Goddess of Victory: NIKKE Toy Soldiers at Your Mercy: A Study of Gendered Representation and the Commodification of Female Characters in Goddess of Victory: NIKKE

Randen, Dorigaya van

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Toy Soldiers at Your Mercy

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Aya Ezawa

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I. Introduction

The mobile phone, an invention that has become one of the most used and sought-after devices that got us hooked to the internet. With popular apps like YouTube, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok, etc., we've become quite glued to our screens. As we spend more time on our phones, companies have shifted their focus, apps and games have become a dominant and highly profitable form of entertainment within arm's reach, available anytime, anywhere. These mobile experiences are designed to stimulate our adrenaline and dopamine, producing similar effects to those caused by consuming sugar: the more we engage, the more we crave. Similarly, mobile gacha games in particular have emerged as a rapidly growing and addictive format, carefully crafted to make it accessible, time-efficient, and psychologically engaging. What makes these mobile gacha games so appealing and different from other games in the first place?

Originating in Japan, the term "gacha" refers to the mechanic of acquiring virtual items or characters through a randomized and often pay-to-win system that is similar to a now digital form of a toy vending machine (Lakić et al. 2023; Woods, 2024). Indeed, we live in an era where digital co-exists with the real, and where the excitement of opening a mystery box is no longer confined to physical toys but instead is embedded in that very digital universe that millions of people interact with every day. This digitalized form of excitement is a fast-growing industry that holds 136.2 billion U.S. dollar of revenue in 2023 (Statista, 2024). These gacha games, with this randomized loot box structure, have captivated millions of players, female and male, on a global scale, from East Asia to the Western markets, contributing to the growing influence of mobile gaming on global entertainment cultures (Hamari and Lehdonvirta, 2010; Kesuma and Princes, 2024). It has expanded to other platforms aside from mobile devices to consoles such as PC's, PlayStation 4 & 5 and Xbox. Some current popular gacha games are: *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020)*, Honkai Star Rail* (Ibid. 2023)*, Arknights* (Hypergryph, 2020)*, Fate/Grand Order* (TYPE-MOON, 2015)*, Azur Lane* (Yostar 2017)*, Goddess of Victory: NIKKE* (Shift Up, 2022)*, and AFK journey* (Lilith Games, 2024).

Gacha games are always free to play (F2P), this is the key characteristic of most, if not all gacha games. Another important characteristic is its accessibility and playability: you can play it as long as you have a device; a mobile phone or other gaming consoles that have enough memory for you to download the game. Furthermore, the growing success of gacha

games is linked to its ability to incentivize players into spending through different monetizing and psychological mechanisms such as randomized rewards, “FOMO”(fear of missing out), limited-time events, rare items, upgrades or characters, advertisement (character/ item promotional art) and additional rewards either from purchasing in-game currency to enable the player “pull” for their desired item/character, or from limited time events (Stobbart and Evans, 2014; Woods, 2022, 2024; Lakić et al. 2023; Kamamura et al. 2023). These monetization and psychological strategies are both dependent on and enhanced by the emotional thrill of unpredictability and the psychological allure of rare rewards, which could foster an addictive cycle of hope, frustration and reward which ultimately could lead to addiction (Lu and Wang, 2008; Hsiao and Chen, 2016). This is the very backbone of gacha games marketing strategy, as it tries to get players invested in the game with their ultimate goal of opening your wallet for them. Depending on the player and whether someone is sensitive to gambling addictions, the game can be entirely free, but gacha games have become sophisticated in ways to make it hard to resist spending your money.

With this growing industry and presence in everyday life, it is important to look more closely at these (addictive) games, not only due to its market dominance but also due to pressing ethical concerns. On one hand, there is a growing concern of the ethical implications of such systems, with the potential of encouraging gambling behaviours as well as the psychological effects on people through represented characters in games (Burgess et al. 2007; Behm-Morawith and Mastro, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Mehroof and Griffiths, 2010; Wei and Lu, 2014; Lopez-Fernandez et al. 2019; De la Torre-Sierra et al. 2024). In March 2025, the EU published new guidelines against potential harmful practices using virtual currencies which lead to multiple cases of children unknowingly spending literal thousands of dollars on the game (European Commission, 2025). This is but a recent countermeasure to regulate gacha games, as they are currently not well-regulated like other gambling activities (casinos). Furthermore, they raise important gender-related questions, as they frequently rely on the visual and symbolic commodification of hyper-feminized characters to incentivize spending, which is still underexplored.

On the other hand, gacha games are widely appreciated for its accessibility, visual appeal, entertainment value, and a sense of progression and rarity it offers. These features are not only monetization tools, but could also foster a sense of community, status, and identity among players (Stobbart and Evans, 2023; Lakić et al. 2023). A common narrative trope is the main protagonist (the player) suffering from memory-loss-syndrome, they lose their memories and are encouraged to retrieve them. This allows players to project themselves into the role,

deepening emotional investment (Ash, 2009; Woods, 2024). Gacha games also often offer players to choose between female and male protagonists, but not always, such is the case for *Goddess of Victory: NIKKE* (GoVN) where the player's perspective is fixed: the player assumes the role of a male commander guiding an all-female squad of androids.

The reason why GoVN piqued my interest is that—in contrast to other game genres—it appears to favor female character representation, not only in quantity but also in the attention given to visual design, marketing, and promotional material. The game, developed by the South Korean studio Shift Up, globally released in 2022, gained popularity due to its distinctive anime-inspired aesthetic and stylized visual design that clearly aims to appeal to fans of games and Japanese pop culture. Its success is especially notable within East and Southeast Asia and among Western players engaged in gacha and fandom communities. While anime-style designs are relatively common in gacha games, GoVN exaggerates this with rear-view combat perspectives (Fig. i), accentuating certain character features and reinforcing the influence of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) in the game's presentation. Additionally, all playable characters are female, which is rare for third-person shooter RPG[1]s, a genre that's dominated by male leads. Having grown up playing on Xbox, PlayStation, and Nintendo platforms, I rarely encountered games where women take center stage as they do here. Across the video game industry, the gap between male-female characters and protagonists in games remains significant, with little substantial progress since the early days of video games (Lynch et al. 2016; Britt and Britt, 2021). In contrast, GoVN distinguishes itself by centering women as a symbol that brings hope to humanity, emphasizing the importance of their existence within the game's narrative. This stands in sharp contrast to the industry's persistent gender imbalance where the protagonist remains male-dominant. But this inversion invites further questions: does it challenge gender norms, or reinforce a new kind of objectification?

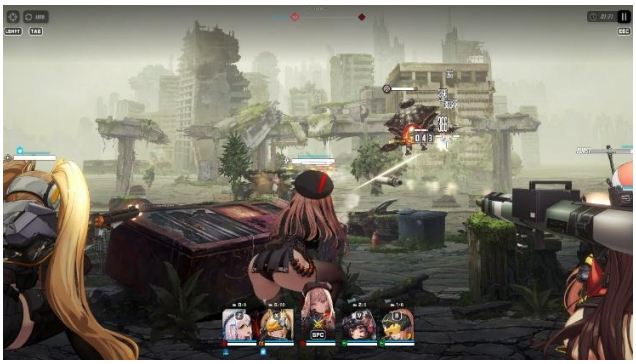

Figure i Shift UP, *Main gameplay: shooting*

[1] RPG (Role Playing Game) are games where players play as a character within a fictional setting and make choices that affects the narrative and character development

More broadly, the lack of female representation in games as well as the often hypersexualized (female) character designs are another major aspect that has sparked debate on how it affects players' (gender) identity. Often fostering a prenotion of women inherently reduced to an object of sex which is highly problematic. However, research on how gender is construed in gacha games specifically still seems to lack. Many gacha games feature a predominantly female roster, which raises questions about character representation, design, and gender dimensions. Additionally, it heavily relies on visual and aesthetic character appeal to incentivize in-game spending. Thus, it is worth exploring how female characters are portrayed in these games: are they empowering figures of agency, or objects designed to appeal to the (presumed male) player? Does this extensive female representation empower women, or does it reinforce stereotypes? And does this reflect the position of females in the broader context, the game industry? How do the game mechanics of gacha game create and encourage constructed gender dimensions to its players? What is the significance of the game mechanics to the characters? What roles do these characters play within the story, and how does this relate to their in-game functionality? Ultimately, my aim is to contribute to the growing discussion on gender roles and representation in digital media—particularly in gacha games, which remain underexplored in academic research. This thesis investigates how female characters in GoVN are constructed through both game mechanics and visual/narrative design, and how these constructions may influence or reflect broader cultural attitudes toward gender.

