

Research on the Visual Aesthetics and Narrative Design of Characters in Chinese Two-Dimensional Games: A Case Study of miHoYo Games

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Abstract. One of the most prominent phenomena in the Chinese gaming industry is the rise of the "Two-Dimensional" culture. miHoYo, as a leader in this sector, has achieved remarkable global success through its game titles. The main objective of this paper is to explore the core logic of character design through the study of miHoYo's representative titles, such as Genshin Impact and Honkai: Star Rail. The first part analyzes the character system from the perspective of the characters' visual aesthetic framework, which consists of symbolical design, color narrative, and technological integration. The second part examines the narrative design of characters, encompassing fragmented narration, character stories, and player emotional projection. The paper delves into the ways the two sides mutually reinforce each other to create not only highly attractive but also commercially valuable character IPs, thereby revealing the evolutionary directions of China's domestic Two-Dimensional games as well as the global gaming industry at large. The findings provide critical insights for the evolution of domestic Chinese Two-Dimensional games and the global gaming industry.

Keywords: Chinese Two-Dimensional Games, Character Design, Visual Aesthetics, Narrative Design, mHbYo Games

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global era characterized by multilingual cultural exchange and active information interaction, games as a form of transnational cultural art with strong artistic appeal have become one of the most popular forms of entertainment globally. Games with a "Two-Dimensional" style characterized by their artistry, unique experiential dimensions, and emotional resonance depth have attracted a vast number of players worldwide. In the Chinese market, due to the enormous commercial scale and large user base, miHoYo's works, like Genshin Impact and Honkai: Star Rail, have become the leading force in the aesthetic development of domestic Two-Dimensional game art.

To a large extent, miHoYo's commercial success stems from its application of the 'character-centric design model', which integrates psychological archetypes and consumer identity theory to transform characters into cultural product symbols [1]. The characters in miHoYo's games are not just game avatars, controllable units, or simple art assets; instead, they are cultural product symbols

that undergo artistic and aesthetic reconstruction in aspects such as character design, background, personality, and even the emotional side, among others.

This research aims to explore the characters in miHoYo's games through the lens of the integration of visual elements and narrative plotlines. They are not only "deities for the players" but also carriers of player emotions and consumption identity. In fact, miHoYo can be regarded as a successful paradigm that has built a "deity model" that establishes tight interconnections, organic combinations, and integrations between game aesthetics, game emotion, and game artistry. In this respect, the examination of the artistic creation logic and approaches in China's domestic Two-Dimensional game context is very important.

2. Dimensions of character visual aesthetics construction

2.1. Symbolic design and cultural integration

Visual perception is the primary determinant. While miHoYo's character visual design is highly aligned with the Japanese-style Two-Dimensional aesthetic, it simultaneously integrates various cultural elements and forms a sophisticated production system empowered by cutting-edge technologies [2].

miHoYo's character design adheres to the "glance principle," which means that each character can be distinguished by its iconic clothing items or accessories without the need for verbal elaboration. Employing symbolic elements in character design enhances the characters' recognizability. The characters depart from the stereotypes of the Two-Dimensional subculture, which constitutes the core concept underlying their visual imagery. By the way, the characters from the Liyue region in Genshin Impact are rooted in traditional Chinese culture. To be more specific, Zhongli's attire is not only influenced by traditional Chinese attire but also integrated with elemental motifs, dragon scales, and rock textures that correspond to his title as the Geo Archon. His outfit fuses handwoven Chinese-style clothing with literal mineral elements and dragon scale details integrated into the automaton structure. Adornments on the clothing bear the marks of his elemental powers, a dragon scale pattern, and rock textures.

Elements of Inazuma, such as the Raiden Shogun's kimono, hakama, and the Electro Mitsudomoe sign, are derived from Japanese culture. They are symbols of majesty and eternity, which can be inferred from the glowing Electro Mitsudomoe and the illuminated chakra points on her hand. Inazuma's character roster includes a scholar, a self-made noble, and an embodiment of wrath. Pommel copper, along with other materials and the obscure incantations referred to as liturgical texts by ordinary people, is used for the black plate. This design strategy that closely integrates visual symbols with cultural connotations not only enhances the recognition of characters, but also is the key to their successful cross-cultural communication [3].

