BEYOND 8-BIT:

TRAUMA AND SOCIAL RELEVANCE IN JAPANESE VIDEO GAMES

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines three Japanese video games, each of which critically engages with a different social issue or national trauma important to Japan. I argue that video games are important not only as cultural phenomena, but because, as media, they can and do bring about profound positive emotional and behavioral changes in our lives. This project builds on current research in Japanese studies and game studies by elucidating how narrative and gameplay mechanics communicate practical knowledge to potential victims, and how playing a game might instill both an understanding of one's own life and empathy for the lives of others. Each chapter contains an analysis of a socially relevant video game and a corresponding discussion of the specific hallmarks of Japanese game design that promote players' empathetic engagement. Chapter one analyzes natural disaster trauma in the PlayStation survival game *Disaster Report* (Irem, 2002, 2003 North America). I discuss how the game teaches real-world survival skills to players, and how it uses "limited engagement," or a form of enforced vulnerability, to simulate what it would be like to survive an earthquake. Chapter two examines anxiety over Japan's declining birthrate and aging population as represented in the puzzle game *Catherine* (Atlus, 2011). I introduce the concept of self-reflexivity or "distanced engagement" to contend that players critically reflect on their own lives through the act of answering in-game opinion polls about marriage and childbirth. Finally, chapter three investigates the working through of post-traumatic stress and wartime atrocities in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015). I illustrate how the game deploys ludic strategies of "external engagement" to encourage a merging of the player's lived experience with the actions of the in-game protagonist. The result is that players feel more direct involvement in the game content. In sum, these affective tools simulate and allow players to "experience" different social situations to which they are unaccustomed, prompt them to critically reflect on their lives and values along the way, and, just maybe, help them transport what they have learned outside the confines of the game in order to enrich their everyday lives.

PREFACE

This dissertation represents the original, independent scholarly work of the author, Ben Whaley.

A version of chapter two has been published in the journal *Games and Culture*: Whaley, Ben. "Who Will Play *Terebi Gēmu* When No Japanese Children Remain? Distanced Engagement in Atlus' *Catherine*." 24 Sep. 2015. Web. 23 pages.

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All Japanese names in this dissertation appear family name first to reflect the original Japanese-language order, except when names are included in quotes where Western authors have already reversed the order, or when a Japanese author is writing in English and uses the English order.

Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Foreign words appear in italics throughout this dissertation. I use the Hepburn Romanization System to spell out Japanese names and words. This system utilizes a macron to indicate long vowel sounds ($\bar{a}$, $\bar{\imath}$, $\bar{u}$, $\bar{e}$, $\bar{o}$). No italicization or macrons are present for proper nouns (e.g., Tokyo) or Japanese words that appear in the Oxford English Dictionary (e.g., manga, anime).

Citations follow the seventh edition of the MLA Handbook. When first introducing a work, I provide complete publication details when I am able to determine them. For video games, I list the developer followed by the original publication date in parentheses. Official English titles are used throughout. When games have been localized (translated and adapted to suit a different audience or market) and released in multiple countries, I include the separate publication dates and the original Japanese titles, if they differ in translation. A comprehensive list of all the games referenced in this dissertation appears at the end of the Works Cited page.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my Mom

Who bought me my first video game and played so many more by my side. Whether in education or in life, thank you for giving me the love and power-ups to beat any level.

Introduction: Beyond 8-bit

"It was inevitable that Nintendo's Family Computer would replace the anime boom. With real games, more people could participate in the stories and probably derive a little more satisfaction from them, too."

—Miyazaki Hayao

By the time legendary Japanese animator Miyazaki Hayao made the above statement in a 1988 lecture titled "The State of Japanese Film" (*Nippon eiga no genzai*), video games had already begun to transform the global entertainment landscape (83). Certainly they were about to transform my own life. It was within a few years of Miyazaki's lecture that I received my very first home video game system as a Hanukkah gift – a previously used Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)[1] with two controllers. Unwrapping a separate gift box revealed the game cartridge I had been dying to play: *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (Chris Gray Enterprises, 1991), based off my beloved Saturday morning cartoon show. I simply could not wait to fly through the levels as Captain Planet and "bring pollution down to zero" with his elemental powers. However, what I had not known was that Captain Planet himself would not be summoned until the second level of the game. To get to that point, I would first need to pilot the teenage Planeteers' "Eco-Jet" to an enemy base while shooting hostile ships and avoiding traps. However, this horizontal side-scrolling section proved so punishingly difficult that I could not progress to the next stage. My excitement quickly turned to heartache as I lost count of the number of times I died and was forced to restart the entire frustrating sequence from the beginning. In the end, I never was able to take control of my planetary hero. Evidently the Captain's oft-shouted catchphrase, "The power is yours!" did not apply to me.

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[1] This system was first released in Japan in 1983 as the Family Computer or "Famicom." It debuted in North America two years later renamed as the Nintendo Entertainment System.

Instead, it was Nintendo's classic puzzle game *Dr. Mario* (1990), which had been bundled with my system as an afterthought, that provided me with the most meaningful and long-lasting enjoyment. This was because I could play the two-player versus mode sitting next to my mother. The two of us would compete to see who could clear the stage the fastest by lining up colored pills and eliminating the onscreen cartoon viruses as they mockingly danced onscreen. In addition to being fun, the repetitive and slightly frantic puzzle gameplay proved to be oddly relaxing and provided a great method for alleviating stress. By the end of a *Dr. Mario* play session, my mother had forgotten her stressors from that day at the university hospital, and I too was no longer as bothered by the behavior of the mean kids at school.

In the nearly three decades since receiving that original NES, I have played hundreds if not thousands of different video games and owned every major home console available. Yet, this project remains inextricably linked to that cathartic childhood experience of playing *Dr. Mario* with my mom. *Beyond 8-bit* examines Japanese-designed video games in order to explore the ways in which they engage with some of the Japan's biggest social issues and traumas: natural disasters; a declining birthrate and aging population; and nuclear war and traumatic memory. Moreover, this project seeks to elucidate some of the positive benefits of working through a site of trauma from within a video game and to explore how games might make us better people. It argues that video games are important not only as cultural phenomena, but because, as media, they can and do bring about important changes in who we are as human beings. I approach these larger research questions by investigating three games, each of which deals with a different type of Japanese national trauma. I also examine the mediological ways that hallmarks of Japanese game design might simulate and let us "experience" new and different social situations,

encourage us to reflect on our lives and values along the way, and, maybe, apply what we have learned outside the confines of the game in order to enrich our everyday lives.

<div align="center">**Options Menu: Terms and Parameters**</div>

In the chapters that follow I use the term "Japanese video game." The descriptor "Japanese" is meant to identify games that originated in Japan and were originally released primarily with Japanese audiences in mind. However, several problems with this typology are evident. Two of the games I discuss in this project, *Disaster Report* and *Catherine*, were subsequently fully localized and released in North America and Europe, sometimes with subtle changes to the graphics or script. The third game, *Metal Gear Solid V*, saw a simultaneous worldwide release. Terms like "Japanese," and its counterpart "Western" quickly become problematic when discussing how games function within a system of "global ownership" and the transnational nature of studio development (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter xxix). To what degree should a game be considered "Japanese" if it incorporates a physics engine developed in Europe or features performances by Hollywood voice actors? Yet, the conception that certain video games are uniquely "Japanese" continues to influence discussions among game studies scholars, members of the gaming press, and fans themselves. Whether or not the term is wholly appropriate, video games are still described as "Japanese" or "Western." This is often the case when referring to certain types of games thought to have originated in Japan, or a Japanese spin on an existing genre, such as "Japanese role-playing games" or "JRPGs." When such terms are used, the tacit understanding is that the games developed in Japan are somehow different from those developed in the West in terms of visuals, narrative structure, or gameplay.

In discussing video games from Japan, my goal is not to promote a sense of cultural uniqueness, yet I do highlight some key gameplay features that I argue Japanese designers

employ to increase player engagement. While these mechanisms are not found solely in Japanese

video games, they are, as I argue, used more frequently to engage players. Thus, I maintain that

there are some distinct advantages to thinking through differences in design practices between

markets in order to highlight the various ways Japanese games might delight or surprise players.

I am also deliberately using a broad definition of "video game." Today, the term video

game might refer to an entire host of experiences, from mobile phone games, to playable

applications through social media platforms such as Facebook, to virtual reality tech demos. In

each case, the technological interface, storytelling mechanisms, or degree of immersion might

vary wildly. The term becomes even more contentious when one adds modifiers such as

"hardcore," "core," or "casual" to denote specific types of play or different kinds of players.

When describing the various features of video games, I borrow the term "gameic" from Azuma

Hiroki's project on "gameic realism" (*gēmuteki riarizumu*). This term is useful because it points

to the ways in which specific video game structures inform other media and shape cultural

consumption. I endeavor to keep Japanese phrases within this project as much as possible, even

though game studies scholarship in the West increasingly prefers the more generalized term

"ludic," derived from the Latin word denoting any and all "games with social rules" that have a

clear winner and loser (Frasca 229–30).

The main video games discussed throughout this project are all "console games." This

means that the game data is stored on discs, played from a home video game system hooked up

to a television, such as a Sony PlayStation or Microsoft Xbox, and operated by manipulating

joysticks and buttons on a controller. My choice to analyze console games deliberate. While

gaming trends in Japan are now shifting in favor of portable and mobile gaming, for much of

Japan's three-decade-long relationship with the medium, games were played exclusively in the

home or in public arcade spaces, known as "game centers" in Japan. In fact, Uemura, Hosoi, and Nakamura position home game systems (*kateiyō gēmuki*) and not arcades as responsible for the video game boom in Japan in the 1980s. They argue that the experiences offered by early console games counteracted the reduction of free time, personal space, and close friends experienced by many Japanese children of the day by providing an integrated environment from which kids could play while simultaneously training their brain through in-game skills (16–17).

In focusing on console games within the home, and mass-market commercial (that is, non-independent) games specifically, I am necessarily excluding entire categories of Japanese games. Some of these computer or mobile games, developed by small, independent teams, or amateur (*dōjin*) creators, contain potent social narratives and inventive experimental gameplay. However, I feel it is valuable to analyze those games that are commercially available and accessible to the widest audience of players in order to imagine how some of the specifics of Japanese game design might be used to affect the mechanics of emotional engagement with other entertainment media more broadly.

Title Screen: What Do Video Games Have to Say About Trauma and Recovery?

Video games have come a long way from the pixelated 8-bit color graphics that transfixed me in front of my living room television set. Today, they are one of the most powerful global entertainment industries, capturing the dollars, hours, and cultural recognition of people all across the world. Total sales of video games are forecasted to surpass $93 billion dollars in revenue by 2019, outpacing global music and magazine sales (Sinclair). Equally staggering are the estimated 3 billion hours of personal time players collectively invest in virtual gaming worlds every week (McGonigal, *Reality* 27). This is to say nothing of the powerful cultural capital of video game characters. According to a 2009 survey conducted by the Davie-Brown Celebrity

Index, the Japanese video game character Pac-Man (Namco, 1980) is more famous than Hollywood superstar Ben Affleck, with a 94% recognition rating among American consumers (Mircovich).

Japanese video games are credited with revolutionizing the medium and single-handedly revitalizing the U.S. industry as it stood on the brink of collapse in the 1980s (Donovan 153). Video games are also a big deal in Japan, where they are deeply integrated into daily life. Each year, over 250,000 gamers and fans attend the annual Tokyo Game Show. Wi-Fi hotspots in Tokyo's Akihabara electronics district allow passersby to download limited-edition content for their favorite portable games. Mario and Luigi appear on themed quiz shows regularly broadcast on monitors throughout Tokyo subway cars. The interactive urinal video game developed by Sega known as *Toylets* (2011) even allows men to play while they piss. Furthermore, Japanese studies scholars such as Azuma Hiroki (*Otaku* 39), Itō Gō (78), and Marc Steinberg (160) have all argued persuasively for the centrality of video games alongside manga (print comics) and anime (animation) within Japan's transmedia ecosystem.

While any of these points would certainly serve as a call to take video games seriously, the reasons why I study games are mostly humanistic. To my mind, the necessity to critically analyze video games comes not solely from the money, time, or cultural impact they generate, but also from the ways they allow for the virtual experience of the highs and lows of the human condition. Today, a wealth of scientific and medical research has begun to offer insights into the potential cognitive, therapeutic, and experiential benefits of using video games to engage with sites of trauma. This research can broadly be divided into those studies that address gamers as patients, who can be healed or rehabilitated by play, and those that regard gamers as potential care-givers themselves, inculcated with empathy for and a practical understanding of the

suffering of actual victims thanks to the games they play. The case studies in *Beyond 8-bit* address both implications of gameic investigations of trauma.

My childhood feeling that *Dr. Mario* play sessions might actually reduce stress levels has since been corroborated by scientific research. Studies at Oxford University in 2009 and 2010 revealed that pattern-matching puzzle games work to distract players from focusing on traumatic memories. These games force players to instead train their attention on tasks that require a high amount of visual processing (McGonigal, *SuperBetter* 37). A virtual reality (VR) application developed by Deep Stream called "Cool!" was designed with this principle in mind. It immerses burn victims in a snowy virtual world so that they can manage their chronic pain without medicine (Scott 62).

A 2013 cover article in the medical journal *Nature* hails the benefits of "neurogaming," or video games that can give practical neurological health benefits when applied to the treatment of diseases such as Alzheimer's or dementia. Here, the featured study compared the brain-imaging scans of elderly patients (aged 60–85 years old) before and after playing a simple racing video game on a smartphone. The result was that the video game promoted increased "executive functioning" (higher level thinking skills), such as decision-making and multitasking, equivalent to the control group of untrained 20-year-old participants. Furthermore, these gains persisted for six months (Anguera et al. 97). Other studies are investigating the effects of using the safe space of video game worlds to help those with PTSD cope with past traumas. When used in a controlled setting and supervised by a therapist, these gameplay sessions function as a successful form of exposure therapy (Murray 170–71).

In her recent book *SuperBetter*, game designer and researcher Jane McGonigal advocates that we envision our own life challenges as part of a grand video game that we control. Asserting

this type of "gameful" mindset, she argues, is effective when managing difficult or stressful

situations. Game developers themselves have equally become interested in using the medium to

communicate traumatic issues through interactive frameworks. The amateur JRPG *Seraphic Blue*

(2004) is an attempt by the designer Tempura (a pseudonym) to address issues of teenage

depression and suicide in Japan (K. Ito 138). In America, husband and wife team Ryan and Amy

Green developed a computer game named *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) as a

means to cope with their son Joel's battle with terminal brain cancer (Tanz). These games

illustrate how the process of designing a piece of software can also become a working through of

personal trauma for the developers who code and spend time with the virtual characters.

Today, games like *Seraphic Blue* or *That Dragon, Cancer* might be subsumed under the

nascent subgenre known as "empathy games." The term was coined by Brazilian-born game

designer Vander Caballero in reference to his adventure game *Papo & Yo* (Minority, 2012) about

the relationship between a young boy and a mercurial red monster. Caballero too encodes his

own personal childhood trauma of growing up with an abusive alcoholic father into the game.

Caballero advocates using the term empathy game to describe those experiences that

eschew traditional ludic structures, such as goals, levels, and fights with powerful boss

characters, in favor of communicating a particular affect or emotion to the player. In a 2014

lecture on the subject, Caballero cites four main criteria for creating an empathy game. These

include a personal story connected to an individual character; a metaphorical or magical realist

approach to storytelling; "closure," or an ending that neatly and quickly wraps up the game; and

strong emotional beats within the narrative. Caballero appears to have had both artistic and

commercial motivations in mind when coining this new category of games. Frustrated by poor

reviews of *Papo & Yo*, Caballero came to believe that players were bound to be disappointed

when a game designed around empathetic play did not conform to established industry or genre expectations. Thus, he now advocates that gamers and professional critics evaluate these non-traditional game experiences based on their potential to move players emotionally (Caballero).

What all of these examples illustrate is that there is much we can learn from a gameic exploration of trauma and recovery. However, I disagree with Caballero's suggestion that we separate out empathetically rich games from all the rest. One of the main goals of this project is to demonstrate that empathetic potential, whether it is achieved through narrative and characters or related gameplay mechanisms, can be found even within big-budget commercial games that are often dismissed as escapist entertainment.

Stage Select: What Can Video Game Play Offer Us?

When discussing video games, one might fall back on the axiom that games are uniquely equipped to affect players emotionally owing to their sense of interactivity and immersion. All other types of linear media are "passive" experiences, the argument goes, and therefore inferior for cultivating empathetic engagement. I disagree. I approach video games, as a scholar of Japanese literature and pop culture, as texts to be played and analyzed as players interact with them. I regard video game narratives, with their branching paths, customizable characters, and multiple endings, as the natural extension of what cognitive grammar approaches to literature regard as "fictive simulation," or the ways in which our mind actively anticipates and simulates meaning from written texts (Harrison et al. 13). This cognitive grammar approach holds that reading literary texts (or watching films) is not nearly as "passive" as commonly thought. Media studies scholars such as Janet Murray (110) and Brian Upton (227) both argue that we bring our own cognitive and cultural templates into stories and then fluidly interpret, anticipate, and revise these assumptions while reading or viewing material. The same process is happening, to a greater

degree I would argue, in video games, where players are not as constrained by the borders and boundaries of the authored text. While a reader has limited leeway for imagining what exists outside the written or filmed diegesis, current video games increasingly allow players to travel to many corners of the narrative and effect change in meaningful ways. Far from isolating video games from other media, game texts, I believe, can teach us valuable lessons about how to engage with other kinds of narratives, including literature.

Here I would like to clarify two main assumptions about video games central to this project. The first is that contemporary video games have something important to say about society and the human condition. This point may seem like a no-brainer for those of us who grew up with the medium – I myself regard video games among the best of all the creative forms we have hitherto developed as a species because they incorporate so many other forms of art. Foundational media theorist Marshall McLuhan states, "Games are popular art, collective, social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture" (235; emphasis in the original). Murray has similarly argued, "To play *Mario Brothers* or *King's Quest* or *Myst* is to open ourselves to the vision of the shaping author in the same way we open ourselves to the author's voice in a novel" (275). For these scholars, contemporary Japanese video games, much akin to other pop culture media such as manga and anime, serve as useful reflections of the country, culture, or auteur from which they came.

However, we cannot apply the same criterion of social utility to all games. Many video games seem wholly unconcerned with making political or ethical statements: they exist solely to provide fun play experiences. Certainly, *Dr. Mario* is a fun game, but the world-famous plumber turned physician has little, if anything, to say about real-world issues regarding the affordability of prescription drugs or access to universal health care. This lack is understandable as,

historically speaking, early Japanese video games and systems were designed and marketed as children's toys (Uemura, Hosoi, and Nakamura 223). Games have traditionally resisted explicit commentary about the world in a way that film and literature have not. Kojima Hideo, the celebrated game designer behind the *Metal Gear Solid* series that will be discussed in chapter three, laments this lack of social engagement in video games. He states, "Now I don't think you see many games that … [go] beyond just being an entertainment medium. I think that's part of my role, part of my duty, to put in my games what I experience through movies" (Kojima, "Finality"). While not all video games address real-world issues, the games examined in this project represent one future of the medium. They were selected in particular because they contain sustained socially relevant narratives (what I term "social narratives") addressing specific traumas and social issues from twentieth- and twenty-first century Japan. These games are *Disaster Report*, *Catherine*, and *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. These three works are commercially and critically successful examples of Japanese-designed games that not only engage narratively with a particular case of national trauma, but also employ interesting gameplay design strategies in order to strengthen the simulative, reflective, or extra-textual impact of the commentary.

As such, these three games might be considered in relation to one of several categories of "persuasive games" that link real-world issues with virtual play. For example, they resemble what Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer term "newsgames," or gameic experiences "at the intersection of video games and journalism" (6). Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer divide newsgames into categories meant to mirror traditional print journalism. These include "editorial" newsgames that present a clear authorial or political opinion, or "documentary" newsgames that investigate a real-world social event. While the games discussed

in this project do reference real-world issues, as a whole they resist easy genre classification and do not fully fit into the categories of "editorial" or "documentary" newsgames. Unlike newsgames, the games I analyze do not attempt to persuade players with an "embedded bias" (6), nor do they provide an unadulterated and factual investigative report on a real social event (6–7). Rather, they more closely resemble the games highlighted by literary scholar James Paul Gee in his book on video games and learning. Gee outlines several positive learning outcomes from video game play, but he discusses these outcomes in relation to commercially available entertainment games that can be easily deployed in the classroom, rather than focusing on a distinct subset of informationally rich educational software.

Bogost's related discussion of "serious games" designed to "invoke, support, doubt, or debate [the] validity or desirability, or universality" of an existing situation could certainly be used to define the case studies in this project at a general level (*Persuasive Games* 58). A useful aspect of Bogost's research is that he remains interested in persuasion and the rhetorical power of video games, something he terms "procedural rhetoric" (*Persuasive Games* 3). However, here too, Bogost's serious games emphasize a central purpose other than pure entertainment, where the rhetorical power of the game leads the player to specific value judgments. While many video games do function rhetorically as Bogost outlines, the Japanese video games analyzed here are also unabashedly interested in entertainment. Moreover, the social narratives discussed do not challenge a single established worldview, but rather encourage players to influence the social narrative as they see fit through nonlinearity and branching narrative choices.

A second major assumption of this project returns us to Miyazaki's epigraph about the presumed uniqueness of video games as a medium. While I generally regard gameic simulation as an evolution of fictive simulation derived from literature and film, this project still contends

that the medium-specific structures and mechanics of video game play, and Japanese game design in particular, do offer a different experience of control, immersion, and identification when compared to other "linear" or "non-navigable" media such as novels and films. In game studies terms, this project analyzes games with an attention to the ways in which *ludosis*, or, "meaning-making through playful action," offers new possibilities when compared to *semiosis*, or meaning-making through decoding systems of signs or media representations (Mäyrä 19).

Media theorist Henry Jenkins sums up the creative and expressive potential of video games in the twenty-first century when he labels them "a new lively art, one as appropriate for the digital age as … earlier media were for the machine age" (*Wow* 23). If video games truly do offer this new potential as an experiential, expressive medium for storytelling, then this project aims not only to apprehend the complex social narratives of video games, but also to articulate the critical stakes of how games might affect the people who play them.

Video games differ in many ways from literature and film, both "high-culture" forms that have previously dominated the focus of academic thinking about representation. For the purposes of this project, I focus on three main areas where I believe video games can offer novel emotional experiences. The first is through simulation. Video games are, at their core, a simulative medium that models how things work (Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer 6). Game studies methodologies mark a fundamental distinction between the "core" gameplay that the player controls firsthand, and the "shell" narrative and representational components that add richness to the game (Mäyrä 17). As will be discussed in the first chapter, while films and novels can represent the "shell" aspects of a natural disaster, a video game can simulate, to a degree, what it might be like to experience that firsthand. Throughout this project I am interested in this experiential potential of video games as it applies to issues of trauma and recovery in postwar

Japan. Games researcher Miguel Sicart writes that to "play" is to "inhabit a wiggle space of possibility in which we can express ourselves—our values, beliefs, and politics" (*Ethical Gameplay* 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 (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" which may in turn engender meaningful self-reflection "beyond the calculation of statistics and possibilities" (23–24).

In chapter two I focus on video games as capable of encouraging critical self-reflection. This is another area that I think distinguishes the medium. Anime scholar Susan Napier, drawing on Laura Mulvey's foundational article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Paul Willemen's "fourth look," writes of a self-conscious "fifth look" that occurs when North American viewers watch Japanese animation. Napier attributes this to the "defamiliarizing aspects" of the animated movement and the inclusion of obscure Japanese cultural references (242–43). While I have never found Napier's take on anime viewership fully convincing, I do think we can find clear examples of this fifth look when theorizing video game play. As an inherently *active* medium, video games require interaction between the scripted simulation authored by the game creators and the unique play style of the user. Players therefore always exist in a liminal state both inside and outside of the game and many Japanese video games capitalize on this dual identity to cultivate self-referential metanarratives that prompt the real-life player to reflect on the actions of the player-character within the game.

