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Representation of Players' Experiences in Fanfiction: A Case Study of Gacha-game Genshin Impact

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Abstract

The world of Genshin Impact, an open-world action role-playing game, has gained immense popularity among players since its release in 2020. Along with the game's updates, the fan fiction works have been growing exponentially on various platforms. In this article, we explore the correlation between the quality of the updates and the number of created fan fiction works. Our hypothesis suggests that when the update is filled with interesting characters, in-game mechanics and events, players become fully immersed in the game world and do not feel the need to create new fan content. Conversely, when the update is unsatisfactory, players attempt to fulfill their desires by creating new fan fiction works. To prove this hypothesis, we conducted a study of the updates and the corresponding fan fiction works. Our findings suggest that there is a significant correlation between the quality of the updates and the number of fan fiction works created. The study also highlights the significance of fan fiction in creating a community around a game and shows how it can reflect players' perceptions of the game's updates. Overall, our article sheds light on the relationship between fan fiction writers and in-game updates, and its implications both for the gaming and literary industry. This study and its results can also be used as a case study in media literacy courses and or lessons.

Keywords: digital media, videogames, fan communities, fan fiction, user generated content.

1. Introduction

Fan studies have become a popular area of scientific research. It is an interdisciplinary field, with links to culturology, sociology, media studies, etc.

Fan communities, as an integral component of media consumers, have evolved their own unique methods of interpretation, modes of social interaction, and styles of cultural production. These practices have emerged from the shared passions and interests of the community, establishing a distinct identity that is both recognizable and meaningful to its members. It is widely acknowledged that these communities play a critical role in shaping the discourse surrounding popular culture and are often responsible for driving new trends and innovations in media (Jenkins, 2018: 16).

Fans make their interpretations and express their evaluation of media products, in addition to open discussions on various online forums, through fan art in the broad sense of the word. It takes many forms: fan videos, fan comics, fan videos, fan songs, fan art, and finally fan fiction. Fans could also influence media production by their activity expressed in some kinds of collective and individual creativity. Fans show a clear liking or disliking of a media product, and thus the media producer understands what is worth editing and what the user likes unconditionally.

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Fanfiction, also known as fanfic or FF, is a type of fictional writing that is often created by fans of some work and is based on existing works of fiction. The author of fanfiction uses existing characters, storylines, or other intellectual property owned by the original author as a foundation for their work. Fanfiction can range from a few sentences to entire novels, and may either stick to the original creator's characters and settings, or introduce new ones. Fanfiction is a type of fan product that can be based on any fantasy theme, with many writers using movies, cartoons, comics, or video games as inspiration for their works.

K. Prasolova defines this type of creativity as “a peculiar, textually expressed passion; ... an emotional, visible and tangible interpretative response of the mass culture consumer to media products” (Prasolova, 2009: 3). Other scholars claim that it is fanfiction that performs “the function of demonstrating the multitude of individual reader interpretations of a work” (Timoshenko, 2015: 91).

Many fan studies involve the study of fan fiction in film or literature fandoms. We decided to focus on video games, in particular one of the most popular in recent times. Officially Genshin Impact is an open world action RPG game, however, most of its players call it a “gacha game” because at its core it has the same mechanics as most gacha games. Gacha is a video game that implements the gacha (slot machine game) mechanism. Similar to loot boxes, gacha games challenge players to spend in-game currency to obtain random in-game items. The developer of Genshin Impact is a Chinese video game developer and studio called miHoYo based in Shanghai, China. miHoYo both developed and produced Genshin Impact themselves. The target audience of the game is mainly young people from 19 to 22 years old. According to a study about motivations for virtual rewards in online F2P Gacha games this age group makes up to 52.3 % of the total number of players (Dong, 2020: 10).

With Genshin Impact being an online game, with a live service support model, it receives constant updates that add content to the game. As it is a gacha game, the added playable characters act as a content that players can explore and interact with. This game, as most others in the same genre do this with the help of the so called “banners”.

