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## Press Any Button to Get Started: Approaching Japanese Culture and Society Through Video Games

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# Ursinus College

Submitted to the Faculty of Ursinus College in fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in  
the East Asian Studies Department.

## Press Any Button to Get Started: Approaching Japanese Culture and Society Through Video Games

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### **Abstract**

This project argues for inclusion of video games into the liberal arts curriculum alongside more traditional texts. Three Japanese-developed video games are analyzed in terms of their appropriateness for the Ursinus Quest curriculum while also exploring their appropriation of characters, themes, and values from Japanese mytho-history. My approach incorporates the methodology introduced by the scholar James Paul Gee who studies video games through the lens of semiotics and gaming theory. Gee defines key elements presented in video games as 'lifeworld domains,' which incorporate cultures, societies, and individual and group experiences. The value of video games resides in the players' development of literacy through accumulation of several processes inherent in gaming: decision making and pursuit of goals, individual and mutual growth, self-awareness, and application of lifeworld domains. The culmination of these experiences reflects knowledge and skills that can be transferred to the classroom, often leaving a lasting impact that players will carry with them beyond campus.

### A Note on Names and Game Mechanics

The section discussing elements from the game *Ōkami* use names of characters from both the game and the Japanese text, the *Kojiki*. The following notes name differences between them:

*Ōkami*: Susano: Aid to protagonist

Orochi: 8-headed dragon boss

Nami: Woman who aided in felling Orochi 100 years before the main story

Nagi: Man who felled Orochi 100 years before the main story

*Kojiki*: Susano-ō: Brother of Amaterasu; slayer of Yamata-no-Orochi

Yamata-no-Orochi: Monstrous 8-headed dragon, eventually felled by Susano-ō

Izanami: Shinto Mother Goddess of Creation

Izanami: Shinto Father God of Creation

The section discussing the games *Persona 4: Golden* and *Persona 5* introduces game characters by their Japanese name order: family name, given name (last name, first name). They will be referred to by their given name after their initial introduction, as that is how they are referred to in-game. (For example, Tatsumi Kanji will be referenced as Kanji.)

A crucial game mechanic in the *Persona* series is Persona, themselves. Persona are monsters that game characters summon to do battle against enemy monsters known as Shadows. The protagonists of these games can create and use multiple Persona. Other characters have only one Persona which is awakened after certain personal realizations are experienced. In turn, these Persona can awaken into stronger forms as the game progresses.

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This project is a result of questions that arose from intersecting interest between my liberal arts curriculum and my passion for gaming. Japanese-developed video games have had a profound impact on my identity and are one of the reasons I am an East Asian Studies major at Ursinus College. As I was searching for an approach for this project, I came across the scholar James Paul Gee's book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, in which he utilized the science of semiotics in analyzing video games. He encourages video games to be recognized as any text, as meaning can be derived from semiotics just as written script. The following essay provides commentary on his methodology, case studying the Japanese-developed video games *Ōkami*, *Persona 4: Golden*, and *Persona 5* for their handling of semiotics and lifeworld domains.

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. Semiotic literacy is developed by understanding the situated meaning the semiotic is presented in. If one hears barking outside of their window, it can be accurately assumed the barking is coming from a dog. However, one single sign does not always convey one single meaning. The dog barking outside the window is extremely unlikely to attack passersby, but that can never be a certainty in the realm of video games. In the *Resident Evil* game series, barking signifies there are indeed dogs nearby, and you had better be prepared to deal with the aggressive repercussions of their mutation. Games developed by the Japanese company, FromSoftware, often use dogs in their video games yet distribute them throughout differing environments. It is up to the player to anticipate the type of dog they will be fighting once they hear that dreaded bark.

By contrast, in *Ōkami*, one of the games further discussed in this essay, the player is in control of much of the potential barking because they play as a canine. The dedicated button to make the wolf protagonist, Amaterasu, bark allows for a variety of reactions to be had by several of the inhabitants in the *Ōkami* world, ranging from humorous to nonchalant to dangerous.

Students who enter their chemistry classroom to find lab tables set up with burners and beakers will know to dress in proper eyewear protection and grab their lab coats to engage safely with their upcoming experiment. Having the same table set up in an art classroom will likely yield a different reaction, signifying to the students that they will be working on still life projects with the burners and beakers.

