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Cruel Optimism and Precarious Intimacies: Player Activism, Fan Service, and the Character Economy in Chinese Gacha Games

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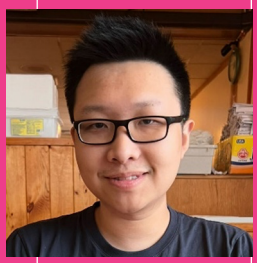

Siheng Zhu is a Ph.D. candidate in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. His doctoral research delves into the cultural economy surrounding gacha game characters, the gamer community of practice, and the strategic decisions made by developers within this unique gaming ecosystem. His work critically examines how Chinese male players navigate sociocultural perceptions of gacha games, focusing on the intersections of identity, nationalism, and alternative narratives in Chinese cultural exports. He has presented his research at prominent conferences, including the Popular Culture Association (PCA) and the Society of Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) in 2023 and 2024.

ABSTRACT:
Anime-style ACG gacha games revolve around a character economy that blends commodified collectibles with intimate fan attachments. This study analyses Chinese gacha game communities as a primary site for understanding how these affective bonds shape fan expectations, modes of participation, and forms of player activism. We argue that affective investments empower deep engagement and co-creative labour, yet also bind players into exploitative cycles of hope and disappointment, producing a precarious intimacy between players and their favoured characters – an intensely felt attachment continually leveraged by game monetization systems. Drawing on Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and Allison's theorization of precarity, we examine how gendered expectations, fan service, and the so-called "You No. 1" movement have fuelled recent conflicts between Chinese players and developers. Methodologically, the study combines media analysis and digital ethnography of Chinese online spaces (Weibo, BiliBili, NGA, and forums) from 2020-2024, alongside developer communications and update notes. And by foregrounding the perspectives and practices of Chinese gacha communities, the research shows how fandom-driven activism increasingly shapes game content and how players negotiate – and contest – the structural tensions within the character economy.

KEY WORDS:
affect theory, Chinese game industry, cruel optimism, digital games, fan activism, fan service, gacha, otaku culture, precarity, You No. 1.

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Introduction

At the core of anime-style ACG (anime, comics, and games) gacha games is a character economy – a system where collectible characters function both as gameplay assets and as objects of emotional attachment and commodified desire. Unlike traditional digital games that prioritize skill-based progression or fixed narratives, gacha games centre play around acquiring beloved characters. Players are encouraged to form affective bonds with virtual characters (Galbraith, 2019; Azuma, 2009), fostering a sense of personal agency and investment through character interaction and customization. Yet access to these characters is constrained by chance-based monetization: players must spend real or virtual currency on randomized *gacha* pulls, making character acquisition both uncertain and financially driven. As Woods (2024) observes, such systems embed players within affective assemblages in which value is produced relationally through desire, anticipation, and the emotional charge of obtaining a coveted character. Such dual structure of deep emotional engagement and lottery-like reward has proven extraordinarily profitable – for example, the gacha RPG *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020) grossed roughly 2 billion USD in player spending during its first year alone (Byers, 2021). At the same time, the character economy's mix of affect and monetization generates tension within player communities, as fans grapple with feelings of both attachment and exploitation. Developers have leveraged the allure of collectible characters to achieve massive commercial success, but they

also face growing scrutiny from players who feel their emotional labour and loyalty are being manipulated for profit (Ahmed, 2004). The result is a fraught dynamic in which gacha game players oscillate between devotion and discontent, highlighting a structural paradox at the heart of this game model.

This article explores the structural contradictions underpinning the gacha-game character economy and the intensification of player activism in contemporary Chinese gacha-game communities. In these contexts, organized forms of player resistance have become increasingly common in response to developer decisions deemed incompatible with established fandom norms. The discussion focuses on disputes surrounding industry attempts to broaden the appeal of gacha titles through more inclusive character designs and narrative strategies – efforts that directly challenge longstanding otaku conventions. As developers incorporate more diverse storylines or add male characters to previously female-centric rosters in the hope of expanding their audience, segments of the predominantly male otaku player base have protested that these changes undermine the core appeal of ACG gacha gaming. Some vocal fans insist that the unique *moe* (Japanese term for adorable or idealized) intimacy of collecting and bonding with cute female characters is diluted by such inclusivity (Galbraith, 2019; Azuma, 2009). In Chinese forums and on social media, some players use the slogan: "If there's a male character, I won't play".[1] This phrase – initially circulated as a blunt expression of resistance – was later abbreviated into the colloquial English-like expression "You No. 1", which fans adopted both for convenience and as a marker of player-driven activism. Adherents of this movement vow to boycott gacha games that deviate from an all-female formula, insisting that only pure 'waifu collector' experiences count. Their stance reflects a broader tension between local otaku consumer culture and the industry's globalizing ambitions. The rise of "You No. 1" thus reveals conflicts between player desires, narrative worlds, and monetization strategies in the current globalized game market.