In gaming, banners refer to collections of items such as characters, maps, and loot, which can be obtained through “rolling”. These banners can either be permanently available or have a limited time offer. Games often feature a combination of both types of banners, with in-game advertising and retention efforts highlighting the exclusivity of the latter's components. To compensate for the limited availability, game companies sometimes make “reruns”. Reruns are just a repeated addition of the previously limited banner. In addition to the mentioned above types of content addition, sometimes developers hold in-game events. These events, and banners, all affect both the interest in the game and the interest in making content dedicated to that game.

According to the Player Counter service, players from Russia make up 6.52 % of all players. Russia is thus in the top 3 countries by active daily participation. Therefore, the authors focus on the Russian-speaking segment of the Genshin Impact fandom and consider Russian-language fanfiction in their analysis.

We are interested in players' reactions to updates, to marketing and advertising moves that attract user attention, the reasons for these reactions and how they are expressed. Our goal is to trace the correlation between fan activity and the publication/release of game updates, as well as the interdependence of the main themes and motivations of fan derivative and professional original content. In other words, the authors seek to determine the strength and direction of this correlation.

As we have said, the main target audience for both video games and fanfiction (its producers and consumers) is the younger generation. This new digital generation has competencies and skills not only in independent writing, but also in interpreting the other's writing, which are little mastered by the generation that teaches media literacy to them. As we know, “one of the most important tasks of media literacy education is to develop the audience's ability to analyze media texts of different types and genres, including fiction texts” (Fedorov, 2019: 244). Therefore, this study is useful for these educators. Learning about such cases equalizes the different generations in the media space.

2. Materials and methods

We took works (texts) posted on the platform Ficbook.net (“Fanfiction Book”, “Ficbook”, KF) as a source of our analysis. In 2007, a resource was established with the primary objective of catering to the creative endeavors of movie, TV series, and book enthusiasts. This platform allows

fans to share their literary work, utilizing characters, storylines, the art world, and other elements from their favorite works. By providing a space for these creative endeavors, the resource offers a unique opportunity for fans to explore their passions and showcase their talent to a wider audience. This has led to the emergence of a vibrant and diverse community, united by their shared love for popular culture and their desire to engage with it in a meaningful and creative way. At the time of our research, according to an analysis by SimilarWeb, Ficbook has 83.5 monthly visitors. This resource is the most popular not only in the field of fan fiction, but also in the field of books and literature in general.

If we talk about the principles this website works on we can say that registered users can publish both fan fiction works and original works written by them directly; translations of fanfiction and original works from foreign languages (most often only with the original author's permission); articles and research about fanfiction as a whole or a particular fandom. "Articles" are texts of a publicistic nature, and are divided into two types: in some particular fandom "Originals" - are articles about fanfiction art and writing (e.g. "Tips for a Beginning Author", "How to Take Criticism Properly", "Why Do We Want to Write Fanfiction?", "Copyright Problems When Writing Fanfiction", and so on); in other fandoms, these articles are written as a character analysis, reflections on a book or series, humorous notes (e.g. "Why Naruto Behaves Unlikely", "Death Note: Light Yagami – Villain or Hero?", "What to Do If You Got Trapped In the World of Hitman Reborn?", and so on).

Each fanfic being a way of expressing fan appreciation for a particular media product can also be appreciated. The author's work (as well as the author himself) receives feedback in various ways: the reader can simply put a "like mark" next to the work, write a review, this website also provides an award function, which users give to their favorite authors to endorse them and their work (an award is worth 25 coins, which without stock terms equals 25 real rubles), can subscribe to it if it's "in progress", can add it to his personal collection. In addition, fiction writers can track the number of views (this is visible only to authors) - the number of times the work has been opened in the browser. The views displayed by this number do not mean that the reader has read the text to the end or that they have started reading it at all - they have simply downloaded the page in their respective browser.

