



Mischaracterization: Players' Lack Of Media Literacy Regarding The Story And Narratives Of Genshin Impact Characters

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Abstract

Background. The evolution of video games as a complex narrative medium has raised new challenges regarding players' interpretation of characters.

Aims. This study examines the phenomenon of “mischaracterization”—that is, errors in understanding and representing characters resulting from a partial or distorted reading of the narrative—within the player community of Genshin Impact, an action-RPG developed by HoYoverse that delivers its story episodically through periodic updates.

Methods. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and Potter's (2021) Media Literacy Theory framework—which encompasses the dimensions of access, analysis, evaluation, creation, and self-awareness (personal locus)—this study collected data from an online questionnaire administered to 44 active players.

Result. The results reveal patterns of imbalance in media literacy competencies: respondents demonstrated relatively high abilities in accessing information and awareness of the industry's commercial motives, yet their conceptual analysis skills (distinguishing between canon and fanon) and reflective awareness of personal bias were low. These findings reinforce the view that media literacy is multidimensional and cannot be generalized based on a single competency dimension alone.

Conclusion. This study also highlights that mischaracterization is not merely a matter of individual cognitive deficits but is also influenced by the episodic narrative structure of the games themselves, as well as the pressure for convergence of opinion within the participatory culture of online communities.

Keywords: media literacy, mischaracterization, Genshin Impact, fan culture, video games



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INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital technology have transformed the way people consume and interpret media. Video games are no longer merely a form of entertainment, but rather a medium of

communication that conveys narratives, cultural values, and complex social representations. Genshin Impact, an action-RPG developed by HoYoverse and released in 2020, presents the fictional world of Teyvat with characters from diverse cultural backgrounds. The story is revealed gradually through dialogue, cutscenes, and periodic updates, requiring players to actively engage with the game to fully understand the narrative.

In practice, not all players interpret characters in line with the official narrative. This phenomenon is known as “mischaracterization”—a misinterpretation and misrepresentation of a character resulting from a partial, superficial, or distorted reading. One prominent example in the online community is the discussion surrounding Neuvillette, the Chief Justice of Fontaine and Sovereign Hydro, who expressed her desire to put the Archons (Venti, Zhongli, Raiden, and Nahida) on trial. This motivation is often oversimplified as a purely personal moral judgment, especially when her statement about Venti is taken literally as an accusation of laziness without considering the broader narrative context.

This phenomenon is exacerbated by fanfiction culture and fan communities, where players often construct alternative narratives as a form of creative expression or protest against the official narrative. Low media literacy makes it difficult for some players to distinguish between the official narrative (canon) and community-created narratives (fanon), blurring the line between personal interpretation and the original narrative representation (Pugachev et al., 2023). This aligns with the findings of Andriany and Triwardhani (2025) that the main challenge for the younger generation in dealing with digital information lies not in access but in the ability to process information accurately.

Previous research by Mihi (2023) shows that differences in translation and cultural adaptation in Genshin Impact contribute to players’ varying perceptions of characters. Kleemans et al. (2017) add that low media literacy hinders players’ ability to fully assess the transformations and motivations of morally ambiguous characters. These studies tend to focus on aspects of translation or character personality, leaving a research gap regarding how, specifically, a lack of media literacy contributes to the mischaracterization of characters in games.

This study employs W. James Potter’s Theory of Media Literacy (10th edition), which views media literacy as a multidimensional ability to critically access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content. Renee Hobbs also emphasizes these four core competencies as access, analysis, evaluation, and creation (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022), which are further

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complemented by the dimension of self-awareness (personal locus) to understand the extent to which personal biases shape individual interpretations. This framework is relevant given that Genshin Impact, with over a hundred characters—each possessing a unique cultural background and motivation—presents character information episodically and sporadically over several years—a structure that differs from linear narrative media such as novels or films.