In examining this phenomenon, we draw on a combination of media analysis and digital ethnography. We analysed online discourse in Chinese gacha-game communities – across forums, chat servers, Weibo, BiliBili, and other social media platforms – from 2020 to 2024, alongside developer communications, patch notes, update logs, and event announcements from major titles. Three case studies – *Genshin Impact*, *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium* (MICA Team, 2023), and *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* (Amazing Seasun Games, 2023) – were selected for their analytic value in elucidating the inclusivity–fanbase tension. *Genshin Impact* serves as a globalized model whose diverse roster prompted sustained discussion about gender representation; *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium* extends a long-standing all-female franchise and illustrates how sequels encounter evolving audience expectations; and *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* provides a contemporary example in which release-stage design decisions were demonstrably revised in response to coordinated player activism. And through qualitative comparison of these cases, we trace how decisions regarding character roster composition and narrative thematics have evolved as developers attempt to reconcile market-expansion goals with the expectations of a niche, otaku-oriented core audience. These examples show how competing pressures – namely, broadening market appeal versus maintaining established fan-service conventions – have increasingly shaped the development trajectories of gacha titles. In several instances, studios have retracted or adjusted inclusive content following concentrated community opposition, whereas others have maintained more diverse narrative directions despite substantial criticism. Such dynamics illustrate how design and monetization strategies are continually negotiated, influenced by both corporate imperatives and community-driven responses (Woods, 2022).

1 Remark by the author: The author's translation from Chinese: 有男不玩 [Yǒu nán bù wán].

Ultimately, we argue that the character-centric design of gacha games has given rise to a participatory ecosystem in which passionate Chinese players actively negotiate and even shape the evolution of game content. By engaging with theories of affective economies and digital labour, we situate these practices in a wider scholarly context: players' emotional investments in characters become a form of value-creating labour for the industry (Ahmed, 2004), even as players themselves grow increasingly aware of this and seek greater say in how that value is used. And by drawing on Berlant's (2011) concept of *cruel optimism* and Allison's (2013) notion of *precarity*, we further contend that players' hopeful attachments to these games – attachments that promise satisfaction yet often led to frustration – drive both their intense loyalty and their capacity for backlash. In what follows, we firstly review relevant literature on ACG gacha games and fan culture, then outline our theoretical framework, before turning to an analysis of three case studies that illustrate these dynamics in action. We conclude by discussing the implications of fan-driven co-production for the future of the Chinese and global games industries.

ACG Gacha Games in Cultural Context

To understand the evolving dynamics of ACG gacha games, it is essential to define this genre in its cultural context. In China, anime-style gacha games are often literally referred to as 'two-dimensional games',[2] reflecting their roots in anime, comics, and games subculture. These titles blend anime-inspired aesthetics with gacha monetization mechanics. Importantly, the "G" in ACG did not initially denote "games" in a broad sense but referred more specifically to gal games – the *bishōjo*-oriented romance and visual novel titles that constituted a formative component of otaku media culture. As Saitō (2021) observes, gal games played a particularly influential role, functioning as "a driving force of globalizing media culture coming from Japan" (p. 1). This visual-narrative framework has since influenced a wider range of game genres. Elements associated with the visual novel tradition – anime-style character design, romance-oriented narrative cues, and otaku-targeted sensibilities – have migrated into action games, RPGs, and, more recently, mobile gacha titles. In this expanded context, the "G" in ACG has come to encompass digital games that adopt this shared aesthetic and narrative grammar, reflecting the increasingly hybridized identity of the category.

Through interactive dialogue choices, players guide branching narratives toward different relationship outcomes. The formula proved compelling to a generation of otaku fans (Zhu, 2020). Crucially, gal games established the notion that fictional characters could be the primary draw for players – the emotional attachment to characters became a selling point. The business model of gal games blurred the line between narrative and marketing, paving the way for Gacha's character-centric economy. In many gal games, although players appear to shape the story through their choices, the design often nudges them toward specific routes, effectively using narrative interactivity as a mechanism to sell characters and the experiences they offer. As a result, the player's emotional investment is carefully guided by the developers' commercial objectives. Gacha games would later adopt and greatly expand such a model of monetizing character attachment. Japanese cultural critics have long noted that otaku consumption revolves around desire for

2 Remark by the author: In Chinese: 二次元游戏 [èr cìyuán yóuxì].

fictional characters, especially the moe female archetypes (Saitō, 2011). Gal games gave players a sense of *ownership* over beloved characters through story conquest; ACG gacha titles mechanized this process by introducing random character lotteries (gacha draws) that require currency. The ritual of spending to obtain a coveted character materializes the otaku desire to interact with and collect these virtual personas. In this way, the gal game's character-centric monetization framework evolved into an even more lucrative system in gacha games, redefining the relationship between players, narratives, and characters.