Finally, I examine the ways in which video game play might bring the adventure outside the confines of the medium, by turning the game into an experiential event within the lived

reality of the player. In his case study of *The Matrix* franchise, Henry Jenkins famously discusses the ways in which the central narrative is told across a variety of media, including films, home video, and video games (*Convergence* 95). As I discuss in my third chapter, this sort of transmedia storytelling can take on a new form in contemporary video games. The story is no longer told across multiple media, per se, but instead unfolds and is informed by actions that occur both inside and outside of the game. That video games can now reward players with in-game items, points, or upgraded skills for tasks performed in their everyday life is, for me, one of the most exciting recent developments in empathetic game design.

These three areas represent but some of the ways in which, I argue, video games can distinguish themselves from other forms of representational media, particularly when addressing issues of trauma and recovery. However, the issue of whether video games can affect players on an individual emotional level remains open to debate. Media scholar James Ash 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 ("Attention" 3–4). For Ash, an individual player's affective engagement is only possible if the video game can capture and sustain both her somatic (hand-eye) and analytic attention ("Captivation" 34). Full attentive engagement with a game eventually leads to, 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 (45). Games scholar and programmer Alexander Galloway, echoing the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, 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 (78).

Still, some scholars highlight the limits of affective engagement with video games. James Newman, for example, argues in his article "The Myth of the Ergodic Video Game" that players identify with game characters not because of 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. According to Newman, this means that players identify with serial character Sonic the Hedgehog not for the way he looks or acts as a character, but rather for his ability to run at superhuman speeds.

What Ash's, Galloway's, 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. Ethnographies centering on the responses of real-life Japanese players to particular video games are insightful but often necessarily limited in both size and scope. Therefore, rather than interview particular players about their personal experiences, I use developer interviews in order to provide insight into the design decisions that went into creating specific games. Furthermore, one of the unique aspects of contemporary video game play is that it allows for a plurality of narrative and emotional experiences. Some games allow players to "live" as someone else at the character level. Others drop players into an emotional circumstance with which they may be entirely unaccustomed. It is likely impossible to speak of how a particular video game might affect all users, and indeed we run the risk of neutralizing some of the unique, customizable aspects of the medium when we attempt to boil a game down to a single affective response.

Different players may have radically different experiences playing the same game. This is one of the most exciting aspects of contemporary gaming. It is also one of the most problematic. Recently, the widely publicized harassment of U.S.-based female video game critics and

designers during the "Gamergate" controversy of 2014 has shown that in the minds of many players, the term "gamer" does not include female users or their experiences. This behavior is to be condemned and it is my hope that this vocal minority of online bullies will be further silenced as more women gain prominence in the industry. Japan has its own set of challenges regarding gameic representation of gender. Japanese video games are often targeted by mostly non-Japanese critics for their seemingly highly-eroticized, sexist portrayals of female characters.

Equally inflammatory in games made both inside and outside of Japan are the misogynist story tropes borrowed from literature and film, such as the "damsel in distress" model, that portray female characters as feeble, lacking agency, and constantly in need of male rescue. When strong, "kickass" female characters do emerge in games, of which there are many wonderful examples, most often they have been designed by men and scripted to enact stereotypically hyper-masculine activities such as shooting and killing. Curiously, while manga and anime texts are replete with non-normative characters who serve to break down gender boundaries, these same characters do not appear as frequently in Japanese video game media. This project cannot address these widespread concerns, except to suggest that more scholarship and classroom attention be spent critically interrogating video games in all their strengths and weaknesses.

As scholars of Japanese popular culture have shown, consumers may also get a host of positive benefits from identifying with a variety of characters, including problematic ones, who may not match the consumer's own gender, sex, race, or moral compass. Moreover, these scholars have explored the ways that the apparent power valence of an image in, for example, anime, may be overturned when the narrative as a whole is taken into consideration (Napier 64–65). All three of the video games discussed in this study contain some of the problematic issues

discussed above, yet it is my argument that each contain equally positive gameplay elements to counterbalance the negative.

In the chapters that follow I am interested in how game texts invite player empathy and present social narratives of trauma. However, rather than locate my arguments solely in emotional resonance or affective responses for a specific player, I take the approach of examining the interplay of narrative, cultural sensitivity, character design, and gameplay that, I argue, work together to provide new and engaging empathetic experiences that generalize across existing player stratifications of race, gender, nation, and culture.

Pause Screen: Contextualizing the Project

Beyond 8-bit is an attempt to bridge the gap between Japanese popular culture studies and game studies by encouraging a dialogue from both sides centered around Japanese-designed video games. In North America and Europe, the nascent field of (video) game studies exists as a predominantly Western offshoot of media studies, complete with its own peer-reviewed journals (*Game Studies*; *Games and Culture*) and an annual conference dedicated to video game research (DiGRA). For a period, Japanese video games were often left out of the Western ludonarrative discussion entirely. Or, when selected Japanese games were referenced in larger media studies monographs, as is the case in Bogost's discussion of "advergames" (games designed to advertise a specific product or service), they were quickly dismissed as "fun and unusual specimens whose novelty and absurdity make up much of their charm" (*Persuasive Games* 187). Within Japanese popular culture studies as well, video games were, for a long time, analyzed less frequently than manga and anime texts.

This trend appears to be changing. In addition to the numerous projects explicitly related to video games and trauma cited earlier, recent years have seen a growing number of journal

articles, book chapters, conference panels, and theses focused on a wide range of topics related to gaming. These focus on such issues as gender and genre (Kim, 2009), social capital (Dalisay et al., 2015), economies of power (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009), labor (Fisch 2015), and moral and ethical gameplay (Sicart, 2009, 2013), among many others. Now there is a growing library of scholarly articles on video games within Japanese popular culture studies (Bolton, 2009; Galbraith, 2011; Hemmann, 2013; Hutchinson, 2007; Taylor, 2007), as well as several case studies on Japanese games in media studies books and journals (Burrill, 2009; Cremin, 2012; Martin, 2016; Picard, 2013). This is to say nothing of the selection of non-academic monographs available on Japanese video games centered on the business histories of specific gaming companies, such as Nintendo (Sheff, 1994) or Sega (Harris, 2014), or the Japanese game industry more generally (Kohler, 2005).

As this project is situated first and foremost within modern Japanese literature and popular culture studies, I, whenever possible, use research on video games conducted within Japan by Japanese scholars. This body of Japanese-language scholarship on video games is situated in a different way than in North America. Early Japanese essays on video games such as Nakazawa Shin'ichi's "The Game Freaks Who Play With Bugs" (1984, trans. 2015), focused on particular games and gameplay practices and mapped these onto larger social phenomena within Japan. While not to discount those scholars who analyze the popularity of social gaming in Japan (Komago, 2012; Nakayama 2012), or provide larger histories of Japanese games (Sayawaka, 2012; Tane, 2011), many Japanese scholars writing about video games today follow the trajectory established by Nakazawa. These scholars are therefore situated within Japan under the category of *bunka hyōron* or "cultural commentary."

This cultural commentary mode of address has some overlaps with North American critical theory, poststructuralist theory, and cultural studies. As such, it fits with my project's focus on social relevance and gaming. However, Japanese research on video games does tend to have a different set of concerns and frequently uses video games and gameplay as a prism for looking at Japanese social and cultural issues. This perspective contrasts with Western media studies scholarship on games that often discusses the larger technological infrastructure of games (focusing on programming software, level design, or simulation; Frasca, 2003), analyzes industry issues related to distribution and localization (Consalvo, 2016), or theorizes the concept of play more generally (Huizinga, 1955; Upton, 2015). I find the general approach of Japanese game research productive for thinking through the links between those video games that are designed in Japan and how they might affect Japanese players and society more broadly. To this end, in the chapters that follow, I draw heavily on the work of three such cultural critics; namely, Ōtsuka Eiji, Azuma Hiroki, and Uno Tsunehiro, all of whom weave game analyses into their larger commentaries about Japanese society and cultural consumption.

Now is indeed a ripe time to conduct research on Japanese video games. *Beyond 8-bit* builds on the existing work that has been done in both Japanese studies and media studies with regard to video games as ethically and politically embedded works of popular culture. One of the central ways this project contributes to the existing scholarship is by providing both a theoretical framework for elucidating factors underlying gameic representations of trauma, and in-depth analyses of three specific socially relevant gaming texts from Japan.

If one approach is conspicuously absent in the current crop of video game scholarship about Japan, it is an attention to the sociocultural and historical significance of these texts within their country of origin. Even a seemingly primitive platform game such as *Super Mario Bros. 3*

(Nintendo, 1988) contains hidden elements of Japanese culture. During the adventure, Mario is capable of transforming his appearance and skillset using a variety of special suits. One now famous suit is modeled on the real-life Japanese "raccoon dog" known as the *tanuki*. This "Tanooki Suit" bestows Mario with the ability to fly and a cute tail. In addition, holding the down arrow and B button on the controller enables Tanooki Mario to turn into a statue, causing enemies to walk right by him for a short period of time. Many Western players, myself included, may have ignored Mario's ability to become a statue. However, the game's official instruction booklet reveals that Mario does not turn into any old statue but rather becomes a stone "*Jizō Mario*"—an important cultural reference. With his red bib and long staff, Mario visually appropriates this well-known image of the bodhisattva protector of deceased children and travelers. This image can be seen in the actual statues of *Jizō* that dot temples and graveyards throughout Japan. To think that I was learning about Japanese culture and did not even realize it! If even *Super Mario Bros. 3* provides this teachable moment, then a major benefit of this project is elucidating the deep ways in which today's video games are used to simulate and reflect on social issues of importance to the Japanese people and thus provide players with new ways to involve themselves in these issues and debates.

While many studies discuss how games simulate behaviors and model worlds at a theoretical level, they often leave out the player experience. That is, the process through which the narrative, characters, and gameplay mechanisms work together to communicate trauma and catharsis to the player. This element is crucial as today's video games increasingly have strong narrative and emotional aspirations. For all the Japanese video games and game characters beloved around the world, there are curiously few studies that foreground the ways in which specific tenets of Japanese game design build on the affective capabilities of other entertainment

media to bring about new ways to tell stories, address human issues, and transform users for the better. It is here that *Beyond 8-bit* contributes most to the growing field of scholarship on Japanese video games.

World Map: Outline of the Study

Chapter one asks whether experiencing disaster trauma in the form of a virtual earthquake in the game *Disaster Report* (Irem, 2002, 2003 No. Amer.) might teach transferrable survival skills to potential victims and also help players better empathize with the plight of survivors. I coin the term "limited engagement," for a form of operationalized weakness designed to simulate vulnerability and produce empathy in players through a reduction of their sense of superiority and control in the game to a ground-level experience of shared survival. At this level of play, success in the game requires the continual awareness of how to survive "physically," by searching for fresh water and practicing earthquake preparedness drills, as well as caring for other computer-controlled companions. If, as art historian Gennifer Weisenfeld argues, disasters are a "generative force in Japanese culture" (13), then this chapter seeks to investigate the potential positive social benefits when disaster trauma comingles with the training potential offered by current video game technology. This chapter concludes by engaging with Susan Sontag's essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) to discuss disaster photography as it functions within the game. I suggest that players of *Disaster Report* experience a newfound sense of emotional engagement with photographic images of mass catastrophe owing to the "virtual memories" generated by their time spent playing the game and working through the survival scenario.

Chapter two turns its attention to subconscious trauma and nightmares by discussing the politics of marriage and childbirth as represented in the action-puzzle game *Catherine* (Atlus,

2011). This game presents a social narrative that comments on Japan's pressing issue of a

declining birthrate and aging population. I make use of national fertility survey data from Japan

to argue that *Catherine* subverts classic gendered game tropes by representing marriage and

childbirth as a series of increasingly terrifying nightmare puzzle levels that emotionally resonate

with the fears of many young Japanese couples. I theorize a strategy for player involvement

based on what I term "distanced engagement," or self-reflexive and intellectual techniques

integrated into the gameplay. Players must constantly answer polls about their views on marriage

and childbirth in order to progress through the game. I conclude the chapter by discussing how

this polling mechanic and online indexing of response data, coupled with the game's branching

metanarrative and multiple endings, encourages players to critically self-reflect on both the game

scenario and what they desire in love and life outside of the game.

Finally, chapter three examines post-traumatic stress and war memory in the stealth

action game *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015). Set during the

end of the Cold War, the game's central protagonist, Big Boss, seems to be a paragon of strength

and bravery on the battlefield. However, by strategically undermining the postwar foundational

narrative between Japan and the United States following the end of WWII, *MGSV* portrays

broken soldiers betrayed by their country and haunted by the specter of nuclear war. This

brokenness can be observed in the various gameplay scenarios that incorporate gameic

manifestations of phantom limb pain and post-traumatic stress disorder to communicate the fog

of war to the player. I argue that the game deploys strategies of "external engagement," or a

merging of the in-game content with the real-world, to heighten players' sense of moral

engagement with the game content. The result, I suggest, is that the game is able to strengthen

the impact of the antiwar social narrative by simulating the real-world consequences and culpability for video game violence committed by the main character.

This dissertation concludes with thoughts about what these three works demonstrate about how video games can grapple with trauma and recovery and how they might affect players when the game switches off. Specifically, I propose that the gameplay strategies of limited, distanced, and external engagement necessitate a re-evaluation of where humanistic and empathetic games are headed as our future begins to look more and more like a video game.

PRESS START TO BEGIN!

Level 1: Virtual Earthquakes and Real-World Survival in *Disaster Report*

Japan has been called an "earthquake nation." According to art historian Gennifer Weisenfeld, disasters have historically served as a transformative force in Japan, influencing not just society and politics, but art and culture as well (13). One such transformative event occurred on March 11, 2011, when Japan experienced the largest earthquake in its recorded history. This magnitude 9.0 quake devastated the northeastern Tōhoku region of the main island of Honshū, crumbling buildings, and causing widespread landslides and fires. More terrifying yet was the tsunami it triggered some 40 minutes later that sent 15-meter-high waves surging inland as far as 10 kilometers, washing away everything in their path—vehicles, buildings, lives (Gill, Steger, and Slater 3–6). In contemporary Japan, earthquakes have also influenced the production and content of video games.

Three days after this Great East Japan Earthquake (*Higashi Nihon Daishinsai*), a small studio named Irem quietly cancelled development on their latest video game. The game in question was *Summer Memories*, the fourth entry in their popular *Zettai zetsumei toshi* (*ZZT*; literally "The Desperate City," but known in North America as *Disaster Report*) series of survival action-adventure games for home consoles. In the game, players assume the role of a disaster victim and must use limited resources to navigate and escape from earthquake- and tsunami-stricken Japanese cities while rescuing other computer-controlled survivors and scavenging for tools and equipment.

Irem, like any entertainment publisher attempting to market a resonant work in the face of a national tragedy, made the logical choice to cancel development out of respect for the victims. While the game's designer and series creator Kujō Kazuma has since resumed development on an updated version of the game, his comments about the cancellation evidence a

general unease with placing entertainment works about trauma at the same level as real-world

suffering and mourning.[2] He states, "This may sound impudent, but what we were trying to

simulate in our game actually happened in reality on March 11 … After seeing the effects of the

earthquake and tsunami, it just became impossible to set a release date for that title" (qtd. in

Parish). Thus, while it is all fun and games (quite literally) to depict a massive earthquake in a

virtual space for entertainment purposes, the implication is that the medium or genre itself must

somehow be already imbued with gravitas in order to depict trauma. Otherwise, the

representation can be perceived as immoral in the senses of trivializing the seriousness of the

event or profiting from the pain of real-world victims.

This difficulty of representing trauma is something theorist Cathy Caruth has discussed in

her book *Unclaimed Experience*. For Caruth, trauma is an incomprehensible event precisely

because the mechanisms of consciousness and memory are temporarily destroyed during the

moment of trauma. She writes, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in

an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was

precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4; emphasis in

the original). This crisis in personal memory inevitably leads to a crisis in history, narrative time,

and artistic representation if one attempts to express a trauma since the original referent was

never fully understood in the first place. If Caruth is right about the difficulty of representing

trauma, then what hope might a video game have of capturing these difficult events?

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[2] Game designer Kujō left Irem in April 2011 in order to establish his own development studio Granzella, which has since obtained the copyright to the *Disaster Report* series from Irem. While *Disaster Report 4* remains officially cancelled, the team has since restarted development on an updated version of the game for PlayStation 4 under the revised title of *Zettai zetsumei toshi 4 Plus – Summer Memories* (Granzella). There are two direct sequels to *Disaster Report* originally published by Irem. They are *Zettai zetsumei toshi 2: Itetsuita kiokutachi* (2006, *Raw Danger!* 2007, lit. "Frozen Memories") for PlayStation 2, and *Zettai zetsumei toshi 3: Kowareyuku machi to kanojo no uta* (2009, lit. "Broken Town and Her Song") for PlayStation Portable, which was released exclusively in Japan.

While a game such as *Disaster Report* can never provide an accurate representation of what it is like to experience an event such as the Great East Japan Earthquake, a pop culture exploration of catastrophe can still teach us about vulnerability and victimhood. If the goal is to understand the pain of others, video games might give us a distinct advantage over film and still photography. Throughout this chapter I examine this idea from two main perspectives: first, by looking at how gameplay mechanics communicate practical knowledge to actual victims and teach survival skills that can be used outside of the game; and second, by considering how the game experience might inculcate understanding and empathy for actual victims among the rest of us, the uninitiated players who experience disaster trauma secondhand through news photographs or online videos. Thus, my argument is that a game like *Disaster Report* might help players learn both practical and affective ways to relate to the experience of a major earthquake.

This chapter centers on an analysis of the eponymous first game in the *Zettai zetsumei toshi* series. Originally developed in Japan for the Sony PlayStation 2 in 2002, the game was subsequently fully localized by the U.S. company Agetec, and released in North America as *Disaster Report* and in Europe as *SOS: The Final Escape* in 2003.[3] I begin by first discussing the social narrative of the video game. The original *Disaster Report* was released nearly ten years prior to the Tōhoku earthquake, yet it remains oddly prescient in how it anticipates the debate on natural versus human-made disasters that emerged in the aftermath of the Level 7 meltdown of the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Fukushima Prefecture in 2011. Next, I turn my attention to the gameplay strategies of *Disaster Report* and introduce what I term "limited engagement" or a

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[3] While most games released today do not receive substantial changes across regions, when *Disaster Report* was localized for Western markets the hair color and names of the main characters were altered. In addition, some location names were changed to cater to non-Japanese audiences. All other elements of the game remained unchanged between the versions, including the level design, with all the original Japanese in-game text on buildings and signs. I use the Japanese-language character names throughout this chapter.

form of enforced vulnerability through the intentional subtraction of in-game skills and abilities

in order to communicate a sense of victimhood to the player. This leads me to a discussion of

how and in what ways this gameic experience of survival might transfer to the real world.

According to interviews with the game's creator Kujō Kazuma, hundreds of *Disaster Report*

players cited the survival information they learned from the game when writing letters of support

to Irem shortly after the earthquake and tsunami prompted the fourth game's cancellation. I

conclude by engaging with Susan Sontag's essay *Regarding The Pain of Others* (2003).

Responding to Sontag's critique of decontextualized photographs, I discuss the inclusion of

disaster photography within the video game and how its presence within the larger interactive

framework engenders a new form of meaning-making wherein players attach their "virtual

memories" to the simulated relationships and events within the game.

1.1   A Social Narrative of Survival for "Generation Zero"

When *Disaster Report* was first released in 2002, it deviated from the established tropes

of the survival genre. Many games use the visuality of disaster in the service of a larger narrative

about a monster or alien invasion, or choose to express disaster *as* a monster or alien (as is the

common analogical reading of Godzilla). Kujō's survival game was unique in that it was the first

game to allow the disaster to appear as itself. In this way, *Disaster Report* coincides with what

Japanese cultural critic Uno Tsunehiro identifies as a new trend in Japanese pop culture

narratives following 2001.

Uno argues for a rupture between an "old imaginative power" (*furui sōzōryoku*) and a

"contemporary imaginative power" (*gendai no sōzōryoku*; 13). This "old imaginative power"

was widespread between 1995 and 2001 and can be found in representative pop culture works

from the period such as Anno Hideaki's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–96). These "old-style"

narratives drew on the social and political climate of the 1990s, which saw the bursting of Japan's bubble economy and the domestic terrorism of the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack in 1995 (14). Consequently, Uno argues that these works reflect a sense of general helplessness felt by the Japanese people. Specifically, individual character agency, or the ability to "do" or to "not do" something (*suru* / *shinai*), was replaced in these mid-1990s narratives with an imposed worldview where seemingly intractable situations were outside anyone's control ("it is" or "it isn't" – *dearu* / *dewanai*; 18).

The turning point, according to Uno, was the terrorist attacks on New York's World

Figure 1. Masayuki Sudō rests on a street corner with Higa Natsumi. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, which gave birth to "generation zero" (*zero nendai*; roughly 2000–2008) and a new, "contemporary" form of imaginative power. Uno characterizes this period with works such as the film adaptation of Takami Koushun's novel *Battle Royale* (2000) and the wildly popular manga series *Death Note* (2003–2006) by Ohba Tsugumi and Obata Takeshi (20–21). This wave of pop culture works emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 and were imbued with a newfound "sense of survival" (*savaivu-kan*). Generation zero characters, and by extension the fans themselves, came to embody the idea that one had to collect their strength and make a decision to act when faced with a difficult situation, even if this meant hurting others or breaking societal rules (23). The social narrative of *Disaster Report* fits nicely

within Uno's conception of cultural works from generation zero. Not only does the game clearly

express the "sense of survival" integral to Uno's thesis, but it also incorporates a subtle political

critique of the Japanese government, something common in many generation zero pop culture

works.

The game begins in the then near-future on June 21, 2005. Players control the avatar of

25-year-old newspaper journalist Masayuki Sudō, who is on his way to begin a new job

assignment at the local newspaper (Figure 1). The game starts aboard an automated train as

Masayuki heads from the airport to his new home of Capital City, a metropolis built atop a

manmade island.[4] It is during this train ride that a massive magnitude 6.0 earthquake strikes,

collapsing bridges, crumbling buildings, and sending the entire island gradually sinking into the

Pacific Ocean. Over the next three days (roughly 10 hours of playtime), Masayuki must safely

traverse the sinking city and make his way to an evacuation zone while avoiding obstacles and

rescuing other survivors.

One such survivor is 20-year-old college student Aizawa Mari whom players rescue from

a hanging train car early in the game. Mari becomes Masayuki's companion throughout the

majority of the escape until a branching point in the narrative where players must decide either to

travel with Mari to her apartment to rescue her dog Gen, or alternatively team up with another

survivor, high school student Higa Natsumi, as she attempts to reunite with her lost brother. In

the interest of full disclosure, I chose to rescue the dog. Another non-player character (NPC)

central to the story is 30-year-old freelance photojournalist Jinnai Kōji. Jinnai is a former

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[4] The game's manmade Capital Island (*Shutotō*) includes many parallels to Odaiba, a large artificial island in Tokyo Bay home to shopping and entertainment districts. For example, the automated *umitsubame* train that Masayuki rides at the outset of the game is clearly modeled after the *Yurikamome* transit system that travels to Odaiba.

employee of the local newspaper and has stayed behind to document the disaster. In the process

he uncovers information about a potential conspiracy related to the earthquake.

Towards the end of the game the earthquake is revealed to have been caused by human

negligence rather than forces of nature. Beginning in 1985, the Prime Minister of Japan along

with Hatta Takumi, Director of the Ministry's Land Development Department, initiated a plan to

separate and relocate the capital city of Tokyo into four locations in order to prevent

overpopulation and stimulate the economy. They utilized a new cutting-edge technology known

as the Honeycomb-Caisson Method in order to reclaim land deep under the ocean and convert it

into a stable honeycomb foundation on which entire cities could be built. After 10 years of

construction, what began as a tiny spur of rock near Hirasaki Island in N Prefecture was reborn

as one of the four locations for the new capital.

