impact seems to be at least partially successful in this endeavour: Several of the participants stated that, since they started playing the game, they have become more interested in learning about Chinese culture. The one aspect that stood out the most for them was food. Within Genshin Impact, there is a cooking mini-game featuring a huge array of different foods that are based on real-world foods. Each character also has a signature dish. Joni has recreated dishes from the game, thinking of her favourite characters in the process since they have those foods listed as their preferences. Associating specific foods with the characters motivates the participants to become interested in trying foods that they otherwise would not have cared for. Sharing culture in this way extends far beyond a means to create an interactive virtual world; it is also a means of exercising soft power. Media has long been used to both draw interest to national cultures and as a cultural means to control public perceptions of a particular country.

Anima is one of the biggest examples of how media has been used for soft power and cultural exchange (Lam, 2007). The company behind Genshin Impact, Hoyoverse, proudly markets itself towards an anime audience and anime terms are commonly used by the game's

fan base on social media – most commonly “waifu” and “husbando”.<sup>10</sup> The company’s slogan is “Tech otakus save the world”.<sup>11</sup> There are elements of Japanese culture in the game: For example, the symbol for the electro region is a *mitsudomoe*, a symbol that resembles three commas placed in a spiral and is typically found on Shinto Shrines or the heraldry of notable Japanese families (Agung & Wiwaha, 2023).

The care given to Japan is demonstrated in how the game’s third region, Inazuma, is portrayed. Inazuma is based on Japan, specifically during the country’s period of isolation, the “Sakoku” foreign policy of the Edo period from 1603 to 1868. As its name already suggests, Inazuma is cut off from all the other nations in the game. Unlike all the other cities in the game, if the player attempts to reach the Inazuma before completing the story quest, they will be struck by lightning and subsequently teleported back to whichever city they travelled from. Completing the game’s story quest to access Inazuma can be quite time-consuming. However, it helps to build a feeling of anticipation for those players who want to visit the island. In terms of geography, Inazuma consists of three main islands, a city centre, a mine, and a military base. The island’s shrine, which is home to a giant cherry blossom tree, is by far the most noticeable feature of the nation, with petals being found all over the island – both as collectables and as part of the scenery. In contrast to the nuns of Mondstadt, the shrine maidens wear the modest clothes that shrine maidens typically wear in the physical world. By contrast, the game’s only playable shrine maiden, Yae Miko, wears a skirt that is so short that it ends just below her groin. There are three other islands: Seirai, an abandoned island, Watatsumi Island and Tsurumi Island. The latter has been critiqued due to the parallels made between Tsurumi Island’s inhabitants and real-world ethnic minorities in Japan (Zhong, 2022). Out of all the nations that have been released as game expansions, Inazuma has been described as simultaneously being one of the most beautiful areas but also one the most difficult for new players or even “pure hell” for players without strong characters.<sup>12</sup> This is because one of the islands has a weather feature that causes a constant lightning storm on the island. The storm also causes the player’s health to deplete constantly, which can lead to the character’s death. Characters can be healed from death but it is an incredibly inconvenient

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<sup>10</sup> These two terms are Japanese phonetic pronunciations of the words “wife” and “husband” and refer to the game’s female and male characters respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Otaku is a Japanese term that means “geek”; although in internet spaces the word has taken on the meaning of someone who is obsessed with Japanese culture – specifically anime or manga and sometimes (derogatorily) hentai.

<sup>12</sup> Hana, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

development in gameplay. Although players may eventually turn this weather feature off through a quest in the game, it dampens the joy of those who simply want to enjoy the scenery of the region.

The region also features some of the game's strongest enemies: a group of roaming samurai who both hit hard (being able to kill weaker characters with one or two hits) and have a large health pool that makes them difficult to kill. The increased difficulty of the region is a topic of contention amongst players. While Zihan (2023) enjoyed the challenge—“if you build your characters properly, there shouldn't really be much of a challenge with the region”<sup>13</sup>—, Joni (2023) felt as though it only encouraged a particular play style:

Inazuma was really hard. It's pretty but the enemies were so strong for no reason. It's like the game wants us to spend money on the stronger characters or it's only catering to people with meta characters.<sup>14</sup>

Although the game has been touted as being user-friendly for players who only want to have casual fun, Inazuma has made some players/participants revise their opinions on this matter. Inazuma's design has nevertheless become a fan favourite, especially among those players who enjoy anime. The NPCs in Inazuma are the same as those in other regions of the game, the only difference being the clothes that they wear (for example, kimonos are commonly worn in the region).

According to Lu (2008), there are three kinds of cultural politics behind anime's international success. The first is de-politicised internationalisation, which primarily serves as a commercial tactic to attract international audiences; the second is Occidentalised internationalisation, which satiates a nationalistic sentiment by reversing Orientalism and portraying the West in a negative manner; and the third is self-Orientalised internationalisation, which reveals a cultural desire to establish Japan as an ersatz Western country in Asia. Distinguishing between Orientalism and self-Orientalism, Iwabuchi (1994: 33) suggests that, “while Orientalism enjoys the mysterious exoticism of the Other, self-Orientalism exploits the Orientalist gaze to turn itself into an Other”. De-politicised internationalism occurs when the design of anime characters gives them an “exotic quality, or international look” (Lu, 2009: 172) with ethnically ambiguous features. This design process

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<sup>13</sup> “Building characters” refers to equipping characters with appropriate game gear, such as weapons.

<sup>14</sup> “Meta” also refers to characters that are seen as the most useful or strong.

is also called ethnic bleaching, as it removes cultural references and makes characters more accessible to Western audiences (Kenji, 1997).

Audiences tend to project their race onto characters, a process termed “own race projection” (ORP) (Lu, 2009). Although ORP presupposes the removing Japanese cultural references, according to Yoshimi (2000) it can also serve as an effective cultural strategy to actively maintain a globalised Japanese identity. In anime, most characters are either coded or stated as Japanese. These ambiguities, especially as they pertain to race and to characters that aren’t white, have been popular in Africa amongst participants who are capable of projecting their own identities onto the characters of a game. Genshin Impact has followed a similar design philosophy by using the same face template between characters, giving all of the characters large eyes, small noses, and small lips.

Fantasy worlds do not have the same races or categories as the real world. Instead, the characters in these worlds are coded and given physical, action, or personality traits that draw parallels to a real-life racial group (Brooks and Herbert, 2006). Each of the seven nations in Genshin Impact is coded based on a region in the real world. Since the characters in each nation look similar, specific choices have been made when coding them. For example, the characters of Liyue are coded as Chinese, while Mondstadt’s characters are coded as Germans. Regardless of their nations of origin, Genshin Impact characters look similar due to limited face and body type variation. They can be told apart based on clothing, names and hairstyles. Skin tone variation is rare and does not say much, considering that characters like Xinyan and Kaeya, from Liyue and Mondstadt respectively, both have brown skin. Genshin Impact features low numbers of brown and black characters and an abundance of Western white characters, perhaps best showcased in the region of Sumeru (Yoshida, 2009). It is relatively common for brown and black characters to be omitted (sometimes wholly) from the plots and settings of anime-based games and from the anime as a genre overall.

#### 1.4 The Sumeru Problem

Similarly to how Japan has utilised anime to modify its global perception, Genshin Impact uses Chinese themes to develop or invoke an international interest in Chinese culture and geography. The game practices self-orientalising to establish power over other Asian

countries and appeal to the West. This is perhaps most evident in how the different countries are portrayed: The game's native China and the developer's beloved Japan are represented with the most accuracy and in the most positive manner: Liyue is shown as grand and respectable and Inazuma as foreign but powerful. Mondstadt is also portrayed to be familiar to anime audiences. In contrast to this, the game's third region, Sumeru, is made exotic to establish hegemony over other Asian countries. This region has faced charges of Orientalism since its release (Captis, 2022). Unlike Mondstadt, Liyue, and Inazuma, which are all based on a single country (Germany, China, and Japan, respectively), Sumeru represents a mix of various North African, West Asian, and Southeast Asian countries. The region is split into two main sections – the forest and the desert. The forest is full of lush trees, colourful flowers, living mushrooms, and sparkling rivers. Even though it is smaller than the desert, the forest is home to the region's main attraction – “Akadimiya”, which is a large university and greenhouse-like structure built into a giant tree and based on Indo-Islamic architecture. In contrast to this lush forest landscape, the desert is nearly desolate, with large dunes, tumbleweeds, cacti and palm trees, a small dilapidated settlement occupied by its few inhabitants and an abandoned pyramid in ruins.

One of the plot elements in Sumeru is border control (Huang, 2023). Within the region, there is a wall that separates the forest and desert areas. Apart from being the home of this nation's academic institution, the forest is also occupied by the pale people. The desert region, in contrast, is peopled by mercenaries and other darker-skinned characters. Whereas the forest region is depicted as flourishing and filled with knowledge, the desert is a place filled with poverty and violent, untrustworthy mercenaries. And although both regions are part of the same nation, the inhabitants of the forest region are treated as citizens while those from the desert are villainised and seen as trespassers. The wall serves as both a symbol of this division and a means to put these thoughts into practice – there being strict control on who can pass through it and who cannot. The in-game reasoning behind the wall's building is that the desert's former king gained forbidden knowledge and caused the land to be turned into a desert. To save the rest of the land from becoming a desert, the God of the Sumeru region placed a wall between the two areas. Within the story itself, many of the desert characters express frustration with the wall. However, as the story progresses, they begin to love it and one character is even shown kissing it. From a point of narrative logic, this aspect of the game isn't described well. All we are told is that the wall was put in place to prevent

the desertification of the forest and that the desert's citizens are still impoverished and discriminated against because of it.

The participants have critiqued this plot element. Will, Meera and Hana in particular have a strong distaste for it due to how it resonates with white saviour narratives: The God of Sumeru is depicted as a pale woman with white hair and, in another perpetuation of the colonial mindset, deserts are depicted as lifeless regions (Brower, 2009). Will has also noted that they felt the wall between the regions serves as a flimsy reason to exclude black or brown playable characters. The fact that the few brown people within the story live in an undeveloped region filled with poverty shows a limit of imagination among the game's writers and designers—or at least limits of imagination when seeking a profit.

Many of the choices that are made about video game design are based on what would be the most profitable for the company designing the game (Leonard, 2003). The desire for money and profit therefore affects game design, as it's easier to profit by catering to existing stereotypes than by subverting or questioning them. This goes beyond merely replicating genre conventions and leads to incorporating the stereotypes of real-world marginalised groups. For example, it tends to be a popular feature of video games to have already marginalised groups cast as the villains that need to be killed, or basing characters and their designs on stereotypes such as busty and curvy women and Arab terrorists (Burgess et al., 2011). These stereotypes are so commonly depicted in various kinds of media that they become invisible when game designers repeat these representations and players consequently accept them “as the way things are meant to be”. This does, however, perpetuate stereotypes against marginalised groups and can have negative implications for people within the physical world. Meera believes that companies think including diversity will not be profitable:

[I]t's in their opinion that if they make their characters from Sumeru like dark skinned that no one will wish on them and yeah it won't be popular.<sup>15</sup>

Genshin Impact attempts to tackle colourism and racism within the story, although it falls flat when those two forms of discrimination also heavily influence the game's design. One aspect of the game that struck me as odd is the stark contrast there is between the designs of playable characters and enemies, particularly within the Sumeru

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<sup>15</sup> Meera, April 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

region. Out of about seventy-five playable characters, only five have a skin tone that is not pale. Darker-skinned NPCs are few and far between.

