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ABSTRACTED EMBODIMENT AND IMMERSION IN MIHOYO'S *GENSHIN IMPACT*

Review by Padraig Lee

Genshin Impact. **28 September 2020. Version 2.1.0, MiHoYo, 01 September 2021 PC. Video Game.**

Chinese game studio MiHoYo's latest game and first foray into the PC and console market, *Genshin Impact,* sets itself apart as a gorgeous, exciting, and thoroughly enjoyable free-to-play entertainment experience. As a video game, *Genshin* further develops upon the anime-style visual aesthetic and action role-playing game (ARPG) combat developed in MiHoYo's previous title, *Honkai Impact 3rd* (2016), while incorporating exploration mechanics and enemy design that are no doubt inspired by other recent open-world action-adventure games – most notably, Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017). However, despite its enjoyable moment to moment gameplay, progress slows considerably within the first few hours due to the sheer amount of content blocked by paywall, gambling mechanics, and a demanding time commitment to attain necessary resources. Additionally, the Wish and party systems used in the game, while customisable and suited to player interest, ultimately reveal issues of both character agency and a prevailing dissonance between the player and the in-game characters they choose to use: a dis-embodied relation between player and character.

Genshin Impact takes place in the mystical world of Teyvat, a pseudo-medieval world of swords, bows, magic, dragons, and quests galore. From cooking competitions and flower deliveries to monster hunts, spelunking through ancient ruins, and battling ancient gods, activities vary wildly in their manner and scope. The game synthesises various media to establish the story's core and extended lore – including the use of gameplay, thematic cutscenes, animated stories, as well as supplementary manga and social media posts – allowing the game to maintain a far-reaching and highly varied player-character experiences, as well as maintaining player involvement and commitment to *Genshin*'s world. By maintaining multiple avenues which entice the player to return to the game, releasing content for the game on a 'drip-feed' over months and years, and creating pressure to return at specific times via rewards and timed events, *Genshin* has established itself as a 'game as a service,' one without an apparent end, and therefore a locus for the expenditure of potentially limitless time and money by its consumers. The connection between player and Teyvat is often facilitated by the player's happy-go-lucky 'navigator,' Paimon. The game's menu button, where non-immersive actions such as graphics, sound options, as well as mail and networking is a profile for Paimon, who is also the facilitator of 'Wishes' that the player can make to acquire other characters that exist in the game world and add them to their party, whether or not this makes

sense in the context of *Genshin*'s story. Paimon is the first character the player meets upon waking in Teyvat, speaks on behalf of the player in almost all dialogue interactions, and is the player's repository of lore and knowledge throughout the game. Additionally, Paimon also extends into a more metatextual role, as it is supposedly Paimon who sends the player notifications and email about both current and upcoming events, which both facilitates a sort of out-of-game immersion for the player as well as incentive for them to return and invest more hours into *Genshin*.

The game's plot is driven primarily by the desire of the game's protagonist, known only as 'the Traveller,' to be reunited with their lost sibling, who is separated from them in the game's introductory cutscene. Interestingly, these two siblings act as completely interchangeable characters in the story, as the player has the opportunity to play as either the brother, Aether, or the sister, Lumine, with the other taking up the role of 'missing sibling.' This seemingly irrelevant distinction between 'main' and 'foil' character acts as the first of many oddly undeveloped character rotations within the game, especially considering the only distinctions between Aether and Lumine, in a practical sense, are their appearance and gender. The player is also not limited to exploring the world as the Traveller but can control other characters that they receive via 'Wishes,' essentially possessing and directing them as best suits the player's desires through gameplay. Playing as these characters does not convey a sense of embodying them or manifesting their will, but, instead, abstracts and reduces them to the status of 'weapon' in 'body' form. This detachment is further emphasised by the third person camera angle that encourages the player to observe their suite of characters performing flashy attacks and abilities, without absorbing the action from a more intimate or embodied perspective. Considering that recruitable characters occasionally roam around Teyvat, even while you are playing with that character as your primary avatar, not only showcases another way that party-switching poses potential issues for a player's fully immersive experience, but also reveals a bizarre disconnect between each side character's in-game 'agency' and their overruled function as a game tool for the player. While party-switching and character choice options are common in many games – especially online games – the player's ability to project a sense of 'self' onto any chosen character is inhibited by not only the necessary and frequent swapping of characters, but also the sheer lack of development these characters receive *as* members of the player's party. The player does not actually play *as* or *with* the characters they are choosing to utilise in a given moment, but as a homuncular tool, a facsimile of that character as it exists in Teyvat's world that is discardable, replaceable, and above all, collectable.

Aside from character (dis)embodiment, another important component of the game includes its 'literal' world as *Genshin*'s regions function not only as facsimiles of real states and cultures but also bear connections to thematically important in-game elements, embodied by a corresponding god ('Archon'). Mondstadt exists as a Germanic or Western European-derivative nation associated with the element of wind and the ideal of freedom; Liyue serves as a proxy to mainland China and embodies stone and contracts; Inazuma represents Japan, electricity, and eternity. While the cultural generalisations made to achieve a sense of cultural legitimacy in each of Teyvat's lands is rather reductive, the unique atmospheres that each region manages to convey through their visual and musical aesthetics creates a situated sense of exploration and discovery that may be *Genshin*'s greatest achievement. However, as the player explores these lands and finds rewards in the form

of chests, resources, and 'spirits of the land' ("Oculi"), the world becomes depleted and barren. The player is actively encouraged to exploit Teyvat's resources, and progress is severely gated behind resources that both do and *do not* replenish. Thus, as the player explores each new region, the excitement of personal progress is tempered with a desire to be as efficient and thorough as possible, so as not to miss any crucial resources needed to progress. In making the game's core resources so scarce, MiHoYo has actively strained the player's relationship with their environment, transforming it from the playroom of wonder it has the potential to be into a highly economised personal repository. Considering, then, these rewarded practices of resource exploitation, alongside the world's reductive parallels to 'real-life' countries and cultures, *Genshin* opens itself to critique (and further research) by actively reifying colonial ideologies and practices in its gameplay.

Considering then each region's ties with a respective god who embodies the literal and physical soul of that nation and the difficulties that other characters in the game go through, in both the acquisition and the use of their Visions, the costs of power explored in *Genshin* seems undermined when considering that the Traveller attains the power of any element that rules the land that they visit; they receive blessings from these gods at statues of the seven by 'resonating' with them and become empowered through 'worship' of the statues (though it is yet unclear whether the traveller derives their elemental power from other deities, or from the land itself). Similar to how the player takes on new characters and rotates through them as 'tools', this conveniently granted magic both empowers and abstracts the player from sensations of immersion and embodiment by becoming another rotation of game commands. While playing, this mechanic similarly diminishes the price of power explored for every other character in the game, setting the Traveller and the player up as 'external,' and privileged to the fruits of the world without engaging with it on the terms set out for its other inhabitants.

Ultimately, while *Genshin Impact* is a massive, gorgeous, and mostly fulfilling gaming experience, it struggles to maintain the player's immersion, leaving interaction with its world and characters far removed from the game's own situated context. However, as the game continues to receive expansion, perhaps some of these issues will be addressed and developed. Regardless, scholars and players alike interested in considering embodiment, character agency, and dynamics between player, character, and environment will find ample material in *Genshin Impact* to explore.

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Padraig Lee has just completed his master's degree in Philosophy at the University of York, UK. With a background in Botany and a keen interest in ludology and computer science, he enjoys exploring works at the intersection of science, the Humanities, and technology. He lives in Ireland with his partner, their dog, and a seemingly insurmountable backlog of video games and fantasy novels.