Methodology

This study will examine the intersection of gender representation, game mechanics, visuals, and narratives in GoVN. The foundation of this paper's critical content analysis approach is grounded in feminist media theory and game studies. Central to this approach is the work of Judith Butler (1990) gender performativity and Donna Haraway (1987) Cyborg metaphor which adds to Butler's concept and links technological aspects to rigid gender binaries within social and cultural environments. I believe these provide a sufficient basis for the analysis as the game GoVN's playable characters are female androids designed for combat whose identities and meanings are shaped by their function, appearance, and the desires projected onto them. Additionally, Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze will help in understanding how visual pleasure is structured through sexualized images. These three concepts allow for a more nuanced critique of how GoVN both empowers and objectifies its

female characters through their positioning as hyper-feminine, combat-ready machines, commodified within a digital economy of collection, rarity, and visual stimulation.

Empirically, the study will analyze the game's visual and narrative elements, including character design, in-game dialogues and gameplay. I will also draw on community-generated content (e.g., tier lists) to explore how players interpret, value, and relate to the characters in terms of both gameplay utility. The gacha mechanic will be critically examined as systems that commodify both character performance and gendered imagery which will be based on existing literature brought up in chapter I. My own gameplay experience will inform this analysis, providing first-hand insight into user interface design, decision-making incentives, and emotional feedback loops involved in collecting and investing in characters. By focusing on how gender is constructed, performed, and marketed, this study aims to reveal the intricate dynamics between game design, stimulated player behaviour, and cultural narratives of femininity in the mobile gacha game landscape.

I will first outline the theoretical framework (chapter II), covering topics such as gacha game mechanics, gender representation and sexualization in media, and the male gaze. The next sub-chapter will provide a short introduction to the chosen game: *Goddess of Victory: NIKKE*. This will follow with chapter III that analyses the visual representation of Nikke supported by in-game images. The subsequent narrative analysis chapter (IV)will focus on empirical findings from the game, supported by selected narrative and dialogues in the game. The final chapter (V) will reflect the implications of these findings.

Limitations

It is important to note that there are limitations, given the sheer number of gacha games available, this study only focuses on *Goddess of Victory: NIKKE*, which may not be representative of the entire genre. While this game was chosen for its popularity and noticeable gameplay, the findings do not intend to generalize other gacha games with different design concepts or target audiences. This study will primarily focus on female characters, as other playable characters are limited to only this gender type. Additionally, the research will primarily rely on content analysis, which may miss nuanced player experiences and perceptions. In order to familiarize myself with the game mechanics and story in addition to having access to my primary source, some conclusions and arguments will reflect my experiences. A more in-depth exploration of player engagement or ethnographic methods could provide a fuller understanding of how gender representations influence player behavior. Furthermore, while a definition on sexualization is given and adhered to, the potential subjectivity during the analysis of the sexualization of female characters might not be fully exempted. While visual analysis and content analysis will offer valuable insights, these interpretations are inevitably shaped by the researcher's perspective to some extent, hence more research on this topic is encouraged. Finally, the study will focus mainly on visual design, narrative and in-game mechanics, and it will not be able to explore all the sociocultural factors that may influence how players interact with the game, such as regional cultural differences or varying player demographics.

II. Why Do Gacha Games Raise Ethical Questions?

Gacha 101: Getting Players Hooked

Before we examine Nikke more closely, a few concepts require explanation. We start with analysis discussions on gacha mechanisms and its implications. Subsequently, how to examine and make sense of gendered aspects in games, as well as how does gender relate to gacha games will be discussed.

As mentioned in the introduction, gacha games present a new set of game mechanics and marketing strategy that is different from other games. While much of the research has focused on traditional game genres, like MMO[2] and RPG, gacha games represent a newer iteration that raises new questions regarding both gender representation and player engagement due to their distinct marketing and gameplay mechanisms. Because of gacha games' distinct characteristics like, loot boxes, it has garnered significant attention due to their psychological impact on players, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of FOMO (fear of missing out) and the potential of addiction (Clay et al. 2005; Griffiths, 2010; Mehroof and Griffiths, 2010; King and Delfabbro, 2018; Woods, 2011, 2024). Behm-Morawitz et al. (2009) and Bessenhof (2006) explore how psychological factors influence player engagement with gambling-like game mechanics, such as loot boxes and gacha systems. They conclude that these game mechanics exploit cognitive biases. To put simply, through these psychological triggers, players become more inclined to play regularly and potentially spend money. Hsiao and Chen (2016) and Balakrishnan et al. (2018) explore in-app purchase marketing strategies, which are often tailored to encourage impulse buying through well-designed user interfaces and reward systems that are capitalized on player's desire for progress and completionism. Based on personal experience with similar gacha games, this sense of urgency and strong desire to obtain a specific limited character can indeed be intense, illustrating how game design capitalizes on scarcity and desire to shape player behaviour. While this provides crucial insights in how gacha games operate and use psychological strategies to create and maintain engagement and elicit desired behaviour, extensive exploration on visual aesthetics in relation to game mechanics have remained scarce. Hamari and Lehdonvirta (2010) discusses how character designs, including sexualized female characters, are part of the advertisement strategy of gacha games. Bridging the relation between aesthetics and marketing is one step towards better understanding gacha games' impact on player behaviour,

[2] MMO (Massive Multiplayer Online) which are games played online often with other players.

but it fails to explain how these mechanics and visuals construe gender. Williams (2020) discuss the role of advertisement in shaping player behaviour, with in-game ads and marketing strategies directly influencing purchase decisions and player engagement. Britt and Britt (2021), Lakić et al. (2023) and Stobbart and Evans (2023) explore how gacha game marketing mechanics are designed to retain players by fostering a sense of community and inclusion. This is reflected in online platforms where players and viewers react to each other and game content. While attention to gacha monetization is crucial, ethical implications of how gender is constructed and enforced through these game mechanics and visualized, ought to be explored further. The convergence of visual aesthetics and market-driven game design reinforces normative gender roles and reinforces objectifying tropes. These design choices influence not only player engagement but also shape broader cultural understandings of gender in digital spaces. Moreover, games like GoVN may offer the illusion of narrative agency through dialogue choices, but these options are ultimately pre-scripted, highlighting how control remains limited within the bounds of designer intent. Gendered aesthetics are not only embedded in game mechanics and its narrative, but the game also reinforces and circulates it through player engagement, which is why it's important to analyse the cultural impact of gacha games. In short, gacha games create a desire to acquire, achieve, use, be selective among other psychological behaviours by its game mechanics and appealing visuals and narratives.

Then, to what extent do players contribute to the popularity of a gacha game? According to Cassel and Jenkins (1998), active players are integral to the success of transmedia storytelling, where game experiences and narratives extend beyond the game itself. This is particularly evident in mobile games and franchises that encourage participation across multiple platforms. Online game communities, streamers who would stream 'pulling' characters create a sense of real experience and flow of the game. Fans, in turn, react to what they would see on the stream. This is but one example of the way in which Jerkins' argument of transmedia storytelling is quite relevant for the engagement with the game. Players and streamers both participate in this psychological monopoly like FOMO and randomized loot box mechanics, ultimately incentivizing emotional and financial investment. These strategies do more than drive gameplay, it commodifies characters in ways that reinforces gendered fantasies and consumption behaviour further. It opens up the question of how gacha—specifically GoVN—construct visually appealing characters in order to generate demand and desire? What role does gender play in shaping these aesthetic strategies and their reception?

What does it mean to be a Woman?

At first glance, gender might seem simple, but it is actually a complex social and cultural system shaping how people are represented and expected to behave. Gender operates as a deep embedded system of meanings, practices, and power relations through which human experiences are shaped by historically and culturally shifting ideas about bodies, roles, and authority. As scholars such as Raewyn Connell (1990, 1995), Judith Butler (1990), Donna Haraway (1987) and Sandra Bartky (1990) have argued, gender is not a natural or fixed trait but a political structure that both shapes and is shaped by systems of inequality. Rather than being innate, gender is continuously produced and performed through cultural norms, personal interactions, and institutional structures (Yoder, 2006; Belknap, 2007). Connell (1995, 77) introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which refers to the culturally exalted form of masculinity that legitimizes the subordination of women and marginalized masculinities. In response to this concept, Schippers (2007) introduced the concept of hegemonic femininity—a complementary ideal that supports male dominance by encouraging female compliance, beauty, nurturing nature, and sexual availability. While hegemonic masculinity is associated with authority and social power, hegemonic femininity only gains symbolic value and reinforces subordination. Video game companies are part of such gendered dimensions through their games.