The Eremites are perhaps the most significant example of the game's stereotypical writing. They are a mercenary group from the desert, many of whom have Afro-features and are presented as violent, dirty, and untrustworthy. While the Eremites are not the overarching enemy of the game, they are treated as morally worse than the villains of the plot and presented as thieves, uneducated and disloyal. Moreover, there are several characters in the game who are openly racist. Their racism is presented as a mere character quirk, and many of them serve as companions to the main character. A "genie in a bottle" character, who is also prejudiced towards the Eremites, makes several comments about how they are nothing but slaves. The Eremites have also seen a love-hate reception from queer people of colour (QPOC) – both in South Africa and globally – as, while they are a deviation from the game's majority pale cast of characters, they still rely on negative stereotypes. Consider the following comment from Meera in this regard:

I also kind of hate the Eremites. They're not too bad to fight, they're just really stereotypical and I hate that the only characters with black/afro features are villains and not playable like you know, the evil brown men and evil, but sexy, brown women. I know that we have pale enemies as well but like we also have pale playable characters, most of them are. The enemies literally have darker skin than any playable character, they even have locs and braids.<sup>16</sup>

While the game presents this as just more background information for the character of Dehya, these types of portrayals and stereotypes are common in media of the same genre. By recreating them, they share something that audiences are already comfortable and familiar with, meaning that these consistently recreated stereotypes do not require much critical thinking or challenge the player's worldview.

Genshin Impact aligns itself with common Orientalist depictions both in how it presents various story elements and the characters that are inspired by Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) and Indian regions. The stereotypes that are prevalent in the region serve as examples of self-orientalism that are meant to uplift the image of China at the expense of other Asian countries. The ways in which these characters are designed and

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<sup>16</sup> Hana, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

written illustrate how real-world standards of beauty and ideas about race and “otherness” influence in-game characterisations. Several character designs (particularly female character designs) have been critiqued as fetishised outfits that are based on real cultural clothes. For example, the character of Nilou is based on a Persian (Iranian) dancer but she wears an inaccurate and revealing belly dancing costume, the uniform of a different art form that is only relevant to dancers in Egypt and Turkey.

The negative stereotypes in the game’s design elements show how neoliberal ideas occupy spaces meant to be for recreation. Meija and Bulut (2019) argue that casual gameplay serves as an extension and acceleration of neocolonial logic. Echoing this sentiment, Will has also felt as though the game’s treatment of Hillichurls (a common enemy in the game) is reminiscent of nativist and anti-black representations of African people:

I feel the game also talks about the Hillichurls like there’s like a tribal aspect to their culture and like ... when you at any point in time ... when you like stumbled upon Hillichurls, like they’re dancing around and they are also kind of like coded as kind of like tribal and they don’t know anything and that’s why the abyss mages take advantage of them as their henchmen. It’s like this is a very dark continent, it’s very like I guess ... it’s just the game is a bit uncritical of media tropes that would be ascribed to characters like that ... you know what I’m saying ... so it just it’s a bit uncomfortable.<sup>17</sup>

A common critique coming from players is that, while there are these ambiguous insertions of LGBT+ characters within the game, when it comes to unambiguous racial diversity, such as making the characters brown-skinned but without a clear race or ethnicity, the game shies away. This happens despite the game blatantly taking aspects from SWANA and South Asian cultures, particularly in terms of architecture and music. Will found themselves quite annoyed with this:

I’m like, “why can I turn my hand around and point at my palm and everyone everywhere, all of the new characters, can be swatched from my palm”? It’s my biggest critique of the game, like shrug your shoulder’s reaction to like queer content in the game like it’s just it’s just there you know? It’s just baked into the game and how the characters are designed and played and it’s that simple but like where you

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<sup>17</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

actually have to design the skin or you release these characters they all look the same but you're explicitly taking inspiration from like from a place that like has those people? It's just a bit it's just a bit like it's a missed opportunity you know.<sup>18</sup>

Fans of colour and feminist scholars have criticised video games that rely on undertones of systemic, structural, and capitalistic violence to provide a sense of the “real” (Denham et al., 2021). Some of this criticism stems from the fact that, within fantasy games, the physical violence that characters deal with tends to be portrayed unrealistically and cartoonishly. In contrast, the structural violence against minorities is included to provide a sense of realism to the game and replicates the structural issues that these groups of people face in the physical world.

When we look at the inclusion of these issues of colourism or racism in the game, a common response from marginalised players is, “But that’s just how things are”. Video game scholars have asked whether these depictions are truly necessary, or why it is typically only groups that face difficulties who have to experience these negative portrayals in fantasy games (Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020). Brown and black people get excluded because both game designers and game fans say that it is not “realistic” for them to be in certain settings. However, the inclusion of black and brown people is argued as necessary because the game is a work of fiction. Schwartz (2006:315) describes how “realism” and detail allow gamers to accept game spaces as “real”. However, defining what realism is in a virtual space and how it operates to create a sense of the “real” is unclear since the concept of “realism” tends only to be applied as a defence in situations where it can justify the racist writing.

## 1.5 Conclusion

This chapter focused on how Genshin Impact’s environment is a significant factor in how players immerse themselves in the game. It also demonstrates how video games are not just objects for recreation but also tools of cultural communication and soft power. This impacts how Genshin Impact portrays both its home culture and foreign cultures, as well as how the game is received by its players. Since games are products of the societies in which they originate, they are necessarily influenced by the prejudices and biases of their designers. While Genshin Impact’s players enjoy the game because of its fantasy environment and the

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<sup>18</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

introduction to Chinese culture that it offers, their immersion and enjoyment are dampened by the othering and negative portrayal of several Asian and African cultures.

## Chapter 2

### The Role of the Avatar

#### 2.1 What is an Avatar?

The word avatar comes from the Sanskrit word *avatāra*, meaning “descent” (Lochtefeld, 2002). Within Hinduism, it means a manifestation of a deity in bodily form on earth, such as a divine teacher. It technically means “an incarnation, embodiment, or manifestation of a person or idea”. Avatars are the characters that an individual controls to navigate video games, the main character or protagonist, and that act as a player’s representation in the game world (Li et al., 2013). An avatar also serves as a way to embody or situate an individual within a game’s virtual world.<sup>19</sup> In the twenty-first century, it would be nearly impossible to play a video game that does not feature an avatar. The types of avatars vary from game to game. Some games, such as *Tomb Raider* or *The Legend of Zelda* series, only grant the player one avatar to control throughout the entire game. Other games like *The Sims* franchise or the *Animal Crossing* franchise offer players their own fully customisable avatar. A third avatar variant involves multiple different avatars to select and play as, though often with limited customisation options.

A variation of the third type of avatar occurs in the gacha game genre. Within gacha games, there is a wide range of characters that players can select, but they can only be acquired through in-game currencies and in-app purchases that are the backbone of the “gacha game mechanism”. Collecting characters is the basis of many gacha games and it is encouraged by the bonds that players form with the game’s avatars. Although gacha games tend to be associated with gambling, the relationships that players form with characters go beyond that (Woods, 2021). Players can form unique and complex relationships with their favourite characters, with the avatar not only representing the player but also becoming a companion.

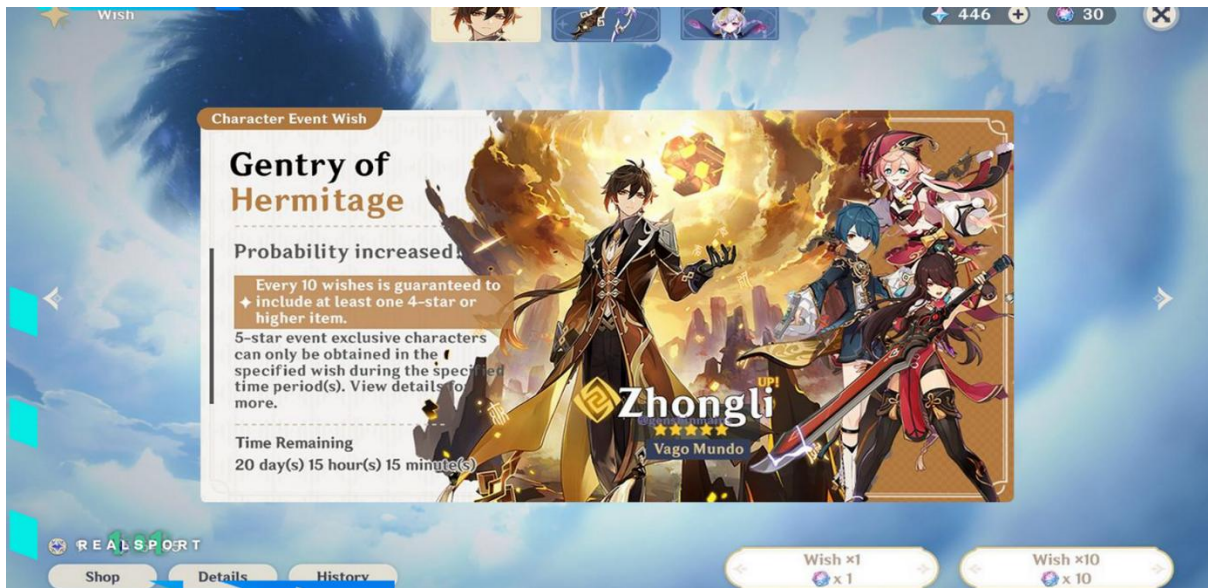
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<sup>19</sup> Embodiment refers to how experiences are enlivened, materialised, and situated in the world through the body (Harris, 2016).

## 2.2 Gacha Mechanics and Embodied Fate: Wishing for Friends

Genshin Impact's avatars come in the form of playable characters that are obtained through the gacha mechanism. Although there is a common perception that people are attracted to gacha games because of its gambling component, this is not always the case (Lakic et al., 2023). While perhaps true for some players, for a large majority, the characters themselves attract them to the game. People spend money not for the joy of gambling but for the emotional payoff of receiving characters they like and relate to. Rentia and Karasova (2022) have found that players are initially attracted to gacha games due to their aesthetic, the narrative elements associated with the games and the gacha characters. Both in the literature and the responses of participants, it appears that the gacha mechanism itself is not the reason why players engage with the game. Rather, the gacha mechanism is used as a means to acquire desired in-game items. However, a strong emotional attachment is associated with successful and unsuccessful pulls (gacha games work with variously named "draws"). A low amount of pulls to acquire a desired character or item is described as a strong and joyful memory, whereas being unable to acquire the desired gacha character or item despite a large number of pulls is associated with intense frustration and sadness. "Collectionism" was pointed out by players as an important motivation to acquire gacha items, with players placing a higher value on the items they needed to complete their collection rather than necessarily on high-rated game items (Rentia and Karasova, 2022).

Genshin Impact makes engaging with the game's gacha mechanics feel like a special event. The gacha has three separate menus: one for permanent characters, another for the limited five-star character, and one for weapons. The banners have been designed to be engaging and interesting and they typically feature the characters in their signature poses, surrounded by their elements or with other items associated with them. For example, Zhongli is shown with a large meteorite behind him to reference both his skillset and his strength. Players make use of a currency called "fate" in order to "wish" for the character of their choice. Although "wish" is the term formally used in the game, many players refer to them colloquially as "pulls" instead.