The chief architect behind the project is Shinzaki Yoshitaka, who also happens to be

Mari's uncle. It is revealed that Shinzaki intentionally triggered the earthquake in order to sink

the island and get revenge against the government. Shinzaki's wife and two children were

crushed in a landslide during construction of the island, which he attributes to negligence and

safety oversights by the Land Development Department. The final twist of the game is that the

landslide was intentionally caused by Hatta Takumi in order to kill Shinzaki's family and

motivate the architect to sink the island out of grief.[5]

The game ends with a rooftop confrontation atop the Capital City Central Tower as the

heroes (Masayuki, photojournalist Jinnai, and either Mari or Natsumi depending on the narrative

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[5] Game designer Kujō notes that the sinking of Capital Island was influenced in part by Komatsu Sakyō's 1973 science fiction novel *Nippon chinbotsu* (*Japan Sinks*) and the manga series *Survival* (1976–78) by Saitō Takao (Parish, Szczepaniak). Hatta Takumi's personal motivations for wanting Shinzaki to sink the island are not fully explained in the game. It is implied that Hatta is working as part of a larger criminal syndicate that will profit from the island's destruction.

branch selected by the player) attempt to signal a rescue chopper but are confronted by Hatta and his armed henchmen. Jinnai is shot and killed by Hatta before Shinzaki wrestles the gun away from the Land Minister and pushes them both off the skyscraper to their deaths. *Disaster Report* features seven different game endings, some optimistic, others tragic, depending on the choices made throughout the game and whether Masayuki has befriended Mari or Natsumi during the side mission.

In their book *Japan Copes with Calamity*, Gill, Steger, and Slater note the importance of framing narratives in the process of coping with and rationalizing disaster. Framing narratives are "shared explanations of situations that are often too terrible and/or too complex to be easily grasped and rendered." Historically, religion has often served as the framing narrative in cases of natural disaster. However, in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake, the two dominant framing narratives that emerged were that of the *tensai* or "natural disaster" and the *jinsai* or "manmade disaster" (Gill, Steger, and Slater 15). The "natural" disasters of the earthquake and tsunami were quickly contrasted with the "manmade" meltdown of the Daiichi nuclear plant that came to be attributed to negligence and cover-up by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). In addition, those local communities who had accepted nuclear power plants in return for large subsidies were also criticized in the aftermath of Fukushima (Gill, Steger, and Slater 19–20).

Disaster Report features a social narrative that negotiates this disaster dialectic while including real-world details about survival following a catastrophe. It is possible to read the Honeycomb-Caisson technology used to create the island as an analog for nuclear power. In-game construction reports, newspaper clippings, and other personal documents can be found scattered within the various environments and they serve to fill the player in on background

information about this technological breakthrough. The player learns that the Japanese-made

Honeycomb-Caisson method has generated considerable interest from world governments due to

its potential applications for population control and economic stimulus. Thus, the island's

completion stands as a testament to the power of the Japanese government to develop and

harness this new transformative technology.

By placing the island's disaster within a larger conspiracy of governmental malpractice,

the social narrative in *Disaster Report* quickly prompts the main characters within the game to

reflect on human responsibility and culpability in addition to shared victimization. To begin, the

earthquake has apparently only severely damaged the island and Capital City. When Masayuki

vows to finish Jinnai's work by publishing his exposé on Hatta Takumi and the Land

Development Department, he plans to do so from the "mainland." This localization of the

earthquake vis-à-vis an otherwise unaffected Japanese mainland is similar to the isolation many

Tōhoku victims felt in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake, as their vegetables and

meat products were subsequently deemed hazardous to human health throughout the rest of

Japan (Ikeda 168).

Masayuki and Mari discover that the underground reservoirs and aqueducts built to expel

excess rainwater from Capital City vibrate during the process and have been deemed unsafe. As

is common with real-world protests against nuclear energy, local residents in the game had

complained to the government to no avail, prompting anti-island activists to occupy the airport

and threaten a class action lawsuit. Further linking to the negative effects of nuclear power,

secret documents in the game reveal that contaminated waste is a byproduct of the Honeycomb-

Caisson technology. The Land Development Department has been dumping this waste into the

Kiser River for ten years during construction of the island, slowly causing the bedrock to crack

and making the area more susceptible to earthquakes. This subtle political critique in *Disaster Report* aligns with the "generation zero" narrativization Uno describes as featuring a "society gone wrong" (*machigatta shakai*) that values technological innovation, corporate profits, and political influence over the safety of its citizenry (21).

While most of the danger in *Disaster Report* stems from the human-made earthquake and its aftershocks, there is a natural disaster as well.[6] Near the end of the game, Masayuki, Mari, and Jinnai receive a radio warning about a 200-foot-high tsunami that is fast approaching Capital City. Of the Tōhoku death toll of around 18,600 people, it is estimated that some 94% of the casualties were due to the tsunami, a fact that has conceptually defined it in the minds on many Japanese victims as the true "natural disaster" over the earthquake (Gill, Steger, and Slater 6). Standard survival advice for a tsunami is, "When the tsunami comes, leave everything behind and flee!" (5). During this section of the game, players have no choice but to follow this advice and run inside the Capital City Tower in order to avoid the tsunami water rushing down the street.

Figure 2. The tsunami approaches bringing a tanker ship along with it (pictured behind the traffic light). ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

During one playthrough I had Masayuki stand in the middle of the road and deliberately waited until the tsunami washed him away causing an instant game over. However, doing so

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[6] Scholars such as Millie Creighton and Gennifer Weisenfeld have problematized this distinction between "natural" and "manmade" disasters with regard to the "3.11 Triple Disaster" (so named to include the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown). Creighton argues that in the case of Fukushima Daiichi, the meltdown cannot be thought of as wholly manmade since it was the tsunami waters that brought about the failure in the cooling system leading to the meltdown (99). Weisenfeld views all natural disasters as tied in part to issues of the social in that they highlight problems at the societal level (306).

allowed me to catch a glimpse of a giant tanker ship riding atop the wave as the tsunami

enveloped me (Figure 2). This odd sight of the ship further authenticates this social narrative by

representing what anthropologists have termed "matter out of place" in relation to a similar real-

life ship, the Kyōtoku Maru No. 18, which was pushed inland by the tsunami (qtd. in Creighton

108).

The game's attention to providing an authentic and believable simulation of disaster can

also be observed in environments and character dialogue. In one memorable section, Masayuki

and Mari make their way through former evacuation and shelter sites such as Windrunner Park

and May Stadium while avoiding aftershocks. Moving through the now evacuated sports

stadium, players see the abandoned cots and water trucks used to aid victims. The scene evokes

the real-world emergency shelters in the affected regions of Tōhoku where "sleeping on cold,

hardwood floors, with little privacy and personal space, was immensely stressful" (Gill, Steger,

and Slater 9). Many Tōhoku victims reported that shelter life put a strain on their existing

relationships due to the packed and shared living quarters. However, in *Disaster Report*, the

gameplay section that takes place in the stadium is the first major set piece to occur since all four

main characters have been reunited from their various side quests. The sequence requires

teamwork and input from all characters as Masayuki and Mari rush to escape falling debris while

Jinnai and Natsumi attempt to find a way to escape the collapsing stadium. The effect is that the

gameplay imperative transforms this emergency shelter setting into an active site of teamwork

and collective problem solving. This gameplay sequence validates some of the more positive

aspects of shelter life according to elderly Japanese victims who enjoyed the sense of community

and camaraderie provided by the shared living situations (10).

Brigitte Steger writes that victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake tried to make sense of their situations and control their anxieties through cleaning both their own bodies and the environment (54). Often this took the form of a differentiation and demarcation between clean and safe *uchi* (inside) shelter space and the dirty and dangerous *soto* (outside) environments (72). In *Disaster Report* there is a noticeable lack of safe *uchi* spaces. Nonetheless, the issue of personal hygiene arises when high school student Higa Natsumi is being rescued at the end of the game (having been successfully reunited with her younger brother). She states to Masayuki, "Where am I going to live? Whatever. All I know is I'm taking a long, hot bath." Subtle interactions such as this reinforce the simple wishes of survivors of natural disaster and add another dimension to the resonance of the game's social narrative.

1.2 Limited Engagement

Game studies scholar Ian Bogost argues that if videogames are to foster empathy for real-world situations, then players should be cast as the "downtrodden rather than the larger, more … powerful [characters]" (*Do Things* 19). One of the primary examples he cites in support of this form of gameic empathy is a Japanese PlayStation 2 game named *Ico* (Team Ico, 2001), in which a young boy with horns must help a princess escape a haunted castle. Director Ueda Fumito's game is played with minimal dialogue. Since Ico, the titular horned boy, and princess Yorda speak different languages (represented to the player through gibberish), the player must press a button to have Ico utter a simple "wait" or "follow" command to Yorda—seemingly the only point of communication between them. Since Yorda is unable to climb and traverse many obstacles by herself, a central gameplay mechanic involves helping Yorda over obstacles and holding her hand while leading her through the game's various areas and puzzles. When shadow creatures manifest to recapture the princess, Ico is armed with only a stick to fend off these

overpowering enemies. The spiritual successor to *Ico* is *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005, *Wanda to kyozō*). In this game, a lone wanderer is tasked with killing sixteen gargantuan beasts with nothing but his sword and horse as an ally.

Bogost is not alone in singling out these Japanese games. Fellow game studies scholar Miguel Sicart finds in *Shadow of the Colossus* an open form of gameplay that leaves ethical reasoning to the players, rather than imposing an overarching good-evil structure. For this reason, Sicart views *Shadow of the Colossus* as an exemplary game that validates players as moral agents within their own play sessions (*Ethics* 215). Finally, Brian Upton also cites *Ico* as a case study where the gameplay and narrative play align with "powerful results" (268). It is telling that Bogost, Sicart, and Upton, three non-Japanese studies specialists, all point to these same games to validate their various arguments about the expressive potential of video game play. I would posit that one of the reasons why scholars gravitate to these specific video game titles is due to the way they strip away many classic video game "superpowers" in order to convey a sense of unadulterated exploration or survival to the player.[7] In short, they serve as prime examples of a Japanese game design strategy that entices players specifically by casting them as underdogs against seemingly insurmountable odds.

I coin the term "limited engagement" to refer to a constellation of gameplay features designed to communicate a sense of vulnerability to the player through subtracting character skills, limiting in-game items, and deliberately controlling the pace and progression of gameplay. Labeling a video game "limited" is not meant as a pejorative. Japanese video games have a long history of playing with these sorts of "limitations" to great immersive effect. The strategy was

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[7] In addition, both *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus* are frequently cited as positive examples in the ongoing debate over whether video games constitute high art. See for example the blog entry titled "Okay, Kids, Play on My Lawn" by the late film critic Roger Ebert (1 Jul. 2010).

first popularized in the survival-horror series *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996, *Baiohazādo*). In that

game, the central goal of escaping from a mansion while avoiding flesh-eating zombies, undead

dogs, and other mutated creatures is made all the more difficult due to the deliberately limited

ammunition and healing supplies scattered throughout the environments. In addition, players

must collect ink ribbons and use them in typewriters scattered through the game in order to save

their progress to their memory card. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of games designed around

limited engagement is a scarcity of in-game items and limited health. Permanently or temporarily

disempowering characters not only heightens the challenge of the game, but it is also an effective

means for communicating vulnerability or victimhood within a diegesis. For example, a

memorable section of limited engagement in *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (Konami,

2001) has players controlling super spy Raiden as he attempts to escape from an enemy fortress

without any clothes or gear. During this section, players must rely solely on their non-lethal

stealth skills, sneaking around corners and ducking from enemy view while Raiden comically

covers his genitals onscreen.

  Whether sweating over how many bullets remain in your clip in *Resident Evil*, guiding

Yorda by hand over dangerous obstacles in *Ico*, or cartwheeling naked through a base while

avoiding sentries in *Metal Gear Solid 2*, limited engagement has been used to create a variety of

memorable gameplay experiences that subvert the tropes of traditionally hyper-strong, hyper-

masculine, and seemingly invincible video game protagonists. *Disaster Report* draws on this

lineage of Japanese game design to create a ludic representation of survival more varied than any

of its predecessors. These limited engagement choices function to alter the positionality and scale

of the experience, forcing the player to "live" the earthquake from within. They also serve to

reduce the catastrophe to a manageable human scale in order to create a sense of emotional

resonance and allow players to identify with the plight of the in-game survivors.

1.3   Communicating Survival Through Limited Gameplay

In creating a gameic simulation of earthquake survival, *Disaster Report* uses a variety of

limited engagement strategies to communicate victimization. Broadly grouped, these include

maintaining the health of the in-game characters, resource management and item crafting, and

branching narrative choices that prompt the player to make either individual or collective

survival decisions. I will address each in order to illustrate how the game successfully imagines

and simulates what it might be like to survive a devastating natural disaster.

Most conventional action-adventure video games feature a health gauge visible onscreen to communicate character wellbeing to the player. The standard green HP (Health Points) bar for overall health (shown in Figure 3 above)

Figure 3. Masayuki carries the injured editor-in-chief of the local newspaper on his back through Windrunner Park as Mari stands at his side. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

depletes as Masayuki tumbles to the ground during in-game aftershocks or is hit by falling

debris. Injury graphically manifests itself as the avatars' clothes rip and they begin to display

cuts and gashes, a testament to the obstacles they have overcome. These graphic cues are

permanent and encourage players to search the environments for accessories such as hardhats

and protective vests to reduce injuries. Injury and weakness are not simply manifested visually.

At one point in the game Masayuki must carry the injured editor-in-chief of the local newspaper

on his back as the group make their way to the park evacuation site (Figure 3). Masayuki will

also periodically hold hands with Mari and lead her to safety[8] when fleeing from Hatta Takumi's

henchmen or the deadly tsunami (Figure 4). In another section, the gameplay adopts a first-

person view as Masayuki crawls over broken glass to move from one section of a collapsed

building to another. Each of these sections alters the tempo of gameplay, necessarily slowing

down the main character's movement in order to communicate a sense of decreased mobility

common when helping others in survival situations.

Figure 4. Masayuki holds onto Mari's hand and helps her cross a gap in a collapsed staircase. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Incorporating a gameplay technique popularized in Ueda's *Ico*, one controller button is reserved for a verbal utterance. Pressing this button will prompt Masayuki to call out to his companions, bringing them immediately running to his side, ready to help with the next task.

Working with the various computer-controlled partners in this way is essential to progress

through the game's various environmental puzzles. In one such scenario, Mari must act as a

human counterweight as Masayuki creeps along a suspended shipping container in order to

retrieve a length of rope needed to tie together materials for a raft.

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[8] The much maligned video game trope of the male hero rescuing the "damsel in distress" is certainly at play in the original *Disaster Report*. However, earthquakes do not discriminate and in this game it is all the characters, male and female, who are depowered and forced into a situation of mutual survival. It is also worth noting that in the sequel *ZZT 3* players can choose either a male or female central protagonist. Furthermore, the currently in-development *ZZT 4 Plus – Summer Memories* will feature a playable female protagonist as well.

Caruth argues that victimhood is unlocatable in any particular person, place, or traumatic event. Rather, it is able to migrate or transmit from person to person across time and space. Thus, central to Caruth's understanding of trauma is "the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8). A victim may enact or perform her traumatic experience through a face-to-face testimony, which in turn affects the listener. Even though *Disaster Report* is a single player game, this emphasis on paired problem solving creates a sense of camaraderie and shared survival. This feeling spreads from Masayuki to the other in-game characters he meets during the adventure as they swap stories of survival during in-game cinematic cutscenes. This is a common rhetorical device, particularly in Japanese atomic bomb literature, where a variety of personal experiences are often included alongside that of the central protagonist. In these stories, characters often stop to swap stories with each other and each narrative becomes equally important for piecing together what happened during the moment of trauma (Orbaugh 212). In terms of play, one of the main ways that players enact shared survival within the game is through managing hydration levels.

Health systems, which convey to the player the declining or increasing health of the main character(s), have existed since the advent of video games. However, unique to *Disaster Report* is a second system for conveying vulnerability—a gauge immediately underneath the green HP bar comprised of a series of blue squares (see, for example, Figure 3 or 6). This is a QP (Quench Points) gauge and it measures Masayuki's hydration levels. Squares from the QP gauge diminish as Masayuki exerts himself physically. The game requires a deliberately slow default walking pace. More strenuous activities such as pulling oneself up from a ledge or sprinting a few city blocks quickly deplete the gauge. Players must constantly monitor both physical wellbeing and hydration levels while playing. While the HP gauge can be replenished by using accumulated

bandages and first aid kits, QP can only be "refilled" by drinking fresh water. Throughout the game, players must constantly look for drinking fountains, sinks, and water trucks from which to quench their thirst. Drinking water becomes doubly important as it provides the only opportunity for players to save their game progress to their memory cards. It is in this unique gameplay mechanic that *Disaster Report* not only communicates the fragility of the human body but also ties itself to the specific importance of fresh water in survival situations, particularly after the Great East Japan Earthquake.

As Brigitte Steger explains, finding fresh spring water sources became of paramount

Figure 5. Inventory management is carried out by storing or removing items from Masayuki's backpack. This bag contains two plastic bottles each with three servings of fresh water. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

importance after the Tōhoku earthquake as the water supply to many local towns became cut off. Water had to be drawn by hand from wells and then always boiled either on propane stoves or outdoor fires to kill bacteria (60–62). *Disaster Report* honors the importance of water within a survival situation. Rather than provide abundant sources of drinking water, the game forces players to carefully and

strategically monitor their actions and physical exertions since the location of the next water source is never known. Limiting water sources in this way is one of the main ways *Disaster Report* fosters limited engagement. Hastily drinking contaminated water to refill your QP gauge will deplete health and make Masayuki ill. It is only by locating a water purifier, or

independently scavenging the various parts necessary to craft the item, that dirty water can be

made safe to drink within the game.

In the disaster shelters of Tōhoku, survivors formed a sense of community and solidarity

by "sharing and solving hygiene problems" (Steger 72). Here too the gameic simulation of

catastrophe references this real-world cooperation. As the game progresses, Masayuki can collect

various sizes of plastic bottles that can be used to transport water throughout the journey or be

given to other companions (Figure 5). Maintaining not just Masayuki's personal hydration level

but also the levels of his companions becomes another central goal of gameplay. Looking after

your friends directly influences the degree to which the computer controlled allies will "bond"

with you, so it is in a player's best interest to continually offer water to your companions rather

Figure 6. Masayuki mimics the real-world earthquake preparedness drill of "drop, cover, and hold on" during an aftershock. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

than guzzling it all for yourself.

The traumatic experience is, as Freud argued in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, reproduced repetitively precisely because of the deferral of understanding at the time of trauma (60). This experience of asynchronicity, inherent to trauma, also defines the rhythm of gameplay in *Disaster Report*.

Aftershocks represent the main risk of injury for Masayuki. In addition to the "call" button

mentioned earlier, another button's sole function is to trigger Masayuki to drop and hold onto the

ground, mimicking the real-world earthquake preparedness drill known as "drop, cover, and hold

on" (Figure 6). Players never know when an aftershock will strike and suddenly collapse a

walkway Masayuki is standing on or dramatically send an entire building tilting off its axis. This topographic malleability certainly adds tension to the gameplay, but it also mimics the inherent unpredictability of disaster injury. The PlayStation 2's DualShock 2 controller contains two rumbling motors that produce haptic feedback as you play. This rumbling occurs in real-time during gameplay and heightens the immersion and believability of the disaster scenario. Because aftershock tremors can be felt via the controller immediately before they transform the onscreen environment, *Disaster Report* is able to effectively simulate the split second decision-making needed in a survival situation. Once the player feels the vibrations of the aftershocks in their hands through the controller they must quickly press the button to have Masayuki brace himself and avoid physical damage.

Gennifer Weisenfeld notes that aerial photography of the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake in Tokyo functioned to establish a sense of human control over nature. That is, if a disaster could be captured in its totality from above then it could somehow be controlled, at least conceptually, by humans (39). Outside of the game's opening cinematic, which showcases the large-scale destruction of Capital City as the earthquake hits, the subsequent survival experience occurs entirely at the individual, interpersonal level. Masayuki and Mari move on foot and must get through damaged buildings, duck underneath debris, and help each other over cracks in the environment. The game contains very little non-diegetic music. The result is that most environments are oddly silent except for the sound of footsteps or blowing wind. The audio design effectively communicates the desolation of these evacuated locations. Spatially, the game incorporates a partially open level design where players enter large environments and are encouraged to explore the various nooks and crannies to collect items before leaving the area.

Collecting and crafting survival items is the second main method the game uses to communicate limited engagement. As is common in survival games, Masayuki's inventory is intentionally limited by the size of his backpack. While the player can upgrade Masayuki's backpack throughout the game, even the largest bag requires players to manage their possessions and make choices as to which items to retain (a flare to signal your location) and which to discard (a jack to lift heavy objects). In addition to collecting useful items like compasses, umbrellas, and flashlights, players can also craft survival items by combining things they have scavenged. Have a bandage, lighter oil, and a crowbar? You just made yourself a handy torch! Situational awareness further tests players to put their survival sense into practice. Rarely does the game instruct players where to go and when to use certain items. Instead, players must reason that they should pull out their compass when lost, illuminate a dark corridor using their cigarette lighter, or slide across a power cable on a clothes hanger! While some of these actions work only within video game logic, others are clearly meant to simulate real-world survival preparedness.

After the game is completed and the final credits roll, players receive an evaluation of their survival skills based on the number of player deaths, the number of times the game was saved, the total distance travelled, and the volume of water drunk. I learned that I had traveled 24 miles during my playthrough and consumed 13 liters of water. While I have no idea if this would pass muster in a real-world survival situation, these game statistics, combined with my frequent deaths and liberal use of save points netted me an overall survival ranking of C. Perhaps I should have drunk more water. *Disaster Report* contains a primitive version of the distanced engagement strategies I will be discussing in-depth in the next chapter with regard to Atlus's puzzle game *Catherine*. By creating an info graphic display to quantify survival ability, the game

encourages players to critically reflect on the overall game experience and their role as a player so as to improve during a second playthrough.

Science historian Ruth Leys argues that Freud's intention was to present trauma as a "psychical" or "historical truth" whose meaning had to be interpreted, reconstructed, and deciphered" (282). *Disaster Report* encourages players to make sense of their own survival experience within the game through a branching narrative with different outcomes depending on the player's individual choices. While the game encourages a collaborative approach to survival, players can choose to help others or work entirely in their own self-interest. Oftentimes these choices manifest as dialogue options where the player can either verbally encourage or discourage a companion about their chance of making it out alive (Figure 7). However, as the game progresses, players are faced with increasingly difficult moral choices. During a decisive moment in the game, Masayuki locates a rescue boat at Windrunner Park. Since the captain is set

Figure 7. Players must choose whether to encourage or dismiss other characters and whether to act in their own self-interest or in the name of shared survival. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

to leave in a few minutes, players must decide whether to board the vessel themselves or return to retrieve their friends, knowing that the boat will likely be gone when the group returns. If Masayuki chooses to abandon his friends and ride to safety, the game limits all further options and ends at that point. Most players will likely choose to return for their friends, both to see how the remainder of the game plays out and also because the play experience has successfully made

them care about their virtual companions. However, even if the player chooses self-preservation, the game does not criticize this choice. Rather, these sorts of difficult choices are necessary and validated within the complex survival simulation of *Disaster Report*, as evidenced by the ending postscript that reads, "Escaped the island on a rescue boat—unfortunately Mari [alt. Natsumi] and Hideaki [editor-in-chief] are missing. I feel terrible, but at the same time, I'm happy to have made it off in one piece."

The malleability of the narrative continues to the game's climax atop the Capital City

Figure 8. The visuality of *Disaster Report* is filled with scenes of citywide destruction. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Tower. *Disaster Report* includes two main ending variations (featuring either Mari or Natsumi as the companion character) that draw on existing disaster genre tropes of overcoming and sacrifice. In the happy ending, Masayuki and Mari are rescued by helicopter following the deaths of island architect Shinzaki

and Land Minister Hatta. The game concludes with Masayuki vowing to write up the exposé with Jinnai's research and photographs once returning to the mainland. The more tragic ending has Masayuki and Mari climb a ladder to the roof of the building just in time to see the rescue chopper depart without them. With nowhere left to go, the two embrace as the tower slowly sinks into the ocean.

