"I am thou... Thou art I..."—How *Persona 4's* Young Adult Fiction Communicates Japanese Values

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Abstract

Life is Strange, INSIDE, Oxenfree—all these video games represent a seemingly entirely new genre. Young Adult videogames diverge from the male, gloomy grown-up stereotypes and replace them with adolescent protagonists in their coming of age stories. Their commercial success seem to validate their endeavors. However, YA narratives are hidden in plain sights for many years within JRPGs. *Shin Megami Tensei – Persona 4* (short *Persona 4* or *P4*) is a cultural ambassador. This paper examines how the game's procedural rhetoric in combination with its Young Adult story advocate in favor of specific Japanese values. The time structure of *P4* reinforces a long-term orientation and requires strategic planning as well as tactical flexibility. So-called "Social Links" represents Japan unique take on collectivism. Each link encapsulates a small YA narrative and offers different benefits to social-active protagonist. Finally, grinding mechanics reflect the notion of repetition-based learning. Japanese schools teach through engaging with developing several solutions to a singular problem. The same holds true for the grinding process. All these elements combined create a game rhetoric promoting these aspects of Japanese culture.

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> *Persona* games are about the unreal and the very real. They are a riot of colour, imagination, humour and humanity, chock-full of weird and cool mechanics and unforgettable characters[1].

The statement above is even more impressive considered the game's main cast is not the stereotypical group of male gloomy grunts that fire almost as many quips as bullets. Instead *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4* (typically abbreviated *Persona 4* or *P4*) tells a grand story about a group of young adults, their way towards adulthood, and a mysterious murder series. This young adult videogame is not only highly regarded among critics, but it is also a prime example of how videogames can communicate culture—which shall be examined here from this very perspective.

The article is divided into two parts. Firstly, it gives a look at video games representing the genre of young adult and try answering the question why the latter is still considered a new one, despite its ongoing presence for many years in Japanese role-playing games (jRPGs). The next step is to examine the *Shin Megami Tensei* (*SMT*) series and explain fundamental aspects of *Persona 4*—specifically its narrative and gameplay. Procedural rhetoric, narrative frames, and identification will be introduced as analytical tools. This setup will allow for the second part to dissect the cultural values communicated in *Persona 4*. While long term orientation, collectivism and repetitious learning are not exclusive to Japanese culture, *P4* manages to communicate its Japanese-specific configuration.

Young Adult Videogames—A Status Quo

The term "young adult videogame"[2] rose to prominence only recently within the videogame industry. In 2015, Nate Ewert-Krocker still bemoaned "Where Are All the YA Games?"[3]. In his perception, a lacuna yawned between games that are design for everybody, like *FIFA* or *Mario Kart*, and those targeted at a mature(ing) audience, like *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) or *Assassin's Creed*. He could not know that he was writing right at the moment of a tectonic shift in the publishing sphere. Only one year later Zach Hines reported about three games that visibly diverged from the adult-dominated mainstream:

> In the recent hit game *Inside*, you play a child on the run through a mysterious and horrifying surveillance state straight out of *1984*. *Oxenfree* stars a group of teenagers with a complicated history arriving at a spooky island for an ill-advised camping trip. *Life Is Strange* puts you in the shoes of a young girl at a boarding school with burgeoning time-warp powers and messed-up friends. The common thread among these three highly acclaimed indie games is obvious: They star youthful protagonists facing confusing coming-of-age moments in worlds tinted by magic and mystery. They're what you might call "young adult" video games[4].

[1] Danny Wadeson, *Why People Love Persona*, in: *Kotaku.com*, online: http://kotaku.com/why-people-love-persona-1769348010 [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[2] Later on abbreviated as "YA videogame".

[3] Nate Ewert-Krocker, *Adolescence is Strange: Where Are All the YA Games?*, in: *PasteMagazine.com*, online: https://www.paste-magazine.com/articles/2015/04/adolescence-is-strange-where-are-all-the-ya-games.html [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[4] Zach Hines, *Why young-adult video games are thriving*, in: *Engadget.com*, online: https://www.engadget.com/2016/08/24/young-adult-video-games/ [accessed: 01.05.2017].