Operationally, “access” refers to the ability to find and use media information sources; “analyze” emphasizes the ability to critically examine media content; “evaluate” means assessing the credibility and relevance of media messages; while “create” emphasizes the ability to produce and share media messages responsibly. Redmond (2015) describes media literacy as “common sense for digital learners,” which enables individuals to understand power structures, biases, and the economic and political objectives behind media content.

As of the latest update on October 22, 2025, Genshin Impact features 107 playable characters, each with a unique background, personality, and motivation. The game’s world of Teyvat is divided into seven nations, each representing a specific natural element and led by an Archon. Character narratives are presented in layers through the Archon Quest as the main storyline, Character Quests that reveal each character’s personal background, dialogue, as well as cutscenes and seasonal events available for a limited time—a structure that requires players to gather and piece together fragments of information on their own to build a coherent understanding of the characters

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to analyze how a lack of media literacy influences players’ misrepresentation of Genshin Impact characters, while also providing practical insights for HoYoverse and other game developers to improve narrative accessibility—for example, through more easily digestible dialogue or in-game story summaries.

Unlike previous studies that attribute character misinterpretation primarily to translation, localization, or participatory fandom, this study demonstrates that mischaracterization is fundamentally associated with an imbalance in players’ multidimensional media literacy competencies. By integrating Potter’s Media Literacy Theory with the context of episodic video game narratives, the study proposes a new framework explaining how access, analytical ability, evaluation, creation, and self-awareness collectively shape players’ interpretation of fictional characters in Genshin Impact.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach, using descriptive case study methods, to gain an in-depth understanding of low media literacy among Genshin Impact players. The qualitative approach emphasizes the natural depiction of social reality through narrative data rather than numbers, thus focusing on the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon within a specific social context (Sari et al., 2023).

The research examines the influence of media literacy levels on how players interpret characters and narratives, focusing on three aspects: message analysis skills, understanding of cultural context, and character interpretation. The study was conducted within the online community of active Genshin Impact players across various social media platforms. Subjects were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) players aged 18–30 who actively follow developments in the narrative and characters; (2) players who participate in community discussions or produce interpretive content (fan art, fan fiction, or posts); and (3) players with varying levels of understanding of the story and characters.

Data were collected using four complementary techniques (Moleong, 2017): observation of players' activities on social media and online forums; in-depth interviews with a number of active players; documentation in the form of screenshots of community conversations, social media posts, and fan works; and a literature review to strengthen the theoretical foundation. Data validity was tested through source triangulation, and data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2018), which consists of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions.

To guide the data reduction and categorization process, this study formulated five operational indicators deductively from Hobbs's four media literacy competencies and the personal locus dimension in the Cognitive Theory of Media Literacy (Potter, 2021): access was categorized as high if respondents cited official sources or community wikis as their primary references; analysis is categorized as explicit if respondents are able to identify the conceptual criteria distinguishing canon from fanon; evaluation is categorized as conscious if respondents state that Genshin Impact is strategically designed to influence players' perceptions; creation is categorized as acknowledging influence if respondents state that fan content helps shape their own understanding; and self-awareness is categorized as reflective if respondents explicitly

acknowledge the presence of personal bias in interpreting characters. These five indicators were consistently used as coding guidelines during the data presentation and discussion of results stages.

DISCUSSION

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized video games as sophisticated narrative media requiring active interpretation rather than passive consumption. Studies have explored **translation and localization** (Mihu, 2023), **moral evaluation of fictional characters** (Kleemans et al., 2017), **participatory fan culture** (Jenkins, 1992), **fanfiction-based character reconstruction** (Pugachev et al., 2023), and **media literacy within gaming environments** (Glas et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that players' perceptions are influenced by linguistic adaptation, community interactions, and narrative complexity. However, the literature has yet to integrate these perspectives into a comprehensive explanation of how media literacy competencies determine players' interpretation of episodic game narratives

Although previous studies have examined translation effects (Mihu, 2023), character evaluation (Kleemans et al., 2017), participatory fan culture (Jenkins, 1992), and fanfiction representation (Pugachev et al., 2023), limited attention has been given to how multidimensional media literacy competencies influence players' understanding of video game narratives. Existing studies generally explain character misinterpretation through localization, cultural adaptation, or fandom participation, while overlooking players' abilities to critically access, analyze, evaluate, create, and reflect upon media information. Furthermore, no previous research has empirically investigated the interaction between episodic game storytelling, canon–fanon confusion, and players' self-awareness as determinants of character mischaracterization.