To identify as a woman or a man is to navigate socially constructed gender expectations seen as normative within a society. These norms are internalized through socialization, the process by which individuals learn to behave in accordance with societal expectations (Wesely, 2012). Through this cultural and social process, you are learned to conform to culturally specific ideals of behaviour, appearance, and roles that signal “proper” femininity or masculinity. Media—including online outlets, newspapers, video games, and cinema—and institutions play a crucial role in reinforcing these gender norms (Connell, 1995; Acker, 1990; West and Zimmerman, 1987). These institutions collectively establish and enforce standards of femininity, dictating everything from appearance to comportment. To illustrate, in a professional setting, attire such as skirts above knee-length may be deemed “inappropriate” and company rules would enforce it. These forms of social and institutional regulation collectively pressure individuals to conform to normalized expectations of womanhood. As a result, gendered notions are institutionalized and embodied. It is read on and through the body: how it is adorned, disciplined, and how it moves through space. Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity deepens this view. Gender is not something

one is, but something one does—repeatedly enacted through culturally sanctioned behaviours. This aligns with Lindqvist et al.'s (2021, 333) view that gender is "culturally and historically specific, internally contradictory, and amenable to change". Haraway's (1987) notion of the cyborg opens space for understanding femininity as something not only socially constructed like female/male, natural/artificial and organic/technological binaries, but technologically mediated and reassembled. This is especially relevant in digital spaces where femininity can be hyper-designed, visualised, and animated by the developers. Understanding this performative quality of gender is crucial before examining how femininity, in particular, is shaped and regulated.

Feminist theorists have long shown that the female body is constructed in patriarchal culture as a symbol of sexuality, often at the cost of women's agency (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Chapkis, 1986). But what does it mean to be sexualised? It's when an individual is valued primarily for their sexual appeal, narrow beauty standards are imposed, reducing them to objects and stripping all other relevant complexity of personhood away. Sandra Bartky (1990, 35) defines sexual objectification as the reduction of a woman to her sexual body parts, divorced from her agency and personhood. Wesely (2012) expands on this by showing that sexualisation is not an isolated or extreme event, but part of a continuum that begins with socialization and deepens over time. From early childhood, gender socialisation teaches individuals to associate their bodies with particular roles and behaviours. Just as has been shown by scholars that gender can be color-coded, blue associated with boys and pink associated with girls. This normalization of association of colour, or anything else for that matter, can be found through subtle but persuasive cues (Ibid, 7). Girls are taught that femininity is embodied through specific clothing, makeup, and gestures that conform to dominant beauty ideals (Ibid, 14–15). This reinforces a sense of self that is visually oriented and externally validated. The attention and approval they receive for appearing "sexy" reinforces the idea that their worth is tied to their appearance (Ibid). This performance of femininity is not limited to visual appearance; it includes bodily comportment—how you walk, sit, and move. As Wesley notes, "Natural bodily traits are downplayed in favour of artificial norms, emphasizing that femininity is socially constructed, not biologically determined" (Ibid, 17). The binary conception of gender is thus not natural but performatively maintained, hence coming back to Butler's gender performativity. The internalization of these ideals fosters complicity in systems of domination, where women discipline themselves to align with standards that ultimately could limit their agency. Yet the sexual ideal is largely unattainable and demands constant labour, often leaving women feeling inadequate.

These mechanisms of gender construction and visual regulation are not limited to the real world, they are embedded and enlarged in cultural products like video games. Within these digital spaces, femininity is often hyper-constructed, stylized, and sexualized. Female characters are commonly designed with exaggerated features and sensual movements that cater to a heteronormative male gaze, which echoes the same beauty standards seen in broader media. In GoVN, the android bodies of these characters visually echo Haraway's cyborg theory, suggesting a posthuman femininity, yet they are nonetheless constrained within familiar concepts of heteronormative sexuality: submission and aesthetic perfection. The body becomes a site of intensified gender coding. As Gailey (1993, 31) assert, "Games played in a society embody the values of the dominant culture; they are ways of reinforcing through play the behaviours and models of order rewarded or punished in the society. Play may invert the social order or challenge the rules within a game format without fundamentally endangering the status quo."

A Man's Man World: Gamified Gender Constructs

Understanding gender as socially constructed and performative, as argued by Butler, Haraway and Connell, becomes crucial when examining cultural artifacts such as video games, which not only reflect but actively shape social norms. Scholars have argued that patriarchy functions through male-centred institutions—and the video game industry is no exception. The gaming industry has mirrored broader gender inequalities by privileging masculine perspectives in both design and narrative. This begs the question: "Do video games function as cultural spaces where gendered behaviours and symbols are normalized and reinforced?"

Research by Rutter and Bryce (2002), Cassell and Jenkins (1998), and Shaw (2010) show that adventure and action games were predominantly developed for and marketed to male players, under the assumed lack of female players presence. This stipulates what Shaw (2014) argues that "game culture" is often perceived as heteronormative, masculine, and white-dominated, leading to the marginalization of women and LGBTQ2+ gamers. These relations contribute to the internalization of gender norms through in-game interactions and representations. The industry often assumes the "hardcore gamer" is male (Juul, 2010), reinforcing a masculine-coded gaming culture. As Condis (2018) notes, performances of masculinity continue to hold privileged status within game spaces.

Just as the gaming world was imagined as a male domain, games themselves often reflected this assumption, with male protagonists dominating the screen (Lynch et al. 2016). Early video games, especially in action and adventure genres, frequently portrayed female characters as narrative rewards or passive objects of desire (Rutter and Bryce, 2002; Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). Although some female characters took centre stage, they were often reduced to limited, supportive roles. A staple example is Princess Zelda in *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 2017). Despite lending her name to the franchise, she was not the warrior but the damsel in need of rescuing because she was, once again, kidnapped by the villain in the game. However, there are exceptions that point to progress, such as Bayonetta in *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009). Although controversial due to rather explicit and suggestive behaviour, she embodies a more complex form of sexual empowerment. Bayonetta was not only the protagonist, but she was also a well-spoken woman who dominates the fighting ring–albeit in a “parodic” sexual way. Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) represents a shift toward strong, non-sexualized female protagonists. Nonetheless, for many years, female characters were often confined to stereotypical roles, either the damsel, the sidekick, or the overly sexualized fighter (López and Ríos, 2019). Especially fighting games seem to depict female characters in hypersexualized ways with minimal clothing, exaggerated body proportions, and suggestive movements (Lynch et al. 2016). It creates the illusion of agency through their abilities and implied autonomy yet is ultimately outweighed and reduced to their visual appearance. This mirrors Connell’s (1995) theory of how femininity is granted symbolic status but remains subordinate in terms of real power and narrative agency. This seemingly essential visual importance reflects and reinforces Laura Mulvey’s (1975) theory of the "male gaze". Women become consumable and aesthetic bodies for the assumed heterosexual male audience. As Russell (2008) and Britt and Britt (2021) note, the prevalence of “fan service” in games often prioritizes male fantasies at the expense of female character depth or agency. This gaze shapes how players engage with and interpret femininity, further naturalizing the visual coding of gender.

Still, there is room for optimism. As Haraway (1987) suggests, technologically mediated spaces like video games hold the potential to challenge traditional gender binaries and provide more diverse expressions of gender representations. In recent years, there has been a visible, though modest, shift toward more varied female representation and a slight decline in overt sexualization (Lynch et al. 2016; Summers and Miller, 2014; Beasley and Standley, 2002). However, this change remains far from transformative in terms of industry

norms. Scholars such as Shaw (2014), Cote (2020), and De la Torre-Sierra et al. (2024) argue that diversity is still treated as a niche concern rather than an integral part of game design. The portrayal of women in games has significant implications for gender binaries and social perception, as game mechanics and narratives often continue to centre male perspectives or reduce female characters to nothing but cute or sexy women.

This visual culture is closely tied to fan communities. One important concept here is *otaku* culture, which began in Japan during the 1980s as a niche and often stigmatized subculture focused on anime, manga, and video games (Ito, Okabe and Tsuji, 2012; Koyama, 2023). Over time, it evolved into a powerful global force, fostering an international fandom that embraces hyper-stylized aesthetics and character-driven obsessions (Ibid, 11). Still seen in popular culture, female characters often cater towards specific fantasies, cute, submissive, or sexually available which reflects the male gaze. Femininity becomes both a performance and a product through video games constructed gender representations. Ultimately making gender not only performative, but packaging and selling it.