Whilst mature-only blockbusters like *Call of Duty, Battlefield*, and *Tom Clancy's The Division* still dominated the US videogame sales in 2016[5], the aforementioned *INSIDE*, *Oxenfree*, or *Life is Strange* mark a surprising development within the market. As Zack Hines described them above, they tell different stories about young heroes and heroines and their individual challenges to overcome. This hints towards a newly rising segment within the videogame industry. YA videogames are seemingly capable to compete on the market. This impression is backed by their critical acclaim[6]. Comparing all *Metacritic*-scores reveals the following:

AAA VIDEOGAME NAME	SCORE	INDIE VIDEOGAME NAME	SCORE
Battlefield 1	89	*INSIDE*	91
Tom Clancy's The Division	80	*Life is Strange*	85
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	77	*Oxenfree*	79

Table 1 Metacritic scores comparison[7]

Despite huge gaps regarding development budgets (AAA games vs. indie counterparts), the resulting scores are quite comparable. Therefore, it can be inferred that critics did not see a significant qualitative difference between those games[8]. Developers also reached financial success with their YA videogames. *INSIDE* is already the second YA title by the *Limbo*-creators Playdead. Dontnod Entertainment also confirmed the development of a *Life is Strange* sequel[9]. The continued work on games that feature young adults as their protagonists hints towards a—at least adequate—success, necessary for the developers to continue these IPs[10]. All in all, these examples indicate the existence of a large number of customers interested in investing money in videogames that can be considered young adult. Yet, despite not being often called as such, there has been an entire genre that frequently feature YA narratives in videogames for a considerable amount of time. As Ewert-Krocker adjusted his statement in the later part of the quoted article:

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[5] Paul Tassi, *The Best Selling Games of 2016 Reveal A Few Surprises*, in: *Forbes.com*, https://www.forbes.com/sites/insert-coin/2017/01/23/the-best-selling-games-of-2016-reveal-a-few-surprises/#608e50b5608e [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[6] Individual critic's voices as well as Metacritic scores are certainly not reliable predictors for financial success. However, with publishers taking critical acclaim and Metacritic as foundation for bonus payments, a developer's decision process to venture into YA territory is likely influence by it and serves as a rough, yet sufficient, indicator.

[7] The displayed scores are based on *PlayStation 4* reviews. Despite *Metacritic's* eclectic methodology, the resulting evidence is satisfying enough for a comparison between the given games. Cf. *INSIDE*, in: *Metacritic*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/inside; *Life Is Strange*, in: *Metacritic*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/life-is-strange; *Oxenfree*, in: *Metacritic*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/oxenfree; *Battlefield 1*, in: *Metacritic*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/battlefield-1; *Tom Clancy's The Division*, in: *Metacritic*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/tom-clancys-the-division; *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, in: *Metacritic*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/call-of-duty-infinite-warfare [all accessed: 01.05.2017].

[8] Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that the left column has a broader target audience in mind. Therefore, achieving a high rating despite the frequently toxic attitude by critics towards many AAA-franchises is remarkable. Meanwhile, indie titles target specific niche markets and allow for a more specialized approach. Hence, the differences in budgets are partially equalized through those effects.

[9] Jordan Sirani, *Life Is Strange 2 Development Has Begun*, in: *IGN.com*, online: http://www.ign.com/articles/2017/05/18/life-is-strange-2-development-has-begun [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[10] IP is an acronym for „intellectual property", commonly used in the industry.

It would be painting with too broad a brush to say that there are absolutely no games about teenagers, or no games that treat teenage issues: Many games in the anime aesthetic feature teenage protagonists, for instance, and both the *Persona* and *Final Fantasy* series have narratives that are challenging but (mostly) appropriate for young adult players. In fact, the jRPG might be the closest thing that games have to YA fiction […][11].

This hidden genre will be examined throughout this paper by analyzing one of the most successful JRPGs in history: *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4.*

Shin Megami Tensei—Persona 4 and the hidden YA narrative

Persona 4 is a heavy hitter among JRPGs. It was originally released in 2008 for PlayStation 2 by ATLUS as *Shin Megami Tensei—Persona 4.* Re-released in 2012 on PlayStation Vita, *Persona 4 Golden* dropped the *SMT* branding as an extended edition with trophy support. Both versions rank high on many critics' lists with a Metacritic score of 90 and 93 respectively—and thereby outperforming in its final form all aforementioned games, despite the advanced release year[12].

Persona 4 originates from a rich and multilayered franchise. *Shin Megami Tensei* (*SMT*) is a long-running jRPG series developed and published by ATLUS. *SMT* started 1987 with *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei* based on the eponymous novel by Aya Nishitani.

> *Shin Megami Tensei* […] is a Japanese phrase that translates as "True Goddess Metempsychosis". [The last term—S.D.] refers specifically to the unending process of birth, death, and rebirth that is of central importance to the Buddhist religious tradition. Even deities are slaves to the cycle of metempsychosis in Buddhist thought, and this belief features prominently in the plotlines of the various Shin Megami Tensei games. Who exactly the titular "goddess" is supposed to be is usually left up to the player[13].

To date, the franchise brought up over thirty games separated in different sub-series, including, among others, *Digital Devil Saga*, *Devil Summoner*, and *Persona.* The last branch hosts five main installments—with 2017's *Persona 5* as its latest—several spin-offs, and cross-overs.

