Veteran vs. Newcomer - Open World Exploration Gacha Games

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores and examines how gameplay and gacha experiences differ in the shared open-world MMORPG game Tower of Fantasy (Tower of Fantasy, 2022) for players with prior experiences in cross-platform gacha games like Genshin Impact (HoYoverse, 2020) and Noah's Heart (Noah's Heart, 2022). There is a focus on the currency systems of the games along with the open-world exploration experiences, and a strong focus on the gacha system in the game: Tower of Fantasy. Subjective views and biases are all common traits of those who are involved within a community, veteran players or newer players would have a different perspective on a game and the key elements that may have been contributed by other sources. The objective of this research paper is to observe and examine the key differences in the approaches of veteran players in Tower of Fantasy. The methods to approach this objective pertains a utilization of mix-method approaches, with a range of formal analysis and trends on social media along with an observational survey of a community of practice, namely, a group of gamers dedicated to; Genshin Impact, Noah's Heart, and Tower of Fantasy, respectively. The different groups, for a span of 3 days, solely observed and played the game Tower of Fantasy where their results were gathered from a community public messaging log during the official release of the game in August 2022.

Keywords: Open world exploration, Genshin Impact, Tower of Fantasy, Noah's Heart, gacha, Discord, in-game currency

Subject: Game Design

INTRODUCTION

This research paper looks into how people with varying degrees of experience playing either Genshin Impact or Noah's Heart react and approach the game Tower of Fantasy in comparison to a newer player who has only played Tower of Fantasy within games of similar genres. We will look into how the players interact with the currency system of the game, and the gameplay experiences of players. We will compare and contrast the veteran's specialized game and Tower of Fantasy, then conclude by discussing the experiences of 3 different fielding players to draw conclusions.

As gacha games are starting to rise in popularity, some are ahead of newer games and some are behind. Tower of Fantasy is a newer game, Genshin Impact is a famous game among open-world exploration games, and Noah's Heart is quite the generic approach to each world exploration MMORPGs but is still popular. These three coupled let us see the value in a deeper understanding of how such games function and garner player interaction.

We will be using a mixed-method approach to conducting research, by using formal analysis and research on trends along with a survey conducted on public messaging platform Discord (Discord, 2015). We will discuss the aspects, graphics, and design of the game as a focus for formal analysis while writing diaries of our gameplay experiences and discussions would be our focus for the survey.

It is important to note and recognize that a big challenge is that all three games are incredibly massive. There is only so much we can cover and discuss within this scope of research. This paper aims to be inquisitive and exploratory and to gain an understanding of how veterans of similar game genres approach a newer game. The conclusions drawn

from this are limited as there are only 3 players involved in the data acquisition. These experiences may not reflect the experience of all players. To recall, this paper has a high emphasis on player experience in Tower of Fantasy with prior experiences in Genshin Impact, Noah's Heart, or no experience at all.

BACKGROUND

In this section, we will discuss and explain the main ideas/theoretical framework of this paper. The main contributors to this section include Mehta & Kyung (2010), Koeder et al (2017, 2018), Lax & Mackenzie (2015), Wang & Sun (2011), Goodstein (2021).

This section focuses on videogames & classification, gacha mechanics, reward & economical systems, dark patterns that increase player commitment, and overall game rivalries in-game

