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HumCore S25

17 May 2025

The New Asian Narrative: How Touhou Project Connects the World Through World-Building

Touhou Project, a video game series created by Ōta Jun'ya (known as ZUN) initially started as an experimental game for ZUN to put his music (*Touhou Reiiden*, 1997) - with a motif to create an action/2D-scroller-shooting game with Shinto aesthetics, rather than the dominant modern/futuristic themed games such as *RayForce*(1994) or the *Striker 1945*(1995). The formalization of *Gensoukyou*, an imaginary space in which *Touhou Project* takes place on, however, started with *Touhou Koumakyou*(Also known as its subtitle, *the Embodiment of Scarlet Devil*)(2002): after since, *Touhou Project* has been a significant piece in the 2000s - 2010s net culture that arised in Japan, and has even been exported to the western world, with references to *Touhou Project* visible throughout the indie game community and the subculture community in the present day.

Touhou Project, as the name suggests, predominantly uses references to Japanese/Asian mythology and symbolism. However, *Touhou Project* is able to speak to the global audience and incorporates a trans-national narrative by intermingling those elements with its western counterparts - in which could be said as its reason of global success. Through the analysis of four installments of the series, *Touhou Koumakyou - the Embodiment of Scarlet Devil*(2002 - will be refered to as *EoSD*), *Touhou Eiyashou - Imperishable Night*(2004 - will be refered to as *IN*), *Touhou Chireiden - Subterranean Animism*(2008 - will be refered to as *SA*), and *Touhou Kanjuten - Legacy*

of *Lunatic Kingdom* (2015 - will be referred to as *LoLK*), the nature of *Gensoukyou* and its world-building will be explored, in specific, what *Gensoukyou* reflects in terms of pre-existing culture and events, how *Gensoukyou* embodies a trans-national message, and what *Gensoukyou* has become in the context of modern world - to identify how *Touhou Project* creates cultural meaning beyond a video game to play for entertainment.

What *Touhou* Reflects

Gensoukyou is architected as the realm of the myth and the forgotten - where folklore creatures and godly figures live together with humans in harmony. In that, *Gensoukyou* as a place itself contains direct reflections to the Shinto religion, with various interactive deities present in it, and also Taoism, with several references to Taoist practice such as *Liandanshu* or the general idea of Yin and Yang to represent various relationship, such as the relationship between humans and yōkai, and in the general use of symbolism associated to the moon (particularly in *IN* and *LoLK*) and seasons (particularly in *Touhou Youyoumu - Perfect Cherry Blossom* (2003) and *Touhou Tenkoushou - Hidden Star in Four Seasons* (2017)). These use of symbolism identifies *Gensoukyou* as primarily an Asian place - almost so that it could be said that it reflects the Orientalistic views towards Asian traditional culture and religion, however in a more artistic manner, in that *Gensoukyou* reflects a harmonious state of traditionalism rather than an archaic one.

In that, *Touhou Project* utilizes several elements from the Asian ‘shared knowledge’ - it utilizes elements of code-switching to render *Gensoukyou* as a homely place for the audience who have an eastern - in specific, Japanese - cultural background. One specific instance could be observed

in *IN*, in which presents an alternative narrative of the *Taketorimonogatari* (Known in the western world as “The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter”), with a specific focus on the theme of eternity - with elements such as the kaguyahime legend (the ‘main’ character of *Taketorimonogatari*) and *Hourai no Kusuri* (The imaginary medicine in *Taketorimonogatari* that brings the consumer eternal life) being central to narrative and character design of *IN*. *SA* also takes motif from the Japanese mythology of *Meido* or *Yomi*, a Shinto - Buddhist underworld, and Japanese traditional folklore creature such as *Tsuchigumo* or *Hashihime* as a motif to setting and character design - these elements establish *Gensoukyou* as a nostalgic, homely place, and as a medium of culture, where these traditional narratives and characters can be conveyed to the modern generation.