The series triggered a vast transmedial effort. Similar to its predecessor *Persona 3*, *P4* is the basis for anime adaptations[14], an on-going manga series[15], light novel[16] and even a live stage production[17]. Meanwhile, the narrative was continued in two fighting games,

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[11] Nate Ewert-Krocker, *Adolescence is Strange...*, op. cit.

[12] *Shin Megai Tensei: Persona 4*, in: *Metacritic.com*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-2/shin-megami-tensei-persona-4 [accessed: 01.05.2017]; *Persona 4 Golden*, in: *Metacritic.com*, online: http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-vita/persona-4-golden [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[13] Alicia Ashby, *The History of Shin Megami Tensei*, in: *Atlus.com*, online: https://www.atlus.com/smt/history.html [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[14] *Persona 4: The Animation*, in: *IMDb.com*, online: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2387612/ [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[15] Luke Reilly, *Persona 4 Manga Series to Be released in English*, in: *IGN.com*, online: http://www.ign.com/articles/2015/06/18/persona-4-manga-series-to-be-released-in-english [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[16] Richard Eisenbels, *Wanna Know What Happens After Persona? There's a Manga for That*, in: *Kotaku.com*, online: http://kotaku.com/wanna-know-what-happens-after-persona-4-there-s-a-mang-1471582579 [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[17] Brian Ashcraft, *Persona 4 Is Being Turned Into a...*, in: *Kotaku.com*, http://kotaku.com/5859170/persona-4-is-being-turned-into-a [accessed: 01.05.2017].

Persona 4 Arena and *Persona 4 Arena Ultimax*, to be later on concluded with the dancing game, *Persona 4: Dancing All Night*[18]. Finally, a cross-over between the casts of *Persona 3* and *Persona 4* resulted in *Persona Q: Shadow of the Labyrinth*. Unlike the majority of the *SMT* franchise, all *P4*-related products were localized and published in the West. It can be inferred therefore that the commercial success in Japan was at least adequately matched in Western markets to justify the effort of localization, distribution, and publication abroad. It is worth taking a closer look at the narrative and gameplay proposals *Persona 4* makes.

At its core, *P4*'s narrative is a crime mystery. The player-named protagonist moves at the beginning of the game to the small town of Inaba. Shortly after his arrival, a series of grotesque murders occurs—and the hero rises with his small-but-growing group of friends forming an investigation team to solve the mystery. Rumors about the so-called Midnight-Channel, a television program that exclusively airs at midnight on a rainy day, lead the protagonist towards an unexpected revelation: the Channel is not only real, but is also a part of an eponymous, parallel world separated only by the surface of television screens. Mysterious creatures, so-called "shadows", inhabit this realm and attack any intruder. The unknown perpetrator behind the killings seemingly throws people into this world to end their lives. Accordingly, the player is confronted with unraveling the identity of the killer and exploring the secrets of the Midnight-Channel realm. These challenges have direct impact on the gameplay of *P4*.

Persona 4's gameplay is twofold. The protagonist has to cope with everyday problems of a high school student—from lessons and exams up to all aspects of social life. During these segments, the player can improve characteristics like courage, expression, or diligence or strengthen bonds of friendship with other character—these are so-called *Social Links* (abbreviated as *S.Links*). The second half is constituted by the exploration of the Midnight-Channel. The investigation team moves through the world in a dungeon crawling manner, fighting shadows, and rescuing new victims of the evil perpetrator. Along with the game's narrative, this combination constitutes a specific cultural rhetoric.

Rhetoric and Culture—How Games Transmit Values

Videogames are tools for persuasive communication. Computers differentiate themselves from the other media by their p r o c e d u r a l i t y. It is, as Jonathan Lessard reminds, "particularly suited to the rapid carrying out of large sets of instructions" which made computers "a natural medium for procedural objects"[19]. Procedurality allows them to mimic processes occurring in our world in all their complexity and nuances. For Ian Bogost, the underlying rules and patterns can be dictated by an individual with persuasive intent—and, as such, can be termed, as Joachim Knape would say, strategic communicators or

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[18] Cf. Megan Farokhmanesh, *The Persona Series, Explained*, in: *Polygon.com*, online: https://www.polygon.com/2016/9/14/-12901558/what-is-persona-explainer-persona-5 [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[19] Jonathan Lessard, *Procedural*, in: *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, Benjamin Robertson, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2014, p. 407.

rhetoricians[20]. Each of these simulations hold a specific set of beliefs and make them persuasive. Bogost developed out of this observation his very own form of rhetoric:

> I suggest the name p r o c e d u r a l r h e t o r i c [orig. emphasis—S.D.] for the new type of persuasive and expressive practice at work […]. *Procedurality* refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith. Rhetoric refers to effective and persuasive expression. Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular[21].