Fan Service and Broadening Audiences

Early ACG gacha games leaned heavily on fan service to sustain player engagement. In this context, *fan service* refers to overtly sexualized character designs, suggestive interactions, and otaku-centric tropes designed to cater to predominantly male otaku tastes. Classic Chinese Titles like *Azur Lane* (Shanghai Manjuu & Xiamen Yongshi, 2017) and *Girls' Frontline* (MICA Team, 2016) exemplified this approach, featuring anthropomorphized warships or firearms depicted as alluring anime girls. Characters were often drawn with exaggerated, provocative aesthetics meant to appeal to the *male gaze*. While casual players sometimes found such sexualization unappealing, many otaku fans cited these elements as a primary attraction and poured significant money into collecting their favourite characters. Some games went so far as to let players 'marry' their virtual waifus through in-game wedding systems, complete with bridal costumes, virtual rings, and special ceremony scenes. Notably, *Azur Lane* even hosted a live VR wedding event in 2018, where participants could virtually exchange vows with their chosen character in a real chapel. These experiences vividly produced forms of immersion that fostered quasi-real affective engagement, reinforcing affective bonds that could rationalize intense play and spending. However, reliance on erotic fan service carried drawbacks. In broader gaming communities, fan service often took on a derogatory connotation, marking these games as niche interests. More critically, such content drew scrutiny from Chinese authorities: sexualized depictions in games occupy a grey zone under China's censorship regime, making titles with overt fan service vulnerable to regulation or bans. By 2019, the ACG gacha genre was poised for transformation as developers sought new ways to broaden appeal without incurring regulatory or reputational costs.

That year, the Chinese-developed title *Arknights* (Hypergryph, 2019) made a significant divergence from the traditional otaku-only gacha game model. *Arknights* combined polished tower-defence gameplay with an immersive sci-fi narrative, attracting a broader spectrum of gamers, including more hardcore strategy fans. Equally significant were its character designs: the game featured a balanced roster of male and female characters and deliberately avoided the hyper-sexualized aesthetic prevalent in earlier titles. Female characters in *Arknights* wore relatively practical outfits suited to their roles as special-ops fighters – a sharp departure from the skimpy costumes typical of the genre. This design shift prompted discussions in otaku circles about whether a gacha game could succeed without relying on standard fan-service expectations. Initial scepticism soon diminished as *Arknights* quickly demonstrated strong commercial traction; industry analysis notes that the game achieved significant early momentum and became Hypergryph's breakout hit, rapidly establishing itself as a major title in the tower-defence and gacha market (Dion, 2023). Its success has also popularized a new phrase, "hardcore without pandering to

otaku",[3] suggesting that a gacha game could achieve mainstream appeal without indulging in the usual otaku fan-service formula. Within online forums, some fans even began to tout *Arknights* players as more 'cultured' or sophisticated compared to those enjoying the overt fan service of other games. Still, discourse around this phrase remained largely within the otaku community's frame of reference. It was not until the arrival of *Genshin Impact* in late 2020 that ACG gacha gaming fully expanded beyond the traditional otaku niche into broader mainstream recognition.

Released in September 2020 by miHoYo, *Genshin Impact* marked the genre's breakout into the worldwide gaming mainstream. The game secured a position among the highest-grossing digital games worldwide, with industry analytics reported that the title surpassed 3 billion USD in global mobile revenue within its first two years (Chapple, 2022). There are several intersecting factors have been identified as contributing to this commercial trajectory. The game launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by increased global demand for at-home entertainment and digitally mediated leisure. At the same time, *Genshin Impact* distinguished itself from earlier mobile gacha titles through its unusually high production values: a fully explorable 3D open world, real-time action combat, and audiovisual fidelity more commonly associated with console RPGs. This technical and aesthetic ambition broadened expectations of what mobile gacha games could offer. Equally significant was the game's inclusive approach to character design and narrative. Departing from the demographic narrowness typical of earlier otaku-oriented gacha titles, *Genshin Impact* introduced a diverse roster of male and female characters embedded within an expansive transregional narrative world. This design philosophy enabled the game to appeal simultaneously to otaku communities, casual players, and international audiences. Within Chinese gaming communities, players began informally categorizing *Genshin Impact* and its successors as "ACG gacha games for general audiences"[4] – a category that contrasts with the historically niche, otaku-focused lineage from which the genre emerged.

While this inclusive model demonstrated substantial commercial success in expanding the player base, it also introduced new tensions. By trying to appeal to everyone, these games inevitably faced conflicts between subcommunities. Long-time otaku players accustomed to the insular, fan-service-rich style of earlier ACG games suddenly found themselves sharing the space with newcomers – including female players and global audiences – who had different preferences and sensitivities. Although debates about play styles, character design, and the game's long-term direction may have circulated in fan spaces from early on, they often remained muted amid the broader acclaim surrounding the game's success. However, the 2021 controversy involving the character Shenhe (discussed below) marked a decisive shift: it drew together these previously scattered concerns and transformed them into a visible dispute over demographic orientation and design priorities. The conflicts that unfolded in its aftermath intensified dissatisfaction among otaku players, and they established the discursive groundwork for the "You No. 1" backlash movement that would emerge in 2023-2024.

