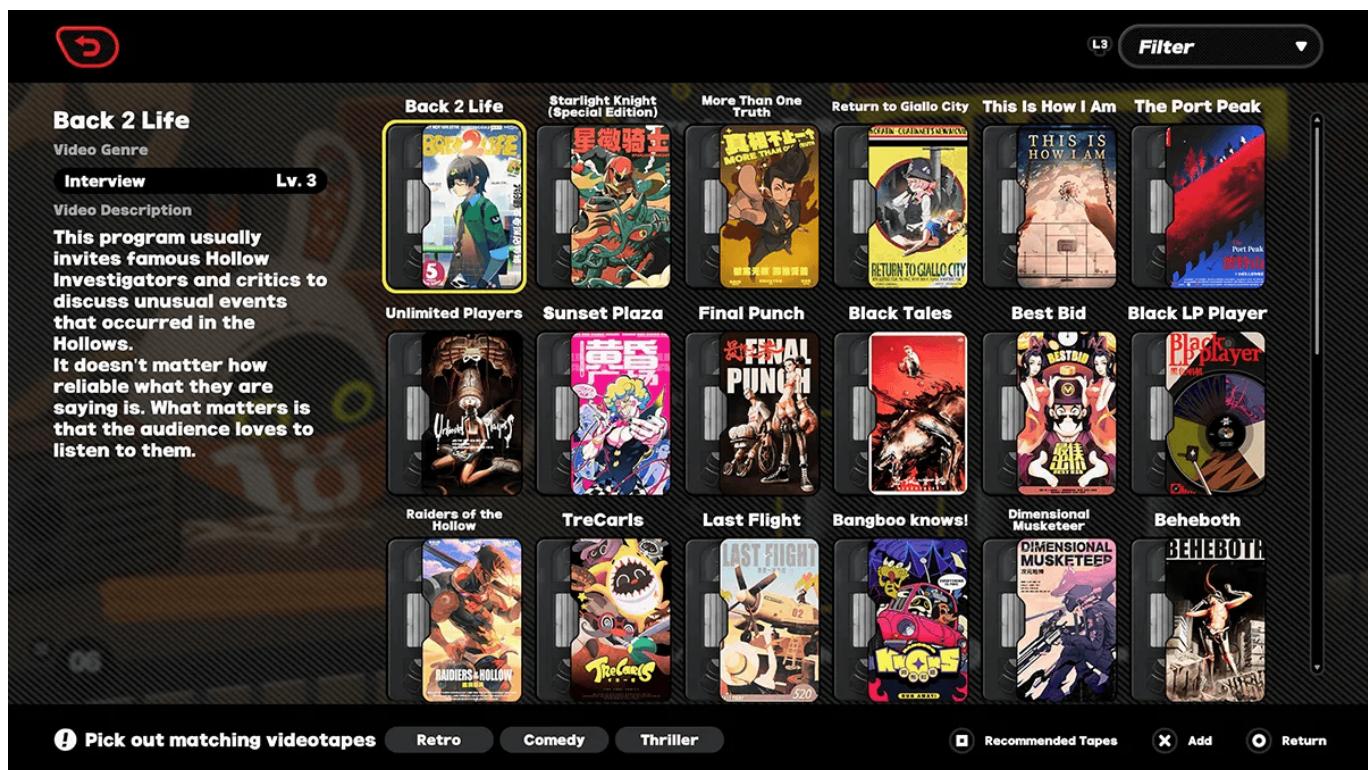


FGCT5002 The Conscious Practitioner

LO1 Globalisation and Polycentrism

In the globalized digital market, the success of a media franchise often depends on its ability to transcend national borders. Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) introduced the concept of "culturally odorless" products—goods that are stripped of the racial, ethnic, or cultural markers of their country of origin to appeal to a wider international audience (Glasspool, 2013). While Iwabuchi originally applied this to Japanese exports like the Sony Walkman, the theory is strikingly relevant to the modern Chinese gaming giant HoYoverse and its latest title, Zenless Zone Zero (ZZZ). To a significant extent, ZZZ exemplifies the "culturally odorless" product, utilizing a "stateless" anime aesthetic to mask its Chinese origins while curating a globally palatable urban identity.