*Figure 5: Zhongli's limited banner. To the right of him are the four-star characters Yanfei, Beidou, and Xinqi. At the top of the screen, the tabs for the limited banner, weapon banner, and permanent banner are visible.*

As you pull for the character of your choice, the screen shows an animation of shooting stars that are falling—blue for a three-star item, purple for a four-star, and gold for the coveted five-star item. Just before the screen would show the stars changing colour, I would find myself praying that I would get the characters I wanted. As a Muslim, the irony of doing this is not lost on me, considering that gambling is prohibited in Islam. There is a certain thrill that comes with seeing the stars turn to gold and getting the character that you have wanted, although tying the relationships that players have with their characters to a gambling mechanism also means that the disappointment is twofold when you get the wrong character. On the one hand, you have wasted money and resources that you might have spent months saving for and, on the other, you have lucked out on receiving a character you like. Whenever I acquired the wrong character, it would leave me with an intense sense of disappointment that would feel so bad I almost heard the game calling me to open my wallet so I could get what I wanted.

Genshin Impact has a pity system, meaning that if you do not receive the featured five-star character within ninety wishes, they are guaranteed to drop within the next ninety. It seems like such an achievable goal: If you were to spend money, you would not be throwing it into the void but rather spending it on a goal that will be accomplished sooner or later. However, said goal costs up to R1,000, money which could definitely be put to better use but,

at least in the game space, seems like a rational expense; just a “little” bit of money to get the character that you want so much. The pull of the game to make players spend money can be strong. Will stated that they do not even open the game’s shop so they are never tempted to buy anything. Zihan has made sure that her bank card details are not saved on her phone so that she can avoid the lure as well. Players also do not like every character, with many saving their currencies by skipping characters until they get a character they like. Lena and Mandy bought a package in the game that gives them currency over a period of thirty days, meaning that they can save and buy the characters they really care for.

The usage of words like “wish” and “fate” in the game’s gacha system is deliberate on the part of its designers (Huang, 2023). These terms help to distance the gacha mechanic from gambling itself and also strengthen the bonds between players and characters. They are meant to make players feel more involved with the game and to fashion their relationships with game characters in less transactional and more reciprocal terms. The act of engaging with the gacha system thus becomes transformed from a system where players gamble or pay for characters or pixels into a means to acquire a companion or desired character. Huang (2023) refers to the concept of “embodied fate” when describing the relationship between players and the characters of the game. The characters express the self-fulfilment of the players and also express their desires in a visible form. Acquiring characters is referred to as “bringing them home”, and some players engage in rituals to increase their chances of acquiring the characters of their choice. Zihan stated that, when a character became available in the game, she would stand by the character’s house in the gameworld when wishing for them. When wishing for specific characters, it is common for players to stand outside the character’s home and in places that appear in the character’s trailer or are otherwise associated with them. Another practice is to “sacrifice” other characters. This process involves “killing” everyone in your party and then wishing for the character of your choice. Will performed this ritual once to acquire the four-star character Fischl. However, they were unsuccessful: “[T]hat’s when I knew this ritual stuff was nonsense”.<sup>20</sup>

At least one new character is released in Genshin Impact every six weeks, with some of them only being available for three weeks at a time. This deliberate scarcity motivates players to acquire the characters quickly (Dang, 2023). But for players who do not spend money on the game, this creates stronger attachments to the characters. This is because, as

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<sup>20</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

opposed to players who spend money and acquire characters instantly, those who play for free have to build up and save game credits for months on end to access these characters.

Zihan, for example, only engages with the gacha system when she likes certain characters and has all of them “levelled up”.<sup>21</sup> She feels close to all of her characters because of how much effort she has put in to make them strong and because she has chosen those specific characters instead of every character that is released in the game. When I opened her profile in the game, I found that she proudly had all of her characters on display. All of them were characters that she cared for deeply and they were all levelled up to 80 as a testament to how much she loved them.

### 2.3 The Effect of Affect

More than most other factors, affect and emotional attachment to characters have a higher impact on a player’s motivation to acquire new characters. The main point is not that players are compelled, manipulated, or otherwise encouraged to put money into a game, but rather that they do so in search of an emotional payoff that satisfies their need for social interaction and self-realisation. The reality that this payoff is anchored in nonhuman life reveals the expansive logic of affective embedding and how these embeddings provide a new grounding for consumption in the era of late capitalism (Woods, 2021). Gacha games are about fulfilling desire (Rentia and Karasova, 2022) and, because players are encouraged to form relationships with avatars that go beyond the game itself, they see gachas as much more than just games. The more engaged or emotionally attached a player is, the more likely they will spend money. The game’s mechanics fulfil the player’s need for engagement, visual satisfaction, and fantasy. Characters that are considered weak or “off-meta” can have an affective embedding that gives them value. This creates an economy of desire where the decisions to spend money in gacha games are made on emotive and affective terms instead of rationally.

Characters are more than just a means to embody the player within the game through an avatar. In some circumstances, they serve as a person the players can befriend or care for and in others the players view themselves as a tool through which the avatar can achieve their

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<sup>21</sup> Levelling up refers to the act of “building” a character. For example the character is increased from being level 1 to level 80 or higher, as well as their skills and weapons.

goals (Greting et al., 2023). When it comes to choosing characters, the vast majority of players prefer to choose the characters that are their favourites and based on their attachment instead of choosing characters who are considered stronger or more “meta”. Although the game has a cast of well over seventy characters, it seems that the participants were all drawn to the same few characters as their favourites. One of the main reasons for this is that these particular characters have “depth”, both in their personalities and lore. In light of how the game releases characters rapidly – with up to three released every six weeks – the participants noted that their personalities have become shallower and less interesting. The participants do not want a mangled mess of tropes or a blank slate to project onto but, instead, prefer relatable and complex characters. Some of the most popular characters amongst the participants were Kaeya, Ningguang, Beidou, and Rosaria.

Luka listed the character of Xinyan as one of her favourites. Xinyan is one of the game’s very few (and for almost two years, the only) brown-skinned female characters. Players often make jokes about her lacklustre power and she is often touted as the “worst character in the game” for that reason. What drew Luka to the character is her underdog quality. She wanted to turn a character that was considered weak into one that would be fun to play and, as a black woman, she saw a reflection of how real black players were treated in how the fictional character of Xinyan was received:

It’s weird because the white characters with bad kits don’t get treated like jokes like she does.<sup>22</sup>

Luka’s connection to the character of Xinyan serves as an example of how the avatar can simultaneously be an object an individual cares for as well as a reflection of the individual and their own identity (Schultze, 2010). Her strong relationship with Xinyan led her to XinyanMains, a Reddit page that is dedicated to Xinyan where other people who also care about the character flock together.

## 2.4 Playing with Gender

The avatar can also be viewed as an entity that has a gendered dimension that the player develops through gaming. According to Butler (1990), gender is not a concept that an individual “has”

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<sup>22</sup> Luka, March 2023, in-person interview, Cape Town.

but rather the result of repetitive performances. These performances can take the form of a manner of dress and way of speech, which amounts to “behaving” gendered traits. Seen in this way, gender is not considered as biologically determined but rather as something that is “performed” repeatedly and reinforced through language. Within virtual worlds, the “performance” of consistently playing as a character that others recognise as a particular gender or as a character to which the player assigns a specific gender, allows the player moments of affirmation and subversion within the game and that are not necessarily an option in the “real” world. Butler (1988) has described how, in certain contexts of “theatrical” performance, being gender non-conforming can be regarded as more socially acceptable than in everyday life (Butler, 1988). Similarly, in virtual spaces, gender swapping is also accepted far more than in the everyday real-world lives of players. In the physical world, children are gendered, or rather sexed, when they are born based on their genitals, thereby placing a lifetime’s norms and expectations on them. In contrast, video game characters are not born but created. In family-friendly games like Genshin Impact, characters' gender is based on design and text. This allows players freedom in making a character’s gender become what they want it to be.

The subjective nature of gender in the virtual world can complicate how we view gender in the real world: If an avatar is considered to be a player’s representation and that player is currently using a female character, does that mean that the player is also temporarily a woman? Most, if not all, players would say “no” because, regardless of the avatar’s body, how an individual identifies is the factor that determines their gender. This concept is easy to understand in the virtual world, even self-evident, which leaves one asking: Why can the same not be said for the physical or “real” world?

While playing with gender in the game space by using a female avatar, for example, one can easily and safely state that the player is merely playing a game or having a laugh and thus not fall victim to transphobic violence. Several participants have noted the affordance of playing with gender through their choices of avatars. Will describes how, for transgender people who are closeted or unable to transition in other ways, virtual worlds and avatars provide a space where they can manifest their ideal bodies. Will links how the game provides powerful characters that can be played with the transgender experience:

I think that this may be like more of my philosophical thoughts on it, but like I think that like transness is like for some people. I think it ... to me, in my head, I think it’s

the answer to the spirituality thing where it's like you know "God made us in his own image" and for trans people it's like "I make myself in my own image I create who I want to be, what I want to be". And I think that that's kind of like the rebuttal, it's the retort answer to that ... I suppose for a lot of trans people. And I think that like, and I think that like that's the power and having a game like ... well having a game like sims or a game where you can customise your avatar ... or even just games like Genshin where you can play as like these great female characters that you love and you think are cool, who have powers ... and like it's something a bit esoteric about them because they have these magical visions that are catered specifically to them, you know, it's like they make their world around them and I think that really speaks to the trans experience.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the player's gender in the physical world, playing as a girl in virtual worlds is sometimes even encouraged by other players (Morgan et al., 2020). This is especially true for gacha games like Genshin Impact, where female characters vastly outnumber male characters. This does not necessarily mean that there is no misogyny directed against the fictional characters or female players: For example, a common joke on social media is that the game's female cast is part of the male avatar's "harem".

Video games and virtual worlds are often perceived as empowering spaces where the restraints placed on the body have been removed. Some of the connotations placed on the body are also reversed: For example, players regard the petite girl Ayaka as one of the strongest characters in Genshin Impact. Similarly, when equipped with her "bracelet" she can always be used to signify a player's wealth, as multiple bracelets can cost thousands of rands. Outside of the game, however, she is subject to the same issues that affect real women since sexualised art and pornography depicting Ayaka are rampant on social media. As long as there is a body, be it flesh and blood or pixels, there will always be meaning and associations attached to it, most of the time out of the control of the body's possessor. The perceptions that other people place on the participants are entirely out of their control, as are the ways in which other people treat them. Therefore, the participants choose to enjoy the affordances that the game allows without thinking about how others would potentially treat them.

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<sup>23</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.