Pop culture depictions of catastrophe, particularly Hollywood disaster movies, often include the spectacle of citywide destruction and images of dead bodies. Indeed, seeing

destruction on such a mass scale is one of the perverse joys of disaster entertainment and

photography (Weisenfeld 80–81). *Disaster Report* is replete with collapsing buildings, falling

rubble, and the occasional cadaver (Figure 8). However, this gameic representation of survival

differs in that it ultimately makes the player responsible for what happens throughout the

journey. By including game endings where both characters escape, or both tragically die,

Disaster Report strips away the sense of superiority and complacency commonly felt when

engaging with entertainment representations of disaster, and also honors the uncomfortable real-

world truth that many disaster photographs capture the images of victims who may not have

returned home.

1.4   Letters of Support and Real-World Survival Skills

Game designer Kujō Kazuma was profoundly affected by the Great Hanshin-Awaji

Earthquake that devastated the city of Kobe in 1995: "The Hanshin Earthquake happened after I

had already left [university], but I had friends who died because of that earthquake, and it made

me realize the horrors of earthquakes. Earthquakes are much more of a threat and a reality than

monsters and aliens and I felt that it was a theme that fit games" (qtd. in Parish). Thus, while it

may not be wholly apparent, from its early stages of planning and development, the *Disaster*

Report series was conceived of both as entertainment and as a gameic tribute to lives lost in the

Kobe disaster.

Debate over whether the skills and information received through video game play can

transfer outside of the game world remains contentious. Brian Upton argues that understanding

that emerges from a video game is "portable" if "it applies not just to the work itself, but to our

general grasp of the world and life within it" (266). Even while establishing this framework,

Upton remains largely skeptical about the portability of video game understanding, reasoning

that most gameplay is designed to be "self-contained" and most game mechanisms do not transfer out of the game. For Upton, interpretive play works best when the experience is devoid of a "gamist agenda," that is, free from the types of goal-oriented demands that traditionally structure video game play. It is when these goals are stripped away, Upton reasons, that players become open to new types emotional and informative experiences from the game (275).

Disaster Report complicates Upton's understanding of knowledge portability and video games precisely because the gamist agenda and pedagogical agenda align with spectacular results. While *Disaster Report* is heavily goal-oriented, the intensity of the survival narrative necessitates the in-game goals and vice versa. Rather than provide a goal-free meditative space to enhance player understanding, something utterly absent in any real-world disaster situation, playing *Disaster Report* requires quick thinking and decision making. This is productive for teaching real-world survival skills as the act of progressing through the game requires repeating the survival techniques, and this in turn reinforces the core instructional points the designers hope to impart to the players. This is a fact evidenced by *Disaster Report* players themselves who attest to having learned much from the survival simulation within the game.

Kujō recalls that after the Tōhoku earthquake, Irem received twenty letters from the public criticizing the continued development of *Disaster Report 4*. Then, after the cancellation announcement of the game, the company received 500 more letters requesting that development be resumed: "About a week after the earthquake we even received a letter from the earthquake and tsunami victim. There was a government employee who wrote saying that they were writing from a disaster struck area but not to cancel the game" (qtd. in Parish). According to Kujō, the majority of the 500 letters received testified to how "useful" the game series had been for current victims. Kujō became aware of how players were finding the survival information in the games

helpful and gradually tried to incorporate more information into the game's sequels. He states,

"When I saw the effects of what happened on March 11, I thought that I could make a game that

is even more informative than in the past. And, when I make the next earthquake/disaster game I

want to make it a lot more informative than in the past games" (qtd. in Parish). To this end, a

digital encyclopedia of survival tips is planned for inclusion in the newest game.

1.5   Living Photographs and Virtual Memories at Game's End

In Susan Sontag's book-length essay *Regarding the Pain of Others,* she reformulates her

basic argument that the relentless deluge of vulgar images in contemporary visual culture is

sapping our ability to exercise empathetic engagement (108–09). While she claims that this lack

of empathy has somewhat lessened in recent years, Sontag still holds that photographs are not

much help if the goal is to understand the pain of others. They "shrivel sympathy" (105).

Sontag's basic argument is that people are often unable to take in the sufferings of others through

photographic media (and by extension films and TV), as we are apt to feel relief that the trauma

is not happening to us rather than worrying about the other (99). For Sontag, while painful

images may provide the "initial spark" for us to reflect on, learn about, or examine mass trauma,

"[they] cannot dictate a course of action" (117). As conclusion to this chapter, I would like to

suggest that the album of disaster photography made viewable to the player after beating

Disaster Report provides a counterexample to Sontag's claims. By having these digital

photographs represent player-controlled gameplay moments within the large interactive

experience, the game infuses them with emotional weight in the form of virtual memory for the

player, increasing the degree of empathetic engagement with catastrophe.

One of the central obstacles to an empathetic reading of disaster imagery is that, in the

moment of trauma, the spectacle itself often defies believability. When news of Japan's tsunami

first broke in 2011, the aerial footage that quickly blanketed TV news broadcasts and the "on the ground" cellphone videos subsequently uploaded online were oddly unbelievable. Skimming backwards and forwards through a YouTube clip of the tsunami's approach evoked Sontag's reading of catastrophe as "eerily like its representation" (10). Indeed, the oft-used phrases in news reports from CNN and the BBC when describing the wave and its path of destruction were "unreal," "unbelievable," or "like a movie." This tendency to regard a catastrophic event as more like a representation of reality than a real event can be observed in the following transcript from CNN Senior International Correspondent Ivan Watson's live report on tsunami footage on March 11, 2011:

> Just unbelievable pictures. There's a building or a couple of buildings that are on fire and are moving with the tsunami. That is just something you just have never seen before and there's a pretty big vessel there getting pushed ashore … There's that fire that I've been talking about – a moving blaze along the tsunami. Just unbelievable stuff here. (Watson)

Within Japanese reports as well, the 3.11 "Triple Disaster" (so named to include the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown) quickly began to be discussed using the discourse of *sōtegai* or the "unimaginable" (Creighton 112).

If, as Sontag suggests, catastrophe is becoming representational, then perhaps video games might be uniquely qualified to communicate complex issues of disaster and survival, owing to their ability to simulate a circumstance that most players have never experienced. Weisenfeld's analysis of earthquake imagery in the aftermath of the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923 is useful in that it proposes that any catastrophe is first "processed by the imagination" which in turn inspires the embodied experience for the viewers of the images (86). This account

Figure 9. Eerily realistic disaster photographs are used to convey the magnitude of the earthquake during the game's opening moments. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

of the experience of trauma as imaginative sounds remarkably similar to what happens in *Disaster Report* as players first imagine a particular survival outcome, act on it in the simulation, and then are engaged through visual, auditory, and haptic feedback. While novels and films can represent a disaster scenario, only a video game can model a system that lets players experience, to a degree, what it would be like to live through such an event.

It is only within the last century that photography and cinema have acquired an authority over other forms of visual and verbal representation. Weisenfeld notes that by the late Taishō period in Japan (1912–1926), pre-cinematic media such as dioramas and magic lanterns co-existed with cinematic and photographic representations (98–99). While Japan's major earthquakes have almost exclusively been documented with cinematic or photographic imagery,[9] at the time of the Great Kantō Earthquake, a plurality of visual strategies were used to communicate the scale and destruction of the disaster. Moreover, each distinct form was thought to express a different aspect of the event. Video games may be the logical extension of this mingled media strategy. Rather than limiting the authority of the visual field to cinema and photographs, *Disaster Report* is able to successfully mix and remix different registers of

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[9] Sontag cites the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in Eastern Europe and the images from Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the historical moments during which photographs acquired a newfound authority for real-world representation (24).

Figure 10. *Disaster Report* **makes use of a variety of graphic styles meant to mimic different forms of representation. Here, disrupted security camera footage shows the earthquake's moment of impact. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.**

representation. These include the intermixing of still photographs; "cinematic" footage, such as the security camera tape that begins the game; the spectacle of citywide destruction as experienced on foot; as well as periodic evacuation updates delivered via in-game radio, which lend yet another layer of real-world authenticity to the social narrative (Figures 9 and 10).

Furthermore, video game play seems to address many of the problems Sontag associates with photographs of trauma. Sontag writes, "Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us" (89). One of the reasons for the transformative power of narratives is their duration. Sontag argues that understanding the pain of others requires an "intensity of awareness" (106) that can only be properly experienced from a "meditative space" (119) in which one can linger over the photographs without talking. In this way, she directly ties empathetic engagement to text narrative. It is interesting to consider video games within this discussion. Playing *Disaster Report* from start to finish can easily take ten to fifteen hours, or longer, depending on the degree to which players explore and collect items. The length of time needed to consume the overall narrative is comparable to the time needed to read a good book, particularly when one considers that the game may be replayed in a variety of ways. In addition, the gameplay undulations in *Disaster Report* balance intense sequences of escape and survival with quieter moments of exploration and item collection. Not only is it possible to have moments of reflection and meditation from within the play experience, but also after the game ends and

players reflect on their overall survival ranking and statistics and consider how their ethical choices may have affected the outcome.

Yet, even while Sontag favors prose narrative over images in terms of their capacity to transmit an understanding of trauma, she acknowledges the importance of photography in personal memory. "To remember," she writes, "is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture" (89). In an extended passage, she further elaborates on how photos capture memory and encode them in a single image:

> Nonstop imagery … is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image … the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. (22)

The problem for Sontag is that photographs are rarely integrated into an overarching narrative to give them meaning. Without this sacralized understanding, looking at disaster photography could function as a form of "ocular aggression" where one derives pleasure from looking at unincorporated death and destruction (Weisenfeld 59, 96). To this end, Sontag suggests that the "weight and seriousness" of photographs are better communicated if placed within a larger prose narrative (121). It is in this regard that I believe *Disaster Report* is able to alleviate some of the problems Sontag associates with decontextualized images of trauma.
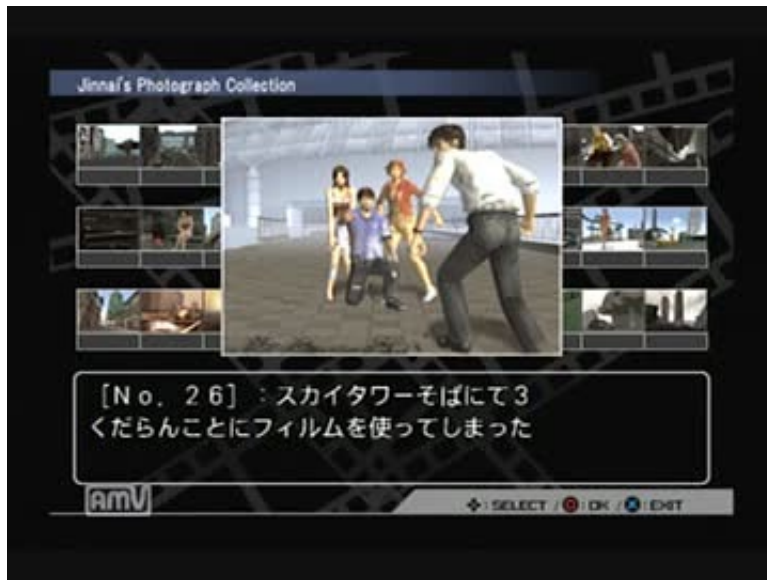
Figure 11. Jinnai Kōji's photograph collection can be viewed once the game is completed. Here, photograph number 26 captures Jinnai (foreground) with Masayuki, Mari, and Natsumi in the background next to the Capital City Tower. Jinnai laments wasting film on this silly shot. ©Granzella Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Disaster photography has an interesting application in the game. After completing a first playthrough of *Disaster Report*, a new submenu is made available from the start screen. Players now have access to the photos journalist Jinnai Kōji took throughout the narrative up until the point of his death. Unbeknownst to the player, Jinnai was snapping photographs,

and now these digital stills function as a photographic tour of the disaster experience from a different character's point of view. There are 30 photographs to view in total, though some can only be unlocked if the game is replayed and a different selection is made at the narrative's branching point (Figure 11).

At first glance, Jinnai's photographs appear to mimic the souvenirs and postcards featuring disaster imagery that became an integral part of "disaster tourism" after the Great Kantō Earthquake, in which residents from unaffected areas traveled to Tokyo to view the spectacle of destruction (Weisenfeld 72, 74). This is because many of these in-game photographs turn their eye to the ruins of Capital City. Photograph number 22 is taken from the top of an elevated walkway. The caption reads: "This was an elevated walkway located above a road now replaced by a river of water." Another photograph, number 23, shows a ruined and evacuated residential district with the caption: "Once a residential area, even damaged, the beauty of the

sunset still remains untouched." Photograph number 28, taken during the group's

aforementioned escape from May Stadium, reiterates the importance of fresh water and hygiene

in the aftermath of a catastrophe. The caption here reads: "Clean drinking water is rare and

valuable when disasters like this occur."

Sontag writes, "All photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions" (10).

The captions above validate the photographic representations in *Disaster Report* for their

accuracy and emotional gravitas. They are somber snapshots of destruction and loss that would

be at home on the pages of a real-world newspaper article—the kind Masayuki vows to write at

the end of the game. If we are to believe Sontag, these still photos should haunt us but not make

us understand the trauma depicted. Yet the effect is curiously the opposite. The scopophilic

pleasure of looking at disaster ruins gives way to the production of empathy as players flip

through this album to a newfound respect for the images. We remember the photographer Jinnai

and his untimely death. We remember the harrowing acts of survival that we, the players,

overcame in these locations. Quite simply the photographs *feel real*, even though intellectually

we know they are comprised of polygons rendered through a game engine and derive from

specific moments of fantasy play. These images represent what we might call "living

photographs," or still photographic representations imbued with a simulated sense of life through

greater narrative contextualization.[10]

My conclusion resonates with what memory studies scholar Allison Landsberg terms

"prosthetic memories," or implanted memories unrelated to one's lived experience. In her

analysis of the famous sci-fi films *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*, which will be discussed at

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[10] Apple has recently introduced a similarly named feature called "Live Photos" with their iPhone 6S smartphone line update. The phone's camera extends the moment of capture by a second and a half on either side of the photo and animates the frames resulting in a still image that moves with lifelike realism. While the technology is different, the goal is similar to add more meaning to a photograph by including the real-time context in which it was taken.

length in chapter three, Landsberg shows how these prosthetic memories, in spite of their artificiality, "feel real and are used productively by the people who wear them" (45). They in fact organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on. Here we see one of many ways that video game play might depart from other "high culture" forms of representation: through the production of simulation-level memories.

The suggestion I would like to make with *Disaster Report* is that, after prolonged engagement with the video game, real-life players, and not just film characters, might experience this sense of emotional connection with entirely fictional memories never experienced in-person. These in-game photographs represent a liminal space—players are both present in the pictures, via their avatars, and not, since they are externally controlling the game. Players both shaped the content in the photographs and also had it scripted for them by a team of game designers. Yet, the "virtual memories" (to move further with Landsberg's language) players attach to the events depicted in the game photos allow them to meditate on the images while viewing them, something crucial for empathetic engagement according to Sontag, contextualizing them within the larger narrative they have just experienced and controlled over many hours of play.

In fleeing Capital City, players strive to make sense of their surroundings, anticipate various outcomes, plan their escape, and problem solve along the way. In short, I would argue that players are doing much of the same cognitive functioning they would do in a real-world survival situation, albeit within the safe confines of the game. To quote Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, "The great advantage of participatory environments in creating immersion is their capacity to elicit behavior that endows the imaginary objects with life" (112). The same phenomenon occurs when players engage, remodel, and work through difficult material in a

game. The result is that players supply the emotional significance from their own personalized gameplay sessions, thereby enhancing what might otherwise be detached media representations.

If mass scale disasters represented in newspaper photos and YouTube videos already border on the unbelievable (or "fictional representation" according to Sontag), then perhaps integrating these photographic and videographic representations into a larger interactive framework that players can explore, control, and relate to, might help users better relate to the pain of others. Indeed, this strategy has already been used by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in their digital exhibit on Kristallnacht within the virtual world Second Life. These experiential exhibits and video games allow for increased immersion in and empathetic engagement with sites of trauma. They also suggest the possibility that empathy might exist, not solely as an inborn human trait, but one that can also be acquired or learned through the entertainment media we consume and the video games we play. For these reasons, playing through a simulation like *Disaster Report* might prompt virtual memories and virtual meaning-making just real enough to help the shaking within the game be felt by those outside of it.

LEVEL 1 CLEAR!

Level 2: The Politics of Marriage and Childbirth in *Catherine*[11]

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 August 14, 3776 (Yoshida et al.). After this date, as a sensationalist *Fox News* broadcast proclaims, the entire nation will "go the way of the dinosaurs" (Piper). If this 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; *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 birth rate 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 there will be no population growth in Japan over the next 1,760 years, there is little doubt within the government that the country is facing a population crisis.[12]

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 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. *Catherine* was subsequently fully localized

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[11] A version of this chapter has been published in *Games and Culture*: Whaley, Ben. "Who Will Play *Terebi Gēmu* When No Japanese Children Remain? Distanced Engagement in Atlus' *Catherine*." 24 Sep. 2015. Web. 23 pages.

[12] According to Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research ("Population Projections for Japan"), at 1.37 births per woman as of 2012, the country has a total fertility rate among the lowest of the advanced industrialized nations and well below the replacement fertility rate of 2.1 needed to sustain the population (8). This low fertility rate has resulted in a rapidly declining population. By some projections, the population of Japan is expected to shrink by over 37 percent, from 126.39 million in 2012 to just 79.97 million by the year 2060 (2). In addition, Japan is a rapidly aging society. Japan's elderly (aged 65 and older), who comprise approximately 25% of the population in 2013, are projected to account for nearly 40% of the population by 2060 (3).

and made commercially available in North America later that year and in Europe 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.

This chapter discusses *Catherine* as a gameic social narrative that not only comments on Japan's population woes, but also inspires real-world self-reflection by the player. Building on the previous chapter's analysis of survival strategies in *Disaster Report*, this chapter focuses on subconscious anxieties that center on romantic relationships, building a family, and having children. I analyze how *Catherine* tackles these topics through what I term "distanced engagement," or self-reflexive and meta gameplay elements that make the artifice of the game purposely visible to players. These gameplay mechanisms encourage players to identify with the socially relevant narrative and game characters while, at the same time, also remaining acutely aware that they are engaged in electronic entertainment. The result is the creation of a critical space from which players can contemplate and self-reflect on the larger themes of the game and their role as a player-author of the game content.

I begin by describing the two opposing gameplay styles in *Catherine* and elucidate how both the characters and narrative deftly address changing gender roles and familial expectations in modern Japan. I follow this by employing national fertility survey data from Japan to examine how the monstrous and grotesque depiction of marriage and childbirth via the game's nightmare puzzle sequences gives a new meaning to working through anxious or traumatic scenarios in the subconscious. This leads me to define "distanced engagement" and discuss its deployment via an in-game polling mechanism that requires players to reflect on their own views about marriage and childbirth. Finally, I conclude by engaging with the work of cultural critics Ōtsuka Eiji and Azuma Hiroki in order to suggest that *Catherine* may function as a new gameic approach to

player self-reflexivity by reintroducing a grand narrative framework into a genre generally argued to be devoid of resonant social commentaries. Furthermore, *Catherine* pairs this social narrative with a multiform structure that allows players to control how the game and story play out. Rather than impose a particular ideology extolling the benefits of marriage and childbirth, some of the game's many possible endings might allow for the breaking of the frames constructed by heteropatriarchy, nationalism, and even the neoliberal capitalist insistence on consumption.

2.1 Playing Catherine

Before proceeding, it is useful to explain the main gameplay mechanics and story of *Catherine*. Created by the Atlus Persona Team, a Japanese game design studio best known for its ongoing traditional turn-based RPG series *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona* (1996–present), *Catherine* represents the team's first departure from that genre. Labeled as an "action-puzzle" game in official promotional materials, *Catherine* is one part puzzle game and one part dating simulation.[13] There is a healthy dose of anime thrown into the mix as well, since interspersed between the gameplay sequences are story scenes delivered via fully-voiced animated segments produced by the acclaimed animation house Studio 4°C. The result is an unusual video game that amalgamates the often sexist and misogynist character portrayals of dating-sims with a broader social narrative about love and relationships in contemporary Japan that encourages a variety of modes of identification among players.

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[13] In "dating-simulation" and certain "visual novel" games, a typically male player interacts with a variety of anime-style characters and chooses from various multiple-choice narrative options with the goal of forming a virtual relationship. These games are characterized by having many possible endings, some of which enable the player to view erotic content featuring their chosen "girlfriend" (Taylor 194–95). However, the creative team behind *Catherine* has stated that they do not regard their game as a dating-sim due to the fact that Vincent possesses a longtime girlfriend at the outset of the story (Hashino 28).

Figure 12. The three main characters: Katherine McBride (left), Vincent Brooks (center), and the mysterious Catherine (right). ©ATLUS ©SEGA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

In *Catherine*, players enter into an internationalized vision of contemporary Japan and control the avatar of 32-year-old Vincent Brooks, a poorly paid systems engineer at a nondescript technology company who lives alone in a messy studio apartment.[14] Vincent's longtime girlfriend is 32-year-old career-driven Katherine McBride, a manager for an apparel company. Vincent has been a faithful boyfriend to Katherine for over five years, but shows no interest in his own career promotion or settling down and starting a family, despite her repeated requests for commitment. A drunken one-night stand at the local bar, the Stray Sheep, introduces Vincent to the mysterious Catherine, a hyper-sexualized and flirtatious 22-year-old, with whom he begins an accidental affair (Figure 12). This initiates a strange love triangle where Vincent must carefully manage both relationships while trying to figure out what he desires most in life: a

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[14] While the game was designed entirely in Japan, the player encounters characters named Vincent and K/Catherine. The Atlus Persona Team sought to harmoniously blend both Japanese and American culture throughout the game design, noting that while the town's appearance is reminiscent of America, the layout of Vincent's one room apartment is typical of Tokyo (Kihara 112).

stable yet predictable family life with Katherine, or the youthful spontaneity promised by his

new fling. At the same time, a series of unexplained deaths has the entire town on edge. As

young men begin dying in their sleep, a rumor circulates that if you experience a strange

recurring nightmare you will die in real life.

However, as the game's story progresses, the player learns the true secret behind the

nightmares. They are in fact a set of "Great Trials" created by Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of

fertility who governs the world's love. Ishtar has employed an immortal demigod named

Dumuzid, masquerading as Thomas "Boss" Mutton, the dapper older bartender who owns the

Stray Sheep, to devise a treacherous nightmare world and condemn to it men who are the "lowest

of the low." These are men who are involved in stable monogamous relationships yet are not

fully committed to establishing a family and having children. It is revealed that the goal of the

Great Trials is thus to separate aimless, uncommitted men from fertile young women.

As Boss informs Vincent, given that a woman reaches the peak of her fertility around

twenty-seven, uncommitted men who do not father children are simply "holding back the future

of the species." Boss thus employs the mysterious Catherine, a shape-shifting succubus from the

Netherworld to catch men with adulterous proclivities and bring about the end of their stable

relationships through a messy affair. The ex-girlfriend will then be free to begin a new

relationship with another man, resulting in population-saving childbirths. In 700 years of trials,

only three men have escaped the nightmare world alive and regained their true love.

Interactive scenarios in *Catherine* alternate between two opposing gameplay styles.

During the "daytime," players control Vincent as he visits his local watering hole, the Stray

Sheep. Vincent can perform a series of limited activities within the spatial confines of the bar. He

can order and drink cocktails, make small talk with his group of childhood friends and other bar

Figure 13. Vincent at the Stray Sheep bar during the daytime gameplay sections. ©ATLUS ©SEGA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

patrons, change the background music on the virtual jukebox, or watch TV news reports that

chronicle the ongoing saga of the so-called "Woman's Wrath" nightmare curse (Figure 13). The

goal of these sections is to interact with the various non-player characters in the game, including

Vincent's two girlfriends, and select dialogue responses and actions from various multiple-

choice menus that will in turn influence the relationship outcomes and bring about one of eight

different game endings.

