Analysis of Differences Between Popular Mobile Games in China and Japan From a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Case Study of *Genshin Impact* and *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby*

XIE Zhaozhe

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Genshin Impact and *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* are two of the hottest mobile games in China and Japan, respectively, in the past two years, both of which have gained enormous popularity and revenue in their home countries. This paper focuses on the cross-cultural perspective, and analyzes the differences between the two games and their reasons for their popularity from three aspects: character design, cultural background, and game genre.

Keywords: popular mobile games, cross-cultural perspective, *Genshin Impact*, *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby*

Game Description

Genshin Impact is an open-world role-playing game developed by miHoYo, a Chinese game company. The game is set in a fictional world where players can explore different regions, interact with various characters, and complete tasks and challenges in the open world. According to Sensor Tower, *Genshin Impact* achieved a revenue of $1 billion within six months after its release, and its total revenue on mobile platforms in 2022 was approximately RMB 11.12 billion.

Uma Musume: Pretty Derby is a simulation game developed by Cygames, a Japanese game company. The game's theme is the combination of girls and horse racing. Players act as coaches of "horse girls" and participate in various races with them. According to Sensor Tower, *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby*'s total revenue in 2022 exceeded $700 million and won the top spot on Japan's domestic mobile game bestseller list. In 2021, its annual revenue reached approximately $1 billion.

Game Differences Comparison

Comparison of Character Design Inspirations

The character designs in *Genshin Impact* and *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* are not only impressive, but also showcase high-level craftsmanship in appearance, voice acting, and modeling, thus earning them a wide fan base and a surge in secondary creations. However, there are noticeable differences in character design between the two games.

In *Genshin Impact*, characters are mainly designed from scratch, with each character having a unique appearance and personality. The game presents rich background stories for each character through their side stories, event quests, and main quests, to showcase their character and allow players to understand their

---

XIE Zhaozhe, MIT, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

experiences and traits. Additionally, the game divides its world into different nations with distinct styles, providing a solid foundation for character design. Characters from each nation are designed to match the style and fashion of their respective country. For example, the characters from the "Mondstadt" nation are based on western styles and emphasize freedom, with towering western-style buildings dominating the cityscape. In contrast, the characters from the "Liyue" nation, based on China, emphasize contracts and have traditional Chinese classical buildings as their main internal architecture. These unique and distinctive original characters have deeply attracted players, accumulating a large number of character fans.

In contrast, all *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* characters are based on real-life Japanese racehorses and are designed through personification combining the elements of horse racing and idols. This unique theme design has attracted a large number of players. In Japan, horse racing is a highly popular national activity, and the racing elements in *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* are tailored for Japanese users, providing a huge market foundation for the game. In addition, the idol element is also indispensable. Prior to this, the idol culture was already well-established in Japan and very popular. Meanwhile, the popularity of ACG culture has made 2D idols an important part of the entire Japanese idol culture. A mature commercial mechanism has driven the development of numerous business models, such as comics, animation, games, song albums, and even lives, becoming one of the important reasons for the explosive popularity of *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby*.

Cultural Background Comparison

Both *Genshin Impact* and *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* are successful games in the realm of ACG, not solely relying on simple character designs and world-building in the game's design. Instead, they also carry rich cultural background elements. Game developers often incorporate historical, philosophical, and literary knowledge in the game to increase the depth and interest of the story. Furthermore, they introduce culture and history, which are not typically well-known, to players. The addition of these elements conveys positive messages and values, expressing the game developers' social responsibility and educational significance.

Since the characters in *Genshin Impact* are original designs, there is more room for creativity in the portrayal of the character images. From the game's storyline, the writer tends to draw on Chinese ancient Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism philosophy to provide the characters with more cultural connotations. For example, the character "Hu Tao" deeply integrates Confucianism's views on life and death. At only 13 years old, Hu Tao inherited the "Wangsheng Funeral Parlor" after her grandfather's death. Despite her youth, Hu Tao has a unique understanding of her work, believing that "Wangsheng Funeral Parlor is a legitimate business, a basic unit of commerce. Work is work, there is no distinction between good and bad, high and low". Hu Tao has this idea because of an experience she had after her grandfather's funeral. She went alone to the boundary between life and death, hoping to meet her grandfather before his departure. However, after waiting for days, Hu Tao finally realized and was relieved that her grandfather had lived a bright and honest life without regrets. She recalled her grandfather's words, "born at birth, die at the moment of death. Follow your heart and do your best". "Life and death are an infinite cycle, and life leads to death, while death brings new life. So, why should we speak ill of death?"