*Figure 8: Left: Kamisato Ayaka wearing her “bracelet” on the wrist of her right hand. This bracelet indicates that the player has already received the character seven times.*

One of the most prominent aspects that Will enjoys in games like Genshin Impact is that they get to occupy and play as a body that is not tied to the discrimination they face with their physical body. As they play the game, they feel as though they have become the character:

I’m playing as Rosaria and as soon as I fight enemies the camera zooms out and I see myself turning into this area and I feel like I’m fighting as her ... you are as elegant and graceful as they are and it almost like infers that power aren’t you ... that identity onto that ... that cuntiness that serve ... you know you’re serving you’re mothering a little ... and it infers that onto you as the player playing in your bedroom at 2 am in the dark ... like you feel immersed in that but I think that like that’s like what the power of a game.<sup>24</sup>

When playing alone, Will is capable of immersing themselves within the game’s virtual world and having the physical world fade away. Even though Will has a group of queer friends and is out to several people, playing in these virtual worlds allows them to explore different aspects of their identity that they can’t fully explore in the physical world. For

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<sup>24</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

example: gender affirmative care, such as surgeries or hormones, can be quite costly while playing as a character universally viewed as a woman is free... or only ten wishes!.

## 2.5 Role-playing Role-players

“Main” is a popular term used within video game spaces and amongst Genshin Impact fans but there is little agreement on the official definition of the term. I asked the participants what a “main” is to them and their answers varied. To some, a “main” is the character that one plays most frequently and has placed the most investment in. But for others, a “main” is the character that you like the most, regardless of how often you play them. Lena consistently changes her teams so that she can level up and try out new characters. Despite this, she considers the characters of Tartaglia and Tighnari to be her “mains” because of the bond she has with them and how much she cares for them. On the other hand, Will prefers to have their “mains” stay on their team, even if they have to play less efficient teams. Regardless of how one defines a “main”, there is a recurring association of the term with “caring for” or “having a bond” with a particular character.

Despite the game’s huge cast, I was stuck using only five characters on the Asian and North American servers because I was a new player and unable to afford any new characters. The term for players who do not spend money on the game is free-to-play or F2P players. These either do not engage with the gacha game mechanism and only rely on the game’s free characters, or they only use the currencies that the game provides for free. The limited selection of F2P characters in Genshin Impact includes the main character known as the Traveler, who is capable of utilising any of the game’s elements, Amber, the pyro-wielding archer, Lisa the Electro mage, Kaeya, the ice swordsman, and Barbara, the healer with water powers. Of this limited selection of characters, I have found that Kaeya has stood out for practical and personal reasons. Kaeya is stronger and easier to use than the other characters. Personally, I also feel that he has a far more interesting backstory and he is the only “non-white” character among the game’s starter characters. I am not alone in this appraisal as Kaeya is quite popular amongst the study’s participants. Zihan listed him as her favourite character in the game. One of the reasons that she enjoys him so much is because of his well-developed lore: Although Kaeya lives in Mondstadt, he was left there as a child by his father and originally hails from the game’s mysterious region of Khaenriah. For Zihan, Kaeya felt like an actual person that she could play as and interact with, unlike many other characters

that feel one-dimensional or flat. Kaeya is also popular amongst the game's LGBT+ fan base, partly because he approaches the main character in a flirtatious manner regardless of their gender.

During my time playing Genshin Impact, I have particularly enjoyed the character of Fischl. While I was not satisfied with her visually—I am uncomfortable with a character who is implied to be a teenager but wears what looks like lingerie—, both her combat style and her character's backstory are quite interesting. Fischl's combat performance involves summoning a Raven, known as Oz, who hits enemies with powerful electric strikes. This allows players to either play passively by casting Oz and moving on to other activities, or to be more active and fight alongside him. Another interesting part of Fischl's backstory is that she is an adventurer from Mondstadt who is an avid book reader to the point that she takes on the personality and behaviours of her favourite book series, even using the main character's name "Princess Fischl" (her real name is Amy). There is something fascinating about role-playing as a character that's already role-playing a character herself.

Will also enjoys the character of Fischl and lists her among their favourites for different reasons. What Will likes most about this character, however, is the fact that she is reminiscent of the "magical girl genre" that Will watched when they were a child. Often aimed at young women, the magical girl genre focuses on girls with magical powers who transform into superpowered forms and defeat villains. Common themes in the genre include friendships, self-empowerment, and agency (Saito, 2014). The reason that Will likes characters like Fischl has much to do with her allowing them to live through their childhood magical girl fantasies and embody that experience. The participants engaged with both the "girls' love" and "magical girl" genres as children, despite being far too young at that age to be the intended audience of the former genre. This is partially what led the participants to have as much of an interest in Genshin Impact when they were adults. They would passively consume these stories as children, by either reading or watching them on television. But through playing the game, they can become active participants who embody the characters and feel as though they are them.

Embodiment describes how experiences are enlivened, materialised, and situated in the world through the body. We define embodied identities through our physical body's interactions with the world around us (Schultze, 2014). Research demonstrates that online identities are rooted both in users' embodied experiences in virtual worlds and their offline

practices (Madge & O'Connor, 2008). Players embed themselves within virtual worlds through avatars. They consequently experience a virtual environment as something they can inhabit and that allow them to belong to this “world” (Klevjer, 2006).

When I encountered Zihan for the first time in her game world, it felt as if I were encountering someone completely new. Despite knowing each other for several months, there was always a slight awkwardness in our interactions. This unease disappeared when we played together, as she would frequently take control of situations and become more assertive with her playstyle. It would seem like she was taking on the traits of her characters, usually “main” damage dealers like Kaeya or Kamisato Ayato (not to be confused with his sister Kamisato Ayaka). Much of the research surrounding the self has indicated that, in constructing the self, an individual’s mind and body are not separate but connected aspects of the self that influence one another. This connection becomes apparent in virtual worlds since, although players will use the same characters, how players behave through these characters differs from person to person. There are no universal ways to experience an avatar: Characters tend to be played differently by each player due to the different life experiences of the players (Gualeni and Vella, 2019).

For example, some players use Kaeya as a physical damage dealer, while others prefer to dedicate him to ice damage. There are even players who use him exclusively as a supporting character, relegating him to the role of building ice bridges to traverse bodies of water. With the character of Venti, the absent god of Anemo, the air/wind region,<sup>25</sup> some players take on his “playful mannerisms” and annoy other players, while there are also those who instead use Venti to help other players. In one particularly memorable session, three other participants and I each played the character of Kaeya: Hana chose to take charge and serve as the main damage dealer, Joni took a backseat and served as a support, and Zihan had the common sense to switch to a healing character. Although we selected the same character, each of us played him differently.

The quest “Timmie’s Pigeons” offers an example of how players can both take on an avatar’s traits while also viewing the avatar as a separate person from themselves. This quest involves feeding wild pigeons on behalf of a young boy named Timmie. While playing this quest, players can choose to kill the pigeons instead of feeding them—something I unfortunately did by accident—which of course leaves Timmie incredibly upset. A

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<sup>25</sup> Venti is the Italian word for wind.

surprisingly large number of participants have chosen to kill the birds and with varying justifications. Often, they would blame it on the character, deciding on a particular course of action depending on which character they were using when they received the quest. Luka, for example, would kill them when using the hotblooded warrior Tartaglia for the quest but not kill them when using Barbara, who is a deaconess known for her kindness.

## 2.6 Avatar and the Body: A Journey of Self-Discovery

One of the reasons why avatar-based video games appeal to players is because the avatar is grounded in and plays with the general phenomenology of the body (Klevjer, 2006). These video games serve as a mediation of embodied agency that allows players to relate to the avatars and enables them to inhabit and belong to a virtual environment (Klevjer, 2006). In the avatar-user relationship, agencies, identities, and boundaries are often unclear, and everyday practices of the body (e.g., wearing clothes, sitting, or dancing) are how online identity is continuously validated. To be embodied within the world, it is essential to note that individuals are not just minds which happen to be connected to a body. Instead, individuals exist as subjects precisely because of how their bodies experience the world (Merlau-Ponty, 2002). The body is not only linked to the game environment through connections with its characters but also through a kinesthetic link (Wilhelmsson, 2008). The study's participants often moan in pain or grunt when taking hits or tilt and shift when running or gliding, meaning that their movements are reflected in those of the characters. The device someone uses to play Genshin Impact, a phone or computer, is not a hindrance to interacting with the character. By serving as an extension of both the character and the body of the player, the device instead functions as a bridge between the two. Whenever the participants or I played the game, we often found ourselves moving alongside the characters, jumping whenever they jumped (or at least rising slightly from our seats), groaning in frustration when they got hit, or even moaning in pain when dying. Pronoun usage would often change randomly from despairing shouts of "Kaeya's dead!" to frustrated cries of "I died!"

Due to the game's enormous map, exploration takes up a significant amount of gameplay. Moving from one country to the next or even from one mob of enemies to another, always uses plenty of a player's time, even if they use the teleporters placed conveniently around the world. Among the participants, each had characters that they preferred to use for exploration. These preferences could be for practical reasons (e.g., taller characters are much

faster at climbing and running than shorter models) though, more often than not, they chose these characters for sentimental reasons. For Zihan, it was Kaeya. She would always explore with him and use him to defeat enemies and open chests or other rewards. This was her way of rewarding him: She did not want to make it seem as if she was only using the character for labour, so she also gave him rewards for a job well done. Contrarily, when she dislikes characters, she denigrates them or uses them for less desirable tasks. For example, Zihan always assigns Diluc when she needs to sacrifice a character before wishing. On the other hand, Will always uses the character of Rosaria. For them, it is not simply an act of “playing as” or “using” a character. While they are in the game, they “become” Rosaria. She is not simply the body that Will uses to play but rather an identity and person that they become. In contrast, when Will uses other characters, the experience is the simpler one of “playing” as that character.

Schultze (2014) describes two different types of embodiments that exist in virtual worlds and the physical world: namely, representational identity and performative identity. Representational identity is based on the assumption that individuals choose how they behave and represent themselves and their appearance because of their identity. As they have a specific preconceived notion of themselves, they choose to perform in a specific way that represents it. Accordingly, representational identity relies on an assumption that there is a previous conscious “I” agent or self with a pre-created stable identity. Performative identity, on the other hand, is based on the idea that identity is produced socially. It is an understanding that “performing” in specific ways gives someone a particular identity. Schultze does not argue that one form of identity is more accurate than the other; rather, identity is a combination of the two, and they may overlap. Within virtual worlds, the avatar that an individual uses, meaning, how they choose to present themselves, can result from either of these aspects of embodied identity. Many of the participants liked certain characters or built strong relationships with their favourite characters based on their ability to relate to or identify with them.

When I first met Hana, I thought she was the picture of grace. It was like seeing the character of Ningguang in the flesh: Hana had Ningguang’s elegant walk, her proud laugh, and even the subtle hand gestures. Initially, I thought that Hana was role-playing the character. I had only met her after she started playing the game, so I was unsure if she always behaved like this or if she deliberately modelled herself after the character. It came as no surprise to find out that Ningguang was Hana’s favourite character. Within the game,

Ningguang is a rich woman who carries herself with an air of charm and power that is admired both in the game and by the player base. Within the game's storyline, she works as a highly successful businesswoman and is the wealthiest person in the world of Teyvat. As a playable character, she uses gemstones to cast powerful yet elegant attacks while wearing a modified qipao<sup>26</sup> and high heels. This combination of Ningguang's commanding and feminine attributes is exactly why Hana found herself drawn to this particular character in the first place: "She's just everything I like in a woman, besides being a capitalist."<sup>27</sup> Another example of how people relate to their avatars is well exemplified in Joni's behaviour. Her favourite game character, Beidou, is a rough, charismatic, and boisterous pirate woman. Like Ningguang she is popular with queer players – particularly with queer women. The "ship tease"<sup>28</sup> between these two characters certainly helps, as noted by several of the participants that regard her as one of their favourite characters. In contrast, Joni is a self-described timid and shy person. The self-assured personality of Beidou symbolises the self-confidence that Joni sometimes wishes she possessed: "I like how cool and strong Beidou is, everyone really looks up to her like she's their big sister."<sup>29</sup> How Joni and Hana relate to their avatars serves as examples of both representational and performative identities. One can see the representational identity in the fact that these players relate to Beidou and Ningguang, respectively, because both of these characters have ambiguous lesbian traits. As Joni and Hana have something in common with these characters, in terms of sexual orientation, they feel as though they are closer to them. By playing the game as them, an important aspect of their physical world identities is represented in the virtual world. In contrast, Joni's desire to acquire more confidence by playing as Beidou illustrates performative identity. Through playing as a character who is more self-assured, she hopes to acquire some of that attribute for herself in her day-to-day life in the physical world.