The signifiers of the above examples are the dog barking and lab equipment, respectively. The context in which the signifier is presented in, the signified, will determine the meaning of the signifier. In other words, the environment the dog barking and lab equipment are presented in determines whether the dog is an aggressor and what classroom lesson will be conducted. This development of semiotic literacy is crucial to an individual's learning experience. Without knowing the context of the situation, of the semiotics, one cannot accurately read the situation. As a result, learning semiotics is like learning a language.

Learning to play a video game is not just learning a skill; it is learning a language by which one develops an understanding of how meaning is communicated and constructed.

The science of semiotics is based within the science of linguistics (words) and how they signify meaning. By extension, semiotics sees the world as a language, its signs and symbols and how they culminate in the human experience. In other words, 'the world is a text': the world is a semiotic domain, a lifeworld domain. One's ability to function in this world is dependent on their literacy and competency of semiotics—the language of the world.

### *Ōkami*

*Ōkami* sees the player take control of the wolf protagonist, Amaterasu, to journey through the fictional land of Nippon to save the land from looming darkness. The game's setting is that of a fictional world of the past. Upon starting a new game file, the narrator introduces the game as a tale of old that has since met its end. Immediately, players are greeted with imagery deeply inspired by Japanese *sumi-e* brush art. Colors are employed as much whimsically as they are liberally while contrasted with bold dark brush strokes, adding a sense of personality and passion to the game. This art style is present in both the 2-D and 3-D assets within the game, the latter of which is married with cel-shading to make for a beautifully designed video game.

The narrative sees Amaterasu and her Celestial Envoy companion, the sarcastic bug-sized Issun, travel the lands of Nippon and the far north Kamui, cleansing the lands of darkness and monsters while regaining the lost Celestial Brush techniques to fight the Dark One, Yami, at the game's climax. Journeying across grassy hills, vast coastlines, dark snowy forests, and even to an undersea palace, *Ōkami* presents itself as a sprawling adventure game



inspired by many elements of Japanese history and culture. The shrines, architecture, various kanji symbols that make up the edge of the battlefields, and more East Asian semiotics are heavily present in the infrastructure of the game. Those familiar with Japanese history will recognize the renditions of Buddhist *samsara* beads, similar to rosary beads, the separation of commoner's and aristocratic corners in the game's capital city, character names and plot lines, and more to gauge that the world of *Ōkami* reflects a fictional age of Classical Japan. For those that miss the infrastructural semiotics, they can still safely determine this created world exists within a pastiche imitation of historical Japan.

Another lifeworld signifier heavily present in *Ōkami* are Japanese *torii* gates. *Torii* gates mark the boundary between the profane and the sacred. When you pass through the gate, you are leaving one space/reality and entering another. You are entering a 'higher' reality where different rules apply, and different possibilities exist. A space where things not of this earth take place. These gates function as checkpoint markers and quicksave locations on top of being aspects of the general design of the game. These quicksave locations are always found just before a dangerous fight. Passing through the golden gate makes a note of the player's progress in the game and will reset them upon their defeat to that location with the items they had at the time of passing through the gate. In a meta sense, the employment of *torii* gates here harks to their liminality in which there are differing existences depending upon which side of the gate one is on. By passing through the gate, Amaterasu 'saves' herself

in a different reality than the one she continues with, only summoning that other reality Amaterasu when she needs a do-over.

The scholar Mark J.P. Wolf writes on the topic of lifeworld domains in created video game worlds, referring to them as secondary worlds, and their real, or primary, world inspirations:

“Secondary worlds are interesting because of the parallels that can be drawn between them and the Primary World; it is through these parallels that we can relate to them and imagine what it would be like to inhabit them. As [previously] discussed, secondary worlds use Primary World defaults for many things, despite all the defaults they may reset. If an author wants an audience to understand and empathize with the characters of a world, Primary World defaults become important for making connections to the audience’s own lived experience and establishing some degree of emotional realism; worlds too removed from the Primary World will be unable to do either.”<sup>1</sup>

It is important for video games to depict lifeworld domains in a comprehensible, believable way. Failure to capture a player’s suspended belief will result in failure of engaging the player with the created world. In the case of *Ōkami*, its centering on mythology provides “history and context for events”<sup>2</sup> experienced in the narrative. The game takes heavy inspiration from

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<sup>1</sup> Mark J. Wolf, “World Structures and Systems of Relationships”, *Building Imaginary Worlds* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012) p 153.