I argue that gacha games are important and prevalent cultural products which, like other media, exerts a level of influence on cultural trends. Characters are valued by their appearance, collectability, rarity, and alignment with consumable archetypes. These dynamics remain critically under-examined in the gacha games landscape, despite their reach and influence across global gaming audience.

❖Goddess of Victory: NIKKE, a brief introduction

Goddess of Victory: NIKKE is a mobile third-person shooter RPG developed by Shift Up and published by Level Infinite (Shift Up, 2022). Since its global release in November 2022, the game has drawn widespread attention for its fusion of fast-paced combat, narrative depth, unique gameplay, and gacha-based character collection. Set in a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by mechanical aliens known as the Raptures, humanity now survives in an underground refuge known as the Ark. To reclaim the surface, they deploy artificial soldiers called Nikke, android female characters designed to fight humanity's battles. These women are programmed to follow the orders of humans and will be terminated if they are disobeyed. "Nikke should always obey the commands given by human beings and there is no exception" (Shift up, 2022).

In the game, the player takes on the role of the Commander (Fig. ii), leading squads of five specialized soldiers through missions that gradually unravel the origins of the Raptures and the true nature of the Nikke themselves. Through this lens, the game explores themes of resilience, identity, and the blurred line between obedience and autonomy. The game emphasizes the fact that these women are *the* force that brings hope to humanity, showing the importance of their existence in the game. Notably, the player cannot change gender as the protagonist and is therefore presumed male.

Figure ii Shift Up, *"Commander": the player*

As of writing, the game features 147 playable characters across different tiers. There are 125 SSR (Super Super rare), 14 SR (Super Rare), and 8 R (Rare) characters. SSR are most wanted characters, whereas R characters are usually not significant to the story or gameplay, being the weakest and simplest in terms of power and visuals. Playable characters are therefore categorized by measured strength/ utility and obtainability. SSR characters are most

difficult to obtain through the randomized loot box system. Among the SSR characters, 16 SSR were introduced through collaborations with anime franchises like *Chainsaw Man* (MAPPA, 2022), and *Evangelion* (Anno, 1995), and the game franchise *NieR: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017). This highlights that the game is not only popular in game communities, but also anime fandoms. Collaboration with popular franchises is an essential marketing strategy of gacha games as it not only functions as a limited event, but it also showcases its responsiveness to contemporary and emerging trends (Cohendet et al. 2018). Because characters are consistently debuting, recent and future characters are not included and represented in this paper.

In order to provide a framework to base observations and statements with, a spreadsheet was made that provides the basis of the visual analysis (Table I). Note that the rarity of the character (SSR-SR-R) was taken into account as well as community-based ranking of the characters. Community-based information is essential to learn the given value of these characters within the game. “How well-loved/ used is a character and why?” This is especially important in gacha games as progress is usually possible through powerful characters. This provides more concrete insights into the power dynamics in the game which relates to a character's importance within the game sphere.

Referring back to the question posed in the introductory chapter: Does this extensive female representation empower women, or does it reinforce stereotypes? To answer this, the following chapter will provide a visual analysis of the playable Nikke seen in the game. Complementary questions such as: “What do they wear,” “How are they portrayed (mannerisms),” “Are the designs empowering or obstructing their agency?,” and “Does the anime style influence the perceived portrayal of these female characters?,” will be discussed.

III. Stylized Women: the Anime-ness of Nikkes

As previously discussed, GoVN, similar to other gacha games, relies heavily on stylized representations of femininity. Usually stylized with short skirts, doll-like appearances, exaggerated body parts, and highly fetishized outfits. These design choices are deliberately constructed based on long-standing tropes in both gaming and anime subcultures (Galbraith, 2009). This sexualisation often is based on the constructed prenotion of gender and what is thought to be attractive. To be sexualised is to be reduced to one aspect that represents the whole. In many games, women are fashioned according to what is presumed to be sexually alluring: large breasts, exposed midriffs, visible thighs, etc. These features are then dressed in tropes—crop tops, lingerie, maid outfits—that signals submission or romantic availability. In GoVN, female characters are rendered as idealized fragments of youth, cuteness, seduction, and submission geared toward male consumption. However, the dynamics become more complex due to the fact that these characters are the "stars" of the game. Their function is not purely decorative: they are also powerful fighters. This dual role—as both subject and object—raises important questions about how femininity, power, and fantasy are entangled. So how does this sexualisation and objectification work when the characters are the stars of the game? Upon closer examination, I've identified three recurring archetypes that organize the female characters in the game: 1) the cute *moe* fighter, 2) the suggestive teenagers, and 3) the promiscuous waifu[3].

Archetype 1: The Cute *Moe* Fighter

When I started playing the game, the very first SSR character I obtained was "Liter" (Fig. iii). Liter has a small stature, oversized mechanical accessories, and round facial features that evoke a childlike, almost doll-like appearance. Her disproportionately large head, wide eyes, and tiny mouth align her with the *moe* aesthetic—designed to elicit feelings of protectiveness and affection from the viewer (Galbraith, 2009, 2014). Although her outfit consists of a toolbelt and a utilitarian bodysuit, signalling technical competence or labour, these are juxtaposed to her youthful and non-threatening appearance. Her visual design draws directly from the conventions of *kawaii* culture, which Tasker (1993) would argue collapses strength into cuteness, thereby neutralizing female agency under the veil of affection. This

[3] A slang term for virtual "wives" intended to mimic Japanese speech patterns (Britt and Britt, 2021,6), often used for female characters that have "wife qualities". Characters deemed as "waifu" do not need to conform to one archetype as long as they possess the right attributes.

contrast between function and form reflects the influence of *kawaii* culture, where even combat or technical characters are rendered in a cute, infantilized style to enhance their market appeal and emotional resonance. However, the *kawaii* aesthetic doesn't fully negate her strength. Based on the Tier list on Nikke.gg, Liter seems to be a powerful support character that is placed in the highest tiers for most game content (Combined, Story, Boss, and PvP[4]). Similarly, Anchor (Fig. iv) is another example of this archetype. She wears a frilly, maid-themed swimsuit, an outfit that is often associated with feminine submissiveness while also exposing much of her body. Her design embodies a dual aesthetic of eroticized innocence, drawing on visual tropes associated with fan service in anime. Her large, shimmering eyes, soft facial expression, and modest gestures evoke *moe*, reinforcing her perceived purity and dependence despite her role as a powerful support character. This childlike eroticism, where innocence and sexuality coexist, is a hallmark of certain strands of anime culture, and functions to blur the line between vulnerability and strength in female character design. Crust (Fig. v) design clearly evokes associations of culinary chef. She is dressed in pink pastel colours, with a cupcake-themed maid outfit, puffy sleeves, and accessories like plush toys and sweets. Her proportions, blushing cheeks, and wide-eyed smile enhance her portrayal as a sweet, docile character. Other Nikke of this archetype also possess an infantilized appearance and modest gestures generate a paradoxical eroticism—innocent yet subtly sexual—that blurs their vulnerability and power.

Figure ii Shift Up, *"Liter" SSR*

Figure iiiv Shift Up, *"Anchor" SSR*

Figure v Shift Up, *"Crust" SSR*

[4] PvP is the abbreviation for 'player vs player', a game mode where the player fights against other players.

Archetype 2: The Suggestive Teenager

Moving beyond childish innocence, the second archetype moves into a more mature aesthetic, whilst still evoking youthfulness. Their body proportions shift: they have longer legs, slimmer waists, more defined curves, and narrower facial features compared to the previous archetype. Their outfits vary more broadly, moving between school uniforms, swimsuits, bunny suits and stylish streetwear, each evoking different contexts of erotic fantasy. A notable example is the second and third SSR characters I obtained through the gacha system is: "Soda: Twinkling Bunny" (Fig. vi), followed by "Tia" (Fig. vii). Admittedly, I was initially taken aback by the exaggerated size of their breasts. The dynamic profile[5] emphasized it even further, because in this animation Soda lets go of her bunny suit, bobbing up and down whilst gesturing paws all the while I was fearing for her breast cups that seemed to miraculously hold on. Tia's animation was calmer, she squeezed both breasts which made her buttoned shirt pop, emitting heart icons (Fig. viii). Notably, compared to the previous archetype adorned in pastel and lighter pallets, these characters include deeper and more vibrant colours which signals a more mature visual. Thigh-high tights that accentuate their plumpness are very commonly seen, along with miniskirts, shorts and bodysuits which leave little room for the imagination. Soda's bunny suit blends innocence with erotica, her softness hiding her devastating power. These design choices reflect a broader gendered trends consistently seen in anime and video games that often translates teenagers and mature women as cute but sexy.