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<sup>26</sup> The figure-fitting, one-piece garment called qipao—also known as the cheongsam or zansae and sometimes referred to as the mandarin gown—is a traditional form of Chinese dress for women created in the 1920s.

<sup>27</sup> Hana, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

<sup>28</sup> "Ship tease" refers to when a romance is hinted to occur between characters.

<sup>29</sup> Joni, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.



*Figure 6: Ningguang (left) and Beidou (right) as seen in their promotional art.*

According to Iris, the game intentionally used popular Chinese girls' love tropes when designing these two characters. Girls' love refers to the genre of fiction that focuses on romantic relationships between women. Like the boys' love genre, which focuses on romantic relationships between men, girls' love tends to be more popular amongst women. Although, unlike boys' love, which tends to attract a mostly straight fan base, the fan base for girls' love tends to sway more towards queer women (Verena, 2015).

Rosaria is a popular character with LGBT+ audiences. When this character was first teased before her release, gamers raised the criticism that, with an exaggeratedly large chest as her most prominent feature, Rosaria was obviously designed for the male gaze. Fans of the game jokingly referred to her as the "vampire nun" or the "BDSM nun" because of how her costume made her look like a vampire and had dominatrix-inspired elements. Upon Rosaria's release, LGBT+ players took an interest in her character and many straight male players were angered because her bust size had been reduced. One of the reasons for queer interest in Rosaria was because, within the story, Rosaria is a nun who has no interest in the Church. She only serves because she was forced into the Church as a child. Rosaria comes across as jaded yet fiercely protective of the things she cares about. Some queer players resonated with

this storyline and found her to be relatable. Lena, for example, felt a connection with her rebellious nature. With her unique design, Rosaria became quite popular with players despite any initial impressions that she was meant to cater to the straight male gaze. Will, in particular, found the character of Rosaria to be their favourite. When I asked who their favourite character was, their face lit up with joy as they started to speak about Rosaria with a contagious delight. They excitedly shared how playing as her made them feel more confident:

I was talking to one of my friends who plays Genshin, and he's a straight guy so he's all about game mechanics and stats, and I'm like I can't play like that ... I need I need a cuntalicious character! She's an atheist nun, which is such a gag, like I'm like "Oh disillusioned Catholic woman let's go" you know... as she walks onto the field in her heels she's great ... I love it I love the girl love it!<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.



Figure 7: Rosaria, the right is a “censored” version of her outfit

## 2.7 The Affordances of Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds are intertwined with the physical world, so much so that anthropologists like Tom Boellstorff (2008) argue against the term “real world” by insisting that virtual reality is just as “real”. Despite this, the participants, and sometimes me as well, make a distinction between their experiences online and in the “real world”, with many stating that their behaviour online is different from the “real me”. Joni and Iris both remarked that they were more shy and less social online. Iris, in particular, took me by surprise with this statement because she came across as a social butterfly when we first spoke at our initial meeting on *Zoom*. Although our meeting was scheduled for an hour, the conversation flowed so naturally that we eventually spoke for three hours, with her permission and encouragement.

While someone might perform differently in a virtual world than they do in their day-to-day life in the physical world, it is perhaps a facet of themselves that they would like to see more in the offline world or rather it is the result of performing differently in the different social setting. Here it is necessary to emphasise that virtual worlds are not entirely different worlds. One can understand them as another social sphere, just as going to school or work means entering another space (Gualeni & Vella, 2019). Virtual worlds are not wholly

different but instead constitute another social context. Every social space offers unique affordances that may shape people's behaviours. Along with other virtual worlds, Genshin Impact can provide a new social realm from the comfort of the players' homes.

Anonymity is perhaps one of the greatest affordances that the participants are granted. As they interact online with people who are mostly strangers, they can behave in ways that are not impacted by the expectations that have been placed on them in the real world. The virtual world thus offers them a clean slate to act out aspects of the personalities that they are scared to "perform" offline. When playing Genshin Impact or using social media, Joni uses they/them pronouns but she/her pronouns in the physical world. This is because they do not yet feel comfortable with outing themselves to family members. Some act the way they do in the virtual world because they want to do the same in the physical world. Cabiria (2008) found that, for some, virtual worlds can serve as an intermediary step that allows them to evolve how they think about their sexual orientations as behaviours. Consequently, they emerge from their virtual experiences with a better sense of their identities.

## 2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how avatars work in virtual worlds and at the relationships that players form with their avatars. Since Genshin Impact is a gacha game, players need to gamble to receive additional characters to the free characters that they receive automatically. To incentivise spending, the game encourages them to form bonds with these characters and to form a stronger bond with the avatars by having to work or spend money to acquire them. Besides this bond, players also view the avatars as extensions of themselves that possess the characteristics they have or want to have. These characteristics are not only limited to personality traits and extend to how the characters express their gender. For some players, the avatar serves as a means to express the complexity of their gendered identities in a virtual space when they are unable to do so in the physical world.

## Chapter 3

### Transgressive Play

#### 3.1 What Makes a Fandom?

The Genshin Impact fandom is one of the main ways the participants share and connect with others. In its most basic definition, a fandom is a group of fans brought together because of their shared interest in something, usually media like television shows, films, novels and video games. Fandoms and fan engagement are some of the main reasons people are interested in video games like Genshin Impact and continue to enjoy them. For some, Genshin Impact serves as a foundation and "sandbox" for these creations. Others find new friendships by creating and sharing content. Many of the participants found themselves more invested in fan content than in the actual game. Iris explained this as follows:

Most of my engagement with things is for fandom, so you know the game is like an extra thing and I'm not as invested in it as I used to be. I think the games are nice but it's not my preferred method of consuming the character stories ... you know I see the fan content interpretations, but I do think the game is important [in] giving the material like the base elements to branch off from ... because there are some interesting basics branch off from you know ... but it's cool to see how people have interpreted them.<sup>31</sup>

Engagement with fandom can come in many forms. One of the main ways in which Lena contributes to fandoms is through drawing fan art, a lot of which is not suitable for work (NSFW). Most of the fan art she draws is posted on Twitter and she makes commissions that help her earn money. Shipping art is the primary focus of her employment. Since Genshin Impact has such a large abundance of characters, it is very easy to draw fan art of the characters and have an audience and market:

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<sup>31</sup> Iris, February 2023, online interview, Cape Town.

You can tell when they've made a character and they just they knew, they knew deep down that this character was gonna profit off of like, you know, body pillow sales and like huge posters for the boys to hang out in their rooms.<sup>32</sup>

Fan art also fills a gap in Lena's life in the physical world. She describes herself as single and explains that drawing characters who are in romantic relationships and who participate in romantic acts provides her with a sense of fulfilment. It may seem like common sense to assume that most fans first take an interest in a piece of media and join a fandom later on, but this is not always the case. As Zihan told me:

In the past I would play, I would get into a fandom first and then if that fandom had video games and I will try it out then. So Genshin is probably the first one where I get into the game first then I'll take [it] gradually ... I get into the fandom like I think to me getting into a fandom can be quite important because I like [it].<sup>33</sup>

What makes fandoms so important? By offering opportunities to help fans connect with other fans, fandoms help retain a consumer's interest in a piece of media. Lena describes how there was a mobile game that she played and loved. However, she quickly lost interest in the game because it had no fandom, leaving her unable to engage with others and see any fan art or other fan content. What kept her interested in Genshin Impact was the active fan engagement, seeing the memes, jokes, and art that other people made for the game allowed her to enjoy it more and increased the longevity of her experience. Iris felt that, although she struggles with the game's multiplayer modes, the ability to play with others and engage outside of the game keeps her interested: "It's easier for me to get invested in a game if I have someone else to play it with."

Fandoms can serve as a way to advertise the game to potential consumers. Iris states that she finds out about games through their fandoms because she is a fandom consumer. Due to this, fandom can be viewed as a double-edged sword that can keep people interested or drive them away from the game:

I can see the love that's been put into it, which makes me want to continue playing it. But as I think as always, like the people online are going to the

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<sup>32</sup> Lena, April 2023, online interview, Stellenbosch.

<sup>33</sup> Zihan, January 2023, online interview, Cape Town.

people who are obsessed with things like discourse and shipping and even the game mechanics and meta is gonna permeate the entire experience.<sup>34</sup>

Fandoms can have a huge impact on how characters, or any media in question, are viewed. Zihan describes how she can end up not liking particular characters because “their fandom or their character can be quite annoying”.<sup>35</sup> Several of the participants share Zihan’s opinion since seeing people be annoying about a particular character on social media impacts how they perceive that character within the game. One of the Genshin Impact characters that Zihan dislikes is Diluc, a winery owner and the strained brother of her favourite character Kaeya. While, in the story, the two characters are on the road to recovering their relationship, the Diluc fans who act rudely towards Kaeya on social media have caused Zihan to find Diluc annoying.

What makes someone become part of a fandom varies from person to person. Although Meera often looks at fan works, she does not consider herself a member of the Genshin Impact fandom because she does not actively contribute to it. While she actively looks at fan art, her lack of other active engagement with the community makes her feel that she is not a part of the fandom:

If I want to like just see like fan art and things like that or fan theories ... then that’s my level of engagement ... but I don’t think I actively take part in the fandom. I don’t add content or talk to people or stuff like that ... if I do talk to people it’s amongst my friends. Almost all of my friends play Genshin and so that’s my little micro-community that I speak to and that ... and we either just speak on our friend discord server or in person ... but no, I’m not super on any kind of like social media.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2 Where are the Fandoms?

The two most popular social media websites for fandom gatherings are Reddit and Twitter (which has rebranded to X). While both of these websites are designed for social networking, they nevertheless have distinct fan cultures. In 2023, both websites faced prominent issues but for different reasons. For Twitter, it was Elon Musk’s acquisition and subsequent

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<sup>34</sup> Lena April 2023, online interview, Stellenbosch.

<sup>35</sup> Zihan, January 2023, online interview, Cape Town.