Videogames and Classification
The idea of classifying video games is well explained by the figure generated from Mehta Saurabh & Kwak Kyung — Application of Game Theory to Wireless Networks.
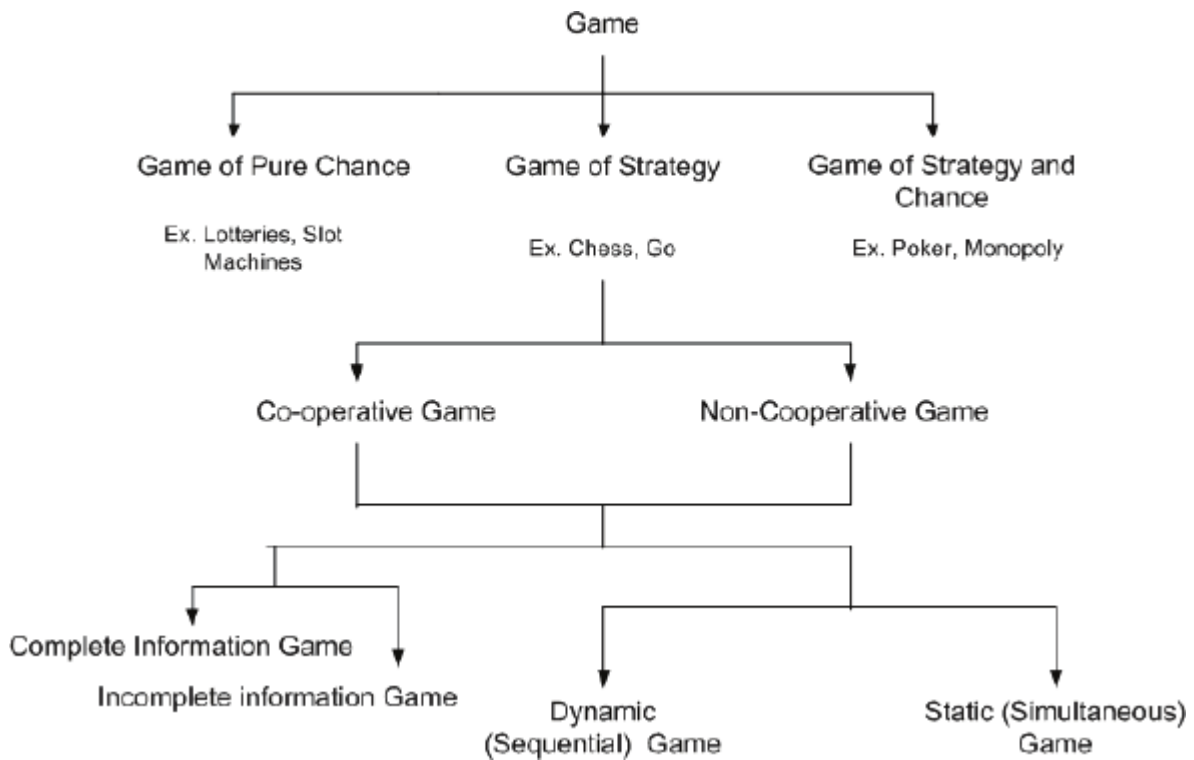
Figure 1: Application of Game Theory to Wireless Networks
Source: Mehta & Kwak (2010)

The image is a simple form of video game classification and relates to game theory and the possible combinations of aspects that lead to an optimum response (Mehta & Kwak, 2010).

Video Games have an intention – strategy, story, etc. Players of these games are introduced to a cooperative function or non-cooperative function. In the 3rd branch outpost, we have two main routes that classify it as RPG, MMO, MMORPG, etc.

Open-world exploration is non-linear, with open areas and many ways to reach an objective to encourage unpredictable player movement and exploration (Mckenzie, 2021). All three games discussed in this paper — Genshin Impact (HoYoverse, 2020), Tower of Fantasy (Tower Of Fantasy, 2022), and Noah's Heart (Noah's Heart, 2022) — are based on open-world explorational gameplay.

Gacha Mechanics

Gacha games are a genre of games and are mostly found in F2P (free-to-play) games. Players spend the money they've acquired throughout the game to acquire objects relevant to the game (Al-Nawaresh& Andersson, 2022). This spending of in-game currency is considered ―pulling‖ for characters (Lax & Mackenzie, 2019). Gacha is a form of gaming to acquire virtual items that is either obtained through gameplay or with real-world currency (Koeder et al, 2017).