Figure ivi Shift Up, *"Rapi: Red Hood" SSR*

Figure vii Shift Up, *"Soda: Twinkling Bunny" SSR*

[5] This refers to a short animation that activates when you view the character and when you click on them

Figure vi Shift UP, *"Tia" SSR*

Archetype 3: The Promiscuous Waifu

The third archetype fully embraces adult sexualization. These characters (Fig. ix, x, xi, xii) are often depicted with sultry facial expressions, confident body language, and overtly provocative clothing: lingerie, bondage gear, sheer fabrics. While they are less infantilized than the previous two archetypes, they are not necessarily more autonomous. Their design purpose shifts from being "cute and defenceless" to "seductive and pleasing." Characters in this group often represent romantic fantasy or idealized partner: the "waifu" construct. They are tailored for affection, loyalty, and erotic admiration. Yet their agency is narrowly defined: they exist to satisfy, to comfort, to obey. Their visual construction often includes dramatic poses that accentuate breasts, hips, and thighs—further reducing their identity to bodily spectacle. Their attire is meant to enforce this visage. Similar to the Suggestive Teenagers, body proportions of the chest, waist and thigh area are most accentuated. These parts are normatively seen to be as alluring, being intimate areas of the body (Tompkins, 2020). Clothing is taken one step further, where bodysuits or simply underwear is the only thing covering their intimate parts. Even combat gear, which should imply utility and protection, is repurposed to reveal more flesh rather than obscure it. Weapons become décor, symbols of mixed meanings of authority and pleasure. A rather obvious example is Mihara's outfit including the whip her hand, resembling BDSM/Dom-sub tensions. This introduces the player to potential masochist or sadist relations. Nikke's names can reflect their designs. "Red Hood" (Fig. ix) refers to the fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood," she wears a red jacket off the shoulders which substitutes the icon red cloak for a modern one. The vibrant red colour signifies bloodshed, maturity, and resistance. "Cinderella," a name lent by another icon

fairytale, wears glass heels, perhaps alluding to her fragility and pressure she endures as a soldier. Fantastical elements like fairytales add another layer of symbolic inversion, Red Hood becomes the hunter instead of the hunted and Cinderella has no prince who can save her. Nikke of this archetype, more often than not, wear heels instead of combat boots. Combined with their props, this dramatizes their beauty as tool of war. The heels emphasise long legs which eroticizes their silhouette and acts as a fusion of softness and lethality.

Figure ix Shift Up, *"Red Hood" SSR*

Figure x Shift Up, *"Cinderella" SSR*

Figure xi Shift Up, *"Ludmilla: Winter Owner" SSR*

Figure viii Shift Up, *"Mihara: Bonding chain" SSR*

Across all three archetypes, several commonalities persist. Most characters share similar facial proportions—wide eyes, small noses, and minimalistic mouths—creating a homogenized standard of beauty. This serves to stabilize a singular aesthetic ideal, regardless of the character's supposed role, age, or background. Additionally, the emphasis on thighs, hips, and breasts spans across all archetypes. It echoes longstanding tropes in Japanese anime where thighs represent youthful allure and vulnerability, aligning with idealized femininity as

simultaneously desirable and approachable (Tompkins et al. 2020). These areas become signifiers of femininity, fetishized zones that anchor the viewer's gaze. Weapons which both symbolize destructive power, become props that either masks or enhances a character's aesthetic and type. In this way, the female body is not just represented but disassembled and reorganized around desire. The camera angles used in animations and character art often reinforce this—lingering on curves, zooming on bounce effects, framing the body over the face. It is a gaze that invites consumption.

One notable contrast emerges when examining R-rank characters (Fig. xiii, xiv). These tend to be more modestly dressed and militaristically equipped, with more realistic armour and less overt sexualization—though exceptions like "Soldier FA" still shows tight-fitted bodysuit. This suggests a hierarchy in which the rarity of the character correlates with sexual allure: SSR characters are not just more powerful, but more eroticized. SR characters also suffer from lack of abundant visual presentation compared to SSR characters (Fig. xv, xvi).

Figure xiii Shift Up, *"Soldier FA" R*

Figure xiv Shift Up, *"Product 23" R*

Figure xv Shift Up, "*N102" SR*

Figure xvi Shift Up, *"Neon" SR*

Finally, the presence of male military figures in the background—or rather the absence thereof—is also significant. The game rarely presents male bodies in the same hyper-stylized or exposed way, reinforcing a gendered asymmetry. Femininity becomes a spectacle,

masculinity is function. The focus on thighs, for example, becomes uniquely feminized. While practical in military settings, in GoVN exposed thighs are not tactical—they are titillating.

Commodifying Women: Objectification and Sexualization

GoVN places stylized female characters at the core of both gameplay and appeal. After all, the game's roster consists almost entirely of weapon-wielding women, each with their own distinct personalities, costumes, and aesthetic traits that elicit both emotionally engagement and visually enticement. This type of stylization reflects broader cultural patterns in how femininity is represented in Japanese anime, *otaku* culture and games, tying into what Tompkins et al. (2020, 237-88) calls the themes of "bodies as objects, bodies as weapons" and "(in)dependence".

These characters are not merely avatars; they are performative symbols. Crafted to embody specific affective responses: cuteness, desire, submissiveness, or romantic fantasy. As Tompkins and her co-authors observed, many Japanese games incorporate the *kawaii* aesthetic—favouring cuteness, innocence, and emotional vulnerability. This aligns closely with benevolent sexism, a framework that attributes traits such as protectiveness, responsibility, and leadership to men, while positioning women as passive recipients and submissive benefactors of men's action (Glick and Fiske, 2001). In their research, Glick and Fiske focused on real-world gender relations, showing how women are rewarded for passivity and nurturance—traits that, while seemingly positive, ultimately reinforce subordination. I argue that this logic extends to virtual characters in gendered game environments like GoVN. Though not real women, Nikke are designed through real-world gender norms seen in popular culture and are scripted to elicit submission, loyalty, and emotional dependence. Much like the women in Glick and Fiske's study, they are valued for traits that centre the (presumed male) player's authority. Their delicate appearance and overt sexualization are central to the game's emotional appeal. While Nikke do not experience benevolent sexism, they are built to perform it. They model an idealized femininity that reinforces the same hierarchical dynamics seen in real life, creating a feedback loop in which media both reflects and perpetuates gender norms.

In GoVN, the female characters become multifunctional icons—simultaneously capable and consumable. The stylized body, outfitted in combat gear that often resembles lingerie, signals both agency and submission. Tamaki Saitō and Hiroki Azuma's (2011) concept of the "*bishōjo*" or beautiful young girl adds to this as the women are both an object

of desire and an action figure. These characters are situated within a controlled fantasy space, where strength is always mediated by a certain level of cuteness and where independence is visualized but rarely actualized. In the game, Nikke are designed to serve, aesthetically and emotionally. This contradiction—strength wrapped in aestheticized vulnerability—creates a dynamic where the character becomes an idealized fantasy: capable in battle yet emotionally dependent, active yet controlled. Saitō and Azuma (2011) argue that these portrayals serve as escapist fantasies tailored to a primarily male player base, often resulting in the infantilization and objectification of the characters. Despite their frontline status as humanity's defenders, they remain designed to serve player fantasies aesthetically and emotionally. Yet, in spite of these sexualized visuals, the SSR characters remain mechanically powerful, occupying upper tiers in meta game content. This duality of hypersexual design paired with in-game utility creates what could be read as a postmodern contradiction: the empowered-but-sexualized woman, whose power and value is always filtered through her desirability.

Many characters in the game are designed with youthful features, such as large eyes, petite body types, and stylized, anime-inspired aesthetics. This results in an infantilizing effect, as the characters' physical appearance suggests vulnerability or fragility, despite their combat prowess. This design decision challenges the common expectation that strong female characters should be depicted with more mature, authoritative features. Visually, this infantilization is most blatant for the first archetype of female characters due to their cute and childlike designs seen through Liter, Crust, or Anchor, among others. These characters mostly adhere to *moe* aesthetics—designed to be cute, loyal, and emotionally dependent—mirrors the ideals of femininity that benevolent sexism rewards: passivity, nurturance, and male-centred loyalty. They embody a stylized innocence that is designed to trigger feelings of protectiveness in the (presumed male) player. They are performative emotional constructs, symbols of cute, controllable, and unthreatening femininity (Galbraith 2009, 2014). This blurs the line between emotional comfort and subtle erotization as they are meant to soothe the player, offering an experience of visual pleasure mixed with simulated responsibility or protectiveness. Liter's clunky utility belt and Anchor's frilly maid-themed swimsuit aren't about logic or realism; they are props in a symbolic system that prioritizes emotional cues over narrative coherence.