Videogames can persuade their users to believe in certain ideologies, favor specific products, or gain knowledge[22]. This line of thought can be expanded to cultures: "[…] for culture is a process of making meanings in which people actively participate" and "it is not a set of preformed meanings handed down to and imposed upon the people"[23]. So instead of merely describing values and ideals, videogames e n a b l e t h e p l a y e r t o p a r - t a k e i n t h i s p r o c e s s. Understanding videogames as digital texts, the procedural approach will be matched by a narrative text analysis. This accounts for those aspects within games that are not expressed through their rules.

An incremental subset of procedural rhetoric is identification. Ian Bogost adapted, alongside ancient rhetoric ideals, New Rhetoric ideas from Kenneth Burke who understood the persuasive power of rhetoric as c o n s u b s t a n t i a l i t y[24]. According to Burke, people are more receptive to arguments if they see a certain likeness with the speaker. Therefore, in terms of videogames, players can be persuaded through characters and situations that resemble their lives and themselves. This thought can be extended and combined with the concept of the *h o m u n c u l u s d i g i t a l i s* to better understand the communication of culture.

Videogames can serve as cultural ambassadors. They advocate cultural values through procedural rhetoric as well as the narrative setup. *P4* does this in a subtle yet efficient manner. It is equally a product of Japanese culture and a cultural ambassador, all the more as Japanese games are predestined to be analyzed under a cultural perspective. The monolithic structure of Japanese videogame industry arguably ignores the otherwise complicated nature of cultural analysis of multicultural development teams. With almost all Japanese developers, *P4* is clearly a cultural artifact of Japan[25].

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[20] Joachim Knape, *Was ist Rhetorik?*, Stuttgart: Reclam 2000, p. 33.

[21] Ian Bogost, *Procedural Rhetoric*, Cambridge, London: MIT Press 2007, p. 2.

[22] Cf. Ibidem, p. 65, 145, 231 (passim).

[23] John Fiske, *British Cultural Studies and Television*, in: *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey, New York: St Martin's Press, p. 142.

[24] Cf. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1969.

[25] TheCockCrew, *Persona 4 – Credits*, in: *YouTube.com*, online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOU2Ht7E97A, 0:25-4:45 [accessed: 01.05.2017].

Tempus Fugit—Advocating for Planning Ahead

It is dark one inch ahead of you.
— Japanese proverb

Expect the unexpected.
— English proverb

Persona 4 is structurally geared to teach the value of long term orientation. As Geert Hofstede puts it, "In a long-time-oriented culture, the basic notion about the world is that it is in flux, and preparing for the future is always needed"[26]. Correspondingly, Japan ranks worldwide:

> […] as one of the most Long Term Orientation oriented societies. Japanese see their life as a very short moment in a long history of mankind. From this perspective, some kind of fatalism is not strange to the Japanese. You do your best in your life time and that is all what you can do[27].

This fatalism can be already found in the over-archiving franchise of *Shin Megami Tensei*. The "True Goddess Metempsychosis" is the leitmotiv of the series' narrative[28]. No matter the excellence of the player performance, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth cannot be broken. The possible worlds of *SMT* head towards its destruction and the only difference possibly made by the player is reducing the impact[29].

The temporal structure in *P4* favors long-term oriented playstyles. An uninitiated player might not be aware that the game's narrative stretches over the course of twelve months or that certain time-periods are automatically fast-tracked (and therefore lost in potential playtime). Developing a long-term strategy is crucial for a "perfect" playthrough, that is one aiming to complete all offered challenges within the game. Such a disadvantage in player's knowledge can quite likely shift a first playthrough's nature to be primarily tactical—adjusting to the unexpectedly changing circumstances. Nonetheless, a long-term oriented player is still able to achieve the goal of a perfect playthrough[30].

This planning procedure is mirrored on a microlevel in every fight. The round-based combat segments do not force players to take action within limited time frames. Instead, it offers potentially unlimited space for forging plans and considering effects. Ideally, a

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[26] Geert Hofstede, *The 6-D model of national culture*, online: http://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/ [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[27] Leo Feyer, *Japan*, online: https://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[28] This leitmotiv is widely spread among jPRGs. The *Final Fantasy*-series holds this thought also in its name, but societal turnover is also present in *Fire Emblem*, *Dragon Quest* or *Ni No Kuni* to just name a few. The often-criticized retelling of the same basic story arc in *Zelda* or *Super Mario* actually reflects upon the similar notion: no matter the victorious end of the previous installments, the forces of destruction will return. Within this broader scope of cyclic narratives throughout franchises, the Japanese express the notion of reoccurring history.

[29] This view might also help to understand the specifically Japanese tendency to create narrative heavy games, like *Persona*. Long conversations and cutscenes frequently occur in Japanese games. While being often depicted as disruptive in the West, it simply reflects upon different cultural values. This type of criticism might originate from low long term orientation and therefore a focus on immediate results. Within Japanese tendency for long term orientation, it is not critical to ensure constant gratification in form of permanently available gameplay agency.