<sup>36</sup> Meera, April 2023, online interview, Stellenbosch.

rebranding of the website. And for Reddit, it was how the website changed its rules regarding third-party websites. Both of these fundamental changes caused these websites to lose active users (Rohlinger et al., 2023). Reddit is more commonly used by fans who share guides of characters, cosplays, fan art, and other theory discussions of the game. Reddit has “subreddits” that users can either make themselves or join. For example, Genshin Impact has an official subreddit where official news is announced. But along with this official communication channel, there are additional subreddits dedicated to leaks of upcoming game information; subreddits dedicated to the game’s characters (with already released and upcoming characters having their own subreddits); and subreddits dedicated to memes and online jokes shared on various websites. Twitter, on the other hand, is a popular website to share fan art and promote fan fiction. Fan-made merchandise, such as posters or other handmade items, are also shared and advertised on Twitter. Beyond networking the fandom, Twitter also has a popular roleplaying community that allows fans to pretend that they are a particular character and engage with others who are also pretending to be various characters. Roleplaying tends to be more popular on niche websites, but Twitter allows the roleplaying to be available in a more public setting, allowing others to either join in or observe. Besides these two websites, other social networking websites such as Discord, YouTube, and Tumblr are also used by fans.

Of the previously mentioned fan fiction websites, the most popular one is Archive of Our Own (Ao3). One of the reasons for this website’s popularity is its rigorous tagging system that allows people to explicitly include or exclude the tags they want to look for in a particular piece of fan fiction. The authors of the fan fiction are responsible for adding the tags to the fan fiction. These include default tags and ones that the authors create. Tags include things such as a work’s rating, which involves flagging it as appropriate for general audiences, as mature or as explicit, stipulating which kinds of relationships are included, be they gay, lesbian, or mixed, explaining which characters are included in the fan fiction, as well as which relationships these characters are being “shipped” with, and highlighting which tropes appear in a work of fan fiction. I found browsing through Ao3 to be a whiplash-inducing experience: Stories will vary from a sweet story of a character who is babysitting the younger characters of the story to an adult-orientated romantic comedy, to an explicit story that features romanticised abuse. One of the more disturbing things I found was an untagged story that featured a romance between the aforementioned character and the child he was babysitting.

A large portion of the participants who use Ao3 do so as lurkers, meaning that they read stories but do not leave comments or kudos. There are many reasons why someone would choose to be a lurker in fandom spaces and not an active contributor. As Iris explains, one of them is shyness:

I used to be less shy but now I'm self-conscious ... I don't like putting myself out there too much ... I'm not like a presence on Twitter or anything.<sup>37</sup>

Fan fiction is also not a universal pursuit for all fans. Participants like Will do not engage with it at all and they were completely unaware of the existence of Ao3 until I mentioned it. Fan fiction also serves as a testament to a fan's dedication to their favourite characters. *Poor Fellow My Country*, a book published in 1975 by Australian Xavier Herbert, is believed to be the longest, published English book at 852,000 words. Currently, the longest Genshin Impact fan fiction is 13,841,097 words long. It is titled "*I love Scaramouche*" and consists in its entirety of the title phrase repeated 4,613,699 times. The longest serious fan fiction is written in Mandarin and stands at 763,061 words, whereas the longest English work of fan fiction is 598,815 words long. Both works are currently in progress and both of them are R-rated romance stories. The former is a romance story between male characters and the latter is a reader-insert story that features a female fan and the male characters of the game.

### 3.3 Fandom and Representation: Archive of Who's Own?

When I checked, there were roughly 142,847 stories within the Genshin Impact tag on Ao3. Of those stories, 75,026 (52.52%) were for male same-sex relationships, 31,219 (21.85%) were for heterosexual relationships, 21,173 (14.82%) had no romantic relationships, and 17,148 (12%) had romantic relationships between two women. Within the top ten most popular relationship stories in the Genshin Impact tag, eight are between two men, one is a platonic relationship between two men, and one is a heterosexual relationship. The only female character within the top ten most written-about characters is the default female avatar of the game. The overall popularity of men over women is surprising as women make up over 61% of the game's playable characters. Of the game's current cast of 70 characters, excluding the player-insert, 43 are female and 27 are male.

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<sup>37</sup> Iris, January 2023, online interview, Cape Town.

While Ao3 promotes itself as a place for marginalised creators who otherwise may not have a voice within the publishing industry, the demographics of the website tend to portray a different story. Other people's presentation of Ao3 as a haven for marginalised creators on their social media also contradicts the reality of the website's demographics. According to a study conducted in 2022, it was found that 77.90% of Ao3 users were white (Rouse and Stanfill, 2022). This actually exceeds the percentage of white authors in the global mainstream publishing industry, which stands at 76% (Lee and Low, 2019). North America and Europe comprise the bulk of the site's user base (62, 17% and 26,83%, respectively), while a measly 0.28% of users come from Africa (Rouse and Stanfill, 2022). The largest traditional publishing markets are the United States (29%), China (17%), and the United Kingdom (8%) (BookMap, 2017). However, the three countries whose citizens spend the most time reading are India, Thailand, and China (WorldPopulationReview, 2017). In terms of gender, 53,77% of authors on Ao3 are cisgender women, while in the mainstream publishing industry, 74% are cisgender women. Nonbinary people make up 13,43% of the website's user base, and trans people make up 8.94%. The reason for the lack of racial diversity within the Ao3 demographics is unknown, although there has been speculation that the website is a discriminatory environment towards people of colour (Lothian and Stanfill, 2021). Despite complaints that have been made by the site's users, racist and Neo-Nazi fan fiction have not been removed or tagged and the site does not mandate the tagging of racist content (Floegel, 2022).

The unwelcoming environment that Ao3 creates can be seen as a reflection of the broader fan culture's treatment of people of colour. While fandom is often presented as a safe space for "outsiders" and "outcasts", actual comments from marginalised people in fandoms paint a different picture (Morimoto, 2018). Some of the participants in this study have described fandom as "unbearably white". Will has noted that, while people of colour are usually treated poorly, white men, including fictional ones, are treated far better in fandom spaces:

This fandom, one thing they will go to bat for is a white twink! They will! It's like the Drag Race<sup>38</sup> fandom, you can literally be racist, you can be racist, or you

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<sup>38</sup> RuPaul's Drag Race is an American reality TV competition.

can do whatever you want but the second you speak up against a white twink, oh it's no it's actually it's just like fire and brimstone!<sup>39</sup>

This observation echoes what other scholars have noted regarding fandoms. A study done by Lori Morimoto on black Tumblr users' fandom experiences found that non-white characters, female characters and those who are both non-white and female are often ignored within fandom spaces, motivating one of her informants to state that "fandom is not made for me" (Morimoto, 2018: 268). Both of Morimoto's participants have noted that the behaviour shown in these fandom works concerning the treatment of the fictional characters and real non-white people in the fandom, reflects the treatment that they receive in the physical world. In such cases, a community meant to be a source of kinship instead becomes one of isolation (Morimoto, 2018).

In another study on the experiences of lesbian Xbox players, all of Gray's (2019) participants were black or brown lesbians who felt as though their identities not only impacted their physical experiences but their digital ones as well. Just as anonymity was not available to them, as often times their voices and accents would give away their race and gender, once their identities were discovered, they found themselves to be victims of violence and exclusion. Speaking about transcultural conflict in fandoms, Morimoto suggests that it would be possible to improve the experiences of marginalised fans. For them to remain in these spaces, normative fans need to meet them with a willingness to listen and learn from their grievances and not habitually deflect and defend. The Genshin Impact fandom is known to have a bad reputation for bigotry. Due to this, people remain in their own niches, which can lead to them not interacting with the fandom at all. Lena describes fandoms as having "pockets":

Some people are like only in it for the mechanics, some of them are in it for the ships, the other ones are in it for like the lore digging ... and they all they, they all sort of like, rub against each other at times so there's always going to be friction. You gotta find the people who know what's going on and like, shame it ... they're like I know what these people do and they're not normal.<sup>40</sup>

While a fandom exists for one piece of media, Genshin Impact in this case, the fandom is not a monolith. People engage with fandoms differently and have different expectations of them.

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<sup>39</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

<sup>40</sup> Lena, April 2023, face-to-face interview, Stellenbosch.

Due to this, people first need to find their niches before fandoms can truly become “safe spaces”.

Fans then take these interpretations of scenes and character interactions and write them down. Some people choose to share these interpretations on social media. They are referred to as “headcanons” because, while they might not be canonical within the game itself, they are canons in the player’s head. Some take these further and craft them into fan works or content. Fans can take those interpretations of characters that they have constructed while playing the game and fashion them into art or stories that they then share on the internet. One of the most prominent ways of creating fan content is through fan fiction: fiction that fans write about existing media properties. Fan fiction can be set in the media’s canonical fictional universe or an alternate universe of the fan creator’s imagination. Although Genshin Impact is a video game, fans elaborate on the storylines and provide their own world-building, thereby turning the game into a more collaborative space to produce art. The creation of fan works implies that players are active consumers of a given media product and not just passive observers (Tanaka-Cooper, 2020). Unlike other forms of media, such as novels and films, where consumers follow the narrative passively, video games require active interaction with the environment and storyline. While games tend to have a specific end goal, players can make choices about which characters they want on their team, which quests they want to ignore, and which ways to solve the game’s problems. This active engagement is an easy segue into producing fan works.

Through fan fiction, fans not only produce homages and parodies of original commodified works for their personal pleasure, but they also publish their works to spark interaction and bridge a shared imaginary (Galbraith, 2011). Floegel (2020) describes the creative aspects of fan works as “user-generated affordances”. Within fan works, there is a space for every single character to be a person of colour or to be queer. Fan fiction is not subject to the same censorship and marketing that limits the diversity of media properties like video games. This allows for the inclusion of more characters from marginalised identities. Through the transformative process of fan fiction, participants can create their own representations where, otherwise, representations would either only be implicit or entirely absent. In fan fiction, characters are made explicitly queer, both in the sense of doing away with ambiguities and making the stories X-rated.

The characters included in fan fiction are most commonly from an original piece of media, although some authors have included original characters (OCs) or written reader-insert stories.<sup>41</sup> In terms of fan fiction, the participants in this study have described how the “flatness” in the personalities of some characters and the untouched potential of the game’s lore make writing fan fiction much easier:

They (fans) like genre bend with it as well ... I mean some of the lore in Genshin just lends so well to like horror and suspense, and like political intrigue. Which is often overshadowed in the in the main game, but it’s awesome to see people be like “you know has no one mentioned that Kaeya is from Khaenriah? Like, why aren’t we talking about this?” ... and then you write like an eleven chapters fan fiction documenting how the hell that might have come about.<sup>42</sup>

For many of the participants, creating fan content is also an avenue for creativity. Zihan enjoys writing fan fiction as she finds it to be an outlet for her imagination and self-expression, a way to provide her interpretation of a character. Lena describes fandoms as “a source of like socialisation, community and creativity, that’s a really great sort of way of reconciling the two”.<sup>43</sup> Lena is a former student who introduced me to the concept of “transmedia world building”. This concept describes how media crosses the boundaries of its original medium to offer a more immersive experience (Jenkins, 2006). Transmedia is also referred to as participatory media, where not just the creators or the writers of an original piece of content decide the fate of the work. Instead, fans are also given a say in how the world is written. Tanaka-Cooper (2020) has compared consumers to hunter-gatherers who go out and seek the aspects of a work that they like and then expand on it, making changes where they see fit to create a rich entertainment experience. Often, this is done by creating character narratives that mirror their life experiences. This practise allows them and the audiences of their fan fiction to connect over similar real-world experiences.