Once Vincent leaves the bar, the player is thrown into the game's "nighttime" nightmare

puzzle sections, which account for the majority of the game's playtime and challenge. Vincent

finds himself trapped in a nightmare where he must climb to the top of a large tower of blocks

without falling to his death. These puzzle sections have a gameplay style reminiscent of the

strategic world navigation in *Q*bert* (Gottlieb, 1982) mixed with the spatial reasoning and

geometric construction of *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984). Players must push and pull blocks to

create stairs that allow Vincent to successfully navigate to the landing at the top of each level's

tower while avoiding various enemies, booby traps, and boss characters along the way (Figure

Figure 14. Vincent climbs a treacherous tower of blocks during the nighttime nightmare gameplay sections.

14). As the player climbs, the bottommost rows of blocks continually fall away, forcing the

player to make split-second decisions in order to successfully navigate the tower and escape from

the nightmare back into the real world.

2.2   The Modern Japanese Family as Imagined in *Catherine*

Throughout the game's animated cutscenes, Vincent and Katherine's relationship is

depicted as a socially relevant commentary that reflects the changing nature of romantic

relationships and gender roles in contemporary Japanese society. In an interview with *Dengeki*

Games Monthly (March 2011), Hashino Katsura, the game's director, remarked that *Catherine*

was created with the universal themes of love and the problems of marriage in mind. He

explains, "While love is a popular theme in movies and TV shows, there aren't many games that

tackle adult love issues in a serious manner, so we thought it would be interesting [to do so in

Catherine]" (28). Beyond the broad themes of love and marriage, Soejima Shigenori's character

designs for Vincent and Katherine, coupled with the performances of the voice actors, and

unique in-game events work together to reflect the larger cultural consciousness of many real-life Japanese adults. To start, the 32-year-old Vincent and Catherine are close in age to the average Japanese gamer who is now 35. On top of this, Vincent's characterization represents an interesting amalgamation of two competing visions of masculinity in Japan: the "salaryman" (company worker) and the "herbivore man" (men uninterested in marriage or sex). Meanwhile, Katherine, as an independent, responsible, and career-driven mature woman, represents a more authentic and socially relevant female characterization that diverges from many male action and fantasy tropes of female game heroines.

One key scene illustrates how *Catherine* presents a more honest rendering of dating life than many video games. In this scene, Vincent and Katherine meet up during their lunch break for tea and pastries at the Chrono Rabbit café. The scene begins with Katherine removing Vincent's sunglasses, stating, "You think you look good in those?" Her dominant position in the relationship is further emphasized when, after Vincent takes a phone call, Katherine criticizes his recent purchase of a new cell phone model and computer. She scolds, "You always throw your money away … Well, it's okay, since you've been working hard … but you need to make sure you're saving up." The impetus for this argument is Katherine's confession that her period is running late and that she believes she might be pregnant. While this is revealed not to be the case later in the game, during the scene both characters accept the possibility, and Vincent in particular is visibly shocked by the prospect of becoming a father. Katherine reinforces her status as an independent career woman when she articulates her desire to go back to work shortly after having the baby. She is even worried that she might have to take maternity leave. "We'll just have to split up the housework," she concludes, after already appointing herself in charge of the joint bank accounts.

In just this short animated scene, we can clearly see how Vincent and Katherine represent a new kind of Japanese couple, one where the woman may be the primary breadwinner, or where both partners are working, and the man is expected to exhibit what marketing professor Steven Chen calls the "3 Cs": possess a comfortable income, be good at relationship communication, and cooperate with housework and childcare duties (296).

Vincent's characterization is unlike that of traditional action game heroes who are rarely, if ever, portrayed as anxious and depressed. Hashino describes Vincent as a "cool bum" (*dame kakkoii*; 30) and the game's instruction manual informs the player that Vincent "doesn't need to wear a suit or a tie for his job, since he has no contact with his business's customers" (5).

Japan gender studies specialist Romit Dasgupta defines the "salaryman" as, "The figure of the urban, middle-class, white-collar [worker] loyally toiling away for the organisation in return for an implicit guarantee of life-time employment stability" ("Globalisation" para. 5). According to Dasgupta, the salaryman came to represent both the "corporate 'ideal' and masculine 'ideal'" during Japan's high economic growth period of the 1960s through the 1980s, and until the bubble burst in 1991 ("Salaryman" 192). Vincent spends day after day in a dead-end job, every bit the image of company loyalty as the postwar salaryman but with none of the social benefits afforded to previous generations. Despite stable employment, the player learns that Vincent is strapped for cash, lives in a messy studio apartment, and has no real responsibilities at work and therefore no hope for seniority-based promotions or lifetime employment. In short, Vincent provides a relevant image of contemporary salarymen categorized by what Chen calls a "loss of authority, loss of seduction, and loss of genius" within the social landscape of post-bubble Japan (294).

However, Vincent's characterization also appears to share some traits with a separate, widely publicized masculinity known as the "herbivore man" (*sōshoku danshi*, lit. "grass eating man"). The term was coined by freelance writer Fukasawa Maki in a 2006 article for *Nikkei Business*. Herbivore men are happy being in the company of women but remain uninterested in relationships that involve either long-term commitment such as marriage, or physical intimacy such as sex. As the term subsequently exploded in popularity among Japanese media outlets, "herbivores" came to be depicted as feminized men in their 20s and 30s who were frugal and had an interest in personal grooming. In Fukasawa's view, herbivores are the type of men who will lie beside a woman and cuddle up at night, only to leave in the morning without having sealed the deal. Fukasawa writes, "It's not that they want nothing to do with love or sex, they're not actively pursuing it—the herbivore man is uninterested in craving meat."

Game director Hashino admits to have taken some inspiration for the game's story from the phenomenon of the herbivore man. He states, "At that time, men who didn't bother with love and relationships and found them too much trouble were interviewed in books and magazine articles. It feels like we put these type [of characters] all around Vincent" (30–31).

Vincent does share some personality traits with the herbivore man, such as a fear of commitment. Yet, as with the salaryman subjectivity, he does not fully fit the stereotype. Vincent avoids marriage and procreation, yet he does not possess the aversion to sex integral to Fukasawa's definition. Much to the contrary, Vincent has plenty of sex. He relishes his nighttime activities with both his longstanding girlfriend and the woman with whom he is having an affair. Thus, while Vincent's characterization clearly draws on both the salaryman and herbivore man archetypes, he cleverly subverts both identity categories and creates a new paradigm. This is productive for engaging a variety of different players whose non-normative gender identities

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might not align with those typically portrayed in video games. While Vincent's romantic trials and tribulations are certainly not free from gendered stereotypes, his overall characterization more closely mirrors what many actual adult players may be experiencing in their everyday lives, and therefore has the potential to be that much more engaging and relatable.

Other relevant aspects of the social narrative become apparent when one considers the ongoing economic stagnation in Japan and the constellation of current obstacles to having and raising children in the country today. Population specialist Toru Suzuki theorizes three main barriers to childrearing in Japan, two being the increasing cost of education and the global economic recession. However, the primary cause for family changes in Japan is often attributed to rising female participation in the labor force and the opportunity cost of children for female professionals (65–66). With a monthly child allowance of just 13,000 yen (approximately $124 USD) to parents with children under fifteen as of 2010, many young Japanese women report that they simply do not want to quit their jobs and end their careers just to have kids (75).

This interplay between social relationships, birthrate, and the economy is further demonstrated during certain in-game events. For example, one of the actions Vincent can perform in the daytime gameplay sections is to check his account balance at the bar ATM. This will always result in a line of dialogue where Vincent laments his lack of savings and ponders how he will be able to support a family. Players must also manage their various in-game relationships by texting via a smartphone interface. Players select multiple-choice responses from a set list in order to compose and send text messages to both young Catherine and old Katherine. Texting sympathetic or dismissive messages, or refusing to respond altogether, will shape Vincent's relationship with each woman throughout the game. With this gameic interface for relationship management, *Catherine* further comments on the detached, often virtual nature

of modern-day dating. In the aforementioned café cutscene, Vincent is anxious and inarticulate in his face-to-face meeting with Katherine. However, emotionally he comes alive during the texting segments, and is able to sincerely apologize for a mistake or open up about his fears and anxieties with the proper player input. In this way, *Catherine* deftly uses a gameic interface to reference the growing popularity of online dating and using social media platforms for managing one's love life.

Through their characterization and narrative progression, Vincent and Katherine do not simply reinforce preexisting Japanese gender identities such as the salaryman or housewife. Rather, their representation, both individually and as a couple, is more resonant with Japanese society today. For the unmarried male or female Japanese player, *Catherine* reflects the real-world social situation of all those who are striving hard in their job, yet still worried about relationships, children, and the future. It is rare in a mass-market commercial video game to see such frank discussions about the changing nature of the Japanese family.

2.3   The Monstrous Unborn

In the previous chapter, *Disaster Report* was discussed as attempting to provide a one-to-one congruence with real-world disaster trauma through its gameic simulation. Unlike Irem's game, *Catherine* uses a strategy common to many manga and anime works in that it intentionally mediates its social narrative through fantasy and sci-fi tropes. During these fantastical nightmare segments, the game remains socially relevant, yet the one-to-one congruence between the gameic reality and the social reality of the player breaks down as the visuality and gameplay scenarios become increasingly warped and bizarre. Yet, fantastical exaggeration becomes a particularly effective tool for engaging players at the site of subconscious anxieties that may not manifest physically but rather return in the form of panic attacks or nightmares.
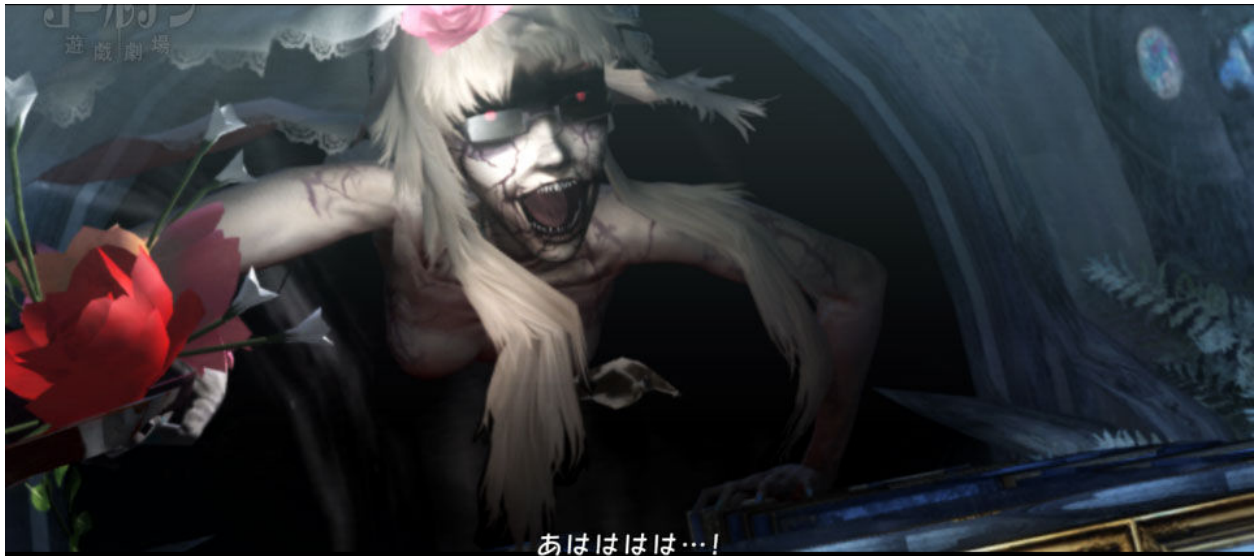
Figure 15. "Doom's Bride," the boss character from Stage 5, is a terrifying vision of marriage and spousal commitment. ©ATLUS ©SEGA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

If the daytime gameplay segments and animated cutscenes in *Catherine* serve to heighten the relevance of the social narrative vis-à-vis a larger Japanese cultural consciousness, then the nighttime nightmare sections are a testament to the power of the subconscious as a tool for working through one's anxieties. Throughout the puzzle sections, Vincent must overcome grotesque, larger-than-life boss characters that serve as a terrifyingly warped reimagining of spousal commitment and childrearing. A "boss" character is a computer-controlled adversary that the player must vanquish in order to progress through the game. Typically, boss characters are larger and stronger than regular in-game enemies and battles occur at the end of levels or main sections in the game.

As Vincent scurries up the tower, he must constantly push, pull, and arrange blocks into a staircase formation in order to ascend to higher levels and avoid the collapsing floor beneath him. At a metaphorical level, players are tasked with spatially rearranging Vincent's mental blockages in the form of a path that can be successfully traversed for self-betterment and escape from harm. Harm comes in the form of various booby traps as well as the skyscraper-sized bosses that chase after Vincent and attempt to fling him off the tower to his death. The

characterization of two such bosses, "Doom's Bride" and "The Child," further emphasize that the diegetic game world of *Catherine* reflects the current cultural climate in Japan regarding marriage and childbirth, albeit in a fantastical manner.

Doom's Bride, the boss of Stage 5, is described in the official game literature as a "monster wearing a veiled wedding dress." Known in Japanese by the title "Pure White Bride" (*junpaku no hanayome*), she is a nightmarish version of Katherine in a frayed wedding dress wielding a butcher knife. Possessing piercing red eyes and dark veins that stain her skin, the bride's appearance illustrates how one's fear of marital commitment might become warped and terrifying within the subconscious (Figure 15). Throughout the boss battle, Doom's Bride shouts insults at Vincent as he climbs, such as, "You really are a loser!" and "Trying to escape your responsibility?!"

Visually, Doom's Bride is a pastiche. She echoes the appearance of the traditional Japanese monster (*yōkai*) Ubume, a woman who dies in childbirth. In contemporary manga and anime, Ubume is often depicted as an undead mother with child in arms, clothed in white and dripping with blood (Papp 35). More generally, Doom's Bride fits into a long literary and artistic trajectory of representing the menstruating maternal body and childbirth as grotesque. In the words of Julia Kristeva, the maternal body is created through "a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides" (101). Kristeva's language matches the design of Doom's Bride whose skin seems to be tearing apart at the seams.

The depiction of boss characters such as Doom's Bride, while clearly otherworldly in representation, become more significant when one considers the real-world concerns Japanese players may have about starting a family. A recent 2011 survey conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research titled "Attitudes Toward Marriage and

Figure 16. Boss character "The Child" from Stage 4. ©ATLUS ©SEGA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Family," sheds some light on the attitudes many singles hold about marriage and childbirth.

According to the survey results, 48.7 percent of male and 60.5 percent of female respondents

aged 18–34 stated that their main worry about marriage was, "whether or not I will be able to

maintain my daily rhythm and lifestyle" (8). And, while this survey question does not

specifically reference children as a separate variable, clearly childrearing represents one of the, if

not the most, salient impediments to one's daily rhythm, especially where sleep and work are

concerned. Doom's Bride could thus be read as the monstrous embodiment of larger Japanese

societal fears over finding the right spouse and starting a family.

The second boss character worthy of examination is The Child. The character design was

inspired by Australian sculptor Ron Mueck's representation of a newborn titled "A Girl" (Kihara

154). This boss appears in two different forms during the game: First, in Stage 4 as an unborn

zombie baby (Figure 16), and again in Stage 6 as a comically deadly baby cyborg with blood-

soaked chainsaws and concealed Gatling guns springing from its body (Figure 17). Interestingly,

the Japanese titles for these bosses are "Fetus" (*taiji*) and "Terrifying Fetus" (*osorubeki taiji*)

respectively, which emphasize a strong link to what Kristeva terms the "abject fetus" born from

Figure 17. The Child's alternate form "Child with a Chainsaw" (Stage 6) highlights the grotesque visuality of childbirth within the nightmare world. ©ATLUS ©SEGA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

the bowels of "abomination" (101–02). While this link to bodily reproduction is somewhat

lessened in the character's name in the North American game version, The Child still clearly

functions as a symbol of Vincent's fear of fatherhood and loss of his own autonomy.

Throughout the boss battle, The Child whines, "Don't leave me! Da-daddy!" and, "Why

are you wunning [*sic*] away?!" Results from the same 2011 fertility survey cited above indicate

that only 33.6 percent of Japanese men and 47.7 percent of women aged 18–34 consider children

a "merit of marriage" (29). While a direct North American comparison cannot be made, a recent

2013 Gallup poll of Americans aged 18–40 revealed that 93 percent already had or wanted to

have children (Newport and Wilke). Here again, *Catherine* presents a highly imaginative version

of a real social concern in Japan today, namely the question of whether having children is an

attractive part of marriage or not.

The linearity of the daytime gameplay segments and animated cutscenes further contrasts

with the replayability of the nightmare puzzle sequences. Within the nightmares, where the

player dies, resets, and replays these boss battles before ultimately achieving victory, the

monstrous images are sterilized and the player becomes desensitized to what once represented a

frightening adulthood. The game space thus offers an area for "safe practice" where players can rehearse and perfect their responses to the potential stressors and difficulties encountered in adult life (Murray 144).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud thinks through why patients might engage in "repetition compulsions" wherein they repeat unpleasant or painful affective states (63). Oftentimes the initial trauma returns through symbolic or metaphorical representation in nightmares. However, a repetition compulsion need not be wholly traumatic. An example of positive repetition can be found in Freud's story of the game *fort-da* ("gone"-"there"). In this game, Freud's grandson simulates both the frightening departure and comforting return of his mother by repeatedly throwing and retrieving a wooden spool on a string (57). Thus, Freud locates in children's play not only the capacity to repeatedly act out a traumatic action but also to gradually lessen the associated fear by replacing it with a repetitive positive action over which the player has some control (58).

Returning to a discussion of the nightmare sections in *Catherine*, one observes the symbolic representation of generalized anxiety over marriage and parenting realized through the game's monstrous and fantastical imagery. Present alongside this anxiety is the sense of overcoming provided to players when they finally succeed in defeating the boss characters and solving the game's puzzles. Metonymically, through the narrative device of the nightmare, and the trial-and-error repetitive gameplay of the puzzles, both Vincent and the player are afforded the opportunity to work through their problems from within the simulation. Where *Catherine* reveals its unique take on working through trauma via interactive means (and also perhaps achieving emotional catharsis) is in its inclusion of self-reflective gameplay mechanisms that

move beyond Freud's simple game of repetition in order to encourage more thoughtful

introspection from players.

2.4   Playing with Distanced Engagement

If *Catherine*'s social narrative draws players into the game with characters and narrative

situations that are proximate to the lives of many young Japanese, then "distanced engagement"

is conversely the detached construct that makes the artifice of the game visible and keeps players

aware that they are voluntarily engaging in fantasy play. Distance in gaming can take many

forms; perhaps the most ubiquitous is the classic arcade "High Score" screen that showcases the

vestiges of other human players (represented by their initials and points) in a leaderboard.[15]

Distanced engagement may also be evoked by extra-diegetic factors, such as a physical game

controller that requires the mastery of many buttons and skilled hand-eye coordination. Or, it

may be caused by intentionally self-reflexive or parodic (meta) elements existing within the

game design itself, such as when the villain Psycho Mantis breaks the fourth wall and famously

manipulates the player's DualShock controller and reads memory card data from within the

television during *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998). In either instance, failing to manipulate the

controller successfully or suddenly coming face-to-face with a game character who reminds you

how many times you have saved your progress breaks the immersion and brings the artifice of

the game to the fore. Rather than isolating or frustrating the player, periods of distanced

engagement, I would argue, cause users to become morally involved as they see their real-life

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[15] Uemura highlights the importance of these high score screens and name entry features in fostering early interaction among communities of gamers. High score screens debuted in the arcade game *Space Invaders II* (Taito, 1979), and subsequently led to the birth of the "scorer culture" that emerged as players would travel between local arcades with the hopes of watching skilled players or exchanging gameplay tips and tricks (Uemura, Hosoi, and Nakamura 206–07). This focus on attaining high scores gradually died down as a new generation of games encouraged dedicated players to search for and unearth hidden programming bugs and secrets (Nakazawa 186, 198).

reflected in the simulated content. It is in this interval of distance that players have the ability to critically self-reflect on both themselves as game players and on the game's social narrative as a whole.

Gary Alan Fine builds on Erving Goffman's concept of "frame analysis" in order to theorize the "framed self." Fine looks at tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and argues that play necessitates a bracketing of one's socially and culturally constructed sense of self in order to create a fantasy self. It is this bracketing process that engenders the possibility for critical self-reflection. Fine writes, "The awareness context of each framed self, the ease of moving to other frames of meaning, and the ambiguities inherent in situations with several levels of meaning permit an examination of relationships among experiences on each level in the game" (4). In other words, it is only when the player is made aware of the game mechanisms through the distance between affective involvement and rational reflection that she can critically reflect on what the game itself means.

Ian Bogost addresses this interval of distance (what he labels the "simulation gap") by coining the term "simulation fever" to refer to the unease that results from the disparity between the "simulation and the player's understanding of the source system it models" (*Persuasive Games* 332–33). Put another way, players experience a "nervous discomfort" stemming from perceived incongruity between the simulation and their understanding of the real world (*Unit Operations* 136). A skilled designer may cultivate particular forms of simulation fever in order to strengthen the rhetorical stance of their games or convey a particular political message (*Unit Operations* 122). I position distanced engagement as an inherently beneficial construct within Japanese game design that can be used to promote thoughtful and positive self-reflection for the player. Rather than foregrounding the disparity between the game world and the real world, as

Bogost does, distanced engagement enhances a game's level of immersion by purposely spotlighting the constructed nature of the game system, thereby further integrating the player's own subjectivity into an already highly fictionalized game world.

While distanced engagement is not unique to Japanese game design, it is used more often and in different ways than in many Western games. In the previous chapter I discussed the game-ending infographic in *Disaster Report* where players receive an overall rating on their survival skills as a simple form of distanced engagement that prompts players to reflect on ways to improve during a subsequent playthrough. In *Catherine*, distanced engagement is far more fully realized as the juxtaposition between a clever and comic metanarrative coupled with a creative use of interface to align the player's real-world actions with the in-game scenario.

In theorizing patterns of narrative consumption, Japanese cultural critic Ōtsuka Eiji argues that video games and other pop culture media attract consumers by engaging them at two sites of narrative development: the "small narrative" and the "grand narrative." Ōtsuka explains, "The 'small narrative' [is] the concrete commodity or single episode of a drama, and the 'worldview,' 'program,' or 'system' … in this work [is what] I've been calling the 'grand narrative'" (109). In video games, the totality of the data programmed into the software (including the complete world, backstories of all the supporting characters, hidden secrets, etc.) constitutes the grand narrative. The small narrative is what any single player experiences during any one playthrough (108). For Ōtsuka, it is the player's desire for mastery over the game and the associated thrill of discovering all the intersections and secrets of the grand narrative that drives pop culture consumption.

Azuma Hiroki builds on Ōtsuka with his project on "gameic realism" (*gēmuteki riarizumu*). Gameic realism is characterized by the absence of a concrete beginning, middle, or

end to the narrative due to the unique ability of video games to "pluralize" (*fukusūka suru*)

narrative possibilities through nonlinearity and branching stories (Azuma, *Gēmuteki* 142). Video

game narratives can be reset, end in a variety of ways, or never end at all. Precisely for these

reasons, Azuma believes that game stories increasingly function as "metanarratives" (*meta*

monogatari) that are aware of, or draw attention to, their own structure and form (*Gēmuteki* 115).

Self-reflexivity and metanarrative are the primary methods through which *Catherine*

achieves distanced engagement. Every dialogue and story choice the player makes in the game

affects an onscreen morality meter that in turn impacts the story's ending. *Catherine* uses a very

unusual gameplay device that serves not only to repeatedly distance the player from the small

narrative throughout the entire game, but also clearly to inspire self-reflection about the larger

grand social narrative. This goal is achieved through church confessional scenes. Though players

might assume that this already quirky game could not get any stranger, they would be wrong!

After the successful completion of each puzzle level in the nightmare world, Vincent enters a

Catholic confessional and speaks with Astaroth (an avatar representing the cruel side of fertility

goddess Ishtar), who plays the role of the priest. In another unexpected inclusion, present in the

background of the booth is a picture of Vincent crucified on the Venus symbol (♀) (Figure 18).