This is precisely the deep thinking and exploration of Confucianism on life and death. The pre-Qin Confucianism had a life attitude of "valuing life and cherishing death". Xunzi said,

> Life is the beginning of human beings, and death is the end of human beings. The end and the beginning are both good, and the way of humans is completed. Therefore, a gentleman respects the beginning and is cautious about the end. The

beginning and the end are the same; it is the way of a gentleman, and it is the culture of etiquette and righteousness. (*Xunzi's Theory of Rites*)

Moreover, "life" and "death" seem to be two completely different states at first glance, but essentially they are interconnected. From the perspective of individual survival, there is both "life" and "death"; while from the perspective of the great life flow of the universe, "death" is another form of "life", which means that this thing is "dead", while that thing is "alive", and vice versa (Guo, 2012). Therefore, Confucianism emphasizes that individuals should actively contribute to society and humanity at every stage of life to achieve their own value and significance. By integrating Confucianism's philosophical ideas into the characters' plots, *Genshin Impact* makes the characters more vivid, fuller, and more meaningful, allowing players to better understand and reflect on the characters' design.

The character design of *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* is based on real-life racehorses and their personified adaptations in the context of horse racing. Thus, there are multiple limitations to consider. Firstly, copyright issues arise as most real-life racehorses have owners, and obtaining permission from the horse owners is required for any second creative works. Second, the issue of the subject matter. Although horse racing culture is very popular in Japan, it is a gray area similar to gambling, so it should not be incorporated into the game as it is. Therefore, the developers, Cygames, are strict about obtaining permission or purchasing the rights to use all game characters based on real horses. Additionally, by humanizing the horses, they eliminate the element of betting and focus only on the horses' pure desire for victory and dreams, thus avoiding the restrictions of the theme.

Uma Musume: Pretty Derby emphasizes the realization of "dreams" and sportsmanship, which highly resonates with the Japanese spirit and culture. Japanese culture has a persistent pursuit of dreams, where people are often encouraged and motivated to pursue their dreams and make relentless efforts towards them. This pursuit of dreams is known as "shi" (志) in Japanese culture. There are also several famous sayings or proverbs, such as Tadao Ando's "If you follow the majority, you will surely lose yourself. You have no choice but to continue what you want without fear of loneliness" and Tsugumi Utsuki's "It is not that there are dreams in life, but that dreams make life". These phrases encourage people to persistently pursue their dreams.

In *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby*, almost all of the horse girls relentlessly run to achieve their dreams. The best example of this is the "Tokai Teio" and "Haru Urara". Tokai Teio's road to running was not easy as it had experienced three bone fractures during its career. For a racehorse whose main goal is to run, the effect of bone fractures is undoubtedly fatal, and most people believed that even if Tokai Teio could return to the racecourse after its injury, it would not be as dominant as before. However, surprisingly, Tokai Teio made a comeback in the "Arima Kinen" race, achieving a "miraculous resurrection" and crossing the finish line like a fleeting meteor to win the championship. On the other hand, Haru Urara's story is entirely different. It participated in over a thousand races during its life but never won. Fans were touched by its persistence and efforts to pursue its dreams and named it the "legend of no victory". Both characters' stories are based on true events, making the stories more realistic and resonating more with Japanese players.

Comparison of Game Types

Regarding game types, *Genshin Impact* falls into the category of online multiplayer games, in which players can choose to explore the game world together with others, while *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby* is a single-player game, in which players can only play alone. The differences in the choices made by Chinese and Japanese players regarding these two game types are naturally influenced by various subjective and objective reasons.

Subjective reasons. Chinese culture has traditionally emphasized socializing and interpersonal relationships, which originates from ancient Confucian thought, emphasizing the sociality and interpersonal relationships of individuals. Confucianism advocates respect for family, elders, superiors, and friends, emphasizing virtues such as harmony, etiquette, loyalty, filial piety, and so on. *The Analects* is one of the classics of Confucianism, in which sayings such as "Learn extensively and hold onto what is good, and you shall become a government official" and "If your parents are alive, do not travel far away; if you must travel far, have a clear direction" emphasize the importance of family, learning, and interpersonal relationships. In Chinese traditional culture, the family and social relationships are closely related, and people believe that the family is the basic unit of society, and the handling of social relationships is based on family and kinship relationships. Deng (2004) mentioned that Confucius' "ren" is two persons, from people, from two. It standardizes the relationship between people in society. Individuals must be incorporated into the group. As the *Origin of Chinese Characters States*, "the reality of Benevolence is that the matter is factual" (S. Xu & X. Xu, 2017), and the Chinese people have always emphasized the love of the family and the source of blood ties. Additionally, "Benevolence" and "Rite" are inseparable. Moreover, the traditional Chinese ritual system also emphasizes the relationship between people, such as the ordered hierarchy of officialdom and traditional marriage and funeral customs. These ritual systems are not only meant to regulate people's behavior, but more importantly, to maintain interpersonal relationships, emphasizing respect and trust between people. The existence of this traditional culture has a certain impact on Chinese players' preference for online multiplayer games.