Iwabuchi argues that odorless products do not conjure images of the producing nation in the consumer's mind. Zenless Zone Zero achieves this through a deliberate aesthetic of "urban fantasy" that defies geographical categorization. The game's central hub, New Eridu, is a reference to global street culture rather than a representation of Shanghai or Beijing (Nelva, 2023). Its visual language borrows heavily from 1990s analog retro-futurism, CRT monitors, VHS tapes, and graffiti, which triggers a sense of shared millennial nostalgia common in the West and Japan, rather than a specific Chinese cultural memory (Zenless Zone Zero, 2025). As noted by game critics, the environment evokes the Shibuya-esque vibes of The World Ends with You or the Westernized cool of Jet Set Radio, effectively displacing the consumer's focus from the developer's nationality to a generalized "global cool." (Zenless Zone Zero Producer Reveals Surprising Inspirations (and It's Not Persona 5) - IGN, s.d.)



(Borges, 2024)

Furthermore, ZZZ relies on the "anime-esque" art style to act as a cultural buffer. Despite being developed by a Chinese studio (HoYoverse), the game utilizes the visual grammar of Japanese animation (big eyes,

exaggerated expressions, specific tropes like the "maid faction") (*The Aesthetics of the Pull: Anime Style and Fan Culture in Zenless Zone Zero: A Study of Otaku Tropes, Database Consumption, and Cultural Proximity in a Gacha Game Reception*, s.d.). In this context, the product is not just odorless; it effectively wears a "mask" of another culture. For the average player, the game "smells" of Akihabara, not mainland China. This aligns with Iwabuchi's observation that cultural products often undergo a process of "de-ethnicization" to ensure friction-free consumption in global markets. The game's UI, English voice acting, and hip-hop-influenced soundtrack further dilute any distinct "Chinese" cultural odor, allowing it to penetrate Western markets that might otherwise be resistant to explicitly foreign media.



(nhatquangdinh, 2024)

However, the "odorlessness" is not absolute. As the game expands, HoYoverse re-introduces "fragrance" selectively through specific factions. For example, recent updates have teased characters with Wuxia (Chinese martial arts) aesthetics or Slavic industrial themes (ZarkySpin, 2025). Yet, these are presented as consumable "flavors" within the database of the game, rather than the defining identity of the text itself.

Zenless Zone Zero is a quintessential "culturally odorless" product in the sense that it successfully erases the "image of the country of origin" (China). By adopting a transcultural "anime" standard and a stateless urban setting, it creates a friction-free entry point for global consumers. It proves that in the modern game industry, the most successful global texts are those that belong to everywhere and nowhere at once.

LO2 Fandoms and Fan Cultures

Henry Jenkins suggests that fan culture is naturally rebellious and acts as a way for audiences to challenge normal attitudes regarding race and gender found in mass media. In the world of modern gaming Genshin Impact is a perfect example of a franchise where fans make media that is much more progressive and inclusive than the source material. The developer HoYoverse faces constant criticism for whitewashing and conservative character designs due to censorship and market choices but the fandom actively uses textual poaching to repair these issues (Textual Poachers, 2025) (Yonezawa, 2024).

The most visible difference between the franchise and its fans is about racial representation. HoYoverse has faced severe backlash for introducing characters from regions inspired by Africa and Latin America and the

Middle East specifically Natlan and Sumeru because they are mostly pale (Trent, 2024). Critics and voice actors have accused the developers of cultural appropriation and noted that characters based on deities like the Yoruba supreme deity Olorun are shown without dark skin which effectively erases the people of the cultures used for inspiration (Trent, 2024). Fans actively subvert the official canon through redesigns (Skorodihina, s.d.). They create fan art that adjusts skin tones to accurately reflect the real world inspirations of the characters and engage in a form of reparative performance to demand accurate representation where the official media fails to provide it (Yonezawa, 2024) (Trent, 2024).



In-Game Footage Showcase
This is under development and is not indicative of the final product.