With these traditional eastern elements, the world-building of *Gensoukyou* also encompasses western elements as coexisting with these eastern elements. *EoSD*’s main narrative relates more to western mythology - with the *Scarlet Devil* a reference to a European Vampire - in which coexist with the more eastern portrayal of the surrounding landscape of the *Scarlet Mansion*, featuring a dusky mountain and a summer themed lake. The soundtrack used in *Touhou Project* and *EoSD* in specific also follows this theme of integrating western elements within eastern context, with *EoSD*’s soundtrack featuring similar verses to Beethoven’s sonatas, integrated with the extended pentatonic melodic progression, giving an Asian gist within the soundtracks. *LoLK* has a similar trend to *EoSD*, in that its narrative is closely related to the space race and the space exploration era in the late 20th century, and features characters that take motif from Greek mythology - however, these are intermingled with the eastern mythology, with relations to the “Moon rabbit” and the “Ryūgū-jō” mythology being the direct motif of the *Lunar Capital*, the main background

of *LoLK*'s narrative. As such, *Gensoukyou* incorporates elements from the western world within an eastern background - to suggest a possible reconciliation between western and eastern cultures - which have contributed to its global success, in that the western audience can relate more to *Gensoukyou*, and can understand it as not an orientalist space, but what encompasses a trans-cultural narrative.

While advocating traditional culture and cultural harmony, the world of *Gensoukyou* reflects the video game and media industries in Japan within the era as a countermovement to the overwhelming westernization of video games and the media. It is notable that the video game industry at this point was featuring mainly western elements within its world-building, in that video games were seen as something new and distinctive from more traditional forms of media, as utilizing western elements reinforced the theme of modernity while helping Japanese games see success in the global market - for instance, Super mario series, featuring western protagonists and a 'rescue-a-princess' narrative. There was little effort to distinguish colonialistic themes within games in this era, as most games were strictly corporate: most video games had the framework of 'conquering' by 'killing' enemies or seizing control over them to achieve a goal. *Touhou project* reflects this era, and attempts to refuse this convention by creating a 'shooting game' without this 'invasive' gameplay, featuring a narrative of harmony, which made *Touhou* stand out among the military/futuristic theme dominated shooting game market in the era.

Alongside this, the *Touhou Project* also goes against the media industry and the 'sexualization' within the Mahou-Shojo genre. Initially starting as a media geared towards children, the Mahou-Shojo genre originally had an educational and child-friendly narrative, helping people in trouble

and fighting against evil, one example being the Magical Princess Minky Momo series(1982-). However, the genre in the 1990s was rapidly changing: with the success of the genre, the industry saw an opportunity to extend the genre into adult audiences, resulting in the genre incorporating more mature themes, with the prime example being the Sailor Moon series(1992-). *Touhou project* conforms to the classical element of the Mahou-Shojo genre, in that the narrative is centered around *Reimu* and *Marisa*, two girls with magical ability - solving various issues that happen throughout *Gensoukyou*. However, by emphasizing harmony within its narrative, and by using a highly stylized art style - *Touhou* refuses this change in genre towards the 90s - and exemplifies that the genre can be still explored and see success without a turn to more mature topics. While being a medium of traditional culture, the *Touhou project* was also reflective of the video game and media industries of the era and created cultural significance as one of the early pioneers who opposed the excessive 'colonialistic' gameplay style within the video game industry.

What Touhou Encompasses

(I am still deciding the structure of this section, whether each paragraphs will be organized based of elements or installments - this section will be about the thematic nature of *Touhou project* - what message it conveys to the modern world)

(This section is projected to be the longest section - probably with at least 5+ paragraphs.)

(General ideas as following -)

Touhou Project utilizes unique systems to break the genre convention of shooting games to remove the element of violence and colonialism within traditional scroller shooting games. The

Spell card system is one of the main ways *Touhou* interact with its players - it refers to character's specific pattern of attacks, in which is assigned a name within the game. Within the narrative of *Genshoukyou*, this *Spell card* system is a peaceful way to settle disputes (insert a source from ZUN's interview): a battle of creativity and artistic skills. The utilization of this system within *Touhou* enables the 'attacks' within the game to move away from the classical lasers and bullets and to colorful and beautiful objects with various shapes - resulting in the users perceiving the game experience as strictly playful. By bounding the idea of fighting in shooter game into a 'play' that is defined under certain rules and conventions, it promotes the traditional Japanese ideology of *Wa*, keeping peace and following social rules, in which replaces the colonialistic ideas other military/futuristic themed shooting games shared within the era. By building the world of *Genshoukyou* to promote peace and harmony using the *Spell card* system, and incorporating it directly within the gameplay mechanics of the game, *Touhou Project* breaks the colonialistic genre convention and emphasizes the message of harmony between the different - with the display of how characters within different context and culture can communicate and find peace within the act of play.