The data was collected through an online questionnaire administered to 44 active Genshin Impact players, with female respondents making up the majority (36 people), followed by males (6 people), and those who chose not to disclose their gender (2 people), all aged 18–30. A total of 93% of respondents (40 out of 44) reported playing every day, indicating a high level of exposure to the game's narrative and content updates.

Respondents' Media Literacy Competency Profile

In terms of access, 53% of respondents (23 out of 44) explicitly cited official accounts or wikis as their primary sources for verifying information about a character before considering

secondary sources such as YouTube or forums. Some respondents even ranked their sources in order of priority, indicating a relatively good awareness of access options, though this does not necessarily guarantee a deep understanding of the narrative.

In terms of analytical ability, only 40% of respondents (17 out of 44) were able to explicitly articulate the difference between fan interpretations (fanon) and the official narrative (canon), while the remaining 60% provided superficial answers without adequate conceptual explanation. This gap indicates that awareness of the canon-fanon distinction is not necessarily accompanied by the analytical ability to consistently distinguish between the two.

In terms of evaluation, only 7% of respondents (3 out of 44) reported having experienced a significant discrepancy between their personal perceptions and the prevailing fan-driven portrayal of a character's personality—some cited the cases of Childe, Kaveh, and Columbina as examples. On the other hand, the majority of respondents (86%, or 37 out of 44) recognized that Genshin Impact is a commercial product strategically designed to influence players' perceptions of and attachment to specific characters, indicating a fairly well-developed critical awareness of the industry's motives—though this is not necessarily accompanied by the ability to evaluate how those motives shape biases in character representation specifically.

In terms of creativity, only 21% of respondents (9 out of 44) acknowledged that fan-created content helps shape other players' understanding of a character, while the majority viewed themselves as neutral consumers of fan content. This finding contrasts with the literature on fandom studies, which emphasizes the significant influence of fan-generated content on the collective perception of a character (Jenkins, 1992), and indicates an underestimation bias consistent with the concept of the third-person effect in communication studies.

In terms of self-awareness (personal locus), only 9% of respondents (4 out of 44) explicitly and reflectively acknowledged the existence of personal bias—aesthetic preferences or emotional attachment—in interpreting characters. In contrast, 70% of respondents (30 out of 44) stated that they had no preference for personal interpretations and tended to accept the official narrative as their primary reference, illustrating a reflective paradox: a normative commitment to the canon, yet a lack of ability to recognize how personal biases continue to shape their interpretations.

The findings above indicate that the misrepresentation within the Genshin Impact community cannot be explained solely by low media literacy in the simple sense. In fact, players demonstrated fairly high media literacy competencies in the dimensions of access and evaluation

of commercial motives; however, these competencies were not equally developed in the dimensions of in-depth analysis and self-awareness. This pattern of unevenness is consistent with Potter's (2021) view that media literacy is multidimensional, meaning that a high level in one dimension cannot be generalized to represent media literacy as a whole.

The gap between critical awareness of external parties (86% are aware of the industry's commercial motives) and reflective self-awareness (only 9% acknowledge personal bias) reinforces the relevance of the third-person effect, whereby individuals are more likely to believe that media messages influence others rather than themselves. Similarly, the high tendency to verify information through official sources in the access dimension is inconsistent with the low ability to conceptually explain the canon-fanon distinction, in line with the argument by Kleemans et al. (2017) that interpretive skills regarding morally complex characters depend on analytical ability, not merely access to accurate sources—as evident in the case of players' evaluations of Neuvillette and Venti.