Meanwhile, the second and third archetypes more strongly resemble cultural ideals of empowerment yet sexualized femininity: the strong, sexy femme fatale whose power is inseparable from desirability. This power, however, remains filtered through male gaze and desire which has broadly been subject to criticism by scholars due to its contradiction. While

the heroines are the focus of the game, their animations and their autonomy reinforce rather than challenge established gender norms. Linked to this is the character's rarity level, previously discussed. SSR characters are subject to exaggerated sexualisation compared to R characters. These design choices draw attention to the tension between their supposed role as military assets fighting for humanity's survival and the visual representation that sexualizes them for the player. These characters appear confident and autonomous in combat but are visually 'tamed' through animation choices (e.g., jiggle physics, lingering camera angles, and fashion) that emphasize their sexual features, reducing them to objects of pleasure. This foregrounds physical features like breasts and hips over personality or narrative depth. These visual strategies are designed to captivate the player's gaze, transforming the characters into sexualized icons rather than complex agents. Instead of signalling maturity or strength, their stylization reinforces vulnerability and passivity. This contradiction creates what Saitō and Azuma (2011) identify as the "*otaku* fantasy" mode. Female characters are presented as simultaneously capable yet infantilized. Their strength is always mediated by cuteness, and autonomy is visualized but rarely fully actualized. Central to this dynamic is the implicit gender relationship between the (usually male) player and the female characters. The player exerts control and authority over the Nikke, written to perform submission, loyalty, and emotional dependence. This reflects the benevolent sexism framework identified by Glick and Fiske (2001), where men are cast as protectors and leaders, and women as passive recipients of care and authority. The Nikkes' emotional and visual cues—fragility, cuteness, and sexual appeal—are fundamental to the game's affective economy. It seemed to be designed to trigger protectiveness and emotional investment from the player. In this sense, empowerment is partial and contingent: Nikke have power within the game world, but this power is circumscribed by their role as objects of desire and care, reinforcing hierarchical gender relations. Their combat agency exists alongside, and is often overshadowed by, their visual submission to the male gaze. This visual and affective framing stipulates with Mulvey's (1975) notion of the male gaze, where women in media are positioned as passive objects for male visual pleasure. Although the game centres women as heroes, it maintains traditional gender hierarchies by making their bodies, and by extension their identities, making them dependent on the player's desire and control. Thus, they are tools and objects at the mercy of the player, designed performing gendered femininity.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, the “anime-ness” is not just a visual style; it is an ideological framework. Through the combination of *kawaii*, *moe*, and erotic aesthetics, the game constructs femininity as a blend of cuteness, submission, and sexuality. Whether presented as a childlike mechanic, a flirty teenager, or a sultry waifu, each female character is carefully designed to match one of several familiar fantasy tropes. While these characters may exhibit strength and competence in gameplay as Nikke.gg highlights in their tier list, their visual and symbolisms continue to centre around a male gaze. It privileges (aesthetic) pleasure over personhood. Nikke thus embodies a deeply ambivalent form of empowerment. On one hand, they are active combatants, indispensable to the game’s progression and narrative. Whilst, on the other hand, their infantilized and sexualized designs anchor them within a framework of subordination that privileges male authority and desire. The characters perform constructed femininity. This is not purely aesthetic but rather reflects a broader cultural and media logic where empowerment for female characters is only accompanied within boundaries that sustain existing gender hierarchies. The stylized women are simultaneously capable and consumable, active yet controlled, mirroring real-world tensions around female agency in visual culture.

These observations serve as a complementary foundation for the next chapter, which will examine how this visual and symbolic construction extends into the narrative structure of the game. Do the NIKKEs possess true agency? Can they act outside of player command, or are they permanently bound by their object status? What contradictions emerge between their appearance and their role as humanity’s last line of defence? In the upcoming chapter, I will explore these questions.

IV. Forced Narrative Compliance

Having discussed the visual representation, it is important also to consider the game's narrative and dialogues as it also construes what Nikke in the game represent. Much like how visual representation influences player expectations, the narrative, through both its story and dialogues, constructs, and establishes the power relations and gender dynamics between the player and characters. Furthermore, it's interactive which poses the question whether the choices the player can choose from normalizes certain behaviour towards these relations, inside the game but also outside the game. Therefore, it is important to look at how Nikke are construed in the game's narrative, are there contradictions between the sexualisation of them and their agency in the game? How does the narrative and player dialogue choices present the player – character relationship? Does it construe gendered binary?
This chapter will examine how the game's structural and narrative choices intersect with broader cultural narratives surrounding femininity, autonomy, and digital embodiment in interactive media. The analysis chronologically follows the main story of the game which includes dialogues between the characters and players. Dialogues or comments outside of the main story are included which are relevant to the player-character dynamic such as the (emotional) bonding game mechanic.

Starting the Game: Lore & Worldbuilding

The narrative of GoVN plays a central role in how the game constructs meaning around its characters and their relationship with the player. Beyond visual representation, the storyline itself provides insight into the complex gendered power dynamics, themes of obedience, and the emotional labour embedded in the game's design. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that while Nikke are designed as tools of war, their interactions with the Commander (the player) extends far beyond strategic gameplay to often into emotional and suggestively intimate territory.

Upon starting the game, the player is greeted with a concerned Nikke, Marian, bending over the protagonist as the protagonist (you) went into cardiac arrest (Fig. xvii). After successfully resuscitating the player, the story quickly describes your precarious and dangerous situation. Whilst trying to escape, you come across two other Nikke, Rapi and Anis, who join your team as you fight Raptures. Upon reaching the destination, Marian starts

to act odd and repeats the phrase “over here.” When her eyes started to glow red, Rapi and Anis determined she was infected by a Rapture and needs to be eliminated. Rapi and Anis ask the player, the Commander, to shoot Marian as they are unable to do so due to their programming. The player does not get to choose to spare Marian. An animated cutscene starts to play, while hesitating, Marian gently holds the gun pointed at her, she thanks the commander for binding her leg and the sound of gunshot rings, the screen fades to black. This marks the kick-off of the game's story (Shift Up, 2022).

Figure xvii Shift Up*, Opening scene*

While I was playing the first chapter, I found myself somewhat taken-aback when the first scene started with Mariam hovering over the player (Fig. xvii). Not only were my eyes drawn to the two rather intrusive breasts positioned on the screen where the dialogue was displayed, Mariam facial expression was also compelling. Her facial expression—hovering between suggestive and emotionally ambiguous—immediately signals the game’s tendency to blend narrative exposition with fanservice elements. This was a rather impressionable visual to be introduced to by the game. This is reinforced as the story continues and is enacted through a conversation between Anis, Rapi and Mariam. Mariam is asked by Anis to take off her top so that she can “…do some maintenance” (Shift Up, 2022). Mariam responds hesitantly, noting that the commander is there too, suggesting that it would be embarrassing. Anis responds by saying: “you don't actually think the commander sees you that way do you? Relax to them we're just emotionless fighting machines. The last thing they're thinking of when they see us is sex, trust me. Isn't that right Commander?” The players are now given the opportunity to interact but can only respond with “…” Anis facial expression immediately turns into a comically iteration of a scornful look (Fig. xviii) “Well well so you do see us that way! interesting!” (Ibid). Ultimately Marian is checked with Rapi insisting to follow by protocol, however the commander was requested to look away. This interaction subtly enforces and normalizes the sexualized situation, enforcing the male gaze while framing it as

a joke, setting up a dynamic where the commander (player) is both implicated and invited to remain complicit.