3 Remark by the author: The author's translation from Chinese: 硬核不媚宅 [Yìng hé bù mèi zhái].
4 Remark by the author: The author's translation from Chinese: 一般向二游 [Yībān xiàng èr yóu].

Cruel Optimism, Precarity, and Fan Attachments

Otaku fan communities have traditionally operated within self-contained niches, cultivating what insiders commonly refer to as "enclose oneself in one's own paradise".[5] This ethos refers to enjoying one's hobby within a closed circle of like-minded peers. Scholars of subculture note that such semi-private enclaves allow fans to pursue their specific interests without outside interference or judgement (Azuma, 2009; McRobbie & Garber, 2006). Within these bounded spaces, different fan subgroups can coexist relatively peacefully by respecting each other's autonomy and content preferences. Crucially, each subgroup's niche interests are catered to without compromise, reinforcing a strong sense of ownership and intimacy around the content.

The advent of broadly inclusive gacha games disrupts such enclave equilibrium. By blending content designed for multiple demographics into a single title, developers aim to maximize their audience – but they also create a structural paradox. In trying to simultaneously satisfy multiple demographic groups, the game's content risks becoming overly generalized or diluted, potentially compromising the distinct aesthetic or narrative features that resonate strongly with specific subcultural audiences. Storylines and character designs may be toned down or balanced to be broadly acceptable, rather than wholeheartedly embracing tropes beloved by a specific cultural group. While this approach broadens initial appeal, it can leave dedicated subcommunities feeling only partially satisfied. If one faction of players perceives that the game is catering too much to another group's tastes – or if content violates the unwritten expectations valued by a subcommunity – the relative stability among subgroups can deteriorate. Conflict among player subgroups emerges; long-time otaku players may clash with newer mainstream fans, with opposing groups accusing one another of undermining the integrity or identity of the game. Developers, for their part, often respond with silence or neutrality, hoping to avoid taking sides. But non-intervention can permit discontent to further intensify. In sum, inclusive gacha games can become sites of extremely heightened tension: uneasy compromises accumulate grievances among fans until a spark ignites open conflict, threatening both the community's cohesion and the game's long-term success.

By late 2023, these ongoing tensions in the ACG gacha scene had coalesced into what became known as the "You No. 1" movement. The phrase itself originated from a single player's offhand comment in 2019, but it struck a chord with a subset of hardcore male otaku players and gradually evolved into a unifying slogan. Adherents of "You No. 1" argue that the introduction of male characters into formerly all-female gacha rosters fundamentally undermines the very appeal of these games. For these fans, part of the gacha fantasy is immersion in a narrative space centred around stylized, idealized female characters – a 'waifu collection' aesthetic valued by this player demographic that playable male characters disrupt. Devotees openly vow to quit or boycott any gacha game that features male characters (beyond perhaps a token non-playable role for narrative purposes). They are often unwilling to invest time or money in developing male units, viewing such characters as unwanted content unless they are absolutely overpowered for gameplay. By early 2024, "You No. 1" had transformed into a prominent campaign within Chinese gacha gaming circles. For its proponents, it became a banner of resistance against the broadening content strategies of developers; for others in the community, it was a source

5 Remark by the author: The author's translation from Chinese: 圈地自萌 [Quān dì zì méng].

of intense debate, with critics accusing the movement's supporters of clinging to regressive tastes or selfishly limiting creative diversity. Regardless of perspective, the rise of "You No. 1" signalled a new phase of fan–developer relations in this genre. Discontented players transitioned from isolated expressions of dissatisfaction to coordinated collective action and strategic demands.

To analyse why players maintain such fervent attachments and how these attachments can turn into collective action, we turn to affect theory. Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism is particularly illuminating here. Cruel optimism refers to a situation in which an individual remains attached to a desired object or outcome even when that attachment is an obstacle to their well-being. In the context of gacha games, players develop optimistic attachments to the game and its characters – the hope that collecting the next character or preserving their ideal all-girl fantasy will bring them happiness or fulfilment. This optimism is 'cruel' to the extent that the very structure of gacha games (with exploitative monetization, or developers who might alter content in unwanted ways) continually frustrates the realization of that happiness. Fans in the "You No. 1" movement exemplify cruel optimism: they are deeply attached to the promise that their beloved game will remain a 'paradise' of virtual companionship, and this attachment persists even as updates or changes threaten to disappoint them. Their optimism that the game can deliver perfect satisfaction leads them to fight vehemently to prevent any content that might compromise the fantasy. In effect, they endure (and even perpetuate) a cycle of desire and disappointment, remaining tethered to a game that can both delight and betray them.