(Natlan analysis part 1: landscape (so people stop complaining when the nation isn't even released) Genshin Impact | HoYoLAB, s.d.)

The Genshin Impact fandom also actively fights the restrictions placed on the game by Chinese censorship laws (Skorodihina, s.d.). The game is legally restricted from showing gay relationships and often relegates characters to best friend status but fans use queer coding analysis to build a queer reality. Fans use fiction and art to reimagine relationships such as the one between Alhaitham and Kaveh who are canonical roommates as explicit romantic partnerships and they have become some of the most popular pairings in the community (Skorodihina, s.d.). This practice allows queer fans to resist the symbolic annihilation of their identities in media and turns subtext into text (Skorodihina, s.d.).



(Miyuli, s.d.)

This subversion extends to gender identity as well. The game lacks official transgender representation but fans have adopted the character Wanderer or Scaramouche as a trans allegory (Skorodihina, s.d.). Fans use headcanons and fan media to reinterpret the character reclaiming his identity and naming himself so it mirrors the transgender experience. This creates a counter visuality that pushes against dominant narratives and allows fans to use the game as a site for identity recovery and community building(Dym et al., 2019).

In conclusion Genshin Impact fans show the role of the prosumer by refusing to passively accept a text that excludes them (Silberstein-Bamford, 2023). By redesigning whitewashed characters and changing storylines the fandom constructs a version of Teyvat that is significantly more diverse and inclusive than the franchise itself. Through these creative acts fans do not merely consume the game they fix it and ensure the media reflects the diverse reality of its global audience (Silberstein-Bamford, 2023) (Yonezawa, 2024).

LO3

Game creation is frequently viewed from commercial perspectives yet the module The Conscious Practitioner emphasizes that games are essentially cultural products. Examining ideas of authorship and globalization reveals that proficiency, in coding is insufficient. A mindful developer needs to break down exclusionary systems to contribute to a forward-thinking industry.

The concept of authorship in games is complex. The auteur theory is still popular (Auteur theory | Definition & Directors | Britannica, 2025), but development is actually a team effort. Authorship is never neutral because it is always full of the creator's biases. In a global market, developers often attempt to erase these biases by stripping a game of its cultural odour. Koichi Iwabuchi employs this term to indicate the extent to which a product mirrors its nation of origin (Iwabuchi, 2002). Eliminating distinctiveness aids international sales; however it frequently results in dull content that prioritizes Western or Japanese standards simultaneously

diminishing other cultural identities (Iwabuchi, 2002). A conscious evaluation requires asking whose culture is being represented and whose is being cleaned away.

The industry also struggles with rigid values and unequal cultural capital. Bourdieu describes how the gamer identity is frequently restricted (Pierre Bourdieu, 2025). Intense genres such, as shooters receive prestige whereas casual games, often favored by women and older players are regarded as less legitimate. These rankings foster an atmosphere where certain groups are seen as the standard audience and others are considered outsiders (Social structure. Groups, Norms, Roles | Britannica 2025). Evaluating development through this lens reveals that design choices like difficulty spikes are often used to maintain this status quo.

Relationships between developers and players is not unidirectional. Audiences interpret games in ways the author may not have intended. Audience creativity shows up in modding and fan fiction, which demonstrates that players can challenge the text. We see this when players create "queer readings" of stories or use mods to add diverse skin tones. This allows audiences to take back space within the medium.



(Skin Tone Variants for Surasthana Nahida V2.0 Mod for Genshin Impact | GI Mods, 2024)

The insights gained from this module have shifted my creative practice. I now understand that neutral design does not exist. Silence on social issues is actually an endorsement of the existing power dynamics. To be a progressive practitioner, I must do more than performative inclusion. This means actively analyzing my own biases during the concept phase rather than treating diversity as a checklist at the end.

In the future, I intend to flatten hierarchies of value in my work by respecting diverse play styles. I will resist the urge to design only for the traditional core demographic. By embracing the fact that media interpretation varies, I can design systems that allow for player expression rather than rigid control. The Conscious Practitioner has taught me that games are political, so my goal is to create games that open doors rather than building gates.

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