The perspective of fan culture studies further enriches our understanding of this phenomenon. Jenkins (1992) asserts that active fans do not merely passively consume media texts but rather reproduce meaning through fanfiction and fan art, which shape the collective understanding of characters within the community. It is this process of reinterpretation that gives rise to fanon—a community interpretation that, while not entirely consistent with the official narrative, is nonetheless treated as a shared truth by some members of the community, a pattern common in the fan ecosystem of contemporary narrative media (Kang, 2024).

Researchers argue that “mischaracterization” is best understood as a structural tension among three elements: the intensity of players' exposure to episodic and scattered content (dialogue, character quests, artifact lore, social media); the limitations of players' cognitive capacity to integrate narrative fragments into a coherent understanding; and the social pressure of online communities that drives the convergence of opinions through the repetition of popular interpretations. Genshin Impact's fragmented narrative structure, which has evolved over the years, differs fundamentally from the conditions underpinning early-generation media literacy theory, which largely assumed media texts to have a cohesive narrative structure.

Furthermore, a number of cases of misrepresentation—including the perception of Venti in Neuvillette's statement—are believed to stem not solely from individual media literacy failures but also from the narrative design itself, which intentionally incorporates ambiguity and multiple

interpretations as a storytelling strategy to maintain players’ curiosity. In other words, some instances of misinterpretation may potentially be part of an intentional narrative gap created by the developers, rather than merely a failure on the part of players to process information. This argument is the researcher’s interpretation of the patterns in respondents’ answers and requires further exploration through in-depth interviews in subsequent research.

Novelty Statement

The novelty of this study lies in three major contributions:

1. Theoretical Novelty. This study integrates Potter's (2021) multidimensional Media Literacy Theory into the analysis of narrative interpretation in video games, an approach rarely applied in game studies.
2. Conceptual Novelty. It conceptualizes mischaracterization not merely as an individual misunderstanding or fandom practice but as the outcome of an interaction among media literacy competencies, episodic narrative design, and participatory fan culture.
3. Empirical Novelty. The study demonstrates that players may exhibit high information access and awareness of commercial motives while simultaneously possessing weak analytical ability and reflective self-awareness, revealing an imbalance among media literacy dimensions that has not been empirically documented in previous *Genshin Impact* studies.

State of the art this research

Wang (2024) discussed media literacy in gaming from the perspective of youth empowerment in digital environments.	Existing literature remains conceptual and does not empirically examine media literacy within specific narrative game communities.	This study provides empirical evidence from active Genshin Impact players, linking media literacy competencies with narrative interpretation.
Xu & Kongjit (2025) investigated cultural sensitivity in players' perceptions of Inazuma's Japanese culture.	Research focuses on cultural perception instead of the cognitive mechanisms underlying character interpretation.	This study extends the discussion from cultural interpretation toward cognitive and reflective media literacy processes.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the multidimensional nature of media literacy as proposed by Potter (2021). First, Genshin Impact players generally employ targeted information verification strategies through official sources and community wikis; however, this ability is not always accompanied by sufficient analytical skills to conceptually distinguish between canon and fanon. Second, a reflective gap was identified: high critical awareness of the industry's commercial motives, yet low awareness of one's own personal biases, consistent with the concept of the third-person effect. Third, linguistic and cultural contexts—particularly differences between English subtitles and local translations—also contribute to variations in players' interpretations of character personalities, consistent with the findings of Mihu (2023) and Xu and Kongjit (2025).

For game developers, particularly HoYoverse, it is recommended to consider features that help players access character narratives in a more coherent manner, such as integrated story recaps (in-game story recaps) or grouping dialogue and lore based on the characters' chronological storylines. For the community and players, it is recommended to foster reflective awareness of potential personal biases, rather than merely being wary of the industry's commercial motives or the influence of fan content on other players. For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct in-depth interviews to further explore arguments regarding intentional narrative gaps, as well as to expand the scope of research to other episodic narrative games to test the generalizability of these findings.

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