Allison's (2013) notion of precarity provides a complementary lens, situating these affective investments in a broader socio-economic context. Allison uses precarity to describe the unstable, insecure conditions of life and labour in late-capitalist societies, particularly among youth in Japan who turn to fantasy, hobby communities, and affective bonds as coping mechanisms. Chinese otaku players similarly live in a fast-changing, competitive environment; many are young men facing intense academic or job pressures and uncertain futures. The virtual relationships offered by gacha games – the sense of being needed by, and connected to, a cast of caring anime characters – can provide an emotional safe haven amid real-world precarity. This helps explain why the stakes feel so high for core fans: a game's shift in content can threaten not just a trivial pastime, but a key source of comfort and identity in their precarious lives. The "You No. 1" adherents' insistence on maintaining an idealized game world (free of unwelcome elements) reflects the fragility of the hope they place in these fantasy spaces. Their situation is precarious in two senses: economically (as consumers continually spending discretionary income on digital goods) and emotionally (as their happiness is closely tied to a commercial product subject to change that may change or demand more spending). Thus, when developers introduce content that jars the fantasy – say, a male love rival or a plotline that diminishes the player's centrality – it threatens an affective lifeline for these fans. Their extreme reactions (boycotts, public outrage) can be seen as a response to that threat, an attempt to reassert control over one stable corner of their world.

In addition to these affective and social dimensions, the dynamics at play can be understood through the lens of affective economies and digital labour. Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions can circulate and accumulate value – in this case, players' feelings of love and loyalty toward characters become a form of capital that game companies monetize. Fans perform emotional labour by investing time, creativity, and passion into the game (through fan art, community building, feedback, etc.), effectively co-creating cultural and economic value. Scholars of games and participatory culture likewise note that players often function simultaneously as consumers, evangelists, and unofficial content creators (Banks, 2013; Kücklich, 2009). This blurring of consumption and production

means players increasingly see themselves as stakeholders in the game's success and direction. When their affective labour is felt to be betrayed or devalued by developers' decisions, it fuels a sense of injustice. The rise of player activism in gacha games – from organized hashtag campaigns to coordinated review-bombing and spending strikes – exemplifies how empowered fan labour can pressure companies. Fans strategically mobilize the cultural and economic value they co-produce to exert influence over creative and development decisions. The "You No. 1" movement's efficacy, as we will see, hinged on collective economic action by players who understood their power as the paying, emotionally invested audience. In short, gacha game players' cruel optimistic attachments and their precarious stake in game worlds drove them to act as co-creators and enforcers of the experience they were promised. Using this theoretical lens, we now turn to three case studies that illustrate how these conflicts have unfolded in practice and how player communities have negotiated power with developers.

To explore how fan–developer tensions manifest, we examine three recent cases from the Chinese ACG gacha game scene. Each case spotlights a different stage of the inclusivity-versus-fanbase conflict and the escalating assertiveness of player activism. The first case, *Genshin Impact*, shows how attempts to introduce diverse content led to internal community clashes in a global hit game, foreshadowing more organized resistance. The second case, *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium*, involves a long-awaited sequel that sparked fierce backlash by seemingly betraying the emotional bonds of its core players; it exemplifies the cycle of fan disappointment and partial developer concession. The third case, *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*, demonstrates the most extreme outcome: facing fan uproar, developers undertook a radical overhaul of the game to cater to otaku preferences, marking a significant moment for the "You No. 1" movement. Together, these cases trace a trajectory from early warning signs of conflict to a point where fan communities could directly reshape a game's content through collective action.

Genshin Impact's Struggle to Maintain Community Balance

Not long after *Genshin Impact*'s meteoric launch, a controversy in early 2021 revealed the challenges of keeping its diverse fan base satisfied. The flashpoint was the reveal of a new female character named Shenhe, whose character design featured a dramatically revealing outfit. Many female players in the community took issue with Shenhe's appearance, arguing that it over-sexualized the character in a way that clashed with her lore as an ancient, dignified adeptus. On Chinese social media, critical posts about Shenhe went viral. Some users questioned why an enlightened immortal would be depicted in what they perceived as lingerie-like attire, while others argued that her design appeared stylistically inconsistent – celestial in the upper body but reminiscent of a nightclub performer in the lower half.[6] These fans contended that *Genshin Impact*'s designers had crafted Shenhe more for the titillation of male players than for coherence with her character concept. Fuelled by such sentiments, a group of mostly women players mass-reported miHoYo's

6 Remark by the author: This is a paraphrase of widely circulated Weibo comments made on November 21, 2021. Individual posts could not be cited due to the social network's ephemerality. The original thread was deleted.

official Weibo post unveiling Shenhe, calling for a more sensible design. The post was briefly taken down by the platform – an unusual event likely triggered by the volume of reports – forcing the developers to re-publish it later. Although miHoYo ultimately did not redesign Shenhe, the company appeared to take steps aimed at addressing community concerns about overly sexualized content. Within weeks, the China server received an update providing optional, less-revealing costume skins for several existing female characters, a move officially attributed to government guidelines but widely interpreted as at least partly influenced by recent fan feedback.