All gacha games use probability or numbers. Numbers refer to the amount of ―pulls‖ a player would have to do in order to activate the ―pity‖. Pity refers to the number of pulls until a character with the highest rating is guaranteed. Overall, Tower of Fantasy is more generous with their gacha system, where you have a higher chance of getting an SSR weapon every ten pulls. Noah's Heart is not the most generous but is simpler compared to Genshin Impact. Soft pity comes from 30+ pulls and players are guaranteed at 50 pulls with a higher probability of SSR acquisition among the games. Genshin Impact's mechanics can be considered the least generous with a low probability for five-stars, however, it also has a soft pity at 70 pulls and a guaranteed five-star at 90 wishes for every banner.

Game Economical Systems

There are two main types of currency that players can acquire in games.

One is soft currency, earned primarily via gameplay in the form of gold or coins. It is the most common or narratively useful currency (Shumaker, 2020). Soft currency is available to spend on consumable items, upgrades, etc., where the player _grinds' in order to amass a large amount of it. The second type is premium currency which is available by purchase with real-world money or is extremely difficult to acquire and is usually needed for rare and exclusive items that do not afford combat advantages (Shumaker, 2020).

Another important aspect is the reward system, where players receive awards or in-game valuables that can be seen as an achievement, titles, items, etc. They generally include a social aspect as an incentive to show off achievements (Wang & Sun 2011, p. 5). Many players prefer to compare in-game achievements and luck that they have acquired through extensive efforts and not those acquired by purchases with soft or premium currency (Wang & Sun, 2011, p. 6).

Rewards can directly impact the game as the player is able to progress smoother through the game. They provide incentives to increase player interest. There are short-term and long-term rewards. Long-term rewards are harder to acquire and require consistent effort and play to achieve; games provide short-term rewards to provide milestones that help the player keep track of their progress and display their unrelenting efforts (Wang & Sun, 2011, p. 6).

METHODS

The methods used in this research.

Research Question: How would having prior gacha and gameplay experience in Genshin Impact and Noah's Heart impact players' approaches to gameplay in Tower of Fantasy?

We aim to explore how people who have experience in games of a similar genre would approach newer games and experience gameplay. Would they have a certain level of basic understanding of how to move forth throughout the game, or would they judge everything based on what they're comfortable with? Additionally, we wish to understand how different players interact with the gacha system in Tower of Fantasy (Tower of Fantasy, 2022).

Method:

To approach our research question, we have decided to use a mixed-method approach. By utilizing a formal analysis and a survey. Our aim was to identify what exactly differs in the gaming experience of a veteran and a new player. Thus, we have conducted a survey through the platform Discord. We gathered our data from the platform which is publicly available, spanning from August 11th to August 14th, 2022 on the server Blumous in Tower of Fantasy (Tower of Fantasy, 2022), with preliminary questioning for the duration of August 9th to August 10th. During the period of observation, players would answer a questionnaire which can be read further down in the appendix section (9.i.). The dates of observation were chosen as it was the official game release of Tower of Fantasy on the 11th.

The participants would document familiarities within a small diary journal consisting of a sentence or two correlating to the topic in question to organize and draw conclusions from. We chose this method because much of our research and data is from personal experience and data can be gathered just from playing the game on its own (Jėčius&Frestadius, 2022). All issues brought up in the data collection are purely for discussion purposes. For this

experiment, players were requested to only participate in Tower of Fantasy (Tower of Fantasy, 2022) for the duration of the observational period.

RESULTS

This section will go over our responses and our in-game experience. The players in this section would each have some data regarding their veteran/newcomer experiences. To reiterate, our research question is: *How would having prior gacha and gameplay experience in Genshin Impact and Noah's Heart impact players' approaches to gameplay in Tower of Fantasy?*

Participant Credentials

There are 3 participants that took part in this experiment. The first veteran was an adventure rank 60 (leveling system in Genshin Impact (HoYoverse, 2020), which is the highest level that can be achieved currently. They have been playing since the release of this game. The second veteran was level 66 in Noah's Heart (Noah's Heart, 2022) and has been playing since the release of Noah's Heart. The third player is a newcomer and has only played Tower of Fantasy (Tower of Fantasy, 2022) out of the three games in question. They have a substantial amount of experience in other games that are open-world exploration.