(The method of character-building in *Touhou* - How *Touhou* creates distinct, attractive(in terms of uniqueness) characters through the symbolism incorporated in the illustration, music and spell-card names)

(More on the notion of harmony - user's agency to be able to play as nonhuman characters and the general harmonious state between humans and Yokais that gives a symbolic message to the players)

(The east-west parallelism - between *EoSD* and *SA* : between *IA* and *LoLK*(its narrative structure being similar - but with a difference in its reference and thematic elements taking from the east and the west))

(The game-specific mechanics - for instance, *IA* putting a focus on eternitiy and the futile nature of it has a time-related mechanic - *LoLK* has a meahcnic of ‘revival’ that is related to the storyline, the narrative being about pureness and basically, Orientalism itself)

What Touhou Became

Touhou Project differentiates itself from other successful games within the era and prior to *Touhou* in that *Touhou* allowed secondary creations and was less commercial in nature - different to *Nintendo* or *Sega*, two major console companies within the era (as video game market was focused in console market in the era) was known for prohibiting secondary creations, especially for commercial purposes - which limited the world of video games strictly into those games and the stories told by the developers of those games. However, *Touhou* was different in that ZUN allowed and encouraged to use *Gensoukyou* and characters from *Touhou Project* rather freely to create content - this creation of content from the fandom, and the interrraction between ZUN and *Touhou* fandom was extended to be a method of content creation in *Touhou* project, with several *Toujin*(referring to work created from fans and ‘passionate people’) works being imported back to the main series itself, especially in the more earlier era of *Touhou*, when the back-setting of *Gensoukyou* was far less formalized within the original game series. Allowing and encouraging these *Toujin* creations enabled the fandom to interract with *Gensoukyou* itself in an active manner

- in which transformed *Touhou Project* as a symbol of *Toujin* culture, and what has relevance to the players and the world we live in, rather than limited in the form of video game and its conventions.

With the establishment of the *Toujin* culture, *Touhou Project* was also a predecessor in the modern subculture market in that *Touhou Project* were one of the first instances that showed that video games can see success focusing on the character development rather than the narrative, which was a more popular choice in the video game market within the era such as the *Final Fantasy* series, *Ys* series, or the *Legend of Zelda* series. The first significant development within the video game market sparked by *Touhou* was the rapid increase in character-centered games - together with the rise of mobile games in the 2010s, it led to games such as *Kaku-San-Sei Million Arthur*(2012) or *Kantai Collection*(2013), focusing on characters as a business-model, and eventually to *Genshin Impact*(2020) or *Blue Archive*(2021) - while remaining active as a community and a game even in the 2020s, maintaining about 700 Comike booths in 2024. One of *Touhou*'s significance in this is that *Touhou* has established a convention in the subculture video game market, and created a framework of *Toujin* creation culture in which enabled the commercial success of modern subculture mobile games.

Touhou Project has also extended itself beyond video games, with its rise of popularity in the internet culture. *Touhou* music, with its unique style, has been recreated and remixed in several different occasions, appearing in rhythm games such as *Taiko no Tatsujin* or *Chunithm*: the remix of "Bad Apple!!" from *Touhou Gensoukyou*(1998) and the animated PV for it had become a viral video in 2009, and since then, has been a symbol of internet culture of the era, used whenever there is a black-and-white screen, and also as a general symbol for *Touhou Project*, making presence

in large internet projects such as *r/place*(2023). *Yukkuri*, a fan-created creature, became a popular choice in game content streaming and made appearances in several educational videos in *Niconico Douga*(Japanese video platforming service) or in *Youtube* - led to a ‘boom’ in TTS market in Japan, significantly impacting the creation and popularization of *VOICEROID* software. As such, *Touhou Project* has become and influenced the creation of the internet culture in the 2010s: laying down foundation for the development of internet-based culture production.

Remarks

(Conclusion - How ideas in Touhou project relates to contemporary geopolitical landscape as well as history and pre-instated culture - How *Touhou Project* has created a meaning beyond a video game to play for fun, and became a medium of culture)

Works Cited