During these confessional segments, the player must always pull one of two rope levers

to answer a simple A or B opinion question related to love, relationships, or personality. The

player's poll answer is then logged and displayed as a pie chart. If connected to the Internet,

answers are indexed against a database of what other players answered during their first

Figure 18. Vincent in the confessional with the crucifixion painting in the background. ©ATLUS ©SEGA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

playthrough (Figure 19). This chart allows players to compare their answers with others and see how their opinions stack up. The Japanese game version also has the capability of sorting response data along gendered lines.

Some confessional questions are clearly humorous, such as, "Is popping bubble wrap fun?" and, "Could you have sex with an attractive ghost?" My answer? Absolutely! However, other questions clearly echo the Japanese governmental fertility surveys cited throughout this chapter. These include questions on cohabitation: "Is it okay to live with your partner without ever intending to marry them?" (Answers: Not a chance / Yes indeed). Also present is the question "How does a life of no responsibility sound?" (Answers: Sign me up / No Way), which is very similar to the population survey question about marriage worries where respondents indicated that they wanted to maintain their daily rhythm and lifestyle. Finally, the question "Is romance annoying?" (*Shōjiki, ren'ai yari kekkon wa mendōkusai?*) (Answers: I hate it / I wuv it [*sic*]) uses the Japanese word *mendōkusai* in its phrasing. *Mendōkusai*, which can be translated as
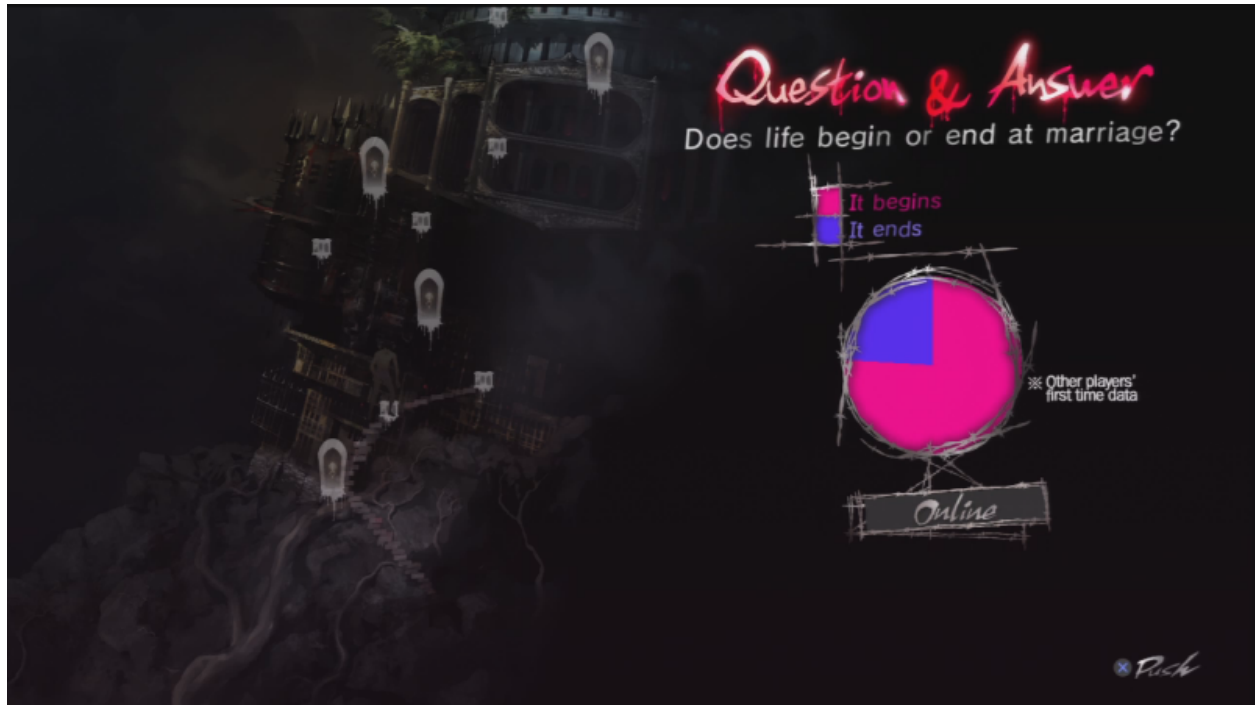
Figure 19. The results of the confessional poll displayed as a pie chart. An online database allows players to compare their responses with others. ©ATLUS ©SEGA. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

"bothersome," or "annoying," is the very same word that many young Japanese men and women now use to describe their relationship aversions or phobias in news articles and on TV (Haworth). For many young Japanese, romantic relationships have become *mendōkusai*, and here is the very same word used in *Catherine* to strengthen the relevance of the social narrative.

While these are just a small sample of the questions in *Catherine*, they all serve to encourage the player's distanced engagement. The gameplay mechanic of voting in a poll clashes dramatically with the intense puzzle sections that come before and forces players to reflect on their own values and how they wish to shape the story.[16]

For media studies scholar Nancy Wood, analogy is crucial to initiating a "working-through" of traumatic events via an encounter with the memory of another (186). Through her

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[16] One could, of course, problematize the act of voting in the polls since players may choose to answer the questions as themselves or role-play and answer questions as Vincent. However, the way the game phrases the questions encourages players to answer the polls based on their own personal opinions.

analysis of Alain Resnais' film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), Wood demonstrates that it is not

a direct comparison between French and Japanese events that extricates Elle and Lui from the

"'tyranny' of their respective traumatic memories," but rather the act of making sense of their

own story by listening to what has haunted the other (192–93). In this way, Wood's call for an

inclusive notion of survivorship echoes the position adopted by Caruth, who notes that one's

own trauma often leads to an "encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise

of listening to another's wound" (8). The indexing and pie chart construction following each poll

force players to compare their opinions with others in the real world. In this way, the game

fosters a form of empathetic identification between players with similar sets of social concerns,

as they must also acknowledge that they are just one of many "men" who have scaled these

towers and answered these questions for the gods.

The contrasting daytime dating simulation and nighttime puzzle gameplay styles in

Catherine could be viewed as a form of "ludonarrative dissonance," in which the game's

mechanics and the game's narrative fiction are set in opposition to each other. Game developer

and critic Clint Hocking coined this phrase in reference to the first-person shooter *Bioshock* (2K

Boston, 2007). He argues that when gameplay and narrative are misaligned, the resulting

disjuncture "all but destroys the player's ability to feel connected to either [the gameplay or the

narrative], forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest … or simply accept that the

game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story."

Particularly insulting to Hocking, as a game player, is that *Bioshock* introduces a

narrative twist halfway through the game that seems to mock the user for having believed in the

game's fiction of free will. Hocking laments that *Bioshock* is taking itself seriously and does not

include this twist for meta or comedic reasons. Indeed, the puzzle and polling sections of

Catherine could be seen as poorly integrated into the game's overarching social narrative. However, a crucial difference between Hocking's critique of *Bioshock* and *Catherine* is that the latter consciously uses these jarring, alternative design choices precisely for metanarrative and comedic purposes. *Catherine* wants to make players laugh and think at the same time. Because of this, the distanced engagement of Japanese game design capitalizes on the feeling of ludonarrative dissonance and redeploys it as a useful and joyful tool for keeping the player immersed and critically reflective.

Azuma generally characterizes postmodern pop culture consumption in Japan as motivated by an ongoing search for a grand narrative that does not exist (a "grand nonnarrative" in Azuma's terms; *Otaku* 86). While video games can never allow the user to fully reconstruct a one-to-one mapping of the world owing to their status as simulations, they do provide, according to Azuma, crucial "small instances of empathy" (116). That is, in the best Japanese video games, the player "identifies with, feels empathy for [characters and situations], and is sometimes emotionally moved" (85).

Azuma argues that dating simulation games in particular are an effective vehicle for fostering these small moments of empathy among *otaku* consumers (individuals who indulge in subculture), even while those consumers have largely given up searching for grand ideological narrative behind the media they consume. Conversely, media theorist Janet Murray believes that puzzle games, while generally lacking in complex gameplay, often offer a "richer level of story satisfaction" compared to other genres (52). The distanced engagement in *Catherine* could therefore represent a creative new attempt to reintroduce a grand social narrative about marriage and childbirth into genres like puzzle and dating simulation games commonly associated with superficial traits and tropes. Due to the distanced engagement present, players must contemplate

the social commentary of the game in real-time and critically self-reflect on their own life and values in order to complete the in-game polls and progress through the game.

2.5   In Lieu of a Conclusion – Multiple Endings

As this chapter has shown, *Catherine* does not exist simply as a static reactionary story about Japan's population woes. Rather, it actively hooks the player through its social narrative and distanced engagement. As a social narrative, Vincent's bizarre love triangle subverts established video game tropes and engages players through socially relevant characterizations that reflect large changes in Japanese society. With regard to distance, the self-reflexive and metanarrative elements continually force players to be cognizant of the fact that they are playing a video game. This is accomplished via the confessional gameplay segments and online indexing of poll answers, as well as the occasional breaking of the fourth wall in character monologues. Meta gameplay such as this purposely detaches players from the game world and encourages them to think about their everyday lives and actions. Indeed, players cannot progress through the game if they do not answer the polls and the sheer act of answering elicits some thought, if not self-reflexivity, about the social realities referenced in the game. It is the synthesis of these two forms of engagement that give video games like *Catherine* the potential to function both as effective social narratives and also potentially encourage real social change through player self-reflection.

Catherine contains eight game endings. No one ending is considered canonical, so players have the ability to shape the narrative and end the story as they see fit. There are three endings that deal with Katherine, three that deal with Catherine, and two variations of a "freedom" ending. A "good" Katherine ending has Vincent and Katherine get back together and begin planning their wedding. A "bad" Catherine ending has Vincent propose marriage to the

succubus, get rejected, and later get hit by a car. Which ending an individual player sees depends on the poll and dialogue choices made throughout the game and a player must replay the entire game and adopt a different play style, or visit YouTube, in order to view the additional endings.

Game director Hashino states that the choice to include a nonlinear narrative and multiple endings was always planned: "This is also something we did deliberately … In the past, when animal horoscopes were trendy, you could hear things like, 'that's because I am a sheep-type' in bars. It became a conversation starter. In that way, I'd like to see people who finished *Catherine* sit for a drink and discuss the endings they got" (Hashino 33). It is easy to envision a scenario where players reflect on how the decisions they made during the game resulted in a specific ending and whether they find their particular ending satisfying or not. While it is certainly the case that multiple game endings might stimulate discussion among communities of players, their potential for engendering self-reflexivity is worth noting as well.

Azuma reasons that players of video games with multiple endings do not experience the narrative as disjointed. Rather, "they emotionally relate to the world of the work as if the randomly selected choice before them at a given moment is the only destiny" (*Otaku* 85). If each game ending is experienced by the player, in that moment, as the one and only possible ending, then the presence of eight different endings in *Catherine* allows the game to be that much more effective and *affective* for different players. A multiform branching story, writes Janet Murray, is a "reassuring format for encountering a traumatic event because it allows plenty of room for conflicting emotions" (136). This may be one reason why *Catherine* was also able to resonate with and find a fan following both in Japan and abroad even though the central narrative is still about masculinity and delivered from the perspective of the heterosexual male protagonist.

I would like to close with a discussion of one of the two "freedom" endings. In the "true freedom" ending, Vincent becomes burned out on relationships as a whole and decides to not get back together with either young Catherine or old Katherine. Sitting in the Stray Sheep, Vincent reveals to Boss that he has finally realized what he wants in life. He confesses, "What you said about the prosperity of the species triggered something. When I was younger…I guess I figured…something would happen to, you know…validate my lifestyle. But that didn't happen. Instead of adapting to life, I got all scared by the slightest decisions. But…Things are different now. I finally feel that I can progress" (ellipses in the original). Much like the players themselves, Vincent is made to self-reflect through his participation in the Great Trials.

Vincent takes out a loan from Boss and wagers it on the upcoming WrasslInsanity 49 women's wrestling tournament. He bets on the dainty wrestler Feather who, despite the odds, ends up winning the tournament. A few days later he is shown to have moved out of his apartment and is in the Spaceport high above the town, thus revealing that the entire game narrative has taken place in a fabricated town on a space colony. Vincent has used his winnings to go on a space tourism voyage that is repeatedly advertised on posters throughout the game. While this turn of events may seem incredibly bizarre and farfetched from a narrative standpoint, Azuma reminds us, "It is [the *otaku*] who may be said to be socially engaged and realistic in Japan today, by virtue of not choosing the 'social reality'" (*Otaku* 27).

By including an ending where Vincent rejects both the hegemonic masculinity of the salaryman and the hip, alternative masculinity of the herbivore man, *Catherine* opens up a space for and reflects the identities and lifestyle choices of many kinds of players, including *otaku* fans. In this freedom game ending, the spaceships that fly by offering to take our hero on a new adventure to a distant planet herald the possibility of a post-national, post-racial Japanese future

in the solar system. This vision of Japan has limitless potential and is in direct competition with the inflexible Web Clock of Child Population that began this chapter. Vincent concludes the game by breaking the fourth wall and speaking directly to the player. He asks us, "Why live a life without doing what you want? That's just a recipe for a life of misery." In this way, the virtual character we have come to care about over the past fifteen hours of gameplay steps out of the game to tell us to take charge of our own lives in a way that can only be described as a beautiful integration of social narrative and distance.

LEVEL 2 CLEAR!

Level 3: Phantoms of War and Traumatic Memory in *Metal Gear Solid V*

Since the advent of home video game systems three decades ago, the most ambitious promise of the medium has always been that of a fully realized virtual world which players could enter, assume an identity, manipulate items, and participate in interactive stories with little or no discrepancy between the game world and the real world. The ultimate goal for video games therefore has always been to actualize what Gene Roddenberry so famously imagined in 1987 with the "Holodeck" from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994). While no video game to date has approached the level of immersion promised by Roddenberry's deep space recreation facility, the goal remains tangible for the video game industry.[17]

Renowned media theorist Janet Murray references the science fiction device directly in the title to her foundational text *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. In that book she asks whether the emergence of new participatory, non-linear media made possible by the digital environment of computers, hyperlinks, and video games will be as transformative a tool for storytelling as the motion picture camera was over a hundred years ago. Murray's oft-quoted prediction, "Perhaps the next Shakespeare of this world will be a great live-action role-playing [game master] who is also an expert computer scientist," provides an indication that the media studies scholar believes they will (152). In the conclusion to her book, Murray speculates that in the digital narratives of the future there may be stories that confer on the user the ability to simultaneously act as author of and a character within their own narrative. In her own words, "We might be given a compelling role within the environment that confers upon us the ability to fluidly switch between

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[17] At the time of writing this chapter the video game industry is showing a renewed interest in the development of virtual reality (VR) headsets for both gameic and non-gameic applications. Many such stereoscopic headsets are currently in development or already commercially available. This includes hardware that connects directly to PCs or existing video game consoles to run applications, such as the Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, and Sony's PlayStation VR. Also popular are VR headset models that are compatible with existing smartphone technology such as Samsung's Gear VR and Google Cardboard.

viewing the world through our own character's eyes and viewing our character through the eyes of others" (283).

What Murray seems to be hinting at, and what the Holodeck promises, is the near full erasure of the distanced engagement strategies discussed in the previous chapter that clearly demarcate player input from the fantasy scripted by the designer. This new type of game would be the result of a more systemic form of immersion where players author a greater degree of the game's content while literally becoming indistinguishable from a character within the simulation (116). Sci-fi narratives have long been fascinated with the idea of simulations so engaging that a player might never wish to leave, or never be able to do so.[18] This chapter is an attempt to think through what this merging of the player and player-character subjectivities might look like in a video game, and, moreover, how this sense of real-world fidelity might aid in the working through of post-traumatic memory.

I address this by proposing what I term "external engagement," or clever gameplay strategies used to turn the gameic experience into an experiential event within the player's own lived reality. The analysis centers on *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions, 2015; hereafter *MGSV*), the most recent entry in the world-famous stealth action series that has long experimented with gameplay tricks to involve the player more deeply in the simulation. I begin by reading the game's complex narrative as an attempt by the designer to undermine the postwar foundational narrative between Japan and the United States of America. This analysis leads me to a discussion of the main gameplay features of *MGSV* and how the series deploys external engagement to purposefully merge the identities of the player and central protagonist in order heighten the sense that the fictional in-game scenarios are connected to the

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[18] Many episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, for example, play with this very premise where members of the crew are trapped on the Holodeck and must play out a simulation in order to return to the real world.

player's real-world actions. Finally, I examine how players work through phantom limb pain and post-traumatic stress disorder in several interesting gameplay scenarios, illustrating how these moments provide a more personalized appreciation of war trauma and recovery owing to the players' moral involvement in the in-game events.

3.1   A Vocal Cord Parasite and the Erasure of the World's Lingua Franca

For twenty-eight years, the *Metal Gear Solid* series (hereafter *MGS* series) has been tasking players to infiltrate secret bases and carry out a military-themed version of hide-and-seek with enemy guards. Designed, written, directed, and produced by legendary auteur Kojima Hideo (b. 1963), *MGSV* is actually the eighth main game in the series, and the third chronologically, contrary to what the numbering might suggest.[19] The series began with *Metal Gear* (Konami, 1987) and its sequel *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* (Konami, 1990) for the MSX2[20] in Japan. The first game was not widely released outside of Japan and the second was not released abroad at all. Consequently, most players likely first donned the sneaking suit of hero Solid Snake through the series' third iteration *Metal Gear Solid*, released for the original PlayStation by Konami in 1998. Unlike the original two games, which featured a bird's eye view and a limited graphical palette of 16 colors, this third entry featured a full 3D engine with abundant cinematic cutscenes and fully voiced character dialogue (Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography 180, 182). The result was the birth of a highly cinematic form of gameic storytelling that brought narrative and characterization to the fore (Sayawaka 269–70).

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[19] In identifying eight main series games I am leaving out the numerous spinoffs from the series, as well as *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes*, a short prologue mission released in March 2014. This demo was created largely to acclimate players to the new gameplay systems before the formal release of *MGSV*.

[20] The MSX was a common PC standard created by Microsoft and ASCII in 1983. The original two *Metal Gear* games were both developed for the second-generation MSX2 system, which debuted in Japan in 1985. The first game in the series (*Metal Gear*) was later ported to the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1987.

Journalist Tom Bissell humorously equates summarizing the convoluted storyline and mythos of the *MGS* series with writing "a one-page encapsulation of *War and Peace*" (186). However, against Bissell's better judgment, I will attempt a basic (and simplified) overview of the complex narrative in order to situate the events of *The Phantom Pain* within the larger series trajectory. Set in 2005, *Metal Gear Solid* casts players as retired American Special Forces soldier Solid Snake who returns to action and is redeployed on a "sneaking mission" to infiltrate an enemy base on the Alaskan island of Shadow Moses. His mission is to counteract Foxhound, a terrorist group led by the mysterious Liquid Snake that is threatening to launch a nuclear strike against the U.S. from a bipedal mechanical tank known as a "Metal Gear"; that is, unless the U.S. government releases the bodily remains of Big Boss, the terrorist leader who Solid Snake supposedly incinerated with an improvised flamethrower at the end of *Metal Gear 2*.

It is eventually revealed that Liquid Snake and Solid Snake are both clones genetically identical to each other and to the legendary soldier Big Boss. They were created as part of the *Les Enfants Terribles* (The Terrible Children) project in the early 1970s, masterminded by Zero, the leader of a secret organization known as Cipher (and later as The Patriots),[21] which functions as the overarching illuminati group controlling the entirety of the United States and masterminding the villainous acts of the series.

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[21] The backstory behind Cipher / The Patriots is equally complicated. "The Philosophers" was originally a 12-member group founded after the conclusion of WWI as a collection of the richest and most powerful representatives from the U.S., Russia, and China. The group amassed a fortune of 100 billion dollars (known as "The Philosophers' Legacy"), only to later fall into disarray and disband around the time of the Cold War, resulting in the three distinct global super powers that exist today. The U.S. arm of the Philosophers (which would take the name Cipher and later The Patriots) grew in strength to the point where it appointed the president and effectively ran the entire United States in secret. By the year 2000, The Patriots ceased being a committee with human members and instead evolved into an advanced and malevolent AI neural network bent on unifying the world through a global takeover.

Figure 20. Big Boss as depicted in *MGSV*. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

MGSV is one of three main prequel games to *Metal Gear Solid* that cast players not as Solid Snake but as his genetic "father" Big Boss (then known by the codename Naked Snake; Figure 20). These games establish Big Boss's backstory in the 1960s and 70s, chronicling his early training as the disciple of the legendary female soldier The Boss, the "mother of U.S. Special Forces," through a life-changing mission where he is tasked with killing his former mentor and lover once she is branded a traitor by the United States. Naked Snake receives the title "Big Boss" from President Lyndon B. Johnson after successfully dispatching The Boss, but later learns that his mentor's alleged defection and betrayal of her country were lies perpetrated by the U.S. government.

After resigning from the Special Forces in disgust, the prequel games then follow Big Boss's global exploits as he establishes a series of stateless private military companies in an effort to overthrow Cipher. His first company is the *Militaires Sans Frontières* (MSF; Soldiers Without Borders), which openly employs fighters from any nation, operating under the credo

that soldiers should never be used as puppets of their national governments. As Big Boss's

military companies grow in size and strength, the prequel games relish in charting the character's

gradual transformation from decorated American war hero to the series' misunderstood

antagonist who is eventually killed by his own "son," who is oddly also himself.

Set in 1984, *MGSV* begins with Big Boss (who now goes by the codename "Punished

'Venom' Snake") awakening from a coma nine years after a sneak attack by the covert strike

force XOF has destroyed MSF's headquarters Mother Base. The game that follows is largely a

quest for revenge in which Big Boss attempts to track down the man responsible for the attack,

the mysterious Skull Face, while recruiting soldiers and rebuilding his destroyed base of

operations.

As the rise and fall of Big Boss aptly illustrates, the *MGS* series has always worked to

cleverly subvert what cultural historian Yoshikuni Igarashi calls the "foundational narrative" of

the U.S. and Japan that has defined the two countries' perception of WWII and how it ended.

Igarashi explains that the popular foundational narrative agreed upon by both nations positions

Emperor Hirohito and President Truman as "great men"; Emperor Hirohito because he made the

decision of national surrender out of concern for his people; and President Truman because he

only dropped the atomic bombs in order to prevent more bloodshed (20). Igarashi elaborates,

"Through the bomb, the United States, gendered as male, rescued and converted Japan, figured

as a desperate woman. Hirohito's so-called divine decision to end the war participated in this

drama by accepting the superior power of the United States" (20).

The construction of foundational narratives is an effective method of coping with the

trauma of war and it also proves to be interesting fodder for video game narratives. Throughout

all the *MGS* games, players have no choice but to question the false narrative of the "great men"

in charge of the world's superpowers. The clear gameic manifestation of this is the ending boss

battle of *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* which culminates in an epic swordfight atop

Federal Hall between Solid Snake's amateur partner Raiden and the former 43rd President of the

United States George Sears, who is revealed to be the terrorist leader Solidus Snake, the secret

third clone of Big Boss. A playthrough of any of the eight main games in the series works to

undermine the "superior power" of the U.S. by portraying the nation as a false superpower that

betrays its own war heroes and is run by a malevolent AI neural network (see fn. 21).

Game director Kojima has spoken openly about his desire to use the *MGS* series as a tool

to rethink established global power hierarchies. As he explains:

> In the past the US was the centre of the world, where everything was happening
>
> … I think my stories have always sought to question this, maybe even criticise it
>
> … Hollywood continues to present the US army as being the good guys, always
>
> defeating the aliens or foreigners. I am trying to shift that focus … I am trying to
>
> present an alternate view in these games. (qtd. in Parkin)

The *MGS* games may initially seem like an odd case study for discussing gameic

representations of Japanese national trauma due to the conspicuous focus on American characters

and geopolitical issues. However, Naoki Sakai has argued that when considering Othering in

relation to Japan, Japanese difference is constructed (and has historically been constructed) by

means of a particularization of the universal. He concludes that Japanese particularism is always

already co-figured with Western universals (163). Following Sakai's logic, it is my contention

that the series has always been concerned with renegotiating the postwar relationship between

the U.S. and Japan by queering the established foundational narrative of U.S military and

economic superiority. Kojima's rhetorical approach has simply been to focalize this story about Japan's relationship with the West through disenfranchised American super soldiers who experience the breakdown of the American dream from the inside.