[30] Cf. Alicia Ashby, Iaian Ross, *Persona 4—Official Strategy Guide*, DoubleJump Books 2008, p.74.

player analyses her enemies' weakness, chooses the most effective arrangement of actions and executes them in a structured and successful manner[31]. The overall game-structure procedurally advocates for more long term orientation and grants benefits for players who cope with this notion.

"From the sea of thy soul, I come..."—Advocating for Social Interaction

Friends are known first in hardships
— Japanese proverb

A friend in need is a friend indeed
— English proverb

Saving the world with the power of friendship. What sounds at first like a cynical summary of the *Persona* franchise—and many Japanese franchises at large—is actually one of the core lessons embedded in their games. Embodied in the "Social Links", the player is encouraged to be social, spend time with a range of characters, and establish social bonds.

Personas are the quintessential aspect of the game. In order to understand S.Links, it requires to grasp the concept of the franchise's eponymous mechanic. Personas are physical embodiments of an individual's personality or, respectively, psyche. They take form only for short periods of time and can be utilized in battles as proxy fighters[32]. The iconic "Thou art I… and I am thou…"[33], chosen for the title of this article, appears frequently throughout the franchise and reminds the player about the special bond between persona and protagonist. Whilst all other companions have one dedicated persona, the protagonist has the special ability to change between several. Their visual appearance differs tremendously and can take the form of creatures from ancient Greek mythological, like centaurs, harpies, or chimeras, through Christian Angelic iconography up to classic Japanese folklore and many more[34]. All personas have a specific type that is differentiated according to the twenty-two Arcana of Tarot[35]. Each Arcana represents a specific archetypical temperament and matches correspondingly an inhabitant of Inaba[36]. Seven links represent the individual members with the investigation team. Fool and Judgment even represent the protagonist and his group's inner unity. The others are a diverse collection of people. These S.Links are specifically prone to be misunderstood. Such distinct cultural signifiers "may strike different chords in different cultures. This may explain why [these—S.D.]

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[31] The specific values of thought and learning is further explored in the section "Grind Yourself to Perfection—Advocating for Repetition Based Learning".

[32] Alicia Ashby, Iaian Ross, *Persona 4—Official Strategy Guide,* op. cit., p. 67.

[33] Cf. *"I am thou"*, in: *Megamitensei*, online: http://megamitensei.wikia.com/wiki/I_am_thou [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[34] This large conglomerate of religious symbols prevented the Shin Megami Tensei franchise for a long time to be published in the West.

[35] Cf. Alicia Ashby, Iaian Ross, *Persona 4—Official Strategy Guide,* op. cit., p. 173 passim.

[36] The only exception to this pattern is *World*. It can only be unlocked by maximizing bonds with all characters and therefore reaching a state of perfection. Ibidem, p. 242. How Jungian psychology and, more specifically, the archetypes are reflected in P4 cannot be explored in this paper due to its predominant focus on Japanese-specific cultural elements.

make disturbing ripples when they surface in mainstream Western media"[37]. While *Persona's* Social Links sometime suffer similar issues of misapprehension among critics[38], Social Links actually influences different aspects of *Persona 4's* gameplay. It has a direct impact on the narrative experience, ally battle behavior and fusing personas.

All Social Links are essentially small, contained YA narratives. Each of the twenty-one S.Links are short stories about different pivotal aspects of adolescence. *Persona 4* "isn't afraid to discuss trauma, LGBT issues, loss, fear, depression, and more"[39]. For example, Yukiko Amagi, representing the priestess arcana, struggles with the parental expectation to take over someday the family's traditional inn. Meanwhile, her best friend Chie Satonaka (chariot arcana) suffers under a lack of vision for her professional future. Other S.Links deal with questions of age (death arcana), challenges of (missing) talent (sun arcana), or meaning of self (lovers arcana). The player spends time with these characters during times of challenge and actively partakes in conversations with them. With the protagonist essentially being an empty husk, identification can take place. What sounds at first contradicting is the source for a persuasive two-step strategy. The semi-defined protagonist allows the player to project her personality with values, ideals, and agendas into the hero. The player does not enact a pre-described role, but establishes (at least to a large extend) the personality of the hero herself. Identification can occur, because likeness is active established through the player[40]. In the second step, this alter ego spends time with the S.Link characters in a more credible manner. Unlike other famous dialogue systems designed by, for instance, Bioware, *P4's* dialog choice options are not color-coded. Instead of "blue" for "being nice" and "red" for "playing naughty", all responses appear equal. However, their impact differs tremendously. While some replies intensify the bond, others have no impact at all, or even a disastrous one[41]. These situations resemble everyday life conversations and allow for identification with the setting as well as with the many different characters potentially resembling people of her own life. Hence, the player is not just a mere observer of adolescent "drama"; she is directly involved and shapes the course

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[37] Douglas Schules, *Kawaii Japan: Defining JRPGs through the Cultural Media Mix*, "Kinephanos" 2015, vol. 5, p. 72.