<sup>2</sup> Mark J. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds* p 189.

the *Kojiki* (712 A.D.), a text recognized as the first attempt at recorded history in Japan. The *Kojiki* served as a recorded text to justify the imperial Emperor's direct relationship with the gods, or *kami*, of Japanese mytho-history. Some readers may have drawn parallels to the ancient text as many notable game characters get their names from figures in the *Kojiki*. Susanō-o, for example, is the unruly brother of the Shinto sun goddess, Amaterasu, and is cast from the heavens due to his wild behavior. He later redeems his status by killing a vile serpent, Yamata no Orochi, and weds a beautiful maiden named Kushinada-hime.

While *Ōkami's* Susano, too, fells the dreaded Orochi, it is in the creative imitation where one can derive meaning for these characters' employment in the context of a video game. Leo Tak-hung Chan writes on the purpose for imitations of preexisting texts in modern times; "...the past of the original [source] is appropriated for present purpose—as a comment on the contemporary Japanese scene."<sup>3</sup> Recreating such notable mytho-historical characters and their adventures in the game is an example of both a transtextual activity and pastiche imitation. Even in instances where the primary world inspiration is not regarded directly, the manipulations of the text serve to immortalize these characters by introducing them in a fitting way to a modern audience. That Amaterasu having been portrayed originally as an elegant woman in the *Kojiki*, is now presented as a white wolf in *Ōkami*

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Tak-Hung Chan "Imitations as Translation: From Western Theories of Parody to Japanese Postmodern Pastiche", *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 25, no.2 (2016) p 6.

deconstructs the stigmas inherent to tradition, novelizing the character in a continuum rather than siloing their existence.<sup>4</sup>

Shinto's *kami* of creation, Izanagi and Izanami, are perhaps the two characters that differ the most from their identifiable source. They are not responsible for physically birthing the lands of Nippon and Kamui but are two figures liable for the 100 years of peace across the land prior to Amaterasu's story. Their names are shortened to Nagi and Nami in the game and are the respective ancestors of Susano and Kushi. Players have been told of Nagi's tale of bravery in the game several times before traveling back in time 100 years in the past and witnessing it for themselves. The 'Great Warrior Nagi' was, indeed, courageous and devoted to bettering himself as a swordsman to end Orochi's oppression of his town. In both fights, the serpent gets drunk (Kushi's Thunder Brew and Nami's 8 Sacred Saké) and is cleaved by the respective warrior of each time.

Although this discussion of time-period hopping in the game itself is brief, what should be understood are the parallels and relationship between the two sets of characters to each other and to the *Kojiki*. Izanagi and Izanami are the Father and Mother of all creation in Shintoism, birthing the many islands of Japan and several *kami*, and thereby providing a world for humanity to flourish. Nagi and Nami do not create the world of *Ōkami* but do usher in an age of peace for fictional *Nippon*. The mytho-historical characters are celebrated in this iteration of their existence, reimagined as grand warrior and supporter respectively.

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<sup>4</sup> Tak-Hung Chan, "Imitations as Translation", p 2.

Adapting traditional texts to fit a modern mold keeps those traditions alive while also enabling new meanings to be derived. Just as reading old texts in the modern age can produce new insights in its readers, so can imitations. They are not opposites, but rather two sides of the same coin. Both garner meaning regardless of the product said meaning stems from. I argue that video games have suffered from prejudices that privilege original texts over their imitations, adaptations, and appropriations, thus excluding the latter from serious consideration in academic discourse.

#### ***Persona 4: Golden***

Stepping off from the train platform into the unfamiliar town of Inaba, the main protagonist of *Persona 4: Golden* is a fish-out-of-water new kid staying with his uncle and young cousin for one year while his parents work abroad. Shortly after arriving, the protagonist finds himself in possession of two strange powers: the ability to create and use Persona (summonable entities used in battle) and the ability to traverse a dangerous shadow world called the Midnight Channel by entering televisions. It is revealed that the protagonist and his friends are not the only ones who can enter the Midnight Channel, however. Someone is throwing people into this world of malcontents and leaving them at the mercy of enemy demons known as Shadows. Many of those kidnapped are his classmates and eventual battle companions, and you, as the protagonist, must save them before the fog that settled upon their kidnapping is lifted. As your cohort grows and you temper your battle abilities with your respective Persona, you form the Investigation Team, vowing to solve Inaba's

recent murder and kidnapping spree. Month by month, the group fights multiple Shadows, create lasting bonds of friendship, conquer their high school finals, and, if all is done correctly, finds the true culprit behind the happenings around Inaba...and how the fog is all-too-related to the strange happenings.