From fanfiction evaluations expressed in such a way, researchers and media producers can determine how many users (which equal fandom members) support a particular interpretation or opinion. In our case, we are going to determine the fans' evaluation of Genshin Impact based on fanfiction evaluations. Therefore, we use such metrics for our analysis.

First, we tried to calculate all of the fanfiction works published in the span of two years after the game's release (October 2020 - November 2022), but, as our research showed, some months were impossible to calculate properly, due to the website limitations. ("Results beyond page 100 are not available"). Therefore, the authors decided to filter the works suitable for analysis. Thus, we selected works according to the following criteria: it must be an original work – written originally in Russian, not a translation, and at the same time have the "completed" status. In total, more than 29056 works have been published ("more" - because in July 2022 the exact number of fanfics posted on KF was not possible to determine, the site still gives the "Results beyond page 100 are not available" response).

Having made a table with the distribution of works by months, we compared the results with the schedule of game updates.

3. Discussion

According to our research, there are no major studies on user interest and fan response, which would be expressed in textual creativity, not only in Russian, but in other languages as well. Foreign scholars focus on the analysis of playthroughs that guide other players through the action and story of a game, and argue that gamers "should be considered active creators of game meanings, as they exhibit many of the characteristics of traditional media fans" (Consalvo, 2003: 321). However, a large number of researchers had articles that are indirectly connected to our arguments (Algavi, Kharchenko, 2020; Algavi et al., 2021; Fedotova et al., 2023; Friess, 2021; Johansson et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Fuentes, Ulloa, 2022; Sapuridis, Alberto, 2022; Widjayanti, Anwar, 2020).

As previously stated, our main hypothesis is that the number of fan fiction works is directly connected to the "success" of the game updates. As we can see further in the results section of our

research, it proves to be true. However, it is important to note that correlation does not necessarily imply causation. In other words, just because there may be a relationship between the two variables, it does not mean that one is causing the other.

When discussing our findings, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study and potential alternative explanations for our results. For example, it is possible that the number of written fanfiction works is influenced by other factors such as the popularity of the game, the size of the fanbase, and individual preferences of fans and not only the direct connection to the success of the game's updates.

Moreover, future scholars who may be researching the same topic can expand on it by providing such valuable data as surveys or interviews.

4. Results

As we described in our methodology, we took works (texts) posted on the platform in the span of 2 years and created a graph (Figure 1) according to our collected data.

Total number of works created in a taken period

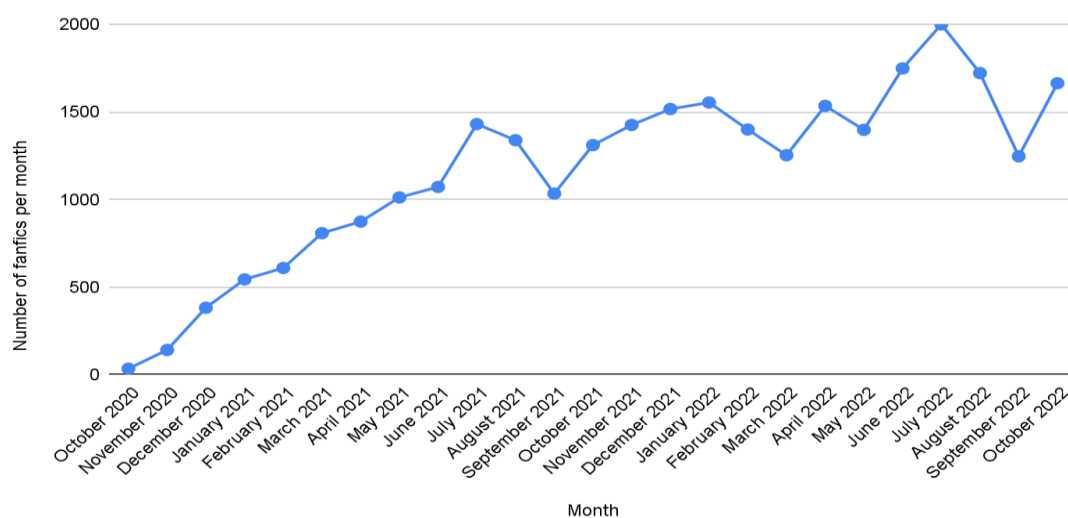


Fig. 1. Total number of works created in a taken period

We found out that there were several dramatic jumps:

- July 2021: a sharp increase of 359 pieces of fanfiction works compared to the previous month.
- September 2021: a sharp drop of 305 fanfiction works compared to the previous month.
- October 2021: a steep increase of 277 pieces of fanfiction from the previous month.
- April 2022: a fast increase of 282 fanfics compared to the previous month
- June 2022: a jump of 351 fanfics compared to the previous month.
- July 2022: an increase of more than 251 pieces of fanfiction compared to the previous month (not possible to determine the exact number)
- August 2022: a precipitous drop of more than 278 pieces of fanfiction compared to the previous month (not possible to determine the exact number)
- September 2022: a steep drop of 475 pieces of fanfiction compared to the previous month
- October 2022: a month-on-month sharp increase of 417 pieces of fanfiction.

From the gathered data it is logical to assume that in the months when we recorded a sharp increase in published works, there were no in-game updates - the interest in the game faded, the monotonous game process quickly became boring, and one of the fan's coping mechanisms was to create their own content based on the game. Accordingly, during the months of sharp decline in the number of fanfics, on the contrary, updates with a lot of in-game content were published, which forced fans to forget about their writing hobby for a while. But after analyzing the updates, we found the following (Table 1):

Table 1. In-game updates

Month	In-game updates
July 2021	1 New Banner; new game region
September 2021	1 New Banner
October 2021	1 Rerun
April 2022	0
June 2022	0
July 2022	1 New Banner; summer event
August 2022	1 New Banner; new game region
September 2022	1 Rerun
October 2022	0

We found that not always a decrease in fanfiction was associated with an update, and vice versa, that an increase is associated with an absence of updates. In 6 cases out of 9, our expectations were confirmed: in April, June, and October 2022, the absence of updates was associated with an increase in fanfiction, while in September 2021, August, and September 2022, the presence of updates led to a decrease in published fan works.

L. Goralik, exploring the media fandom's propensity for creative writing and identifying the motives of fic writers, suggests that the "serial nature" of information flow plays a significant role in fanfic creation according to this or that canon: "while waiting for a new series or a new season, he may experiment with his own of foresight, adding an extra layer of thrill to his life by comparing his assumptions to the next phases of the original; he may comprehend and play each individual piece". According to the author, the main traditional approach of fic writers is "to interpret details and fill in plot voids left by canon authors for one reason or another" (Goralik, 2003). In the case of fandoms grown around gacha games in general and Genshin Impact fandom in particular, we see the same trend: in the absence of updates (which equals new series by Goralik's definition) fans are interpreting canon, making sense of new plot twists, new characters and game environments. This is what we see as the reason for the increase in the number of fanfics in the months of updates. In these cases, the number of fanfics is completely dependent on the release of updates. The correlation is direct.

Our assumption about the connection between the sharp drop in the number of fanfics and the proportional increase in the interest of the game and its updates is also confirmed by the officially published monthly revenue of character banners announced as part of the updates.

Thus, in September 2021 players spent \$33,020,905 to try to obtain a new character (Baal, or Raiden Shogun, Electro Archon, Guardian of Eternity, Immortal Shogun), in August 2022 – \$19,068,372 (Tighnari, or Avidya Forest Watcher), in September 2022 - \$26,780,298 (Ganyu, or the general secretary of the Liyue Qixing).