[38] Western critics often describe *Persona's* jRPGs mechanics as intermixed with "dating simulators" aspects. This misconception derives from a distinct closeness to so-called *ren'ai-simulators*. The character requires certain attributes like knowledge or bravery to even initiate a conversation. The intentionality of S.Link and the values they communicate are different from the typical " visit five times to unlock a sex scene before the final fight".

[39] Danny Wadeson, *Why People Love Persona*, in Kotaku, http://kotaku.com/why-people-love-persona-1769348010 [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[40] The adjustment of a player characters adheres in an elegant and simple way the p r i n c i p l e   o f   c a l i b r a t i o n that states: the better a video game adjusts its persuasive elements, the more powerful its persuasive abilities become. Instead of a complicated network of algorithms and metrics aimed at deciphering the player's personality to improve persuasive likelihood, the player simply adjusts these parameters herself. Cf. Sven Dwulecki, Arras Khaldi, *"I am trying to help you. And this 'game' you're playing..." An analysis of the rhetoric behind Until Dawn's psychology*, "Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne" 2017, no. 2.

[41] This unguided conversation experience condenses the plethora of rhetorical challenges an orator has to face. The player must gain an understanding of her conversational partners, anticipate possible results of the given replies and adjust the protagonist's behavior accordingly. Therefore, the deployed procedural rhetoric reinforces the notion of anticipatory audience consideration. Universalist "always choose nice/evil" approaches will not lead to continuous success in the game actively discouraged by larger rewards for context-sensitive replies. Cf. Alicia Ashby, Iaian Ross, *Persona 4—Official Strategy Guide*, op. cit., p.34 and Joachim Knape, Ulrich Anne, *Medienrhetorik des Fernsehens* [transcript] 2014, p. 18.

of each of these coming of age stories. The player is procedurally linked through her decisions to the fate of her encounters and in turn these bonds connect her to a network of individuals.

The Social Links allude towards the value of collectivism. All these characters are distinct from one another. They are personal and can be considered an expression of individualism. This might strike one contractionary for a collectivist culture. Yet, *Persona 4* actually reflects much more the specific cultural identity of Japan:

> Certainly Japanese society shows many of the characteristics of a collectivistic society: such as putting harmony of group above the expression of individual opinions and people have a strong sense of shame for losing face. However, it is not as collectivistic as most of her Asian neighbors. […] Japanese are experienced as collectivistic by Western standards and experienced as Individualist by Asian standards. They are more private and reserved than most other Asians[42].

The S.Links encapsulate this very thought. All meaningful, emotionally charged interactions with individual arcana representatives are usually one-to-one-situations. Social relations are clearly represented as a private experience between i n d i v i d u a l s . Meanwhile, the game mechanics facilitates a playstyles that strives towards establishing as many S.Links as possible and maximizing those. This is specifically achieved by a c o n t e n t l o c k . Only if a S.Link is fully developed, the player is allowed to create the most powerful versions of this arcana. Furthermore, if it is a bond with a member of the Investigation Team, the companion's persona transforms into a stronger version with lesser vulnerability for its prior weakness[43]. S.Links improve the creation of personas as well. Those materialized expressions of personality can be fused in order to create stronger or different kind of personas. Established S.Links grant additional experience points (XP) for the creation of these. The stronger an established bond, the more XP are granted to the fused persona[44]. Also, personas themselves influence the establishment of bonds. If the player equips a persona with the corresponding arcana type before engaging with a social link character, the relationship progresses faster[45]. In a procedural manner of thinking, applying the correct "mindset" improves the facilitation of such friendship significantly.

Social bonds also determine battle behaviors of the protagonist's team mates. Already the simple establishment of the simplest bond modifies a friend's in-game reaction[46]. If an otherwise mortal blow endangers the protagonist, any ally with a social link will take this damage instead. With advanced depth of the relationship, the given friend can help in different ways. A significant form is the ability to cure a character's ailment like rage, confusion, or fear. The narratological explanation for this behavioral change is clearly the

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[42] *Japan, in: Itim International*, online: https://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html [accessed: 01.05.2017].

[43] Alicia Ashby, Iaian Ross, *Persona 4—Official Strategy Guide*, op. cit., p. 69.

[44] Ibidem, p. 71 passim.

[45] Ibidem. p. 45.

[46] Ibidem. p. 59

established stronger bond. Through understanding one another, the companions can support each other and sooth negative emotions. The procedural perspective says the more, strong bonds are formed, the higher the groups combat output. Overall, the player profits from better performing group members because she can delegate certain tasks to the AI companions and focus on other priorities.