Furthermore, the characters of Snezhnaya collectively integrate Gothic elements with Tsarist Russia-style fashion narratives. Their creators have constructed origin narratives with profound connotations, which encompass five significant thematic associations, one of which relates to the dark period inherent in the characters' dramatic and intense sides of life [4]. He made a bundle of heroines, and most of them shared a characteristic: a propensity for cruelty and a focus on the dark facets of the world.

Kafka in a trench coat and with a smile on her face behind sunglasses is a paradigmatic example from Honkai: Star Rail of an elegant, noble, mysterious, and mature woman with a commanding presence. In Genshin Impact, Hu Tao's plum-blossom-shaped pupils, Qianqun Taigua hat, and vivacious expressions and movements fully embody her dual role as the director of the Wangsheng

Funeral Parlor, presiding over life-and-death affairs while retaining a playful and mischievous demeanor.

2.2. Color narrative and emotional guidance

Character theme colors function as a medium for miHoYo's tool to guide viewers' emotional responses while shaping brand identity through design. Color is not only a reflection of visual style, but also a narrative tool that guides players' emotions and cognition [5]. The artistic traits, inner dilemmas, and spiritual depths of their souls are vividly conveyed through the color schemes employed to shape their personas [6]. As an illustration, the color blue, associated with freedom, and mainly a lighter one for Venti in Genshin Impact, is used to symbolize the wind, while Eula's blue, silver, and white trio of colors signifies her identity as the "Spindrift Knight" and the "conflict and vengeance" that come from her aristocratic lineage. The overall in-game color palette across miHoYo's titles tends to be unified, characterized by high saturation and bright tones, creating a distinct impression of "miHoYo-style colors." In addition to integrating the visually stunning and otherworldly game segments, the colors also allow the players to easily recognize the brand.

2.3. Technical implementation and detailed presentation

In line with the core philosophy that "tech otakus save the world," miHoYo's visual delight is closely linked to strong technical backing. Through the effective application of 3D modeling, PBR (Physically Based Rendering) materials, dynamic lighting, and other technical methods in a very effective way, miHoYo reaches an extremely high level of detail in the depiction of materials like skin, fabrics, and metals [6]. Character faces have become more expressive and nuanced, with changes in eye gleams and micro-expressions that greatly enhance the characters' lifelikeness. Beyond characters' normal attacks, skills, and ultimate abilities (Elemental Bursts in Genshin Impact, and Ultimate Skills in Honkai: Star Rail), the developers also devoted substantial efforts to crafting the corresponding animations and particle effects. These moments not only showcase the technical team's expertise but also serve as the most direct visual medium for communicating the characters' personalities and powers. The extremely bright and striking image of the Raiden Shogun's "Musou no Hitotachi" (the Unwavering Cut) operation, for example, is not only a pivotal visual turning point of her narrative but also a key symbolic element.

While the visual style of the game captures players' attention, the narrative backdrop resonates with their emotions. miHoYo employs diverse narrative strategies to communicate characters not as "just drawings" but as "real and emotional characters" [7].

3. Design strategies for character narratives and emotional embedding

miHoYo's narrative style bears the hallmark of "Souls-like" games, thus predominantly adopting a fragmented storytelling approach. That is, the majority of narrative elements are embedded in character voice lines, character stories, character-related weapon and artifact descriptions, world quests, and item texts. Character narratives are not presented in a linear, straightforward fashion; rather, they are dispersed across these elements, requiring players to gather and explore clues to construct a complete narrative picture. Taking Genshin Impact as an example, the annihilation of Khaenri'ah, the catastrophe that occurred five hundred years ago, and the emotional tribulations of most characters are conveyed through this narrative device. The players gradually deepen their understanding of characters and the world as they investigate, collect clues, and decipher meanings.

This "exploring" approach leads the players to experience empathy for the characters to a greater extent and be more engaged emotionally with the characters. Fragmented narrative not only enriches the level of worldview, but also enhances players' sense of immersion and emotional connection through the process of active exploration [8].

"Story Quests" (or "Companion Quests") are tailored narrative modules developed by miHoYo for open-world characters. The storyline in these quests moves away from the usual fighting to the characters' psychologies and even their development or pivotal choices. Story presentation, cinematic camera angles, and character dialogues unlock the full immersive dimension of a character for players. As an example, Zhongli's Story Quest "Farewell, Archaic Lord" centers on the philosophical themes of "contracts" and "legacy," thus making the player understand the profoundness and eternal significance behind his "leisurely travels in the mortal world." Nahida's Story Quest details her journey from confinement to freedom and from self-doubt to unwavering conviction. Basically, the entirety of the glamour and the depth of a character can be manifested through their Story Quest.