Those thrown into the Midnight Channel are trapped in dungeons with their own Shadow serving as dungeon boss. These personal Shadows are entities that take on the extreme personality traits the individual has denied as a part of their identity. Each kidnappee rejects their reflection, shouting “there’s no way in hell that you’re me!”<sup>5</sup> and arguing “that’s not true!”<sup>6</sup> when the Shadow speaks the secrets of their heart. Identity is a prevalent theme in *Persona 4: Golden*—building and accepting one’s identity in a world that will do you no favors. Two of the Investigation Team’s members, Kanji and Naoto, stand at unique crossroads before, during, and after accepting their Shadows. Their distinctive plights provide commentary on their struggles in youth, difficulties in fitting in, uphill climbs to be accepted in society, and more that will be explored in brief case studies of both characters.

Tatsumi Kanji is portrayed as a typical punk kid with bleached blond hair, open black leather jacket revealing a skull shirt underneath, and a biting attitude. He has garnered notoriety for being a delinquent and is chided by the police a handful of times throughout the story. No one can approach him or hold a conversation without Kanji snapping at them,

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<sup>5</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

including his own mother. Behind all of the piercings and threats, however, Kanji is a sensitive character who is desperate to hide his hobbies for fear of being stripped of his masculinity. He desires to be ‘strong’ but does not have the freedom to pursue strength in a society that looks down on him for sewing and making dolls.

These perceived feminine hobbies are Kanji’s most protected secret. Society’s expectations smother his mental state, manifesting in Kanji’s Shadow to profess his hatred for women due to their gossiping ways.<sup>7</sup> “They look at me like some...some disgusting THING and say that I’m a weirdo...”<sup>8</sup> is shared by the Shadow as he continues to voice the bottled-up emotions of Kanji’s heart. Shadow Kanji mimics previous comments made by women who have belittled his interests, correlating that he must be gay if he enjoys sewing and that it is not a manly way to spend his time. The overly flamboyant Shadow wonders what it means to be a manly man before claiming women are scary and that he prefers the honest company of men.<sup>9</sup> Following this, Kanji rejects the Shadow’s confessions—rejects himself—and the battle ensues.

As always, the Investigation Team comes out victorious and subdues the Shadow to its previous state. The air is tense as Kanji’s Shadow admits he cannot be kept down from a simple fight. Knowing this and knowing that his Shadow has aired the dirty laundry, Kanji

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<sup>7</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

confesses, “it ain’t a matter of guys or chicks, I’m just scared...of being rejected.”<sup>10</sup> The game then gives the player three text choices to say to Kanji, none of which impact the narrative of the game but allow for genuine emotions to be felt during the experience. All choices are in support of Kanji and in his acceptance of his Shadow self because it is a part of him. The young man is not alone in his plight of finding what it means to be ‘strong’ and ‘manly’; he is not alone in figuring out what it means to be himself. Kanji joins the Investigation Team and welcomes his new friends. Slowly, Kanji comes into his own living as himself, for himself, regardless of what the world expects of him.

A junior detective comes to Inaba roughly a third to halfway through the story to aid in the police investigation. Shirogane Naoto acts in a calculated manner, following leads and challenging Inaba police on their previous case conduct. The Investigation Team members are occasionally questioned by Naoto, either individually or as a group due to conversation topics that Naoto eavesdropped on. The junior detective holds reservations about the protagonist, but nonetheless moves on when there is no proof of the latter’s involvement with the case. However, Naoto is able to make several key deductions when comparing the victims’ circumstances, following in their footsteps to be the next target of the kidnapper.

Naoto, adhering to the narrative, is found at the top floor of a dungeon within the Midnight Channel. At first unperturbed by the truth being stronger than fiction, Naoto is seemingly bored when conversing with the boss Shadow—*her* Shadow. The gender reveal

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<sup>10</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.



during the climax of the conversation shocks the Investigation Team, likely garnering similar reactions from the player. The numerous times Naoto was referred to with male pronouns and regarded as the Detective Prince is not lost on her Shadow as they speak the truth. “At your core, you admire the sort of ‘strong’ and ‘cool’ men who populate detective fiction. But in trying to emulate them, you must know that in truth, you’re nothing of the sort—you’re a child. [...] ‘Naoto’... Such a cool, manly name! [...] How could you become an ideal man when you were never male to begin with...?”<sup>11</sup>

Upon her Shadow’s defeat, Naoto forgoes her mild tenor façade and speaks to the Investigation Team in her true voice. As a member of a long line of highly respected detectives, Naoto wished to keep her family’s name in good standing. She believed masquerading as a male would aid her ability to climb the ladder in police work. “My sex doesn’t fit my ideal image of a detective... Besides, the police department is a male-oriented society. If they had the slightest ‘concrete’ reason to look down on me, no one would need me anymore...”<sup>12</sup> The confession spurs her new friends to support the underlying wish in Naoto’s heart, the wish that her Shadow cried over. As the story progresses and the protagonist spends more time with Naoto, her confidence surges into a redefined sense of self. During the conversation had when her relationship reaches its maximum level, she decrees, “I myself can’t relent in my training...to become a formidable woman detective!”