The below text snippets are images that display their first impressions of the game recorded on Discord — a community chatting platform (Discord, 2015).
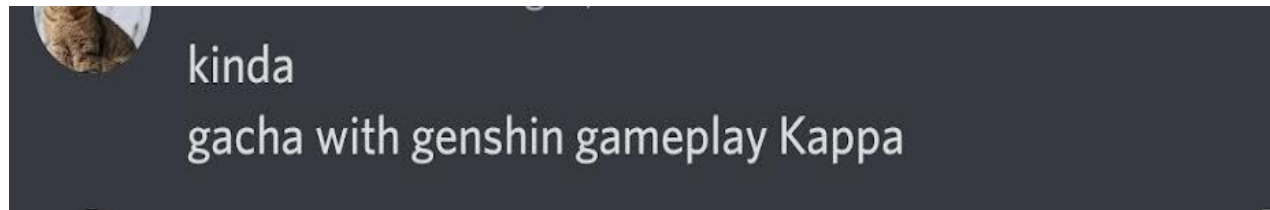
Figure 2: The Genshin Impact Veteran. The player judges his impression of the game as a "gacha" game that has a similar playstyle to Genshin Impact.
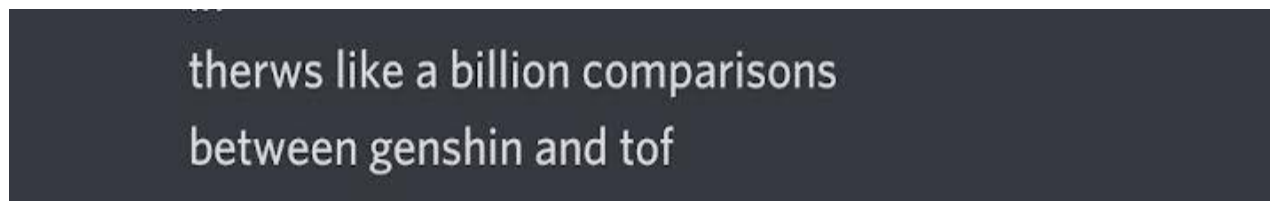
Figure 3: The Noah's Heart Veteran. The player refers to the online discussions of Tower of Fantasy being a copy of Genshin Impact. They insinuate that the game is quite well known due to the online discussions.
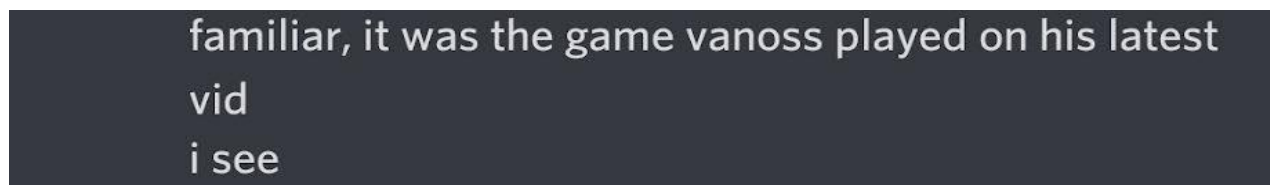
Figure 4: The newcomer. This player's first impression of the game arose from a content creator who played Tower of Fantasy.

Common Trends Across Games

This section mainly focuses on the commonalities that are present in each game conforming to the main aspects that affect   gameplay.

Teleportation/Movement Convenience

These teleportation devices allow a player to travel conveniently throughout regions within the game.

Figure 5: Waypoints in Genshin Impact. Allows for easy navigation across regions.

Figure 6: Light Pillars in Noah's Heart. These allow for easy navigation across regions but unlike the other two, a challenge needs to be completed in order to access the light pillar. If the challenge is failed, then the player cannot use the light pillar.