All these advantages are clearly procedurally expressed arguments with narrative frames expressing the value of friendship. The player discovers through interactions that social bonds are advantages, because they increase progression while delivering insights into the different young adult stories surrounding the protagonist. The player literally fills the (procedural) gap missing through engaging in social relations. She is able to help people while she gains an understanding of how each individual adds positively to the success of the hero's quest.

Grind Yourself to Perfection—Advocating for Repetition Based Learning

With many little strokes a large tree is felled
— Japanese proverb

Little strokes fell great oaks.
— English proverb

Typical for a jRPG, *Persona 4* requires the player to grind frequently. In order to increase the characters' abilities as well as their personas, continuous fighting against shadows is required. While neither being unique to *P4*, nor to Japanese games in general, grinding certainly resonates with distinct Japanese values. The act of repetition as a method of learning is dominant in Confucian heritage cultures (CHCs), such as Japan, China, Singapore, or Hong Kong[47]. Despite the outstanding academic results of CHCs, Western authors display frequently their doubt about this teaching method:

> The Japanese seek perfection in some tasks (kata) as a means to acquire spiritual satisfaction in their lives […]. The Japanese learn through repetition at school and in college. They are hardly given an option to think for themselves. They tend to be satisfied with established rules, following the set path without making life difficult for themselves, instead of seeking to be original or creating new ideas […]. They get to be very good at what they do, probably much better than anyone else doing the same thing in another part of the world, but it is also very difficult for them to depart from their routine. We might call them super-specialized[48].

The quest for perfection is equated here with a mindless repetition without end. John Biggs criticized this oversimplification present in several studies released already in the late nineties. Education in CHCs does not replace cognition with mindless memorization, but utilizes repetition to foster a significantly different mindset.

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[47] John Biggs, *Learning from the Confucian heritage. So size doesn't matter?*, "Journal of Educational Research" 1998, vol. 29, p. 731.

[48] Hector Garcia, *Geek in Japan—Discovering the Land of Manga, Anime, Zen, and the Tea Ceremony*, Kanagawa: Tuttle Shokai 2011, p. 43.

> Japanese children are socialized to be obedient, to conform, and to persist; Western children are raised to be assertive, independent, curious, and to explore on their own terms. But schools the world over require obedience, conformity to group norms, and persistence in working on boring tasks of which students do not see the point […][49].

Japan has a socio-cultural background wherein persistence and repetition was meant to prepare the citizens for life. The grinding mechanic embedded within jRPGs mirrors this notion. *Persona 4* also requests from the player to engage in a vast number of encounters that challenge her abilities. Over time and after successfully overcoming large amounts of fights, the player is rewarded with level-ups of her protagonist and equipped persona. The battle mechanic is designed in such a way that the player usually faces randomly generated groups of enemies. Each enemy type has a set configuration of strengths and weaknesses[50]. That is the point of intersection for Social Links and personas. Any given weakness is based on elements, like fire, wind, or ice, and can be exclusively targeted by personas[51]. Hence, a player with strong S.Links and thereby enhanced personas profits from higher damage output against enemy weaknesses[52]. Only by identifying those, the player can maximize the impact of every attack, improve performance, and reduce the overall spend time on grinding. This procedural connection emphasizes how the collective empowers the individual. Yet, it is the individual that makes a difference through perseverance. This interplay between mechanics express precisely the Japanese take in collectivism. Rushing a task is simultaneously discouraged. The speed-forward option allows the player to automate all combatants' reactions, but limits the player's party to physical attacks. This potentially saves time, but for the cost of increased damage intake while not capitalizing on enemies' weaknesses. Due to *P4*'s lack of any free status replenishments, the player either has to invest resources in status items or has to be satisfied with less XP gain[53]. Brute-forcing strategies are therefore procedurally presented as disadvantage. A player unwilling to commit to the challenge of perfecting her grinding skill has to suffer the consequences of time-inefficient gameplay. All these intertwined mechanics indicate that *Persona 4* favors an approach similar to Japanese teaching methodology:

> Whereas Western teachers identify whole class teaching with lecturing, Asian teachers do not spend large amounts of time lecturing. They present interesting problems; they pose provocative questions; they probe and guide. The students work hard, generating multiple approaches to a solution, explaining the rationale behind their methods, and making good use of wrong answers[54].

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[49] John Biggs, *Leaning from the Confusion…*op. cit., p.728.

[50] Alicia Ashby, Iaian Ross, *Persona 4—Official Strategy Guide,* op. cit., p. 252.

[51] Not only shadows have such weaknesses, so do the team member's personas. Narrative elements, like the co-dependency between the unlikely friends Yukiko and Chie, find its expression here as well. Their personas are specifically vulnerable towards the strength of the other. This re-emphasizes the close connection between a character's psyche and the form the individual persona takes. Ibidem. p. 8, 10.