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<sup>11</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

In her book *Re-Inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation*, Tessa Morris-Suzuki writes on matters concerning Japanese identity. She suggests, “Discrimination...produces difference just as much as difference produces discrimination”<sup>13</sup> regarding socio-cultural issues experienced in Japan. When applying her quote to the situations with Kanji and Naoto, one can accurately determine the two characters are suffering from discrimination, more specifically gender discrimination. The two were made Others by the society around them; they were not like everyone else, nor did they meet the expectations of their gender identity as established by society. Kanji and Naoto were aware of this and made efforts to withhold their true selves from the world, endeavoring to awaken a sense of sameness and join the bustling world around them as a ‘typical’ person.<sup>14</sup>

However, support of their unique individualities encouraged the two teens to embrace said Otherness and let their freak flags fly. *Persona 4* professes a message akin to one conveyed by Morris-Suzuki: identity exists on a spectrum. Identities are dynamic entities that form and reform, merge and split, and more than anything, evolve as a result of one’s experiences.<sup>15</sup> As she explains, “*aidagara*—intersubjectivity—the fundamental relationship from which both self and society are simultaneously formed... Human beings’ experience of their natural environment—their exposure to heat or cold, drought for monsoon rain, the cycle of seasons or the sudden onset of storms—influences the character of their

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<sup>13</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan: Time, Space, Nation*, (M.E. Sharp, 1997) p 84.

<sup>14</sup> Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*, p 99

<sup>15</sup> Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*, p 98

intersubjective emotions...”.<sup>16</sup> It goes without saying that more than just our natural environments impact our identity. Parents, friends, teachers, society, politics, religion, philosophy, etc., all impose their own expectations and ideals. To ignore a part of one’s identity is to deny the existence of such identity—to deny the self *of* the self. We can, and are naturally meant to, cultivate varying identities into our own being. The challenge inherent to identity is the matter of expectations mentioned previously: specifically, when and where identity conflicts with those expectation. By employing a narrative in which characters accept themselves for who they are over who society wants them to be, *Persona 4* celebrates identity and encourages its players to live their truest self.

As with the case of *Ōkami*, *Persona 4: Golden* similarly portrays imitations of the Shinto Creation Gods, Izanami and Izanagi. However, their portrayals hold more significance in the latter game. Izanami is revealed to be the true antagonist of *Persona 4: Golden* during a tense confrontation she has with the protagonist. She admits to awakening the latent Persona abilities the protagonist and certain others for the purposes of fulfilling what she believed to be the true wishes of man. Additionally, Izanami admits she is the one who created the Midnight Channel and the abundant fog present throughout the Shadow-ridden world and Inaba. Her reason? “Everything was for your sake... To create the world mankind

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<sup>16</sup> Morris-Suzuki, *Re-Inventing Japan*, p 115-6

so wanted. [...] Your anxiety causes you to see only what you want to see, and believe only what you wish to believe... As I said...your desire is for a world enshrouded in fog!"<sup>17</sup>

Izanami's stoic revelation is rejected by the Investigation Team. They argue while most people all too often ignore that which they do not wish to see or believe, not everyone subscribes to that way of life. Firmly, they claim mankind does *not* want a world enshrouded in fog. The ultimate enemy will not be swayed, however, and the battle with Izanami commences. Using a crystal of power that you had nurtured through your journey, yet another false shroud surrounding Izanami is lifted and her true form, Izanami-no-Okami, is revealed. The hard-fought battle ends when you, the main protagonist, awaken your Izanagi persona to Izanagi-no-Okami and unleash his Myriad Truths, saving all of mankind from a world entrapped in fog.