4. Synergistic empowerment of visuals and narrative: industry implications

miHoYo recognizes the crucial role of emotional projection within the "otaku culture" and, as a result, it deliberately enhances the narrative to connect the player (the Traveler/Trailblazer) and the characters. The player-controlled protagonist serves as the primary narrative perspective, with all key characters interacting and forging bonds with them. The design naturally narrows the psychological distance between players and characters. Getting to a higher level of "friendship" or alike can lead to the opening of more voice lines, story snippets, and profile entries, which are all parts of the character becoming more familiar with the player. Engaging in activities such as chatting or gifting items in the Serenitea Pot or on the Astral Express fosters a stronger sense of involvement and that of being a friend. Crucially, miHoYo's characters are not idealized; they possess flaws, grapple with internal conflicts, and bear traumatic pasts. For instance, the "eternity" that Raiden Shogun craves most yet fails to truly comprehend or how Jingliu endures torment yet derives strength from her submission to Mara. All these "imperfections" give the characters more life and make them real, thus enabling them to get players' empathy, kindness, love, and even protective instincts—facilitating deeper emotional projection.

One of the most sophisticated aspects of miHoYo's character design is the fact that neither the visuals nor the narrative is separate but rather they form a tightly integrated, mutually reinforcing system. Understanding a character entails interpreting accessories, scars, color schemes, and even sartorial styles—all of which narrate the character's history, identity, and personality. When you know the character's story and then you look again at these visual elements, this often leads to a sudden moment of epiphany. This causal linkage significantly enhances the narrative and artistic value of the character designs.

A visually stunning character design, devoid of a substantive narrative backdrop, remains merely an "empty shell". It is precisely the rich narrative groundwork that endows these visual elements with emotional resonance and symbolic significance. Thus, when gamers discover that Shenhe's red ropes are her way of binding her "Lone Star, Calamitous Fate" and its evil aura, this particular visual design stops being "just" an aesthetic and becomes a symbol of her resistance against destiny.

Thanks to this comprehensive design integration, characters evolve into three-dimensional, culturally distinctive entities and even develop into independent IPs. At first, one is attracted by their "look," then gets captivated by their "inner self" and lastly emotional attachment and consumption follow. The proliferation of character promotional videos, demos, and user-generated content is the

combined effect of the visual and narrative strengths which together foster a vibrant and powerful fan culture ecosystem revolving around the characters and yielding significant commercial viability and sustainable cultural impact [9]. The transformation of characters from visual attraction to emotional attachment constitutes the core path for them to achieve long-term commercial value and user retention as independent IPs [10].

Therefore, miHoYo's success in character design is not a matter of chance; it reflects the company's successful balance between the mechanized industrial production and the artistically creative, the co-existence of the dazzling visuals with the profound narrative.

5. Conclusion

miHoYo has established a comprehensive character creation framework encompassing mechanisms for symbolic visual design, color narration, technical expression, fragmented lore, in-depth character self-narration, and emotional projection. Thanks to this, they have been able to raise virtual idols that have high communicative value and that are capable of transcending cultural boundaries and resonating with the global audience.

Firstly, this is a very valuable lesson for the domestic Chinese Two-Dimensional game industry sector and the entire content industry. The Chinese content industry is confronting increasingly fierce competition and this means that the creation of characters with a unique appeal and cultural substance is the basis of building long-lasting IPs.

Highly visually expressive characters demand thorough and strong technical research and development as their support; they cannot be lacking at the same time. The façade of "character traits for sale" is hard to keep going. Only through solid, deep narrative can a character attain inner vitality, thereby facilitating the formation of strong emotional bonds with players and enabling the transition from a "traffic-driven" to a "retention-oriented" relationship.

In the days to come, with the advancement of technologies such as artificial intelligence and game engines, character interactivity and AI integration will get highly advanced. miHoYo's route reveals a fundamental truth: no matter how far the technological progress is, the unrelenting search for the summit in character visual aesthetics and story profundity, along with the ceaseless understanding of humanity and feeling, remains the core determinant in creating compelling virtual characters and driving the advancement of games as the "Ninth Art".

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