Figure 21. Skull Face, the central antagonist of the game. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

MGSV, the eighth and supposedly last game in the series, introduces a new and previously unseen thematic in order to critique the foundational narrative of U.S. dominance: the English language. Indeed, players sense that language will play a key role in the game from the opening epigraph by Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran (1911–1995) that reads: "It is no nation we inhabit, but a language. Make no mistake; our native tongue is our true fatherland." The game's chief antagonist Skull Face later recites this same quote to Big Boss during an extended monologue wherein he reveals his plans for world domination (Figure 21).

Skull Face views English as a parasitic lingua franca (common language) that subjugates and homogenizes indigenous cultures and languages. This hatred of foreign language stems from the villain's upbringing in a small Hungarian village where, it is implied, forced servitude to the Nazis and the Soviets necessitated that he adopt the language of the various occupying groups. Skull Face recollects, "With each new post, my masters changed, along with the words they made me speak. Words are peculiar. With each change, I changed too. My thoughts, personality, how I saw right and wrong … Words can kill. I was invaded by words, burrowing and breeding inside me." Thus, the central threat the player must stop in *MGSV* is the dispersal of a deadly vocal cord parasite that will target and kill any host who speaks the English language. Skull

Face's plan is to wipe English from the face of the earth and in the process destroy Cipher's mother tongue of operation. With the world rid of the "infestation" of English, Skull Face reasons that "all men will breathe free again [and] reclaim their past, present, and future."

The rhetoric of Skull Face's logocentric view of national identity echoes Benedict Anderson's theorization of a nation as a socially constructed "imagined community," where citizens "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (49). Anderson contends that the creation of imagined communities was made possible through the emergence of a new form of "print capitalism" that gave a fixed and permanent form to printed books and media represented in vernacular language. This in turn led to the decline of script languages such as Latin (or, within the East Asian context, Classical Chinese). The result was that various local dialects (or "language-fields" in Anderson's terms) could now understand each other through print and this fostered common discourses and new notions of imagined community (56–57).

The conceptual framework of "imagined communities" is useful not only for thinking through the rise in nationalism. It also shows how non-national imagined communities, those untethered to political ideologies and geographical boundaries, can arise in place of traditional nation states. These new communities might require a distinctive medium to represent them. Returning to the game, just as Anderson notes that print-capitalism gave rise to the formation of new kinds of "languages-of-power," to represent imagined communities, so too is it ultimately revealed that Skull Face desires the establishment of a new lingua franca in the form of nuclear weapons for global domination. To quote Skull Face:

> The world will need a new common tongue. A language of nukes. My Metal
>
> Gears shall be the thread by which all countries are bound together, in equality.

No words will be needed. Every man will be forced to recognize his neighbor.

People will swallow their pain. They will link lost hands. And the world will

become one. This war is peace.

Skull Face desires to sell nuclear weapons to all the nations of the world in an attempt to

invalidate the political and national power of the existing arsenals wielded by the superpowers.

For Kojima, a staunchly anti-nuclear game designer who always works antiwar messages into his

game narratives, this is a clear satirical critique of the deterrence discourse of "mutually assured

destruction" (Parkin). The central threat posed by Skull Face in *MGSV* critiques the idea that

nuclear proliferation will result in increased global safety.[22]

Equally present in the game narrative is Kojima's subtle critique of what Lisa Yoneyama

terms Japan's "phantasmatic innocence," or the ways in which the country's national

remembrance has led to a forgetting of the history of race-based atrocities in East Asia (11). The

gigantic mechanized Metal Gear tanks that Solid Snake and Big Boss must destroy at the end of

each game in order to prevent the threat of nuclear annihilation epitomize this clever subversion

of Japan's innocence. When the player first encounters the bipedal tyrannosaurus-looking Metal

Gear REX in *Metal Gear Solid*, the mechanical design immediately recalls mecha (humanoid

robots piloted by people) designs from famous Japanese anime. This is a point humorously

acknowledged by REX's lead engineer, the otaku Hal "Otacon" Emmerich, who admits to

having drawn inspiration for REX's designs from the anime he loves. In this way, Kojima's

---

[22] Nuclear proliferation and disarmament are also gameplay activities within *MGSV* in the form of an optional side-game titled "Forward Operating Base" (FOB). In this game, players develop and manage an online base that can be used to invade the bases of fellow players for resources. Since these same players can in turn invade your own FOB, developing nuclear weapons can act as a useful deterrent for such attacks. However, further evidencing the designer's pacifist proclivities, nuclear weapons can also be decommissioned in this game mode as well. In fact, the game encourages players to do this and rewards the action. If online players collectively deactivate all the nuclear weapons across a regional server, a special congratulatory video is triggered.

game simultaneously critiques nuclear proliferation while reinscribing the destructive nature of

the weapons. This is something Igarashi notes is also lost in the foundational narrative between

the U.S. and Japan in that it interprets the atomic bombs as tools of peace (42). These destructive

weapons are housed in a mechanical body purposefully evocative of Japanese popular culture

that can only be destroyed by a disgraced U.S. Special Forces soldier. In this way, Kojima's

narrative criticizes both the postwar hegemonic power of the U.S. and the assumed victimhood

of the Japanese.

3.2   Tactical Espionage Operations and the Never-Ending Battle

Stealth sections have been present in video games prior to Snake putting his boots on the

ground. However, the original *Metal Gear* on the MSX2 was the first video game to concentrate

solely on these elements, effectively creating an entirely new genre of "stealth action" games. In

this types of games, players are encouraged to sneak quietly through secret bases without

detection, use non-lethal weapons to silently incapacitate enemies, and hide from patrols along

the way. To give the player the upper hand in this virtual game of hide-and-seek, *MGS* games

utilize radar or marking systems whereby players can monitor the movement and field of vision

of enemy guards in order to increase their situational awareness (Figure 22). If spotted by the

enemy, there are precious few moments in which to retaliate or flee and hide until the pursuit

dies down. When confrontations are unavoidable, tranquilizer rounds or stun guns are a stealthy

way to neutralize the enemy, though players are more than welcome to unleash rocket propelled

grenades and assault rifle rounds albeit at the risk of being instantly discovered.

Up until *MGSV*, series games have traditionally featured a highly cinematic and linear

form of gameplay akin to watching a CG animated movie. Gameplay sections would be

punctuated with grandiose boss fights and long expository audio conversations via "Codec," an

Figure 22. An example of the stealth gameplay in *MGSV*. Big Boss sneaks into an enemy outpost having marked all the soldiers to aid in his situational awareness. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

in-game cochlear implant that functions as a two-way radio with mission control. More

(in)famous still were the tightly directed, edited, and choreographed cinematic cutscenes used to

tell much of the game story. A 27-minute-long scene from *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the*

Patriots (Kojima Productions, 2008) holds a Guinness World Record for the longest such scene

in a video game.

Until recently, players, as either Solid Snake or Big Boss, could infiltrate a series of

enemy bases, but the degree to which they could explore and plan their approach was always

limited by the relatively small indoor game maps and the technological limitations of the

hardware itself. *MGSV* represents the series' first foray into an "open world" style of gameplay

where Big Boss is placed within two large open environments in Afghanistan and Africa. The

third main location in the game is Big Boss's Mother Base, an offshore plant in the Indian Ocean

resembling an oil rig with interconnected platforms that house the various teams of soldiers

players can recruit throughout the game and the weapons they can develop. To reflect the

geographical distance between these three maps, Big Boss must fly by chopper should he wish to

travel from Mother Base to the Afghan battlefield. Owing to this division of open worlds, the

story unfolds not as an uninterrupted cinematic event as in previous games, but rather as a series

of 50 main "tactical espionage operation" missions (and hundreds of optional side ones) that can

be triggered by the player at will. The wide-open maps allow players to improvise and creatively

plan how they will infiltrate and exfiltrate from enemy headquarters, using the natural terrain and

weather patterns to their advantage. These missions have varied objectives such as extracting

POWs or assassinating rebel leaders, and upon completion, players receive a letter grade and an

in-game monetary reward depending on how efficiently they completed the mission. Ignoring the

main story missions entirely is also an option, as players are free to wander and explore the two

gigantic game maps, capturing wild animals, foraging for medicinal plants, or raiding guard

outposts to supply Mother Base.

This new mission-based gameplay structure has a direct impact on the pacing and

progression of the game as it relates to the communication of war trauma. Individual missions

can now be played out of sequence so the central storyline of Skull Face's vocal cord parasites

unfolds episodically as in a TV show. Players can now undertake missions back-to-back,

choosing to stay out in the battlefield for days at a time without returning to Mother Base for a

shower.[23] The cyclical nature of equipping weapons, deploying to the battlefield via the mobile

command center (an armored chopper), and completing the mission objectives effectively

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[23] The game runs a realistic day/night cycle roughly every hour of in-game playtime, with real changes in weather reflected across the game maps as well. While the automated voice on Big Boss's iDroid handheld device will encourage players to return to Mother Base to boost the morale of the soldiers or take a shower, how long Big Boss spends in the battlefield is up to each individual player.

communicates the fog of war for military participants as sorties bleed into one another, often with little narrative setup.

The repetitive mission structure in *MGSV* also finds resonances with Azuma Hiroki's analysis of Sakurazaka Hiroshi's light novel *All You Need Is Kill* (2004).[24] The light novel in question centers on United Defense Force soldier Kiriya Keiji battling an alien enemy known as the "Mimics" (*gitai*). Kiriya becomes stuck in a time loop where his death on the battlefield results in him being resurrected 30 hours earlier. This endless loop of "live-die-repeat" is what allows Kiriya to slowly gain skills as a soldier and ultimately discover the secret to beating the invaders. It is in this constant resetting of the timeline and respawning of the protagonist that Azuma sees the structures of video game play embedded in Sakurazaka's literary work. Kiriya assumes the roles of both the player-character and player-author in Azuma's model as he behaves in real-time within the narrative loop as an actor, yet is also able to actively control the loop by killing himself in order to reset the day (*Gēmuteki* 169–70).

Azuma reasons that differentiating the character level from the player level in this way in literature and video games is effective for cultivating player empathy (*kanjō inyū*) around the "cruelty of death" (*shi no zankokusa*; *Gēmuteki* 179). As Azuma elaborates, readers of stories where the principal characters can only die once feel empathy for the powerless (*muryoku*) characters themselves. By contrast, in stories where a resetting of death is possible, as is the case in *All You Need Is Kill* and most modern video games, the sense of empathy is transferred to the player herself who feels a sense of powerlessness over only being able to control one life and one narrative stream of the character at a given time (*Gēmuteki* 180). In what follows I argue that

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[24] A "light novel" is an easy-to-ready book targeting young readers, often supplemented with anime-style illustrations on the cover and throughout the text. Sakurazaka's light novel was subsequently made into a manga and then adapted into the 2014 American science fiction film *Edge of Tomorrow* (Warner Bros.) starring Tom Cruise.

Kojima's game simultaneously promotes empathy in both registers by collapsing this player-author and player-character distinction into a single speculative layer (as is done in *All You Need Is Kill*) in order to increase the player's sense of immersion in and ownership over the game content.

3.3 Strategies of External Engagement

The gameplay moment occurs in *Metal Gear Solid*. Solid Snake has just defeated Liquid Snake's right-hand lieutenant, the mustachioed gunslinger known as Revolver Ocelot, and rescued Kenneth Baker, the former president of the weapons manufacturer ArmsTech. Baker hands Snake an optical disc containing data from the training exercise run by his company's bipedal mechanized tank Metal Gear REX with the instructions that it be returned to the Pentagon. Moments before he dies of a mysterious "heart attack," Baker instructs Snake to obtain a card key held by Meryl Silverburgh, the niece of Snake's commanding officer. He tells Snake, "In any case, you should contact Meryl by Codec. Wasn't her frequency written on the back of the CD case?"

The player naturally assumes that this comment is in some way related to the optical disk Snake just received. However, scrutinizing the in-game item in the player's inventory will yield no clue as to how to successfully make contact with Meryl. As many baffled players eventually discovered, what the comment referred to was the back of the physical packaging in which the game was sold. Pausing the game to look at the real-world CD case, players notice a small screenshot on the back depicting Snake's Codec conversation with Meryl. Her Codec frequency is clearly shown in the picture as "140.15" (Figure 23). This is just one of many such memorable
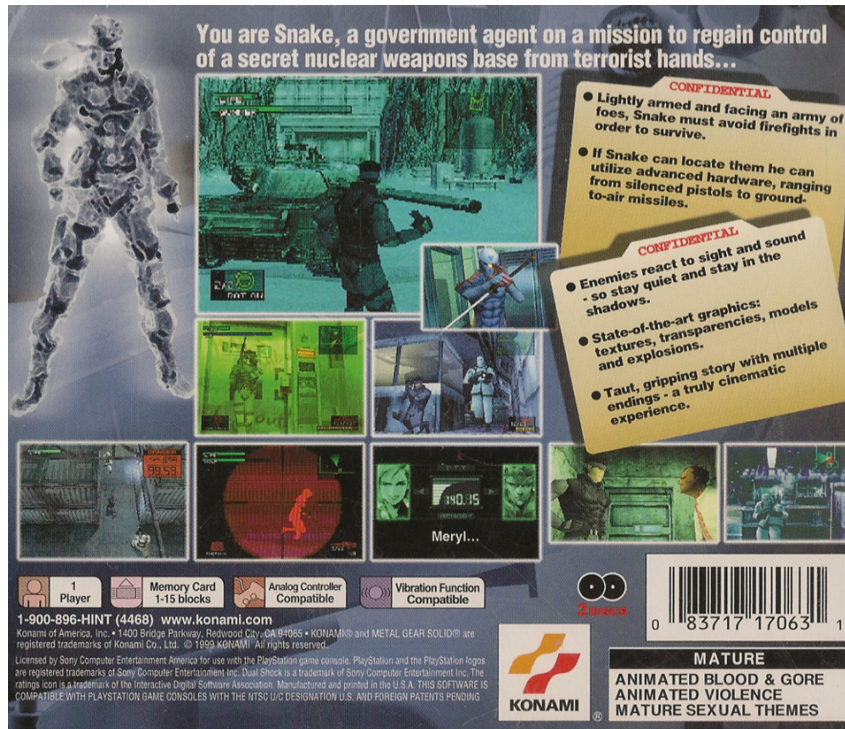
Figure 23. Players must locate Meryl's Codec frequency on the back of the physical game box (bottom center). ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

gameplay moments from the *MGS* series that serve to enhance the overall game experience by interfacing the player's real-world activities with tangible results inside the simulation itself.[25]

Communications scholar Nina Huntemann's interviews with players of "wargames" (military themed shooters of which she considers the *MGS* series to be a representative example), reveal that online gameplay sessions were often interlaced with discussions where players spoke candidly, via in-game chat, about their real-world concerns surrounding the politics and current events depicted in the game. However, according to Huntemann, what was missing from these player discussions was any "constructive mechanism *beyond the game* for dealing with this fear" (234; emphasis added). I argue that by looking at some of the gameplay strategies in the *MGS* series, we find a possible framework for thinking through how a simulation might move beyond the confines of the virtual space and reach out to affect the player in the real world. To this end, I coin the term "external

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[25] There are other such examples of external engagement strategies from Kojima's series. In *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami, 2004), for example, players battle a centenarian sniper known as "The End." If players choose to fight, the resulting gun battle takes place amidst lush jungle foliage. However, players can also circumvent the fight entirely by exploiting the advanced age of their adversary. If one quits midway during the boss battle and waits one week of real-world time (or cheats and sets their console's internal clock forward by one week), upon returning to the game Snake will be informed that The End has died of old age, obviating the need for the duel.

engagement" to refer to a purposeful collapsing of the player-author and player-character identities through gameplay techniques designed to turn the fantasy of the gameic experience into an experiential reality within the player's own lived reality, beyond the act of simply pressing buttons and rotating analog sticks.

One of the most successful examples of external engagement in game form can be observed in the global craze surrounding the virtual pet Tamagotchi. Designed and launched in Japan in 1996 by the toy manufacturer Bandai, Tamagotchi is a plastic egg-shaped handheld electronic keychain featuring a virtual pet whose animated image is displayed on a small LCD screen. The pet begins as an egg, hatches and grows into a child, and progresses to adulthood, gradually changing form along the way until ultimately dying. By manipulating a series of three buttons, players can feed, play with, and even clean up the Hershey Kiss-shaped excrement of their virtual pet. When a Tamagotchi gets sick, it is the player's responsibility to administer virtual medicine. Not doing so in a timely fashion can result in the pet's death (Allison 170–76). Caring for one's Tamagotchi becomes an experiential event within one's daily life, as players are encouraged to carry the device around with them at all times in order to monitor the wellbeing of their companion. In this way the spatial confines of virtual play are gradually broadened as players bring their pets out into the real world. As Tamagotchi and the recent global craze surrounding the mobile app *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016) make clear, these games promote new forms of emotionally significant, techno-intimate play made possible by connecting in-person with other players in order to form partnerships, while also using emergent technologies like augmented reality (AR) to superimpose game characters and tasks out in the real world.

Game studies scholar Colin Cremin believes that video games only truly come alive through the collaboration of the "player-artist" and "ludo-creator" (75). Cremin is correct to

highlight the fact that all gameplay sessions are necessarily a negotiation between a designer and a player, and that input from both parties is integral for the final product to function. However, even while extolling the virtues of this collaboration, Cremin views it as inherently "imbalanced," with the player-artist functioning more as an "apprentice" to the designer (77–78). The strategies of external engagement to be discussed in relation to *MGSV* highlight some of the ways this balance of creator power might be rethought, with players occupying an increasingly more integral role in the enactment of fantasy play that they script and enact in their everyday life, outside of those spaces typically reserved for video game play.

Thinking through strategies of external engagement also expands on game theorist Alexander Galloway's central criteria of "congruence," something that he argues is necessary for achieving realism in video games. Galloway suggests that there must be "*fidelity of context* that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one's thumbs, into the game environment and back again" (78; emphasis in the original). The fidelity of context to which Galloway refers is a one-to-one mapping between what is depicted in the video game and what is lived by the player. The example given by Galloway is of a war game played by a youth growing up in a war-torn country under enemy occupation. There is little doubt that consuming a work of entertainment media that directly reflects the user's lived experience carries great potential for empathetic resonance. However, most players of video games engage with scenarios that are heavily distanced from their everyday lives. While we may love to play as Solid Snake in his sneaking missions, few of us will ever be involved in the type of active combat depicted in the games. It is here that I find a central limitation of Galloway's thesis that external engagement strategies potentially address. While looking up the Codec frequency on the back of the CD case does not align our lived identity with the video game (we are, of course, not actually Solid

Snake), it does provide the same sort of alignment that brings the game to the player in real life.

And it does this without the requirement that the game player have a life experience that directly

correlates with the game content. In this way, external engagement strategies, because they are

more open to the varied speculative genres that inform video game play, make the power of the

game experience more available across existing stratifications of race, class, and gender.

In many ways, external engagement is the natural complement to the distanced

engagement strategies discussed in the previous chapter. Both *Catherine* and *MGSV* include self-

reflexive gameplay moments. The difference between the two games comes largely through the

manner in which these strategies are deployed. As discussed in the previous chapter, *Catherine*

uses metanarrative in-game polls as a means to humorously promote player self-reflection by

making the artifice of the simulation visible. The *MGS* series contains similar examples of

comedic distanced engagement, such as when Psycho Mantis reads the player's memory card

data (see previous chapter). However, the *MGS* series is noteworthy in that, existing alongside

these moments of distanced engagement are the external strategies that serve to collapse the

distinction between player-author and player-character and in so doing increase both the pleasure

and, perhaps, crisis of transportable traumatic memories. While the external engagement

strategies to be discussed in relation to *MGSV* are by no means perfect for interfacing with a

player's lived experience, they nonetheless work to alter players' critical media viewing faculties

and provide a compelling example of the ways in which game narratives and game immersion

might evolve in the near future.

3.4 "I'm Big Boss, and you are, too…"

While reflecting on the development of *Metal Gear Solid* for the original PlayStation,

series creator Kojima gave a clear indication that Solid Snake was meant to function as an analog

for the player's own identity. To quote Kojima, "We tried not to give [Solid Snake] too much character because we want players to be able to take on his role. Snake isn't like a movie star. He's not someone you watch. He's someone you can step into the shoes of. Playing Snake gives gamers the chance to be a hero" (qtd. in Newman, *Videogames* 129). *MGSV* utilizes external engagement to more fully realize Kojima's promise of comingling the player's real and virtual identities due in large part to a major plot twist that occurs at the end of the game that forces a reevaluation of the lead character's identity politics.

This revelation happens during Episode 46 of the game titled "Truth: The Man Who Sold the World." Players are tasked with replaying the very first training mission of the game "Phantom Limbs," where Big Boss awakens from his coma and must escape from a military hospital in Cyprus as Skull Face's XOF forces attack. A weakened Big Boss is aided in his escape by a mysterious patient named Ishmael, whose face is concealed in bandages. The two successfully drive out of the hospital only to have their getaway vehicle collide with a guard post rendering both men unconscious. During the first playthrough of this mission, players must use a character customization interface to create a male character avatar unrelated to the in-game model of Big Boss.[26] Dr. Constantinou holds a mirror up to Big Boss's hospital bed and informs the soldier/player that his facial appearance must be altered via plastic surgery in order to elude his attackers. Players naturally assume that the avatar model they just created will provide the hero's new face (Figures 24 and 25).

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[26] For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to clarify the distinction between a player-character and an avatar. A player-character, like Big Boss, possesses an independent voice, appearance, and personality distinct from that of the player. By contrast, an avatar often takes the form of a graphical figure that players customize with their own appearance and personality in order to gain entry to an artificial world (Murray 113).

Figure 24. Players use a character customization interface to create their own in-game avatar. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 25. Big Boss observes his own face in a hospital mirror. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

It is only when replaying this mission a second time as a flashback that the game's shocking twist is finally revealed: The player is not in fact the real Big Boss. Rather, the character players have been controlling all along is a former comrade and combat medic who served under Big Boss until he lost an arm and fell into a coma after the sneak attack on MSF's Mother Base. An audiocassette tape from the "true" Big Boss (who aided in your hospital escape as the bandaged Ishmael) explains this twist to both the player and the medic moments before the game ends:

> Now do you remember? Who you are? What you were meant to do? I cheated death, thanks to you. And thanks to you, I've left my mark. You have, too – you've written your own history. You're your own man. I'm Big Boss, and you are, too…No…He's the two of us. Together. Where we are, today? We built it. This story – this 'legend' – it's ours. We can change the world – and with it, the future. I am you, and you are me. Carry that with you, wherever you go. Thank you…my friend. From here on out, you're Big Boss. (ellipses in the original)

It is thus revealed that this nameless ancillary character has been conditioned to function as Big Boss's "phantom," to use the game's terminology, a body double meant to simultaneously throw off attackers and increase the soldier's legend on the world stage. The medic's transformation into Big Boss's phantom has been utterly complete, augmented with voice modification and plastic surgery to such an extent that the man has forgotten his past life, believing himself to be the one and true Big Boss. Indeed, it is revealed that hypnotherapy has even transferred the memories and skills of the real life Big Boss to his new phantom doppelganger.

The medic's conversion holds strong resonances with what memory studies scholar Alison Landsberg terms "prosthetic memory," or implanted artificial memories unrelated to one's lived experience. Landsberg coins this term in relation to her analyses of the main characters from *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Total Recall* (1990), both of whom question the extent to which their memories are natural or artificially implanted. She writes, "Prosthetic memories circulate publicly, and although they are not organically based, they are nevertheless experienced with a person's body as a result of an engagement with a wide range or cultural technologies … These memories are not 'natural' or 'authentic' and yet they organize and energize the bodies and subjectivities that take them on" (25–26). Just as the prosthetic memories of Rachael and Douglas Quade energize the characters of both films and endow them with their subjectivity, so too do the medic's implanted memories and skills from Big Boss literally transform the man into the legend of the soldier and provide players with the combat techniques they use in their missions.