The Japanese *renga* (linked verse) sequence, *Three Poets at Minase*, offers lessons on clarity like those found in the game. The last five verses read as follows:

*A grove of withered trees—  
yet even here spring winds blow.*

*Mountains at morning—  
but how many frosty nights  
preceded the haze?*

*Smoke makes for a peaceful scene  
around a makeshift hut.*

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<sup>17</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

*Among the lowborn too  
must be some who spend their time  
in tranquility.*

*For all men everywhere  
the Way lies straight ahead.<sup>18</sup>*

No matter how terrible the world may seem, no matter how uncertain you are in your place in the world, there is a path for you. We all succumb to fog in our life, resigning ourselves to being another tired face among the crowd. Yet that does not mean we are forbidden from ever walking again. The path never left once the fog settled it. Clarity will lift the fog, enabling for safer navigation down one's path. While that same clarity may not remove all the fog along the way, it allows the path to be walked without as much uncertainty as before.

Izanami commends the Investigation Team, "Children of man...well done!"<sup>19</sup> Her message addresses matters inherent to and beyond that of the game world. Congratulations are surely due to the youths for their triumph, but the player had many paths to choose from during the course of the game. This fight could have been missed—the truth left in the fog. Yet they saw through that thick mist and achieved true victory in pursuit of clarity. Izanami's message is also meta in its delivery, as her words serve as the words of the game makers. It is easy to lose your bearings in fog because of the lack of shape and substance within. Clarity, too, is tricky to navigate. What does it mean to be lost in fog? Does the fog

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<sup>18</sup> Sōgi, et al. quoted in Steven D. Carter, *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology*, (Stanford University Press, 1991) p 326.

<sup>19</sup> *Persona 4: Golden*, Steam PC version, ATLUS, 2020.

need to completely dissipate to allow for clarity? Can clarity still retain some fogginess? They are questions with many answers. Those many answers will be determined by one's experience, self-reflection, and how one chooses to live in this world.

### *Persona 5*

It is not easy to make decisions in a world where there are as many alternatives as there are human beings. It is especially difficult to make decisions in the face of adversity, yet that is what *Persona 5* wishes to teach its players. *Persona 5* is a game about being the change you want to see in the world, standing up for what is right and never faltering when met with seemingly impossible obstacles. The game challenges players with making choices during these heated moments. As the narrative continues, these choices are presented in such a way that encourage thoughtful reactions, culminating in an experience that players are likely to reflect on once the story meets its end.

The way this narrative unfolds mirrors that of the *jo-ha-kyū* structure often found in Japanese performative arts. *Jo-ha-kyū* storytelling is steady at onset, *jo*, and continues at an even pace through most of the tale. The slow burn leads to a climax, *ha*, usually culminating in a dramatic reveal and/or epiphany. The *ha* settles and moves to the *kyū* stage as the story reaches its conclusion. Each story told in this fashion promotes some form of reconciliation during its *kyū*. This may be professed in way that can be read as spiritual or religious or can often include a parting statement on or about society. Whatever the case, these messages are meant to be taken earnestly by the audience. Video game narratives frequently end with

messages aimed toward the player, posing the conclusion in such a way that encourages reflection on the game and how the player's experience has impacted their life. In this way, games offer a way to explore one's values and understandings in a way that is not as heavy-handed as those found in the classroom.

As with the previous installment, players take on the role of a teenage boy in a new city who fights Shadows with Personas alongside his friends. These battles take place in the Metaverse—the so-called 'cognitive world'. Similarities exist only within game mechanics (i.e., battle elements) and general plot (where the new kid beats the ultimate evil with his friends), as these games do not have sequential narratives. *Persona 5* follows the protagonist in a fight against the oppressive status quo. He and his friends form the Phantom Thieves, vowing to be the faces of true justice in their twisted world. Departing from the previous game's focus on individual character growth, *Persona 5* pushes the message a step further by showing how individual growth can result in lasting outward impact.

The Phantom Thieves are consistently told to stay out of other people's business, sit down, shut up, obey. When they act against those who would stifle their spirit and continue to let injustice prevail, they are labeled uncouth rebels. The title could not make the youths happier, for as many times they are told to do as others say, there are those appreciative of their revolt. Their collective desire for social reform keeps them motivated on their path of vigilante justice. Individuals masquerading as leaders are targeted once their crimes are known to the Phantom Thieves, and they are pursued both in reality and in the Metaverse to

enact a change of heart. While this fictional Japan is wrought with corruption, the group of youths believe anyone can be redeemed.