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<sup>41</sup> Reader-insert stories are stories where the reader is placed inside a story based on a particular media and interacts with the characters of the media.

<sup>42</sup> Lena, April 2023, online interview, Stellenbosch.

<sup>43</sup> Lena, April 2023, online interview, Stellenbosch.

### 3.4 Queercoding: Making Subtext into Text

In the case of video games, designers and writers usually have a specific player or market in mind for a game. This specific player has been named the “implied player”, a term coined by Espen Aarseth that refers to the ideal player of a video game who follows the guidelines of the game’s designers (Aarseth, 2007). This player embodies all the predispositions that are necessary for the video game to exercise its effect. Aarseth argues that it is a construct and that it does not fully align with any real player. Instead, it provides a set of expectations that the player is meant to fulfil. What Aarseth terms “transgressive play” is play against the implied player. This is a form of game playing that does not follow the intended design of the game but instead looks for glitches in the game that the player can exploit for their own enjoyment or benefit. The video game industry is often described as homogenous, as it is simply assumed that all players are white, cisgender, and heterosexual men (Shaw, 2009). This perceived homogeneity has led to a lack of LGBT+ content in games, extending to the online cultures surrounding games as well.

For gacha games, the implied player is a heterosexual man who typically possesses a disposable income to acquire new characters. This assumption is partly accurate, at least regarding the gender makeup of gacha game players. When it comes to general gaming statistics, women account for 48% of all video game players (Bougacha, 2022). Most gacha games tend to have a player base that skews male, with Genshin Impact’s player base being 61% men and 39% women, according to a 2021 survey (Lindner, 2024). While the game does have LGBT+ content, it is often ignored or portrayed ambiguously. In response to the lack of LGBT+ content, some gaymers have taken to creating their representation in games,<sup>44</sup> either through “shipping” characters by imagining relationships between them, or through “transforming” a character by envisioning a different gender or sexuality for them (Zemlicka, 2020). Shipping, in particular, occurs commonly in fan spaces among LGBT+ fans, especially women. Kohnen (2018) describes how social networking sites (Tumblr in particular) are spaces for identity exploration and community building. She has found that, through fan community activities such as writing fan fiction, sharing experiences, and creating fan art, fans were able to reflect on their queer identities and address what it means to be queer. While Tumblr is a globally available social networking site, Kohnen focused on

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<sup>44</sup> A portmanteau of the words “gay” and “gamer”. The exact origin of the term is unknown and is used to broadly refer to any LGBT+ gamers.

its influence in the United States. She also noted that queer women occupied a large portion of these fan spaces.

Fan fiction offers an opportunity to take incomplete stories, both in terms of representation and storytelling, and make them more fulfilling. In terms of LGBT+ representation, it looks at instances of queerbaiting and inverts them onto queer potential (Needham, 2020).<sup>45</sup> Meera emphasises that not reading fan fiction would make *Genshin Impact* feel incomplete:

So, see when you play *Genshin*, have the new reading fan fiction as well otherwise you're just thirsty and dying ... like you have to read the fan fiction type fiction to supplement because the gay-baiting is too much, too much!<sup>46</sup>

A form of constructing queer readings or interpretations is through the practice of “outing” popular culture as queer, meaning that one interprets popular media works as though they had intentionally been made with queer representation in mind (Lipton, 2008). The ability to control interpretation allows queer youth to create positive representations of themselves. When queer youth are empowered by a queer reading practice, they eventually learn to demand more tangible representations of the queer experience (Lipton, 2008).

*Genshin Impact* has been accused of queerbaiting; although, many argue instead that the game queer codes. Queer coding refers to the practice where characters are only ever implied to be LGBT+, never explicitly stated. This can be for various reasons, the most notable being censorship. Fan fiction and fan works can be interpreted as a form of resistance against heteronormativity (Llewellyn, 2022). They question ideas and “common sense” that have been normalised, using media to engage the broader public in asking crucial questions: Why must all relationships be straight? Why is everyone cisgender? Creating works centred on people who are not heterosexual or cisgender means to normalise queerness (Llewellyn, 2022). In this regard, fan fiction and fan art are an example of queer theory. Queer theory is a rejection of the status quo, and predefined labels and involves exploring and creating alternative ways to understand identity based on people’s own terms. This has led to queer theory being compared to drag in that it allows people to question the norms of the world,

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<sup>45</sup> Queerbaiting, also known as gaybaiting, refers to a marketing technique for fiction and entertainment in which creators hint at, but do not depict, same-sex romance or other LGBT+ representation (Harrad, 2018). It is typically done to attract a LGBT+ public, or cisgender and heterosexual allies, to the particular media property.

<sup>46</sup> Meera, April 2023, online interview, Stellenbosch.

particularly as pertains to gender expression and performance (Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020). Both queer theory and drag engage with the queer imagination and ask us to question or imagine a world that is different from the one we currently live in.

With video games, which emulate real life and have real-life social norms and objectives, queer players use transgressive play to create their own counter-normative narratives and interpretations. This anti-heteronormative transgressive play engages with queer imagination to facilitate the re-imagining of virtual worlds (Keenan and Hot Mess, 2020). Kohnen (2018) describes queer expression through fan art and fan fiction as a form of resistance. Fan communities are frequently seen as a source of escapism from reality. However, Kohnen notes how the members of these spaces argue against this statement as they consider their fan creations and community as being anchored in the real world and in activism. The creations that they make, many of which centre queer characters, are meant to work against the normative depictions of heterosexuality in media (Kohnen, 2018). Similar to this, Lothian et al. (2007) have found that the often erotic works created by the members of fandoms are meant to challenge heteronormativity in society and provide women with an outlet to express themselves. This might happen primarily with fan content but there are other means through which this occurs as well, such as rethinking or reviewing in-game stories to make them queerer than they are. For example, Will interpreted and reimagined the story quest of Ayaka as not being a date between the character and the player-insert male avatar but rather as a lesbian love story:<sup>47</sup>

When I did Ayaka's story quest I got butterflies when she was like: "Oh maybe we'll meet in another life" and obviously I'm playing as Lumine and so I'm like "Oh my God lesbians she wants me!" but obviously if I was playing as Aether, I would be like: this is boring!<sup>48</sup>

At face value, the story's quest comes across as a date between the main character and Kamisato Ayaka, as it involves trying on new kimonos and making food, ending with Ayaka performing a dance for the player. The dance takes place through an unskippable cinematic cut scene that switches the player character to whichever of the twins the player selected at

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<sup>47</sup> Quests are the main story content in Genshin Impact. There are four different types of quests: Archon quests (which follow the game's main plot), world quests (which are given by random NPCs and give more lore to the different regions of the game), commissions (which are small daily tasks), and story quests (which focus on one specific character and develop their personality or background).

<sup>48</sup> Will, March 2023, face-to-face interview, Cape Town.

the start of the game. However, in reality, the story's quest follows Ayaka on her quest to find out more about her deceased mother. It is written to place the player in Aether's shoes so that their perspective of the game involves Ayaka falling in love with them. Will, however, makes their own interpretation the correct one.

Players tend to play the most with story quests, since they present among the few opportunities when players can interact with a game's playable cast without choosing them as a playable avatar or owning them. Some players will restart the quests repeatedly, usually by exiting the game during cutscenes, as a means to continue playing and spending time with the characters, especially when they are characters that the players do not own. Leaving the story quest unfinished can also allow the character to linger around in the game's world, thereby giving a more "alive" feel to the game.

The character of Lisa the librarian, who is also a witch, has a story quest that revolves around collecting an overdue library book. While this quest revolves around finding the lost book, it also focuses heavily on spending time with Lisa. The player questions the owners of an antique shop, a restaurant, and a flower shop about the book's whereabouts. While questioning them, the player can choose from various options. There are several correct answers that a player can choose to further the quest. To make the quest feel more like a romantic date, players like Hana choose options that Lisa, the character, would like, such as a pair of bloomers, her favourite food, and her favourite flower. This prolongs the quest and showcases how there are more creative ways to enjoy a quest than only playing according to its linear design.

One of the ways through which LGBT+ players create representations is to draw or write the female characters as muscular or butch. Players take the game's available characters and mould them to fit onto these more familiar labels. Part of the reason why the characters' identities get altered and played with is to make them more familiar to a South African audience. This serves as a form of meaning-making, allowing players to interpret situations, events, objects, or discourses in the light of their previous knowledge and experiences. Within queer Chinese communities, there are three different subcategories of lesbians, meaning that lesbians will typically sort themselves into one of three subcategories: T, short for "tomboy"; P, a shortening of *po*, which is the Mandarin word for "wife"; and H, which is short for "half" or women who feel like they straddle the line between T and P (James, 2023). These cultural nuances tend to be lost on South African gaming audiences, among whom subcategories such as femme, butch, and stud tend to be far more popular.

There are many female characters within the Genshin Impact storyline. However, they all have the same body type and visual representation, which is young, sylphlike and incredibly slim, though with some minor variations in terms of height and bust size. These characters have thus been drawn specifically to appeal to heterosexual men. Away from the representations created by the game's designers, the game's fan art works against the heterosexual male gaze and, by representing its female characters as taller or bulkier and less demure, makes them more appealing to the queer women who play the game. In queer fan representations, the female characters of Genshin Impact are often drawn with appearances that are more appropriate and realistic for their careers, e.g., as knights, pirates or mercenaries. For example, the story describes Beidou as muscular and large. But her visual representation in the game contradicts this description and shows her as thin and sylphlike. It is only in fan art that she is drawn to match her physical description more closely.

Some drawings and fan fiction also provide the characters with culturally accurate clothes. For example, the leader of Inazuma, Raiden Shogun, is given a longer kimono that extends beyond her upper thighs. Lena shared some fan art that centred on reimaginings of the Sumeru characters. In the figure below, the character representations in the top row have been reworked in fan art while the bottom row's representations show how they appear in the game. The focus of the fan art was mostly to draw more accurate images of the characters and align their representations with the real-world cultures that inspired them.



*Figure 1: Fan art of the Sumeru cast: From left are Nahida, Tighnari, Alhaitham, Dehya, Nilou, and Candice. The characters Tighnari<sup>49</sup> and Alhaitham<sup>50</sup> are both named after real scholars from the Islamic Golden Age.*

The character of Nahida, who is the God of the region, is portrayed as a small and pale child with white hair and a white dress that has minor green accents. Besides the bangle on her right arm, nothing else gives a hint of the region that this character represents. In the fan art

<sup>49</sup> Named after the Andalusian Arab Muslim agronomist, botanist, poet, traveler and physician Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Malik al-Murri al-Tighnari al-Gharnati (commonly referred to as Al Tighnari).

<sup>50</sup> Named after the medieval Islamic mathematician, astronomer and physicist Abu al-Hasan ibn al-Hasan ibn al-Haytham (commonly referred to as Hasan ibn al-Haytham).

depictions of Nahida, she is given mehndi,<sup>51</sup> thale bottu (the jewellery covering her forehead), and a modified sari to reference the Hindu mythology from which her character is drawn. Other characters are also given more culturally appropriate attire in fan art depictions, such as Nilou<sup>52</sup>, who is given Persian clothes, and the North African character Dehya, who is given Amazigh, also called Berber face and neck tattoos.