Figure 7: Spacerifts in Tower of Fantasy. These allow for easy navigation across regions, but unlike the teleportation in the other two games, there is an animation where the player with a sort of data-like particle effect. It takes longer to teleport using these compared to the other two teleportation devices.

Navigation

To follow up the previous section where we discussed the means of teleportation for navigation convenience, this section will display the navigation system itself.

Figure 8: Navigation system in Genshin Impact. The navigation system has routes denoted by particle effects. Guided navigation is not always available for content within the game. Only certain quests would have guided navigation while others don't.

Figure 9: This is the navigation system in Noah's Heart. The navigation here is completely guided for every quest, they use particle effects to determine a route for travel. What's unique to this navigation, in comparison to the other two, is that the routes marked are generally smart routes but your character would be set on that route unless you interrupt the process of navigation. There are times when the game does not account for obstacles so you would get stuck when using a mount and navigating.

Figure 10: The navigation system in Tower of Fantasy has two major components. There are guided routes for all quests and, similar to Genshin Impact's navigation system, the routes are shown through particle effects. Unlike Noah's Heart, this navigation system does not teleport you when navigating, it would most likely provide a route by foot unless you teleport manually like Genshin Impact.
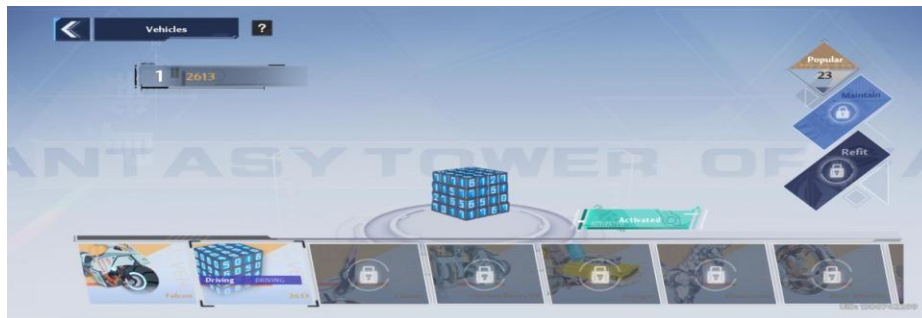
Mounts

Noah's Heart and Tower of Fantasy both have mounts to assist players on their travels, but Genshin Impact does not. To make up for this, Genshin Impact's character movement is relatively fast, and there are buffs/character passives to assist players in travels.

Figure 11: The mounts in Noah's Heart. The mounts available in Noah's Heart are mainly horses of which you can breed to get higher-rated mounts. There are events that assist players in gaining the resources needed for mounts.

Figure 12: The mounts in Tower of Fantasy. The mounts are mostly machine based and can come in a variety of designs. Unlike Noah's Heart, these mounts cannot jump or sprint, there is a fixed speed for them. They have smoother travel along bumps or uneven terrains.

Jetpack/Flying/Gliding System

A gliding system that would allow players to cover a substantial distance through air maneuvers.

Figure 13: Genshin Impact's gliding system.

Unlike the other two games, the gliding system is fast and does not elevate the player before flight, but rather allows the players to consistently travel by gliding from a higher point. They use stamina to determine how long a player can glide. Certain in-game acquisitions allow players to increase their maximum height midair without consumption of stamina.

Figure 14: Noah's Heart jetpack system.

Unlike Genshin Impact, Noah's Heart makes use of a mechanical representation of a jetpack which does not require stamina and allows players to travel consistently using air maneuvers. The jetpack essentially raises the player to a certain height where they then make use of a gliding system that can only go lower or at a consistent height. The flight period is the longest out of all 3 games and has minimal interference.

Figure 15: Tower of Fantasy's Jetpack System.

Similar to Noah's Heart, Tower of Fantasy also has a jetpack that raises you to a certain height. This jetpack only raises you by a small amount and the gliding period is restricted by stamina constraints. The stamina consumption is quite high for gliding and the flight duration is incredibly low. The jetpack in Tower of Fantasy uses a glider that almost immediately sinks.