Figure xviii Shift Up*, questionable face of "Anis" SR*

As the story unfolds, the game's worldbuilding reveals the mechanical subordination of the Nikke. Nikke are central to both the game's story and its world-building. They are programmed to be unable to harm humans as their role is to save humanity from Raptures. Engineered through advanced military technology, each is built with a NIMPH (Neuro-Implanted Machine for the Protection of Humans) system—a neural interface that allows resurrection after death, as long as the brain remains intact (Shift Up, 2022). This technology ensures combat utility but at a cost by enforcing obedience, emotional suppression, and systematic memory erasure which is often used to eliminate familial attachments. This is confirmed during a mission in chapter 2.5 where the commander and his squad are exiled to an Outpost and ordered to capture a unique Rapture named Chatterbox, a speaking, intelligent foe. This narrative turn introduces both political manipulation and covert operations, expanding the stakes of the game beyond combat. For example, the subject of memory erasure, central to their identity as manufactured beings, is addressed by Rapi, who explains: "We'll revert back to the way we were fresh off the assembly line. We won't remember a thing. I heard that in most cases the combat data remains, but everything else…" (Shift Up, 2022). When Rapi's memory erasure fails, the implications become more severe as she says: "They'll probably give it another go, and if it doesn't work that time…" (Ibid). Anis then adds: "Then you'll be discarded. You are, to some extent, an irregular after all." Rapi concludes: "No exceptions. Ark policy." Anis continue and points to the player's authority: "You are the one to make the final decision, Commander. Nikkes shall obey any and every order issued by their Commander" (Ibid). These lines not only clarify the structural subordination of Nikke but also suggest a complex dependency in their relationship with the

Commander. Further into the story, another (unplayable) character, Shifty, reinforces the disposability of Nikke by stating: “Nikkes can be produced on any assembly line with lightning speed and using the bare minimum of materials” (Ibid).

However, despite these limitations, some Nikke can resist their programming. Unique units like the “Pilgrims”—older models with limited memory storage—exhibit nonstandard behaviour, while others become corrupted by the Raptures themselves. Such deviations raise existential questions about agency, and what it means to be “human” or to break free from artificial control. This however is seen as a threat just as how Chatterbox is hunted down by the player. What’s important to note is that Nikke unaffected by these “irregularities” are unable to kill other Nikke due to their programming. This means that ‘rogue’ Nikkes are able to not only harm humans, but also other Nikke. Thus, the narrative sets up a contradiction: Nikke are objects of control, desire, and utility, yet they are also emotional, caring, and—at times—rebellious. The player is placed at the centre of this tension, occupying both the position of authority and the object of their affection.

Yet, narratively, the player is not omnipotent. Several story arcs, like in chapters 4 to 7, depict the player as vulnerable and dependent on Nikke for survival. These sequences showcase the player become helpless multiple times, experiencing life-threatening situations due to the cold temperatures and kidnapping. This, to an extent, exemplifies that although the player has authoritative power over Nikke, he is still susceptible to danger and is dependent on Nikke for survival. Highlighting that Nikke, although their agency is heavily limited, still can exert agency narratively, even if it’s scripted through care, improvisation, or emotional response. However, along with this dependency, suggestive scenes nonetheless present themselves. One such instance occurs when the Commander is suffering from hypothermia, prompting the Nikkes to consider transferring body heat. Neon says: “Take off your clothes and snuggle up to the Commander” (Shift Up, 2022). Rapi responds: “...what?” Anis explains: “You need to use your body to get the Commander’s temperature up.” Rapi hesitates: “It’s just that when you put it like that, it sounds a little…” (Ibid). Anis exclaims: “Are you kidding me? How do you expect me to do something like that? How embarrassing!” (Ibid). Looking at another similar situation where two Nikke found the Commander unconscious in the snow, the following dialogue unfolded where Ludmilla guides Alice in managing the unconscious Commander: “Uhm, Alice… you really should be a bit more delicate with them. That’s it. Just grab onto them right there. No, not there! That’s a bit of a…sensitive area” (Ibid).

Game Content & Gameplay: Agency Through Mechanics

At its core, GoVN emphasizes team-based, cover-driven shooting where each character brings a distinct set of abilities. Without a proper team it is nearly impossible to complete missions. Combat involves strategically assembling squads based on weapon types: Assault Rifles, Shotguns, Sniper Rifles, Rocket Launchers, or Machine Guns, and elemental alignments: Fire, Wind, Iron, Electric, or Water. These affinities affect how characters interact and perform on the battlefield and can perform better or worse depending on the enemy weakness. As previously highlighted, characters are further ranked by rarity—R, SR, and SSR—with SSR units being the most powerful and difficult to acquire through the game's gacha system. Each Nikke possesses a unique skill set, composed of two passive "Automatic Skills" and one active "Burst Skill." Burst Skills are executed via a shared combat gauge and must be activated in a strict three-phase sequence—Burst I (support), Burst II (damage dealer), and Burst III (finisher). This system rewards precise timing and team composition, adding tactical layers to each encounter. However, this also reinforces a dual dynamic of power and objectification. Seemingly power going hand in hand with often hyper-feminized designs as examined in the previous chapter. This suggests a troubling linkage between combat effectiveness and sexual appeal.

The Power level, which is central to combat viability, is determined by character level, skill upgrades, gear, emotional Bonds, and Collection bonuses. If their squad's collective Power falls below mission thresholds, players usually fail or struggle immensely to complete the mission which reinforces selectively focusing on "optimal" characters. Aside from levelling up characters with limited materials obtained through gameplay, players must choose which Nikke to invest their resources and time in. Characters' rarity tiers (R, SR, SSR) and unique skills, weapon and element shape their usefulness. Naturally, SSR characters are designed to be most sought-after, and therefore are a stronger and better alternative to R and SR characters. This creates a natural bias for SSR characters to invest time into. And as seen in the previous chapter, SSR characters are often most attractive and sexualised compared to R characters. Since gacha keeps creating new content to keep engagement, new characters and game content are added. This can result in power creep, a phenomenon in gacha games where newer character outshines older characters in terms of strength. This embeds a gendered economy of value, where beauty, desirability, and utility are expected.

To keep players engaged and enable them to get stronger, a variety of game content is offered: 1) the Main Campaign, 2) Outpost, and 3) the Ark, depicted on the homescreen of the game (Fig. xix). The main Campaign consists of multiple chapters and levels. Ranging from

daily to weekly tasks incentivises players to regularly log in and play to obtain valuable game materials. In the Outpost players can find several systems meant to support character progression. The Advice feature, which is tied to the Bond system, lets players interact with Nikke to improve the power and unlock personal stories. The Synchro Device allows for players to reduce material costs for levelling up characters by synchronising five Nikke. Liberation (Rehabilitation Center) grants players access to exclusive SSR characters by completing long-term daily missions. And finally, the Simulation Room which is a daily labyrinth-style challenge which rewards players skill upgrade materials. A more combat-focussed content is the Ark, where various combat-related challenges can be played for experience and material rewards.

Figure xix Shift Up, *Homescreen interface*

Bonding, Emotional labour & strategic Intimacy

Among the aforementioned game content, the Bond system which improves a Nikke power level offers more in-depth character information through personal stories and Advice gameplay. The Bond mechanic is a system where players invest time, give Advice and gifts to Nikke in order to deepen relationships with them which can incentive emotional investment. However, bonding is limited to characters the player possesses. Aside from SR and SSR characters the player has not acquired, R characters are also excluded from this system and therefore cannot be Advised or given Gifts. Similarly, abnormal Nikkes are also excluded from this system (Nikke.gg, 2025). This exclusivity for Rare characters and abnormal Nikke pushes players to favour more “domesticable” characters and reinforces gendered hierarchies within the same pool.

Advising a character opens a short dialogue with the character about something small but relevant to the characters personality. The player can Advise characters up to five times daily, which make it more selective. Furthermore, this interaction remains firmly controlled by the player, who dictates the character's interactions and Bond progression. Increasing a Nikke's Bond level by Advising them or giving Gifts, which is a shortcut to levelling their Bond level, can increase their power output. Players can gather dedicated bonding items that based on the rarity of the ticket (R, SR, SSR) respectively advances a character's bond with the player (Fig. xx). Notably, each new Bond level reached unlocks a Bond story of that character, totalling 5 Bond stories per Nikke.