This true compassion is a lasting element throughout the narrative. However, it is not always easy to convey, nor is it always received. An instance of this overlap is best experienced during a confrontation with a character named Akechi. This young man meets with the Phantom Thieves first in reality before allying with them in the Metaverse. Once the player progresses to a certain dungeon, Akechi turns on the group, going so far as to hold a gun aimed at the protagonist. He was your friend, yet the teen is deluded by his own revenge and self-hatred. One Phantom Thief pleads to Akechi, “You’re your own person! You gotta know that!”<sup>20</sup> Another claims, “it doesn’t matter where you start over!”<sup>21</sup> Akechi is a character that has killed several without remorse, yet the Phantom Thieves continue to reach out to his humanity. They persist, calling out to him over Akechi’s own insults and threats and after both boss battles. At the end of the confrontation—after being told that friends do not matter, that no one but yourself matters—the Phantom Thieves still extend their hands to Akechi.

Additionally, the best (and most unexpected) instance of their compassion being rejected is not had from a single confrontation nor from a single character; it is that of society’s rejection. Throughout the game, there are many scenes of civilians looking up at the

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<sup>20</sup> *Persona 5*, PlayStation 4 version, ATLUS, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> *Persona 5*, PlayStation 4 version, ATLUS, 2012.



great screens surrounding the main city square. The messages heard from these screens are echoed through the streets and spread over online media. The people of this fictional Japan stop their interactions there, however, continuing to post and share the gospel of the screens without considering the meaning behind the words. Many of the Phantom Thieves express frustration over these citizens, reflecting that they are blind to the truth and care little about anyone or anything other than themselves. As the story continues, there is no change in the general population; no one other than the Phantom Thieves stands up for what is right. Even as the major antagonist (an influential politician) confesses to all his monstrous crimes, including but not limited to murder, blackmail, and kidnapping, the public still support him. The player would be remiss if they did not wonder what the point of continuing their save file is when there is little to show for so many hours in...

Compassion for these citizens is what drives the Phantom Thieves. "Genuine compassion is uncomfortable. It's difficult. It's maybe even a little bit scary."<sup>22</sup> This fear is realized when the group are haunted to know the major antagonist is not the *true* antagonist. Paralleling *Persona 4: Golden*, there is another responsible for the corruption of their world. The youths start to find their answers deep in the Metaverse world of humanity's collective unconscious, Mementos. As the storytelling reaching its climactic *ha* section, the Phantom Thieves find hundreds of citizens and their former targets behind prison bars. One of them

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<sup>22</sup> Constance Kassor, *The Discomfort of Compassion*, Tricycle.org, published April 24, 2018, <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/discomfort-compassion/>

claims they are not captives; they are living paradise. “This is the freedom to not make decisions... The release from having to think for yourself.”<sup>23</sup> A Phantom Thief retorts, “Having the freedom to not make your own decisions only means someone else is controlling you!”<sup>24</sup>

Those residing in the Depths of Mementos are imprisoned, eternal victims of the Holy Grail, God of Control. The true antagonist pulls no punches in explaining their rationale when battling the Phantom Thieves:

*“You fools. Human, yet wishing to eradicate the desires of humanity. The Prison of Regression is representative of the collective desires of humanity. They wish to be chained down, surrender their cognition, and neglect the world around them. These feeble-minded commonfolk will make your ‘social reform’ all for naught... The shared heart of the masses has fallen into an excess of insolence and transformed into a prison... Thus, the only suitable end for them is to perish within the prison they wished for themselves. Humanity itself wished for the Holy Grail to be a god that would rule over them! [...] I am the one who grants the desires of the masses... I give life to their voices. [...] The administrator must guide mankind toward proper development. The foolish masses merely spread indolent thoughts and force the*

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<sup>23</sup> *Persona 5*, PlayStation 4 version, ATLUS, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> *Persona 5*, PlayStation 4 version, ATLUS, 2012.

*progress of society backward. If left to humanity, the world would slowly meet its demise.*"<sup>25</sup>

The Holy Grail does not relent in their physical and verbal onslaught. The malevolent god believes there is no future for humanity if they are allowed their willpower because, "The act of making decisions is accompanied by nothing but pain"<sup>26</sup> and that pain will ultimately lead to increased societal distortion. What sort of rebels would the Phantom Thieves be if they succumb to the pressure to conform this late in the game? They wouldn't be, which is why they continue to fight for humanity. Attacks from the God of Control hit incredibly hard in this ultimate boss battle. All seems doomed...except the desires of the 'feble-minded commonfolk' to see the Phantom Thieves succeed. One member shouts out their resolve, "No matter how painful reality is, it's all over if you don't try to change how things are! I'm not the only one who thinks that."<sup>27</sup> The game enters the *kyu* stage as the protagonist awakens their ultimate Persona to best the God of Control. The world is saved, Mementos disappears. Humanity's will and freedom are restored. The Phantom Thieves' job is done.