The Shenhe incident, however, also provoked a fierce counter-reaction from Genshin's traditionalist male fan segment. On forums and BiliBili, some men vented that the outraged female players were feminist extremists or malicious agitators bent on censoring anime-style content. To these critics, the fact that miHoYo even acknowledged complaints about Shenhe's design, evidenced by the temporary post removal and the addition of conservative costume options – was a worrying sign that the developers might capitulate to what they saw as an external moral agenda. They feared the game's core appeal to its male audience was under threat. In response, a number of male players began coalescing around a hardline stance: they vowed not to tolerate any perceived pandering to "politically correct" critiques. This posture echoed the nascent "You No. 1" ethos of "if content is not tailored to us, we won't play". In hindsight, the Shenhe controversy was an early indicator of the gendered rift forming within *Genshin Impact*'s community. It crystallized the fears of one side (losing beloved fan-service elements) against the frustrations of the other (feeling objectified by game content). Although the conflict eventually died down, it set the stage for more organized action. In the aftermath, the "You No. 1" slogan began surfacing more frequently in discussions among disgruntled male fans, anticipating the fully-fledged movement that would erupt in subsequent years.

Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium: A Repeated Dilemma

Another flashpoint arrived in late 2023 with the beta test of *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium*, the sequel to a highly popular bishōjo gacha shooter. Fans of the original *Girls' Frontline* had long cherished its all-female cast of combat androids (T-Dolls) and the player's role as their Commander – complete with a marriage system that let players marry their favourite T-Dolls. Anticipation for *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium* was high, and many long-time players hoped the sequel would return to the classic ACG gacha formula and avoid the mixed-gender trend exemplified by *Genshin*. Those hopes were soon dashed. *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium*'s closed beta in October 2023 suffered from numerous bugs and some tedious gameplay, but most jarring was its narrative overhaul. The story leaped ten years beyond the original and removed the player from their position of authority. The beloved Commander role was now a disgraced former officer in exile; the PMC company the Commander led had disbanded, and the famed T-Dolls – the characters that players had bonded with – were scattered across various factions pursuing their own missions.

This drastic shift not only distanced players from the characters they had grown attached to, but effectively erased the emotional bonds and history carried over from *Girls' Frontline*. Many veteran fans found the new setup alienating: rather than reuniting with their favourite T-Dolls as trusted comrades, players were confronted with a world in which those characters barely remembered or acknowledged the Commander. The breaking

point came when data-miners uncovered an unreleased story segment hidden in the beta files. This side-story featured one of the most beloved heroines featured in the first *Girls' Frontline* game, QBZ-95 (nicknamed Daiyan), on a mission alongside a new male character named Raymond. In the narrative, Raymond is a troubled outsider plotting revenge; over the course of the mission, Daiyan empathizes with him and dissuades him from violence. Their interactions were surprisingly intimate, implying a deep personal bond. At the story's end, Raymond gives Daiyan a family heirloom and tells her he hopes she remembers him. Crucially, the player's Commander was absent throughout this episode – still in exile during these events. Daiyan does not even mention the Commander, despite players having had the option to 'marry' her in the first game. For long-time fans who had invested emotionally (and financially) in Daiyan as their virtual partner, this was devastating: watching their cherished T-Doll develop apparent romantic feelings for a random male NPC – and act as if the Commander never existed – felt like a profound betrayal of the bond formed in the first game.

News of the leaked "Daiyan × Raymond" storyline ignited a firestorm on Chinese gaming forums. Beta players, already sceptical due to the game's other issues, were furious that the sequel seemed to abandon the fan-service relationship ethos of its predecessor. The hashtag of the "You No. 1" movement surged in the game's discussion threads, with players loudly vowing to boycott *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium* if the content remained. After about a week of escalating outrage, the team finally released a brief update on their blog. They insisted that the leaked storyline was unconfirmed beta content and not representative of the final game, promising to revise the narrative for release. These vague assurances failed to calm the community; many players distrusted the response, suspecting it was an attempt to downplay a real storyline.

When *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium* officially launched later in 2023, players discovered that the contentious story segment had indeed been altered – but not in ways that fully satisfied the fanbase. The character Raymond was removed and replaced by a female character in the event, and the player's Commander avatar was written into a minor role. Yet the core plot remained mostly intact. In the revised ending, the Commander finally speaks with Daiyan, inviting her to escape with him – only to have Daiyan stay behind. To many fans, this felt like another slight: the outcome still denied players the heartfelt reunion or closure they craved, and it reinforced the sense that developers had ignored player sentiment and were merely patching over the issue. Feeling disillusioned, a large portion of the veteran player base quit the game within weeks. *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium*'s retention plummeted as word spread that it had failed to deliver the experience veterans wanted. Many departing fans became early adopters of the "You No. 1" campaign, citing *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium* as proof that developers were sacrificing otaku-oriented content in misguided attempts to broaden appeal. This case underscored that earlier lessons had gone unheeded, and it emboldened core fans to double down on demands that developers keep their promises to the loyal base.

