

Who Will Play *Terebi Gēmu* When No Japanese Children Remain? Distanced Engagement in Atlas' *Catherine*

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Abstract

This article examines the Japanese action puzzle game *Catherine*, arguing that the game presents a social narrative that comments on Japan's pressing issue of a declining birthrate and aging population. It also theorizes a strategy for player involvement based on "distanced" (self-reflexive and meta) engagement. Through an examination of the narrative, characters, and gameplay, supplemented with national fertility survey data from Japan, the article argues that *Catherine* subverts classic game tropes and fosters player engagement with a socially relevant diegesis. Simultaneously, the unique meta-gameplay elements utilize what I term "distanced engagement" to encourage the player to critically self-reflect on both the game scenario and their role as a player. In this way, the article considers how the unique relationship between story and distanced engagement allows video games like *Catherine* to function as impactful and interactive social narratives.

Keywords

Japan, engagement, self-reflexivity, distance, social narrative, Japanese, distanced engagement, empathy, Atlas, *Catherine*, RPG, video game, childbirth, population, affect

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The Japanese are going extinct. According to the Web Clock of Child Population in Japan (*Nihon no kodomo jinkō tokei*) hosted by Tohoku University, the country will have one child remaining on June 7, 3664 (Yoshida, Ishigaki, & Mail Research Group, 2014). After this date, as a sensationalist *Fox News* broadcast proclaims, the entire nation will “go the way of the dinosaurs” (Piper, 2012). If the above-mentioned scenario seems familiar, that is because a human population bordering on extinction has served as the theme for many dystopian novels and films (*Children of Men*, 2006; *I Am Legend*, 2007; and *The Book of Eli*, 2010). However, in the case of Japan, this situation that once seemed purely speculative is in fact becoming a more plausible future due to the country’s widely publicized ongoing social crisis of a declining birthrate coupled with an aging population, known in Japanese as *shōshi kōreika*. While the logic behind this alarmist countdown clock is undeniably flawed, as it presupposes that population statistics in Japan will remain utterly static over the next millennium, there is little doubt that the country is facing a population crisis.¹

What if this troubled future could be averted? What if the Japanese people could be brought back from the brink of extinction? This is the central speculative question that informs both the narrative and the gameplay structures of *Catherine* (*Kyasarin*), a mature-rated action puzzle video game developed by the Japanese game company Atlus and released for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 gaming consoles in February 2011 (Atlus, 2011). *Catherine* was subsequently fully localized and made commercially available in North America later that year and in Phase Alternate Line (PAL) territories in 2012. The game was a critical but not a commercial success and, to this day, remains a cult favorite among Japanese, North American, and European gamers.

Influential media theorist McLuhan (1964) states, “Games are popular art, collective, social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture” (p. 235; emphasis in the original). Indeed, McLuhan’s assertion echoes our common understanding of political or allegorical storytelling in entertainment works. Few would deny that contemporary Japanese video games, much akin to other pop cultural media such as manga (print comics) and anime (animation), might serve as useful reflections of the country and culture from which they came.

However, contemporary video games complicate McLuhan’s notion of social relevancy in entertainment. As an inherently *active* medium, video games require interaction between the scripted simulation authored by the game creator and the unique play style of the user (Cremin, 2012). Sicart (2013) writes that to “play” is to “inhabit a wiggle space of possibility in which we can express ourselves—our values, beliefs, and politics” (pp. 8–9). His description of “ethical gameplay” is useful in that it acknowledges video game design as ethically (and, I would add, culturally and politically) relevant (p. 24). Furthermore, Sicart argues that simulation-based representation is capable of promoting social understanding through gameplay. In ethical gameplay scenarios, players must navigate a game’s unique moral system, and this allows for the experience of “fringe themes” that

may in turn engender meaningful self-reflection “beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities” (pp. 23–24).

This article discusses *Catherine* as a gamic “social narrative” that not only comments on Japanese society but also conduces toward real-world self-reflection and perhaps even action by the player. I argue that *Catherine* accomplishes this through the interplay of socially relevant characters and themes with what I term “distanced engagement.” Distanced engagement bolsters the potency of the social narrative by openly employing self-reflexive and meta-gameplay elements, nonlinearity, and ludonarrative dissonance. The result is an immersed yet still critically self-reflective player. By analyzing this gamic engagement dialectic in *Catherine*, I will show that the game does not function simply as a static social allegory for Japan’s population woes. Rather, *Catherine* encourages players to identify with the socially relevant narrative and characters while, at the same time, also remain acutely aware that they are playing a piece of electronic entertainment and thus maintain a critical space for contemplation and self-reflection.

Playing with Social Narratives and Distance in Video Games

The issue of whether video games can affect players on an individual emotional level is a contentious one. Recently, Ash (2012, 2013) has written a series of articles on “affective design,” arguing that video games attempt to generate particular emotional responses through their material and aesthetic construction. For Ash, an individual player’s affective engagement is only present if the video game can capture and sustain both her somatic and her analytic attention (2013, p. 34). Full attentive engagement with a game eventually engenders, according to Ash, a form of “affective vulnerability,” where players open themselves up to the game world and characters and are thereby open to emotional connection (2013, p. 45).

Galloway (2004) also allows for the possibility of player empathy provided that his central “congruence requirement” is met. This requirement is that the real-world social reality of the game player must in some way align with the procedural reality of the game in order for the social narrative to become emotionally resonant. Still, some scholars challenge empathetic engagement with video games entirely. This is the case for scholar Newman (2002) who argues that players identify with game characters not based on the appearance or characterization of the avatar (traditional sites of empathetic engagement) but rather through the unique set of techniques and capabilities that they afford the player.

What Ash, Galloway, and Newman’s arguments all suggest is that emotional engagement with a virtual world or virtual character is incredibly complex, dependent on a variety of factors, and highly personalized with each player. It is likely impossible to speak of how a particular video game might affect all users. In this article, I am interested in how game texts invite player empathy and present social narratives. However, rather than locate my arguments solely in emotional resonance and affective responses for a specific player, I take the approach of examining the