Figure xx Shift Up*, Bond item: "Gift"*

Several, explicit or vague dialogues unfold with suggestive undertones throughout the main story, as well as side dialogues like character-specific stories (Bond mode). One such bond story was with Trina. According to Nikke.gg, she is in charge of managing trees in the Ark who is gentle and mature by nature. However, due to her desire to become one with nature she exhibits unconventional behaviour. Or simply put, she strips off her clothes. Since she seems to be a strong character, recommended for in-game content (Nikke.gg, 2025). This makes her worthwhile to invest in her and her Bond level. Upon reaching the first bond level with Trina, the scene opens on a black screen with the following text: "I have been defeated. Bested by the primal intrinsic in humanity. Powerless against an unstoppable urge within me" (Shift Up, 2022). The player is prompted to interact, but only one choice is offered at each stage, such as: "!"and "I can feel something at my fingertips." It continues: "What…What is this?" An image resembling a splendid greenhouse is shown on the screen. The story continues with ambiguous, flirtatious exchanges like "Is something wrong, sun?" and "Oh, I didn't realize you were into this sort of thing," to which the player can only respond, "N-no! That's not it!" A line of narration follows: "I hurriedly dress the Nikke standing in front of

me.” Trina now becomes visible mirroring her artwork (Fig. xxi). She says: “Haha, you’re welcome to feel more” and continues, “I have become one with nature after all.” The screen fades to black and marks the end of the first unlocked character story. The second story shows the players first encounter with where Trina was arrested due to being nude in a public park. Ultimately, he was requested to keep an eye on her and find out her motive for undressing in public parks. Later, whilst watching her snipping branches the player narrates: “She’s quite good with her hands.” Seconds later however, she “shrugs off the clothes that were draped over her body, as if she was a snake shedding skin.” The fourth story starts off with a description of Trina being stuck in a hollow tree with “her lower half sticking out of it.” The dialogue option: “Must be strong…Must be strong” appears (Ibid). What was noticeable is that other similar suggestive instances are described throughout almost all her character stories episodes. While explicit nudity was absent, Trina’s backstory, personality and love for nature feels less of an emotional bonding moment, but rather a deliberate catalyst to create these suggestive dialogues. Instead of deepening her personality or developing meaningful backstory, the writing tends to prioritize titillation, inviting the player to imagine sexualized scenarios. This shifts the focus more towards romantic fantasy-driven engagement.

Figure xxi Shift Up, *"Trina" SSR*

Contrasting Trina’s story to Liter’s shows how different narratives are constructed based on how the character is portrayed based on their archetype. Throughout her story it’s revealed that she is prepared to die as she doesn’t believe in Nikkes living forever (Ibid). Her story does not include these suggestive scenes nor dialogues and instead focusses on Liter’s personal views on her life and her existence. I would argue that this difference in narrative

between these two Nikke is precisely because they adhere to different archetypes: Trina a promiscuous waifu and Liter a *moe* fighter. This would explain why Liter's dialogue is more reliant on her personality, which only strengthens the emotions and protectiveness over her. Subsequently, her narrative is driven by her personality more than her physicality, which strengthens the emotional appeal. Together, these examples highlight how narrative structure and gameplay combined with character design work hand-in-hand to reinforce gendered consumption patterns within the game which forces them into role of consumability for the player. Depending on the archetype, it reinforced preexisting notions of gendered binaries used to construct these characters design and personality, where this specific narrative enforces it further. Nikke are picked apart by type and used to sell these fantasy-driven binaries to its player base, wrapped in a bow so to speak. The player has little agency to choose an alternative, aside from skipping the stories altogether.

V. Conclusion: A World of Controlled Femininity

This paper started out with the question of whether *Goddess of Victory: NIKKE* constructs and reinforces gender relations and binaries through its visual designs, game mechanics, and narrative framework. GoVN presents a world where female-coded characters are technologically advanced and emotionally distinguishable, yet consistently subjected to systems of control, commodification, and objectification. The emphasis on visual attractiveness through the gendered and sexualised depictions of female characters is not exclusive to this particular gacha game. The narrative did not attempt to challenge this but enforced it and positioned the characters in a one-sided relationship between the players.

Throughout this analysis, key themes where examined: the lure of gacha mechanisms, gender representation, gendered visual symbols and the tension between narrative and game structure. GoVN relies heavily on its visual appeal of its characters, sexualising and infantilising them, conforming to stereotypical, male-centred fantasies. The contradictory construction of the characters between empowerment and objectification seen in both their appearance, their stories and role in the game's narrative enforces cultural constructed prenotions of gender embedded in Japanese popular culture. The body is categorized in archetypes, along with their clothing and weapons which are props to enhance this, in spite of the militaristic role forced on them. Nikke are nothing more than Barbie dolls, sold in different types, styles, and roles, mass-produced and ready to be consumed. On top of not being equally strong among each other, they are almost powerless. The player picks and chooses whoever they deem to be of value, but just as quickly can be tossed away when their value no longer meets their standards. The structure of the game and narrative only add to these power dynamics. Bond systems that are meant to create deeper emotional connections are only superficial and limited for designated Nikkes. R characters are nothing more but background props, whereas Raptures or Pilgrims function as the necessary evil to propel the player to a goal of victory. Furthermore, these irregular Nikke are deemed dangerous, spinning the narrative that not conforming to the enforced systems of control leads to endangerment and prosecution.

This raises an important question: why does any of this matter? Isn't it just a game? If one doesn't like it, can't they simply choose another? This line of reasoning overlooks the broader cultural and psychological implications of gacha systems. Gacha games incentives are problematic, not only because it promotes gambling and foster addictive behaviour but

normalises it. Just as how randomized loot box systems have become a staple of the genre, so too becomes it normal to sell gender and gendered fantasy. Selling gender shouldn't be normalized, but it becomes more problematic through these psychological strategies. Furthermore, normalizing these fantasy-male centred depictions of women, confirms gendered symbols of femininity through body and emotional dependency, which only perpetuates problematic stereotypes and gender roles. "Women should act cute and be submissive. They should listen to me; dress the way I want and do as I say." This is the underlying fantasy being sold. Programmed to be submissive, loot to show off and pushes the fantasy of mastery over women like mastery over technology essentially gamifies femininity (Condis, 2018).

Naturally, female representation in games is not inherently harmful. However, if this trend of illusion of agency and empowerment is the only constructed gender binary represented in games, especially if female characters are the overwhelming majority, it would not be meaningful but detrimental. The inability to separate female empowerment from her appeal: visually and personally, is problematic. It creates a constant narrative of this inseparability, which would depreciate female characters, and women that do not meet these standards. As numerous scholars have pointed out, media representations deeply affect how individuals perceive themselves and others. Hinton (2016), Tompkins (2020), and Shaw (2014) all stress the power of visual media in shaping gender identity. As Wesely (2012) pointed out, women learn from a young age what is socially seen as "attractive" and adopt these behaviours to a certain extend. These media messages, though fictional, have real consequences. Subsequently, gacha games are cultural products, they both represent and influence or reinforce normalized social constructs (Perreault et al. 2021). They are embedded in wider ecosystems, platforms like Twitch and YouTube, where community discourse, fan content, and monetization strategies amplify these norms (Speed et al. 2023). Moreover, with gacha often using visual style which are often shaped by global anime aesthetics, carry their own cultural codes and gender implications (Hernandez & Hirai, 2015; Condry, 2013; Koyama, 2023; Kang et al., 2025).

By not critically examining these games, we risk accepting these troubling patterns of commercialising gender through problematic game mechanics and exploitative designs. These trends do not merely reflect fantasies; it reshapes the boundaries of what gender can mean within digital spaces. I hope to see future research exploring how these dynamics can differ across global player communities, how male-coded characters are framed in similar systems, and how player reception and resistance play a role in negotiating these gendered narratives.

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Table I: Visual Analysis: Female Character Design in Games

Category	Aspect	Scale (1–5)	Guiding Question/Statement
Body Proportions	Bust Size	1 = small/realistic → 5 = exaggerated/unrealistic	"The character’s bust size appears exaggerated in proportion to the rest of her body."
	Waist-to-Hip Ratio	1 = realistic → 5 = extreme hourglass	"Does the character have an extremely small waist compared to her hips and bust?"

	Hip Width	1 = narrow → 5 = unrealistically wide	"The hip width is depicted in a stylized or unrealistic way."
	Body Fat / Muscle Tone	1 = diverse/realistic → 5 = idealized/uniform	"Does the character reflect narrow or idealized standards of beauty (e.g., thin, toned)?"
Facial Features	Facial Proportions	1 = varied/realistic → 5 = doll-like/idealized	"Are facial features overly idealized (e.g., big eyes, tiny nose)?"
	Expression Sexualization	1 = neutral → 5 = overtly seductive/flirtatious	"Does the character often display suggestive or sexual expressions?"
Clothing	Skin Exposure	1 = fully covered → 5 = minimal/revealing	"Does the character's outfit emphasize sex appeal over practicality?"
	Clothing Fit/Physics	1 = realistic → 5 = unnatural/tight/jiggly	"Is clothing designed to highlight body movement or exaggerate form?"
Rarity	R (rare), SR (Super Rare), SSR (Super Super Rare)	n/a	“Does the rarity impact the character's design? (less rare = more basic/ less visually appealing?)”
Power	Community-based tier list		“Does the character’s power influence the design and the favourability in-game?”

Created by Dorigaya van Randen