[52] It should have become apparent by now how intricately complex all mechanics interplay with one another.

[53] Ibidem. p.57.

[54] John Biggs, *Leaning from the Confusion…*op. cit., p. 731.

The individual is faced with a problem—in school context an academic question, in *Persona 4* as specific group of enemies. The players—just like the students—have to "work hard, generat[e] multiple approaches to a solution [...] and making good use of wrong answers"[55] which means in this specific setting identifying weakness, designing time-effective attack patterns and adapt those for circumstantial changes.

Not only the process of learning is mirrored through mechanics, so is the learning progression. The end of every learning cycle in *Persona 4* is culturally encoded. The moment an issue is considered solved within the game, is similar to a classroom situation as well: "A single problem is discussed for hours by students, with teacher adjudicating, until a consensus acceptable to teacher and students is reached"[56]. Obviously, no game designer can sit next to every single player, engage in a personal discussion with the "student" (meaning "player"), and reach the required "consensus". Instead, the designer creates a proxy to ensure the required learning effect: the a r t i f i c i a l i n t e l l i g e n c e (AI). It can be considered a *h o m u n c u l u s   d i g i t a l i s* that represents its creator's will and executes procedural commands that express rhetorical messages[57]. The player negotiates whether or not she is ready to move, by successfully solving the boss encounter.

These especially difficult enemies are an expression of the *homunculus digitalis* that forces the player to display her acquired knowledge and make an efficiently use of prior developed tactics. The fight can be seen as a procedural negotiation that either ends with winning the encounter—and displaying the minimal requirement—or ends in failure. The latter option forces the player to re-evaluate and repeat the grinding procedure until the protagonist and his team is ready. This way the AI serves as a gatekeeper for the story progression as well as an examiner for acquired game-mechanical knowledge.

Persona 4 as a Cultural Ambassador

> The protagonists speak and text like school children. They make misinformed or sexist remarks. They fumble social interactions. They are, in short, teenagers. At its core this is a spectacular work of contemporary young adult fiction, one with a strong moral core, angled yet never didactic, expansive yet always focused[58].

This description of *Persona 5* holds equally true for the other installments of the *Persona* franchise. The defining young adult narratives that made *Persona 4* so intriguing communicate persuasively Japanese values. Meanwhile, all the shown above mechanics represents different aspects of Japanese cultural ideas. These small indicators add up to a larger picture. *Persona 4* is neither just a set of procedural rhetoric mechanics, nor is it

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[55] Ibidem.

[56] Ibidem, p.732.

[57] The *homunculus digitalis* is an analytical framework to apply rhetoric theory to the other hypercomplex structure of videogames with the many individuals involved in its development. Cf. Sven Dwulecki, *"Building the Future and Keeping the Past Alive are One and the Same Thing". A Rhetorical Analysis of the "Metal Gear Solid" Saga*, in: *More After More. Essays Commemorating the Five-Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas More's Utopia*, eds. Ksenia Olkusz, Michał Kłosiński, Krzysztof M. Maj, Kraków: Facta Ficta Research Centre 2016, p. 159 passim.

[58] Simon Parkin, *Persona 5 Review: Spectacular Simulation of Teenage Life*, in: *TheGuardian.com*, online: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/29/persona-5-review-teenage-game-franchise [accessed: 01.05.2017].

simply a collection of small young adult narratives. The jRPG typical grinding emphasizes a positive value of repetition and mimics the teaching methodology of CHC nations. The intricate interplay between narrative and gameplay expresses the importance of friendship which reflects Japan's unique type of collectivism. The storyline covering an entire year offers the freedom of choice to focus on those aspects of the storyworld that interest the player the most.

When games are not just mere products of a geographical region, but a standing offer to engage with its specific culture, than videogames become cultural ambassadors. With this concept in mind, the never-ending loop of hallways in *P.T.* are not just a minimalistic level-design, but transport meaning through repetition with its focus-shifting nuances. The seemingly endless grinding in *Final Fantasy* games is not anymore a way to expand playtime to justify prizing, but a procedural expression of an educational ideal of self-improvement through rigorous re-evaluating of the acknowledged scenarios in order to develop alternate approaches. The marriage mechanics in *Fire Emblem* are therefore a procedural expression representing the importance of social bonds and the virtue of collectivism, rather than just another tie-in to attract *ren'ai* fans.

The rhetorical research of videogames and specifically, the study of how videogames advocate for specific national cultures beyond geographic, political, or economic borders is—like rhetorical videogame studies in general—still in its infancy. Yet, these first insights reveal already a wide array of research opportunities that encourage the reevaluation of preconceived notions of cultural identity along with often superficially understood young adult narratives.

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