I was unable to locate fan art of the official written character representations in Genshin Impact fan works of these written interpretations. Numerous websites host fan fiction, such as Archive of Our Own, Fanfiction.net, Tumblr, and LiveJournal. Archive of Our Own has over 100,000 works. Joni and Hana directed me toward some of their favourite stories, one of which is the current female romance story with the most kudos,<sup>53</sup> a story titled “Chimera” which has just over 6,000 kudos; admittedly a high number, but one that pales in comparison with the 35,000 kudos of the website’s highest-rated male romance story. Despite the general lack of attention to women-centred stories, dedicated queer fans show their appreciation by leaving in-depth and heartfelt comments. “Chimera” takes place in an alternate universe that centres the wants, desires, and dreams of the minor Genshin Impact character Beidou and transforms her from a supporting cast member into a main character. The story begins as a romance but slowly develops into a dramatic action plot in which Beidou has to defeat a giant sea beast, to not only save her love but also the rest of the world. While the story takes place within an alternate universe to that of the game, the characters’ overall personalities correspond with the official game’s universe. As a nod to Genshin Impact’s country of origin, Chinese mythology constitutes an important influence in the “Chimera” story. For example, the character Ningguang, who is the main love interest in this fan fiction, is a representation of the Goddess Nūgua.<sup>54</sup> Originally, the author of “Chimera” intended for it to only consist of one chapter (commonly referred to as a “one-shot” in fan

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<sup>51</sup> Mehndi (or Mehendi) is a traditional form of painting on the human body (most especially hands and feet) with a paste that is made from dried henna leaves. It is painted onto the skin in intricate patterns that usually create a temporary cherry-red or brown staining or tattoo.

<sup>52</sup> A Farsi girl’s name meaning “water lily” or “lotus flower”. It is typically used as a nickname for the longer given name Niloufar.

<sup>53</sup> “Kudos” is the word used for “likes” on this website. The word “kudos” is used in informal English speech, most frequently in North American English, as a complimentary expression of praise, honour or congratulations for a specific person’s success or achievement.

<sup>54</sup> Nūgua or Nūwa is a mother goddess in Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, Chinese Buddhism, and Taoism. She is considered to have created humankind with yellow clay and is one of the Three Sovereigns in Chinese mythology. She is said to have repaired the damage after an enormous battle between several deities broke the pillars that support heaven and created holes in its floor.

fiction). However, the outpouring of support that they received in the story's comments motivated them to lengthen the story to eventually include thirty-three chapters. One of the first reader comments is negative:

[Y]ou can NOT put Chinese mythology and sapphics together, I cant TAKE IT I am Chinese, grew up Chinese and ngl [not gonna lie] always sort of had a crush on the sketches of nu gua in books and stuff, but not knowing there is a depiction of her being Ningguang, I am in LOVE WITH HER.<sup>55</sup>

Upon completion, its 213,918-word count leaves “Chimera” just 2,000 words shy of the length of Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*. Joni is a big fan of the story. The element that she enjoys the most is that, in the context of a lesbian relationship that is central to the story, the characters feel fleshed out and fully developed. The writing of “Chimera” took over two years to complete, with Hana and Joni waiting patiently for updates that came daily, weekly, and (eventually) monthly. The story’s comments section was often a jovial space that included excited remarks theorising about what would happen next in the upcoming chapters.

In addition to “Chimera”, another story that gained popularity is “Lantern Rite Afterparty”. Not even 2,000 words long, this story largely focuses on a sexual encounter between the characters Ningguang and Beidou. The title refers to an in-game event, called the Lantern Rite Festival, which has become quite popular with queer players because Ningguang and Beidou interact onscreen for the first time and have dialogue that fans interpret as romantic. The popularity of this piece of fan fiction stems from how it plays with gender. Two of the tags on the story are “Butch Boy Beidou” and “Daddy Ningguang”. Within “Lantern Rite Afterparty”, Ningguang still dresses in a feminine manner (as in the game) and wears a long modified blue qipao. But she also asks to be addressed by the term “Daddy” and acts dominant towards the butch character.

Even though this may seem contradictory, the practice of non-binary or gender non-conforming lesbians using “male” gendered terms is quite common. Shaw (2015) describes how many LGBT+ people with intersecting identities are aware that their identities are not represented in media due to being too complex. Fan fiction enables more complex gender representations because it is written for fans and by fans. Unlike official game franchise

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<sup>55</sup> Comment by Ao3 user, messeduplittlebastard, October 2023. Emphasis made by commenter.

narratives, fan fiction is not created for profit, which allows for the representations of intersecting “unmarketable” identities.

Besides featuring queer romances, the character descriptions in queer fan fiction stories will frequently mention features associated with transgender bodies. This includes mentioning top surgery scars, which occur when transgender men have female-looking breasts removed or reconstructed surgically to appear more like male-looking pectoral muscles. The ways in which characters are shown to be queer goes beyond the story itself: A story’s tags generally mention the sexual identities of the characters, such as “Trans Kaeya” or “Lesbian Ningguang”. Some of the content written for transgender people tends to be fetishistic in nature. For example, the “man with vagina” tag is often not used to represent transgender men but rather cater to a specific transphobic sexual fetish. As a result, transgender authors commonly use the tag description “author is trans” to inform readers of the story’s content and as an implicit statement that this work of trans-fiction will be more accurate than the fetish stories of cisgender authors.

### 3.5 Conclusion

While Genshin Impact is popular amongst LGBT+ players as represented by the participants in this study, like many other video games, it is not designed with these LGBT+ players specifically in mind. As a way of working through this heteronormativity by design, LGBT+ players engage with gameplay and the wider online Genshin Impact gaming environment through various subversive methods of queering, which include fan fiction, fan art and transgressive play. Their transgressive play goes against the game’s implied white, heterosexual, cisgender male player, extending quests and increasing queer enjoyment.

Added to this, the fan fiction created about and for Genshin Impact frequently focuses on making queer themes unapologetically conspicuous, while a prominent body of fan art increases the game’s representational diversity. Fan fiction and fan art are both shared with and created by fandoms. Although these fandom spaces can, at times, be places of exclusion and prejudice, they are also meant to be empowering spaces that, as with any fan environment, aren’t bound by the money-driven normativity of the game’s official design. In being free from these restrictions, the Genshin Impact fandom offers the game’s players a

liberating space that is remarkably inclusive, thus allowing a culturally, racially and sexually diverse game audience to express themselves through their engagement with the game.

## Conclusion

This study is an ethnography of an online gaming community of the video game Genshin Impact; insight has been gained into the gaming practices of a selection of participants who identify as non-white, LGBT+ gamers in South Africa. While the gaming space has often been filled with exclusion and prejudice against those coming from marginalised identities, people who subscribe to those identities nevertheless continue to both play video games and interact with gaming spaces. Genshin Impact offers players an immersive environment. This is because of both the game's genre, ARPG (action role-playing game), and its open-world design. Through highly detailed environments, many of which resemble real-world locations, Genshin Impact offers players the feel of physically being within the different locations. This has taught the study's participants, and the game's players from all over the world, more about the cultures of the countries that are featured in the game, thereby inspiring them to do even more of their own research in learning about them.

The game is, however, not devoid of the contextual problems of the physical world. Despite its fantastical world-building elements, Genshin Impact remains a commercial product that was created to earn profits in the physical world. Moreover, it is vulnerable to real-world cultural biases in that the game's design does make use of national and cultural stereotypes of other countries. This stereotyping is most notable in the game's nations that are based on Asian countries other than China. The political desire to develop and establish China as a global superpower has led to inaccurate portrayals of other Asian countries as well as African countries.<sup>56</sup> For the participants and players who are aware of these problematic stereotypes, these inaccurate portrayals can often ruin their immersion and enjoyment of the game's virtual world.

In order to navigate the virtual worlds of role-playing video games, players need to make use of customisable avatars. The avatars of these video games allow players to be embodied and exist within the game's virtual space. Although the avatar is a placeholder for the game's main character that the player controls, players form unique relationships with their avatars to the point of seeing the avatars as projected placeholders for themselves inside

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<sup>56</sup> This use of gaming media to establish particular relationships between countries, assigning a pecking order to the powerful and less powerful in terms of how accurately or inaccurately their cultures are represented, has also occurred frequently in the gaming industries of Japan and the USA.

the virtual world of the game. As the avatar is used as a personal means to navigate the fantasy worlds of video games, players form intricate emotional bonds with their avatars, often while also interacting with the avatars of other players in multiplayer games. Players will spend hundreds or even thousands of hours online with their avatars, forming strong psychological connections. The resulting relationships between players and their avatars can manifest in different ways, depending on each unique person and character. The two most common ways of seeing the avatar are as a friend or a representation of themselves. Forming an avatar relationship is encouraged by the designs of role-playing games, as this genre of games relies on the players liking characters enough to spend real-world money on acquiring them. Many of the study's participants enjoyed the free or easily acquired characters in Genshin Impact more, to the point of them being their favourites, rather than the game's rarer or more "meta" characters. This may well be because the players encountered the free characters first. But it is also because they formed strong bonds with these characters based on their compelling designs, storylines, and personalities. Often times for many of the participants they would play with characters who they shared personal details with, such as gender or sexuality. Playing as these characters would often be a gender reaffirming experience as in the physical world gender transitioning can often be a costly experience while in the virtual space, they can occupy a body commonly viewed as "female" without the need of expensive surgeries. As players rely on frequently changing characters, and such frequently change genders, it demonstrates that gender is not just dependent on an individual's body but also personal identification.

The bonds that players form with their avatars inspire them to create fan works and interact with fandoms. These interactions are often also a source to showcase their creativity as graphic artists and writers. Like the avatars that participants use when playing Genshin Impact, fan fiction and fan art can fill in the gaps that players experience within their own "real-world" lives. A prominent example of this practice occurs with fans who are not in romantic or sexual relationships, such as LGBT+ players who cannot live open lives, would feel romantically fulfilled through the game's characters romantic relationships. The fan fiction that the game's players create can also take on transgressive themes, such as stories that showcase diversity and inclusion, thus highlighting how certain characters or regions are mistreated by either the fandom or the game's writers.

Players also engage in transgressive play as a form of play that goes against expectations of what constitutes the game's "implied player". The implied player of video

games is often assumed to be white, male, heterosexual, and cisgender. In gacha games, the implied player is also assumed to be someone who spends real-world money on the game's monetised gacha mechanics. Transgressive play takes a different approach—as with participants like Will—by ignoring the game's intended heteronormative romance subplots and reimagining a lesbian romance in its place. In doing this, they break free from the game's design constraints and create a richer and more unique experience, not only for themselves but also for the enthusiastic wider queer community that plays the game alongside them.

Through this research project, I was able to talk to and learn about some wonderful individuals and the communities in which they partake in. Despite my frequent use of the term, they began to be viewed less as participants and more as friends. What I hope has been made clear with this project is that LGBT+ and non-white players are not new to the gaming scene but rather they are groups which have always existed and now are achieving more and more prominence. Social media have contribute to increase accessibility, visibility and the growth of these groups. Despite discrimination, these communities continue to thrive, initiating processes of transmedia worldbuilding, that bridge "virtual" and "real" worlds, dicovering to and discover new ways to imagine a different ways of being, making gaming spaces truly "open world".

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