Combat

Figure 16: Combat system in Genshin Impact observed with the character KaedeharaKazuha (Hoyoverse, 2020).

In Genshin Impact, you would play characters themselves instead of mostly playing as your customized character. The combat system of Genshin Impact is quite unique as each character would have an element and unique skills. In

the figure, we can observe the five-star character Kazuha. His main abilities are to swirl elements and use a sword to attack. His E skill (special skill) allows for swirling and his ultimate skill allows for an AoE (Area of Effect) damage where there is a whirlwind that attaches the element swirled to the opponents in the AoE. It periodically attacks the opponents Kazuha can also buff the elemental abilities of his allies.

Figure 17: Combat system in Noah's Heart observed with the phantom Kami (Noah's Heart, 2022).

The combat system in Noah's Heart is quite unique as the player and the characters obtained have a different set of combat values like Tower of Fantasy. We can observe the player's character along with the special skills of the phantom Kami. Just like Genshin Impact, Noah's Heart also has a system of elements, the phantom Kami has thunder elemental affinity. This allows the player to develop the skills of their individual character while borrowing their phantom's abilities and essentially gaining special abilities. Kami's abilities are related to electrical polearm wielding. The first ability is his consecutive polearm strikes which stun the enemy midair and applies thunder to the weapon at hand. His E-skill is a fury of polearm phantom stabs and air strikes.

Figure 18: Combat system in Tower of Fantasy observed with the simulacra (character/weapon) Zero (Tower of Fantasy, 2022).

The combat system in Tower of Fantasy is quite simple but incredibly fun. Players have 3 weapons that are deployed and one main weapon to use at a time, the weapons on standby would charge up and generate an ultimate ability. This system is not common in the other two games. Notably, without the simulacra, the player's attacks are just punches. The weapon induces abilities in correlation to the elemental affinity of the simulacra. Zero, as we observe, provides the player with fire-based abilities. His punches are inlaid with fire cubical structures and provide AoE attacks for the player. His ultimate skill is an AoE attack.

Now, these sections would highlight the player's experience in Tower of Fantasy in reference to their origin game. The Genshin Impact (HoYoverse, 2020) players answered a questionnaire on which this section will summarize and formulate   results.

Genshin Impact's Veteran Experience

The Genshin Impact veteran is at the highest leveling point, Adventure Rank 60. He has incredibly bad luck with gacha systems and has lost pity for Genshin many times. After starting Tower of Fantasy (Tower of Fantasy, 2022), he first noticed the characters. To note, Genshin Impact has a lot of lore surrounding characters and combat variety, he believes that the characters in Genshin Impact are much better than that of Tower of Fantasy. His currency acquisition rate in Tower of Fantasy is quite slow in the general F2P gameplay in comparison to Genshin Impact where his primogem (premium currency) acquisition is much faster and higher than in Tower of Fantasy. Although currency acquisition is difficult in Tower of Fantasy, it provides a much easier and faster way of leveling early game where he quotes ―quests give like 30k XP‖. He finds the weapon leveling system of the game and Genshin Impact quite similar and decent if they are on the same level.

In response to the teleportation devices, he finds the spacerifts a bit unfamiliar, the spacerifts in Tower of Fantasy take about 20 seconds to load. For this, he has evaluated the teleportation and navigation systems in Genshin Impact as better. Overall, he finds himself reacting to situations as he would in Genshin Impact like using character skills or the gliding system as he would in Genshin Impact, and almost always forgetting that there is a mount for faster travel.

Noah's Heart Veteran Experience

The Noah's Heart Veteran is currently one of the higher levels that are available in the game at level 66. She has decent luck with gacha systems and mostly hits soft pity. After beginning her Tower of Fantasy journey, she first noticed the gadgets and free gifts awarded by the development company. She particularly enjoyed the character customization because it was simpler than Noah's Heart. After beginning the plot, she particularly enjoyed the story cutscenes and her favorite being the explanatory introduction of Heirs of Aida (Tower of Fantasy, 2022).