In contrast, Japanese culture places a greater emphasis on solitude, which has its roots in multiple aspects. On the one hand, Japan's natural environment and geographic location make it easy for people to experience the beauty of silence, solitude, and nature. For example, Japanese landscape paintings and haiku poetry emphasize the beauty of solitude and nature. On the other hand, traditional Japanese culture also emphasizes personal inner experiences and spiritual pursuits, such as the "mono no aware (もののあわれ)" and "sabi (さび)" aesthetics that originated in the Heian period. According to Lin (2017), "mono no aware" and "sabi" represent the appreciation, transformation, and sublimation of things that are negative and imperfect in a general sense and the negative emotions caused by them, such as desolation, decay, decay, emptiness, loneliness, and antiquity, and also endow them with positive values and meanings. In a way, this concept has led to the "culture of loneliness" in Japan today. Furthermore, Japan's modernization and rapid development have increased people's life and competition pressures, making solitude and contemplation a way to relax and relieve stress. For example, "solo activities" have become a trend, referring to activities that one does alone, such as solo travel, solo movie-watching, solo shopping, and so on. In addition, Japan's "yowai en (弱い縁)" culture reflects a sense of detachment and independence in relationships. In daily life, people clearly distinguish between "inside" and "outside", and those who are "inside" are familiar with and close to each other, without differentiation. In language communication, people call each other by name directly and express their thoughts and feelings directly. In contrast, they treat those who are "outside" with a sense of distance, indifference, and respect (Chen, 2013).

Objective reasons. Online games are popular in the Chinese game market, which was mainly dominated by the home computer market in the 1980s and 1990s, while the console game market was not very developed. This was mainly due to IBM PCs and clones holding a large market share in China's computer market, but most people only used personal computers for work and study, and had little demand for game.

The Chinese game market has also long faced issues with piracy. Without copyright protection, game developers are unable to generate revenue from game sales, which has had a significant impact on the healthy

development of the game industry. The development of the single-player game market requires even more copyright protection and legalization, as game developers need to obtain authorization from console manufacturers and pay certain copyright fees in game sales. Without copyright protection and legalization, the single-player game market is difficult to develop in a healthy manner.

In addition, China's cultural and game censorship system has also had an impact on the development of the console game market. Under the censorship system, some console games may not be able to pass the censorship review due to their content and themes, thereby limiting their distribution in the Chinese market (Zhang, 2017). Therefore, in the absence of adequate imports of single-player games, the majority of the Chinese game market is occupied by domestically-produced or imported online multiplayer games, which are more numerous and varied.

Japan, as a country with a highly developed single-player and console game market, saw the emergence of some noteworthy game development studios in the 1980s, such as Nintendo, Capcom, Square Enix, Konami, and so on. These studios not only possess strong technological capabilities and game design skills, but also gradually accumulate a large number of loyal fans, forming a unique cultural atmosphere. These factors played an important role in promoting the development of Japan's single-player game market.

It is worth mentioning that home game consoles are highly popular in Japan. Currently, the top three game console market shares in the world are held by Sony PlayStation series, Nintendo Switch, and Microsoft Xbox series. Among them, Sony and Nintendo are both Japanese companies. In addition, Japanese people like to play games at home, which also promotes the progress of Japan's single-player game market.

Besides, the Japanese single-player game market is very much focused on local characteristics, such as JRPGs, anime games, Japanese action games, and so on. In these areas, Japan's game production level and market demand are both very high, which also promotes the further expansion of single-player games in the Japanese market. This market background collectively results in the Japanese people being more inclined towards single-player games.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on three aspects of character design, cultural background, and game genre, comparing the differences between *Genshin Impact* and *Uma Musume: Pretty Derby*, two popular products in the mobile game markets of China and Japan, respectively, and the cultural and market factors behind these differences. The research results provide some new insights for game players in the Chinese and Japanese markets in their market selection, and have certain reference value for game developers and marketing personnel, helping them better understand the characteristics of cross-cultural markets and the needs of game audiences.

References

Chen, L. (2013). On "honne" and "tatemae" in Japanese communication. *Journal of Jiamusi Education Institute, 30*(1), 245+249.

Deng, C. Y. (2004). Cross-cultural communication between the East and the West in social psychology. *Journal of Yibin College, 26*(3), 41-43.

Duan, X. X., & Zhang, Y. (2021). Research on the current development of the Japanese game industry. *Industrial Innovation, 5*(10), 51-53.

Guo, R. J. (2012). Realistic concern and transcendent pursuit of Confucianism's view of life and death. *Journal of Suzhou University, 33*(2), 55-59.

Lin, S. H. (2017). The beauty of "wabi-sabi" and "mono no aware". *Reading, 39*(6), 164-172.

Wang, Y. H., Zhang, T. Y., Liang, H. Y., & Zhu, J. Y. (2022). Comparative analysis of operation modes of mobile game markets in China and Japan: Taking "Genshin Impact" and "Uma Musume: Pretty Derby" as examples. *Marketing Management Review, 30*(10), 97-99.

Xu, S., & Xu, X. (2017). *Origin of Chinese characters*. Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company.

Zhang, Z. T. (2017). Analysis of the current situation and development of China's stand-alone game industry. *Computer Knowledge and Technology, 13*(6), 233-235.