Snowbreak: Containment Zone and Fan Movement

Perhaps the most dramatic instance of the "You No. 1" movement's influence was seen in the trajectory of *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*. This sci-fi shooter gacha, released in mid-2023 by Amazing Seasun Games, initially attempted to follow *Genshin Impact*'s

inclusive approach – until its predominantly male otaku player base pushed back. During *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*'s final closed beta, the introduction of a single male playable character into an otherwise all-female roster triggered immediate backlash. On gaming forums, some players argued that adding a male character disrupted the all-girl atmosphere they associated with a waifu-oriented title and undermined what they considered the proper identity of the game.[7] By contrast, an isolated comment on social media noted that adding a male character might diversify the game's narrative and appeal to female players, but this perspective was drowned out by the dominant reaction. Players adopted the rallying cry "You No. 1" and collectively threatened to abandon the game unless the male character was removed. In an unprecedented move, the developers capitulated even before launch: they announced on the game's official Weibo that the contentious male character would be removed from the final release. Many players expressed astonishment at how swiftly the developers responded to community pressure, with some remarking that the deletion signalled an unusual level of attentiveness to otaku concerns.[8] Despite this last-minute concession, *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* launched in July 2023 to a lukewarm reception. The pre-release controversy had already damaged its prospects – negative word-of-mouth from the beta uproar dampened what should have been a strong niche launch. Early feedback criticized *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*'s art style for lacking the colourful anime charm of typical ACG titles; others found the gameplay progression unrewarding and the gacha monetization stingy. Under normal circumstances, a gacha game that flounders at launch rarely recovers its momentum. But instead of letting *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* fade, the developers adopted a radical strategy: they decided to transform the game entirely to win back the otaku faithful. Over the next months, Amazing Seasun Games undertook sweeping changes. First, they purged virtually all male presence from the game's world. Even minor male NPCs (officers, quest-givers, etc.) were removed or replaced with female counterparts. The narrative was tweaked so that the player was surrounded exclusively by a female squad at all times. In parallel, the studio doubled down on *kanojo-kei* (girlfriend-style) fan-service elements to enhance the romantic appeal. Dialogue from the heroine characters – initially stoic – was rewritten to be more affectionate toward the (implicitly male) player-protagonist. For example, one formerly formal teammate began using a pet name for the player and expressing worry for his well-being, emphasizing personal attachment. The art team also added more provocative costume skins: one heroine's bulky space suit was redesigned into a sleek form-fitting outfit that accentuated her figure (a clear play for fan service). In public developer communications, *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*'s lead designer emphasized that the team intended to avoid content that players consistently reported as unwelcome or undesirable. According to summaries posted by players, the designer stated that elements widely criticized across platforms would not be included in future updates.[9] By early 2024, *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* had effectively reinvented itself as the very thing "You No. 1" advocates had demanded: a pure waifu collector experience devoid of unwelcome male characters or distracting storylines.

7 Remark by the author: This is a paraphrase of widely circulated players' comments posted on BiliBili on May 20, 2023. Individual posts could not be cited due to the social network's ephemerality and limited accessibility.

8 Remark by the author: This is a paraphrase of players' comments on BiliBili following official announcement made on May 28, 2023. Individual posts could not be cited due to social network's ephemerality and limited accessibility.

9 Remark by the author: This is a paraphrase of player-recorded summaries (posted on January 16, 2024) of a developer promises during official livestream. Original posts and recordings could not be cited due to ephemerality and accessibility constraints.

Equally important was *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*'s change in attitude toward its community. The developers became markedly transparent and responsive. Throughout early 2024 they actively solicited player feedback on forums and Weibo, asking fans which character outfits or events they wanted most. Community managers hosted livestream Q&As and replied directly to popular user posts. Such degree of transparency is relatively uncommon within the gaming industry, where development teams typically maintain a measured distance from their player base. In *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*'s case, however, the studio's unusually direct communication soon attracted attention from both players and gaming media. A report by the Chinese outlet 17173 News ("The game", 2024) indicates that the developers publicly acknowledged player dissatisfaction during a period of heightened community controversy, framing their response as an attempt to engage more sincerely with ongoing concerns. After months (or years) of feeling ignored by other companies, many otaku players were surprised and impressed to see developers so eager to listen. Gradually, the narrative around *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* shifted from one of disappointment to one of admiration for the team's commitment to its fans. From the players' perspective, the significant strategic revision of *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* validated the power of their collective voice.