*Persona 5* carries with it a message of urging people to think for themselves rather than submit themselves to the status quo. Sometimes you must break the chains, disrupt the flow, and rebel for the good of humanity. We must accept the changes that are ever-present

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<sup>25</sup> *Persona 5*, PlayStation 4 version, ATLUS, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> *Persona 5*, PlayStation 4 version, ATLUS, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> *Persona 5*, PlayStation 4 version, ATLUS, 2012.

in an ever-changing world. Accepting change is a trait humanity must cultivate lest we find ourselves prisoners of those who attempt to dictate life for us.

## **Conclusion**

We can understand each other through the language of video games. Gamers can learn how semiotic take on entirely different meanings within the game, then how those same semiotics potentially change as the game continues or between different games, entirely. The first-year seminar course at Ursinus College, the Common Intellectual Experience (CIE), currently promotes recall of semiotics and lifeworld domains present in the traditional texts on the syllabus. Favoring recall over interpretation and application of semiotics and lifeworld domains cripples engagement with the source material and does not easily promote answers to what CIE asks of its students: What should matter to me? How should we live together? How can we understand the world? What will I do?

Video games are hybrids of diverse lifeworld domains. One can dissect what is uniquely Japanese in the Celestial Brush Gods portrayals as animals from the Chinese Zodiac, going beyond simple physical design to theorize what significance each Brush God has to their respective power. One can similarly delve into Shadow and Persona designs and abilities, comparing them to their lifeworld inspirations. Peculiarities in language opens linguistic doors on the discipline of translation and how adept the translators' "ability to

communicate cultural materials appropriately”<sup>28</sup> is conveyed to the audience. That audience, in turn, has expectations and come into the game with their own biases. These biases can inspire comparative research back to the purpose of appropriates of lifeworld domains, determining whether such pastiche play is in fact ‘play’.

Above all, video games can be read the same as any text. The terms ‘text’ and ‘literacy’ should not be limited to written accounts. Meanings are found in more places than the classroom, than the novels, annals, lectures, etc. The omnipresence of semiotics in our daily lives, including classrooms and video games, proves that signs and symbols portray meaning as a text would. The system of signifiers and signified conveys meaning not only in verbal texts, but in all aspects of our world: all the world is, in that sense, a text. For liberal studies curricula to be diverse, they must broaden their definitions of ‘text’ and ‘literacy’ to incorporate the existing cultural literacy in its broadest sense. Gee professes that in this modern world, “[spoken or written] language is not the only important communicational system. [...] Furthermore, very often today words and images of various sorts are juxtaposed and integrated in a variety of ways”.<sup>29</sup> The age of globalization provides a wealth of unique perspectives and experiences beyond the textbook and outside the classroom. There is an entire world’s worth of acquired knowledge not expressed through text or novels; not bound by a seal of approval from a committee of pedigreed academics too stifled by tradition. The

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<sup>28</sup> Tak-hung Chan, “Imitation as Translation”, p 5.

<sup>29</sup> James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2003) p 13.

stigmas associated with video games have unfairly kept from the scope of academic discussion—stigmas that have seldom reason to be so vehemently defended.

We can grow to understand one another through video games: through their narratives and philosophies within: through their cultural significance and lifeworld domain portrayals: through the real emotions depicted by the game characters and felt by the player. Gee's critiques of the educational system and academia at large have not lost their relevance in the almost two decades since his book's publication. By contrast, video games have seen incredible growth, advancing through multiple generations of home-gaming consoles. Implementation of ground-breaking technologies in the years since have allowed for more advanced games to be made which are additionally more accessible than ever thanks to a multitude of gaming platforms. "Video games have an unmet potential to create complexity by letting people experience the world from different perspectives".<sup>30</sup> This unmet potential is overdue for respect and discussion, and it is my hope that the material presented in this essay will inspire future research in gaming studies.

Video games inherently enable players to reflect on their experiences in the game, incorporating the application of lifeworld domains present within and what the culmination of their gaming experience means for their life and identity going forward. Life is a culmination of experiences, and those encountered resulting from playing video games are not wasted. Video games deserve to be included alongside more traditional texts within the

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<sup>30</sup> Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach About Learning and Literacy*, p 151.

liberal arts curriculum and beyond. Video games deserve to have a seat at the table with other media worthy of academic discussion.

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