Noah's Heart SR and SSR's skill discrepancies were not much but still distinguishable, something she observed in Tower of Fantasy was that the SSR characters are significantly overpowered in both skill and animations, the SR skills are great but they are less effective compared to an SSR.

Compared to Noah's Heart, the leveling speed is quite slow in Tower of Fantasy. She finds the weapon leveling system easy aside from the level restrictions. Although there are level restrictions before a player can maxout their weapon, this is understandable as the leveling conditions for the weapons are relatively simple and it can lead to players having little to no struggle in the early game if these restrictions are abolished.

To conclude her experiences, she finds herself reacting to navigation systems at times as she would in Noah's Heart. The situation of her forgetting that the game does not move the character on its own or use smart teleportation to convenience the player automatically is a regular occurrence.

Tower of Fantasy Newcomer Experience

The newcomer player finds that his leveling progress is quite fast, he quotes ―I leveled up just by collecting some chests and dandelions whenever I saw them‖. He finds the gacha system user-friendly because of its simplicity and the feature that allows players to gain an SR with a higher base probability of SSR every 10 pulls. He particularly hates how slow the character moves, forgetting that there is a mount to assist. He finds that the stamina regeneration slow and gliding also uses a substantial amount of stamina. Not to mention that all the quest NPCs are miles apart.

He finds acquiring currency decent without any major grinding for a newcomer. He finds that if you play casually, you can do a 10-pull every 2 days. Gold is quite easy to acquire from killing local mobs. To add, he quite likes how fast-paced the mob killing is.

His overall opinion on the story progression is quite high as there is definitely more story in comparison to other open-world games of similarity ―It even has cutscenes all over the place‖ he quotes. He particularly enjoys that his character can respond with his own dialogue.

He likes the navigation system as it provides blue dots that lead to quest NPCs if you get lost. He also likes the teleportation aspect of the game due to accessibility.

Comparisons
Characters and Weapons

The weapons used in Tower of Fantasy (Tower of Fantasy, 2022), Genshin Impact (HoYoverse, 2020), and Noah's Heart (Noah's Heart, 2022) are different. Genshin Impact and Noah's heart have more traditional sets of weapons.

They use more polearms, swords, fans, blades, etc. Whereas Tower of Fantasy uses futuristic weaponry like suppressors to limit and monitor abilities/specialties within the game.

The characters themselves don't have much lore unlike Genshin Impact and Noah's Heart. Although they have story quests for the SSR characters to learn more about the characters, these aren't available for every character.

In Tower of Fantasy, the leveling of weapons is the focus. It becomes much simpler to understand and grind for. Players can spend more time experiencing gameplay instead of spending time gathering resources for hours.

Currency & Resource Gathering

Resource gathering within Tower of Fantasy is relatively simple. Players can acquire ascension materials through bounties or realms.This aspect of the game is quite similar to Genshin Impact and Noah's Heart.

Players are constantly seeking or receiving resources and items. Hence resource and currency systems are always being interacted with. These systems are limited. Content becomes repetitive as the interactions and relationships between players and systems change. As the player levels up, the interactions between players and the reward systems would significantly lessen in Tower of Fantasy.

At the moment, gathering premium currency is difficult. There will most likely be complications in the amount you gather as you move forth in the game.

Graphics

The graphics of Tower of Fantasy are good but incomplete in some areas. Most of the terrain in-game is plain save for the places relevant to the storyline. They've attempted to develop the places that occur in the storyline frequently. In comparison with Noah's Heart and Genshin Impact, the graphics fall short.

The major problem with the terrains being undeveloped in Tower of Fantasy is that for quests, players would need to travel long distances within the game. This can be tedious if there is no scenery or anything that catches the eye.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PAPER

The biggest limitation of this paper is that the research conducted and the data derived are only subject to three players and one of each category which may be subject to biases.