By mid-2024, after the developers executed their sweeping changes, the tone of player commentary shifted to triumphalism. The same forums that had been filled with anger were now celebrating victory. One commenter from 17173 News in China wrote that *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*'s team had embraced a philosophy of 'users (players) above all' (Zhengjing, 2025, para. 17), making it the first major studio to fully submit to otaku fan demands and turn a struggling game's fortunes around. The results were immediate. As word spread that the game had "gone full waifu" and developers were actively courting the otaku audience, players who had quit began to return out of curiosity or renewed enthusiasm. Industry reports suggest that *Snowbreak: Containment Zone* experienced a marked commercial recovery throughout 2024. As summarized by the game-industry outlet Gamelook ("Guo Weiwei praises", 2025), the title's annual revenue exceeded 1 billion RMB, with domestic revenue increasing approximately seventeen-fold relative to 2023. Although the report does not provide granular month-to-month data, these year-end financial indicators nevertheless point to a sustained upward trajectory in the game's market performance. Commentators marvelled that a title on the brink of failure had engineered an unexpected commercial recovery. Crucially, this turnaround was not achieved through luck or a viral fad, but came about by deliberately catering to a dedicated subculture. Otaku players responded by opening their wallets: many who had been on a spending strike resumed purchases to support the now-otaku-friendly game. In effect, Amazing Seasun Games demonstrated that listening to fans and giving them exactly what they want could resurrect a flailing gacha game – a lesson that sent shockwaves through the industry. In an April 2024 Chinese game industry roundtable, an executive argued that there has not been a successful purely male-targeted 'waifu game' (Dongdong, 2024, para. 38), justifying reluctance to invest in niche products. *Snowbreak: Containment Zone*'s comeback provided a counterexample too stark to ignore.

Conclusion

The cases examined above demonstrate how Chinese gacha-game communities have become increasingly influential actors in shaping the development trajectories of contemporary ACG titles. In the post-*Genshin Impact* era, collective player discourse

and organized activism exert measurable influence on design, marketing, and narrative choices. Through social media coordination, forum debates, and spending-based interventions, players actively negotiate what kinds of characters, aesthetics, and representational frameworks these games should adopt. Developers, aware of the potential consequences of sustained backlash or coordinated boycotts, are less able to disregard the demands of highly invested constituencies.

At the same time, the rise of such participatory dynamics introduces significant challenges concerning voice, representation, and creative authority. Fan communities are internally heterogeneous, and not all segments possess equal visibility, cohesion, or rhetorical force. As a result, the expectations of a dominant subset – such as the male otaku players associated with the "You No. 1" movement – may disproportionately shape design outcomes at the expense of alternative player groups. Efforts to cultivate broader inclusivity or diversify character rosters can be constrained when studios prioritize the demands of the most vocal or economically influential demographic. This dynamic risks producing a self-reinforcing cycle in which the preferences of one group become increasingly entrenched, while others disengage or become marginalized.

These developments exemplify the ambivalent nature of participatory culture in the gacha-game ecosystem. On one hand, players are no longer passive consumers but co-constructors of game worlds; their affective investments, creative labour, and communal practices generate substantial cultural and economic value. Concepts such as Ahmed's affective economies and work on digital labour highlight how emotional attachments circulate as a form of capital that developers both rely on and strategically cultivate. On the other hand, as Berlant's notion of cruel optimism suggests, the very attachments that empower players also bind them to structures that may repeatedly disappoint them. Many fans maintain steadfast hopes for an idealized game world – even when commercial imperatives, regulatory pressures, or market-expansion strategies make such expectations untenable. Their affective commitments drive engagement but also fuel disillusionment and collective resistance when redesigns undermine the fantasies they hold dear. Allison's account of precarity further illuminates why these conflicts carry such emotional weight. For many young Chinese otaku players, gacha games serve not only as entertainment but as affective refuges amid broader uncertainties in work, education, and social life. When content changes threaten this sense of stability, the resulting tensions extend beyond questions of taste and become bound to broader struggles over identity, comfort, and control. The intensity of fan reactions – including spending strikes, public critiques, and organized campaigns – reflects the precarious attachments that structure participation in these game worlds.

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that fan-driven co-production, though uneven and often contentious, is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of the Chinese gacha-game industry. The cases of *Genshin Impact*, *Girls' Frontline 2: Exilium*, and *Snowbreak* illustrate a spectrum of outcomes: from internal conflict within a globally mainstream title, to contested shifts in a long-standing female-centric franchise, to substantial revisions enacted in response to player mobilization. These patterns underscore a persistent tension in the contemporary gacha market: balancing expansive, inclusive design ambitions with the specialized desires of dedicated otaku subcultures. As Chinese studios continue to develop for both domestic and global audiences, understanding how these competing pressures shape creative and commercial decisions will remain crucial. What is clear is that Chinese gacha players – through their emotional labour, economic power, and collective organization – have asserted a new form of agency over the games they inhabit, positioning themselves as central participants in the genre's ongoing evolution.

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