In only 3 of the months we reviewed, we found an inverse correlation: in July and October 2021 and July 2022, the updates that came out led to an increase in fanfiction. In these months, new characters were added:

- July 2021: Naganohara Yoimiya (The Queen of the Summer Festival, the Owner of Naganohara Fireworks) and Kamisato Ayaka (Shirasagi Himegimi, the Princess of the Kamisato House);

- October 2021: Tartaglia (Childe, Ajax, the Eleventh of the Eleven Fatui Harbingers);

- July 2022: Klee (Slippery Sun, the Spark Knight).

Interestingly, the developer revenues from these characters were also significantly lower: Naganohara Yoimiya and Kamisato Ayaka: \$8,615,144, Tartaglia: \$7,785,438, Klee: \$24,808,479. The latter figure stands out from the others because in addition to the introduction of a banner with the character itself, a major season-long in-game event was tied to his release, which was directly dedicated to that very character and his story.

We took a closer look at the fanfics published during those months and found that members of the fan community really didn't like the characters. We counted the number of fanfics in the selected 3 months where the characters that appeared in the update were the protagonists.

Table 2. The characters that appeared in the update were the protagonists

Month	Character	Number of fanfics
July 2021	Naganohara Yoimiya	2
	Kamisato Ayaka	23
October 2021	Tartaglia	292
July 2022	Klee	45

Thus, the number of fanfiction works with Naganohara Yoimiya accounted for 0.1 % of the total number of fanfics in that month, with Kamisato Ayaka - 1.6 %. In October 2021, fanfics with Tartaglia accounted for 22.3 % of the total number of fanfics published this month, and in July 2022, fanfics with Klee accounted for approximately 2 % (approximately, because it is technically impossible to determine the exact number of fanfics published this month).

We also discovered that in these published works the predominant theme is the presence of a love line. There are far fewer fanfics in the "gen" category (from "general audience," the story is centered on action or plot without an emphasis on a romantic line) than there are in the "het" category (from "heterosexual," romantic and/or sexual relationships between male and female characters), "slash" (focuses on romantic or sexual relationships between male characters) and "femslash" (focuses on romantic or sexual relationships between female characters) categories combined.

Thus, out of 2 fanfics with Naganohara Yoimiya 1 was written in the "slash" category, 1 in "femslash". Kamisato Ayaka's fanfics are divided as follows: 23 works total – 2 "gen", 2 "slash", 8 "femslash", 10 "het", and the rest represent "other types of relationships" and "a mixed category". Of the 292 fanfics featuring Tartaglia, 20 are written in the "gen" category, 172 are "slash", 84 are "het", the rest are "other types of relationships" with "a mixed category". Of the 45 works featuring Klee, 15 are written in the "gen" category, 13 are "slash", 5 are "femslash", 9 are "het", the rest represent the "other types of relationships" and "a mixed category" categories.

The cause of such distribution is the absence of a romantic line in the game itself: representatives of the active fandom (which equals fanfiction writers) cannot find such content in the game, so they transfer their expectations into fanfiction stories.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study explored the relationship between Genshin Impact updates and the creation of fan fiction works. We hypothesized that the quality of the updates would influence the number of fan fiction works created, and our findings supported this hypothesis. When the update was of high quality, players were more likely to become fully immersed in the game and less likely to feel the need to create new fan content. Conversely, if the suggested content has not fulfilled players expectations, players were more likely to try to fulfill their desires by creating new fan fiction works. And although our hypothesis was not completely true, the significant correlation can be seen.

Our study also highlights the significance of fan fiction in creating a community around a game and shows how it can reflect players' perceptions of the game's updates. Fan fiction can be seen as a way for players to express their creativity, explore their favorite characters and storylines, and ultimately, keep the game experience alive beyond the updates.

Finally, our findings have implications for the gaming industry as a whole. They suggest that updates should strive to meet players' expectations and provide a high-quality experience that fully immerses them in the game world. By doing so, game developers may be able to reduce the need for fans to create their own content and instead encourage them to engage more deeply with the game itself. Overall, this study sheds light on the complex relationship between fan fiction and game updates and provides insights into how they can both be used to enhance the gaming experience.

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