Improvements for Game Development in Tower of Fantasy

Firstly, a design aspect we would like to see improve is the stamina and speed issue. In an open-world exploration game like Tower of Fantasy, players would need to travel often. The movement speed of the character is incredibly slow which can warrant player dissatisfaction. The stamina consumption for activities like gliding or climbing is incredibly high and the overall gliding system is quite faulty as they begin to sink almost immediately, it makes one question whether the gliders are decoration.

Another issue is the gacha resource acquisition. This premium currency in a sense becomes harder to acquire as players progress further into the game. Due to this, players who have already completed most of what the content has to offer have essentially reached a stage where resources needed for gacha become quite difficult to acquire. Veteran players most definitely progress faster, and those who were attracted by gacha would find it hard to retain interest.

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings display that the way veterans and newcomers' approach and interact with gacha games and open-world exploration differ from one another in the sense that there would be more comparisons and habits picked up by veterans as opposed to a newcomer. If one has experience in open-world exploration, similarly one would pick up on some habits. Another aspect that we have concluded is that players have different views depending on the game that they were majoring in prior to the experiment. Many also tend to find and locate issues in a game after comparing it to what they already know. The Genshin Impact veteran would notice the gacha system's flaws and advantages along with the stamina aspect in Tower of Fantasy. The Noah's Heart veteran would notice flaws and advantages in the overall graphics and characters. The newcomer would definitely notice the conveniences of traveling and inconveniences of resource gathering.

Our findings noted that a newcomer would find the resource and currency systems rewarding while the veterans would assume the long-term effects of that specific system. Overall, the currency systems of each game differed. Genshin Impact had a good currency system but players would need to save resources efficiently and grind quite a bit. Noah's Heart resource acquisition system is easy to operate. For Tower of Fantasy, according to our players, resource acquisition and soft currency are quite easy to acquire.The acquisition of gacha money was difficult.

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APPENDICES

Questionnaire/Questions asked to document player experience

What is your AR/Level?	Veterans - Response in regards to Genshin Impact/Noah's Heart
How long have you been playing ___?	Veterans - Response in regards to Genshin Impact/Noah's Heart
How is the gacha system in ___?	Veterans
How is the gacha system in Tower of Fantasy?	All
How fast is your leveling process?	All
Did you find acquiring currency difficult?	All
What is an aspect of the _battles' part of the game you dislike?	All
What is an aspect of the _battles' part of the game you like?	All
How is the story progression at the level you are at? Do you like it?	All
How is the open world gameplay so far, is it easy to explore across?	All
How is the navigation system in ToF (Tower of Fantasy)?	All
What is your opinion on the spacerifts versus other games you might know of that have a teleportation system?	All
How do you like the weapon leveling system?	All
How is your currency acquisition rate going along?	All
Do you think the leveling system is better than _ system?	Veterans
Are there any aspects that seem familiar or are present in other games released prior to this which are almost identical? One example would be alright.	All
If you are familiar, what are your opinions on the online discussions regarding Tower of Fantasy copying other games of the same genre?	All

Glossary

Word	Definition
Gacha	Gacha is derived from —gachapon‖ which originates from Japan and is a vending machine that has capsules containing toys. In a sense, you know the characters or toys you can get, but you do not know what you will get when you get a capsule.
Gacha Pool	The possible objects that are available within the gacha.
Pulling	When a player would wish on a banner, netizens would use the word —pulling‖ as if you are taking something out from a banner.
F2P	Free to play
Whale	Someone who spends large amounts of real world currency on a game.
Reward system	A system that rewards a player based on their progression or for getting an achievement. Are most commonly in the form of events or achievement panels.
Soft currency	Common currency like gold or coins within a game. It can be acquired easily without spending real world money.
Premium currency	Hard to acquire currency with a representation of something valuable. Can be acquired mostly through spending real-world money.
SSR	Super super rare
SR	Super rare/Skill rating
XP	XP or EXP are general abbreviations for experience points.
E-skill	A special skill of a character
Ultimate skill	A special skill of a character that is usually more useful than the rest.
Mob	Enemy/cannon fodder monsters generally

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