In *MGSV*, Kojima resolves the series narrative with players no longer *playing as* but rather *becoming* Big Boss by shaping his actions in the various story missions and influencing the soldier's global legacy. In this way, the designer makes an attempt to collapse the already realized player-character (Big Boss) and player-made avatar into a single entity. This attempt can be observed most clearly during the game's concluding scene. Here, the final shot is of "Big Boss" (as the medic) looking into a mirror only to see the player's avatar face reflected back at him as an alter ego (Figure 26). This avatar's face, created during the first game mission so many hours ago now provides an indexical link to the player's own real-world identity within the game. As Big Boss ponders his true identity, so too do players now contextualize the soldier's

Figure 26. Subjectivities merge as Big Boss discovers his true identity as the player. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

legacy through the specific gameplay moments they authored. Thus, with this final look in the mirror, the physical act of playing the video game has served as a kind of implantation of Big Boss's prosthetic memory into the player.

3.5   Phantom Pains and Post-Traumatic Memory

Video games often ask players to model morally questionable, unlawful, or violent behavior. Yet, a common critique of such games is that the virtual aggression carried out rarely mirrors the complexity or harshness of real-world conflicts. Huntemann makes this claim in relation to "military-themed games" like the *MGS* series, stating that the depiction of war presented is "cleaned up, void of horrific consequences, civilian casualties, and psychic devastation" (231–32). Huntemann is certainly right to suggest that many video games do naturalize and sterilize violent processes in the service of crafting an entertaining action narrative on par with what is offered in other entertainment media. However, I would argue that it is

incorrect to fold the *MGS* games into this trend as Kojima's series has always demonstrated a clear engagement with war trauma and memory.

Previous entries in the *MGS* franchise evidence the designer's penchant for addressing traumatic representation at both the narrative and gameplay levels. A notable example of the former is in the characterization of the "Beauty and the Beast Unit" of female soldiers who make up the main bosses Solid Snake must defeat in *MGS4*. Each member of the unit is a former child victim of war haunted by intense post-traumatic memories. One of the more memorable backstories is of the unit member codenamed Crying Wolf, who grew up in a war-torn village in Africa. Wolf inadvertently suffocated her baby brother while frantically trying to stifle his cries so as to not be spotted by the advancing enemy. As a means to isolate themselves from their respective traumas, each woman fights Snake from within an animalized mechanical suit.

In the same game, traumatic stress manifests within the gameplay in the form of a stress meter or "psyche gauge" displayed below Solid Snake's health bar. Players must constantly monitor this gauge as it will rise or fall during contentious conversations or in the heat of battle. If Snake's stress level gets too high, it will affect the player's ability to fire weapons or heal from injury. During these moments when Snake is overcome with panic, the player must find a safe space in which to hide and administer an injection of "nanomachines" to help bring the soldier's stress level back down (Bumbalough and Henze 28).

Thus, a crucial point missed in Huntemann's analysis of war games is that non-realistic gameplay can still function as an effective tool for communicating the complex psychological aspects of trauma and survival. These aspects are more difficult to convey in a video game than a photo-realistically rendered battlefield and speak to the inherent flexibility of storytelling within the medium. This is a sentiment shared by Murray, who similarly concludes that the goal of

mature games should be to include difficult material so that it can be "engaged, remodeled, and worked through" (173). As Murray goes on to argue, and as the game design of *MGSV* supports, the more constructivist possibilities made available within the simulation environment, the better it is for engagement with difficult subject matter.

MGSV represents the series most sustained and direct video game commentary to date on the themes of war, trauma, and remembrance. In the words of the game's creator:

> As you can tell from the title, The Phantom Pain, I want to kind of depict how you come back from war, and even if you make it back you won't be able to make it back unscathed. You might be injured, you might lose a limb, you might lose a friend, a superior. Even if you come back, there's some pain with you. I tried to depict this in my games. One way to do this is by my characters losing limbs, that's something I did want to put in the games. (Kojima, "Career")

Throughout Big Boss's quest to rebuild Mother Base and seek revenge on Skull Face, users play through post-traumatic stress in three distinct ways: first, through the integration of prosthetic limbs into the gameplay to signify the phantom pain and loss experienced by Big Boss and his comrades; second, through post-traumatic flashbacks featuring a deceased character; and third, by using the strategies of external engagement to link Big Boss's war atrocities with the actions of the player.

MGSV provides a gameic actualization of Landsberg's prosthetic memory through the use of actual in-game prosthetic limbs and phantom limb pain[27] that communicate how bodily

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[27] Kojima borrows his game title from "phantom limb pain" (PLP), a real-world medical condition where patients perceive chronic pain in a region of the body that is no longer present, either due to amputation or illness and injury. There is still no consensus on the true mechanism causing phantom limb pain. PLP was initially thought to be a psychiatric illness and was previously listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, though recent research has supported a neurological basis for the disorder (Subedi and Grossberg 1, 3).

injury and war memory haunt various characters. This is most clearly evident in the

characterization of Big Boss and his sub-commander, the half-Japanese, half-American,

Kazuhira Miller. During an early game mission, Big Boss is tasked with infiltrating an enemy

base and rescuing Miller, who is being held by the Soviets as a prisoner of war. Upon successful

exfiltration, it is revealed that Miller has lost his right arm and left leg during nine months of

torture (Figure 27). On the chopper ride back to Mother Base, Big Boss's injured comrade

evokes the phantom pain of the game's title. He questions, "Why are we still here? Just to suffer?

Every night, I can feel my leg... And my arm... even my fingers...The body I've lost...the

comrades I've lost... won't stop hurting. It's like they're all still there. You feel it too, don't you?"

(ellipses in the original). Throughout the remaining game Miller refuses to use advanced

technological upgrades to compensate for his lost limbs. Rather, he opts to utilize only a

rudimentary walking crutch and prosthetic leg to help with mobility, and these clunky aids act as

a visual reminder of the physical cost of war.

Miller's acceptance of his own phantom pain stands in stark contrast with Big Boss.

Early in the game a metallic red bionic arm is developed for Big Boss to aid him in his missions.

This prosthetic arm becomes a fully customizable piece of equipment central to gameplay. For

every mission successfully completed, players generate "Gross Military Product" or GMP, an in-

game currency that indexes to Mother Base's overall economic status. By spending GMP for

development costs, players can upgrade Big Boss's bionic arm with additional useful features

such as delivering an electric stun to enemies or firing off a projectile (Figure 28).

Landsberg notes that prosthetic memories are made portable through the

commodification produced by capitalism. This is because artificial limbs (or artificial memories

in the sci-fi context) can be purchased by anyone with sufficient means (27). The capitalist

Figure 27. Miller contemplates his lost limb and phantom pain. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 28. Big Boss's upgradable bionic arm provides an electric stun to a nearby enemy. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

GMP expenditure underlying the development of new weapons and items is a clever gameplay application of this concept. Players must steal secret blueprints from enemy bases in order to upgrade the bionic arm with new capabilities, and the profusion of bionic technology throughout the game world further evidences how easily these technologies become tools in global espionage. If Miller represents the more standard traumatic loss and memory associated with war injuries, then Big Boss's upgradable bionic arm, which functions above and beyond the limits of the human body, redefines the discourse of sympathy commonly associated with amputation. Moreover, as an indispensable piece of upgradable gameplay equipment, Big Boss's bionic arm provides a path for player mastery over disability that turns a potentially painful corporeal deficit into something inherently beneficial within the game experience.

"Post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) is characterized in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*) as a set of behavioral and emotional symptoms following exposure to one or more major traumatic life events. The most commonly associated symptom of PTSD is the "fear-based re-experiencing" of the traumatic event that occurs in the form of a distressing dream or "flashback." During these flashbacks, patients may experience a dissociative state lasting from a few seconds to a few hours, which results in a complete loss of awareness as the traumatic event is relived. While a variety of traumatic life events meet the criteria for PTSD, the first example listed in the *DSM-5*, and the one most commonly associated with the disorder, is "exposure to war as a combatant or civilian" (American Psychiatric Association).

MGSV provides a clear gameplay manifestation of PTSD through a side mission involving a deceased series character named Paz who returns to haunt Big Boss. Paz was first introduced in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker* (Kojima Productions, 2010), the game that

immediately precedes *MGSV* in the series chronology. In this game, Paz Ortega Andrade, or "Pacifica Ocean" as her true name is revealed to be, is a female double agent for Cipher in her mid-twenties. As *Peace Walker* progresses, Paz's loyalties to the villainous Cipher organization begin to waver, and she eventually joins Big Boss's MSF and becomes a trusted member of his team. In the events immediately prior to *MGSV*, Paz is captured by Skull Face and held for interrogation at Camp Omega on the southern tip of Cuba. Big Boss successfully locates and rescues Paz. However, during the ensuing exfiltration by helicopter it is discovered that the enemy has sewn multiple bombs inside Paz's body in an attempt to sabotage the escape plan. Big Boss and the medic (prior to his transformation) furiously attempt to remove the devices but they are unable to do so in time. Paz ultimately throws herself from the chopper in an effort to save her friends, only to explode in midair a few seconds later, causing the chopper to crash.

Paz returns in *MGSV* as the traumatic manifestation of the guilt the combat medic (now occupying the role of Big Boss's phantom) harbors over not being able to extract the bombs and save his friend aboard the helicopter. Much like the dissociative flashbacks of PTSD that are relived by patients as if they are occurring in real-time, Paz's side mission is played out without telegraphing the fact that her presence is a traumatic hallucination. When the character suddenly reappears halfway through the game in the sickbay at Mother Base, she is reported to have survived the blast but be suffering from amnesia. It is only by exploring the game world and recovering a series of ten "memento photographs" that Paz can begin to regain her lost memories. These photos depict key scenes from the previous *Peace Walker* video game and must be located and brought back to the medical platform one-by-one. This repetitive gameplay task of locating the photographs does not just function to reestablish Paz's memories; it acts as way

for the medic to come to terms with his own PTSD through repeated re-exposure to the original site of trauma.

Upon presenting Paz with the tenth and final photograph, Big Boss finds himself back on helicopter reliving Paz's failed rescue. Only this time, at the moment Paz jumps from the chopper and explodes in midair, Big Boss abruptly returns to the present only to find himself standing alone on an outdoor medical platform. The entire side mission sequence is revealed to have been a traumatic flashback. A single blue butterfly, a visual motif associated with Paz's character, flutters in front of Big Boss. As he attempts to pick the butterfly out of the air with his large bionic hand, this too disappears from within his grasp, providing a visual cue that while the medic may come to terms with his traumatic memory through repetition and re-exposure, the phantom pain of loss lingers on.

This gameplay sequence engages the politics of prosthetic memory Landsberg speaks of in relation to the film *Blade Runner*. Landsberg notes that while the replicant character of Rachael has artificial memories, the photographs she views of her implanted "past" nonetheless help the character to structure her own life narrative and sense of existence. As Landsberg explains, "While [the photograph] fails to authenticate her past, it does authenticate her present" (40). In much the same way, the memento photographs collected throughout *MGSV* do not represent the actual past experiences of the medic, for they depict experiences that happened to the real Big Boss in a previous game and not his body double. Yet, they do authenticate the present traumatic memories and recovery process for the medic by forcing him to relive and come to terms with a hardship central to his own lived identity.

The traumatic fear of not being able to save one's comrades during war reemerges at game's end in the form of Episode 43 titled, "Shining Lights, Even in Death." This time, the

mission utilizes the techniques of external engagement to give the player a much more personal experience of war trauma. Throughout the over 30-hour main storyline of *MGSV*, players are tasked with recruiting soldiers to join the ranks of Big Boss's private army. Players accomplish this by first incapacitating an enemy soldier in the game world and then strapping a self-inflating balloon to their back in order to send them hurling up into the sky. This somewhat comedic take on the real-life Fulton surface-to-air recovery system developed by the CIA ensures that talented soldiers can be successfully extracted from battle and returned to Mother Base.

These recruits each have their own strengths and weakness which allow them to aid the various development departments at base responsible for gathering intelligence, developing equipment, or providing medical services. In addition to the main infiltration missions, a considerable amount of gameplay time is dedicated to surveying, recruiting, and managing comrades. Each recruited soldier is given a unique codename and appears to genuinely look up to Big Boss, often stopping to salute him when his chopper touches down at Mother Base, or to verbally thank him as he walks by. This bond is only strengthened by the fact that the player must individually select each soldier they recruit, often by using Big Boss's handy "intel-scope" that can scan enemy bodies and tell players what particular skillsets will be useful on Mother Base. When a soldier falls ill, it is the player's responsibility to reassign him or her to the medical sickbay and hope for recovery. The result of this simulation management gameplay is that players feel a personal investment in the men and women they recruit and assign to the various divisions of their base and come to care for these virtual soldiers as if they were actual comrades. Taking a cue from the virtual pet gameplay described in relation to Tamagotchi and *Pokémon GO*, the various *MGSV* companion apps for mobile phones allow players to continue to check on and manage the wellbeing of their soldiers even when disconnected from the game.

It is by purposefully exploiting this relationship between Big Boss and his men that *MGSV* makes it strongest statement about how external engagement can communicate the horrors of war to the uninitiated. Episode 43 begins with Big Boss learning of an outbreak of the vocal cord parasite at Mother Base. In what follows, players must move through a quarantined section of the medical platform and are instructed to kill any infected soldiers to contain the spread of the virus. As Big Boss moves through the dimly lit corridors, some soldiers beg him not to shoot; others salute and accept their fate. Using the limited engagement strategies discussed in the first chapter, this sequence does not allow players the freedom of choice to save any of their men. Rather, players are forced to brutally execute every infected member of the crew. With the sound of each echoing gunshot, the automated voice on Big Boss's iDroid handheld repeatedly intones, "Staff member has died," in a soulless display of indifference. In the quote that began this section, Nina Huntemann argued that military games often sterilize the horrific consequences of battle. In this scene, the jarring juxtaposition of gruesome violence enacted by the player and affectless narration is incredibly affecting and deftly upends the way in which the death of computer-controlled grunts is often devalued within video game worlds.

Furthermore, the murderous act is made all the more personalized through the strategies of external engagement. Huntemann argues that the fundamental problem with gameic explorations of trauma is that while players may temporarily engage with a traumatic fear in the game, this engagement is short-lived and rarely provides players with any long-term emotional understanding (233). In Episode 43, each of those killed is a former soldier that the player herself recruited to Mother Base, managed, and cared for both inside and outside the game. By directly tying the in-game massacre to the player's own recruitment efforts, the sense of culpability is strengthened and the horrors of war become that much more experiential for the player. This

Figure 29. Big Boss amid the horrific act he has just committed. ©Konami. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

sense of player complicity is further emphasized after completing the mission. At this point, all

the soldiers killed during the episode are now listed by codename under the KIA tab in the

game's staff management menu, further cementing the player's own direct involvement in this

unthinkable mission. The ending image of the gameplay sequence shows Big Boss falling to his

knees in a hallway littered with the bodies of the soldiers he has just killed (Figure 29).

The episode ends on a note of healing, with Big Boss refusing to bury the bodies of his

fallen comrades at sea. He vows to make diamonds from their ashes and carry them into battle.

As the musical score swells, Big Boss delivers the line, "I won't scatter your sorrow to the

heartless sea. I will always be with you. Plant your roots in me. I won't see you end as ashes.

You're all diamonds." Yet, the cathartic tone belies the masterful way in which Kojima's game

subverts the generic stereotypes of action and war games. *MGSV* structures its gameplay so as to

train players to project themselves into the role of central protagonist Big Boss and encourages

them to recruit and care for an entire personal army of soldiers. Next, the game allows players to

work through the healing process of post-traumatic memory from the point of view of the medic.

The culmination is an experience of wartime trauma that players themselves must enact in

relation to their brothers and sisters in arms. If the goal of the *MGS* games has always been to

integrate the player's own subjectivity into a decidedly antiwar simulation, then this ending

example of external engagement represents a powerful new vision for communicating feelings of

culpability and victimhood in a way that was previously only the stuff of science fiction.

LEVEL 3 CLEAR!

Conclusion: Toward a Gameic World

"Video games are bad for you? That's what they said about rock 'n' roll."

—Miyamoto Shigeru, Creator of *Super Mario Bros.*

If I were attending a support group for players, I would stand up and announce to those in attendance that "I am a gamer." I am not of the generation that created the first forays into the medium, but I am of the generation for whom games have been an ever-present part of daily life. For those, like me, from this joystick generation, Miyamoto Shigeru's quote rings true. As the "father" of such Nintendo classics as *Donkey Kong* (1981), *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) suggests, video games as a medium have always held the promise of representing the human condition in ways as profound as our best novels, films, and songs. Yet, public discourse has often misunderstood the hobby. Gaming has been portrayed as an inherently subcultural activity, one performed in isolation in basements by maladjusted adolescent boys. We know from industry-wide surveys that this stereotypical image of video gaming and game players is no longer accurate, yet its staying power continues to shape the way gaming culture is discussed in the public sphere.

An assumption that video games are simply "toys for boys" is both reductive and unhelpful. While many video games are certainly designed to provide fun and moments of unadulterated play to users, others increasingly have strong emotional and narrative ambitions akin to the best works of cinema and literature. One of the fundamental goals of this study has been to introduce and critically analyze three lesser-known commercial Japanese video games in terms of their cultural significance and the ways in which they allow for a working through of trauma. While my goal has not been to dismiss the problematic aspects of video game play, of which there are many, I have focused on how certain games use specific design strategies to

make a positive impact on players. To evoke the title of this dissertation, I have argued that contemporary video games really have moved *beyond* their humble 8-bit origins. Today, the best games tell emotionally resonant stories, allow players to experience fringe themes, and provide a means for working through traumatic or stressful events.

As *Metal Gear Solid* series creator Kojima Hideo notes, video games need to tackle these complex social and cultural issues if the medium as a whole is to mature and evolve. To quote Kojima, "If we [as developers] don't cross that line, if we don't make attempts to express what we really want to express, games will only be games … We won't be able to achieve what movies or novels have achieved … Games will never be considered as culture" (qtd. in Makuch). The same might be said about scholarship on video games. If criticism and classroom instruction do not openly discuss and debate both the merits and faults of these gameic social narratives, then video games may remain forever imprisoned within the sphere of child's play.

 Rather than separate video games from other narrative, representational, or entertainment media, this study has demonstrated that the simulative interpretation and anticipatory learning often regarded to be a unique selling point of video games is also present when consuming traditional, "linear" media. Just as video games are drawing inspiration from books and films, so too are these entertainment media looking to games for new insights into how to tell stories and engage users. Thus, video games can and should be discussed in dialogue with cinema and literature, not to profess the medium's superiority, but rather, as Janet Murray suggests, to provide an indication of where participatory storytelling might be headed in the future. While some scholars and designers call for a bracketing off of empathetically rich games from all others, this project has shown that socially relevant storytelling and empathetically rich gameplay can be found even within entertainment games and genres thought to be devoid of

such elements. It is my opinion that we need a more comprehensive understanding of what

constitutes video games and video game play. That said, the fundamental question of "what can

video games do that no other medium can?" remains an important one for getting at the heart of

what games offer us beyond simply play. Thus, this study has also paid careful attention to the

ways in which video game play, and Japanese design in particular, affords new and distinct ways

for fostering player engagement and empathy around social narratives.

A central limitation of this or any study on video games is that it must necessarily focus

on only a few specific cases and attempt to draw larger conclusions. As much as I would love to,

I cannot play every video game out there, lest I end up in that aforementioned player support

group. Instead, I have selected three critically and commercially successful console games, each

of which grapples with a different social issue or form of national trauma important to Japan. I

have also introduced and coined terms for three new engagement strategies that I regard as

hallmarks of Japanese game design.

Chapter one discussed earthquake survival in *Disaster Report*. I introduced the gameplay

strategy of "limited engagement," or the subtraction of in-game skills in the service of simulating

vulnerability. I discussed how playing through the earthquake scenario might create empathy for

actual disaster victims and also teach real-world survival skills. Chapter two used the concept of

"distanced engagement," or self-reflexive and intellectual elements designed to promote player

critical self-reflection, to analyze the puzzle game *Catherine*. I showed how the game integrates

players' opinions and anxieties about marriage and childbirth directly into the gameplay, via a

polling mechanism, in order to tell a larger social narrative about Japan's declining birthright and

aging population. Finally, chapter three closed with a discussion of *Metal Gear Solid V: The*

Phantom Pain and post-traumatic war memory. For players of this stealth action game, "external

engagement" techniques work to destabilize the distinction between the characters in the game and the player outside of it. The result of this form of real-world engagement, I argue, is that the horrors of war become an experiential event within the player's social reality, and that this newfound fidelity strengthens the game's antiwar message. In today's console games, all three of these design strategies work together, along with myriad other factors, to keep players engaged and help them overcome challenges both inside and outside the simulation.

This project has foregrounded the narrative and mediological elements of three Japanese video games. In each case study I have highlighted the importance of these game design strategies for introducing players to new situations, teaching real-world skills, and providing moments of introspection. Yet, my discussion has largely remained at a narrative and structural level. I have not yet examined what these tools might look like for real players. That is, what are the critical stakes of what happens when the game is switched off, and do these engagement strategies promote meaningful change in the lives of players? While an ethnography of players is outside the scope of this project, I would like to close by looking at one testimonial of the long-lasting impact of video game play made possible by Japanese design.

Since August 2011, video game voice actress and internet star Ashly Burch has maintained a web page named *How Games Saved My Life*. The site features testimonials from a wide variety of players who write about how specific games have positively affected their mental and emotional health, physical wellbeing, or, quite literally, saved their lives. One such testimonial is written by a player identified as Schane Mitchell and returns us to our discussion of *Catherine*. Mitchell, who had had been cheated on by his romantic partners five times, credits the game with helping him better understand the mental state of those who are unfaithful and restoring his own sense of self-worth following the multiple infidelities. Mitchell explains, "I

was obsessed with this game. I would play it and play it and work through all the challenges just

to see my main character struggle living with the guilt that he was a backstabbing cheater."

Mitchell claims to have beat the game eight times to see all of the endings, and this repetition,

coupled with the in-game polls helped reinforce the central moral messages of the game: "I

found it simply mind blowing that cheaters, who I previously looked at as being subhuman, have

so many hardships and so much pressure on them. It gave me the mental clarity to let go of my

past and accept them for what they had done, since they'll have their own personal demons to

fight against for the rest of their life—metaphorically, anyway" (Mitchell).

Of course *Catherine* will not affect all players the same way it has affected Schane. Yet,

the game succeeded in helping this player precisely because it offered new mediological ways to

engage with a universal narrative of infidelity. It was because of the repetitive gameplay,

multiple endings, and distanced engagement that the game was able to provide a working

through of trauma for this particular player. Perhaps it can work the same way for others. These

engagement techniques are on display in a Japanese-designed game, yet the numerous

testimonials archived on Ashly Burch's site evidence that they work cross-culturally to engage

players from many different countries, cultures, and personal backgrounds.

When discussing video games in academic settings, a common preamble begins most

questions I receive from audience members: "I don't play games, but…" How I wish I could

change this thinking! I believe all of us are playing video games all of the time. As Azuma

reminds us, gameic (*gēmuteki*) structures exist in a variety of media, including literature. The

more we begin to think of video game experiences not solely as software displayed on a

television and controlled with joysticks, the more we open ourselves up to the ways in which the

medium has already enriched our lives and social interactions. Popular video gaming began in

university research labs, debuted in arcades for the masses, travelled into homes, and is now integrated into most aspects of the world we live in. Is Facebook a video game? How about online dating? While we may not agree that these platforms and experiences constitute video games proper, they certainly share many similarities, from the look of the interface to the tapping and swiping gestures we use to manipulate the digital content.

To extend the logic of Azuma's book, I would argue that we are moving toward a "gameic world" (*gēmuteki sekai*). If Prime Minister Shinzō Abe surprise appearance at the closing ceremony of the Rio Olympics dressed in a Super Mario suit is any indication, perhaps we are already living in one. Many tech companies are currently betting on virtual and augmented reality as the next major computing platform after mobile development, capable of uniting us across continents and bringing us together in a virtual space. We can already observe these subtle changes taking hold. Today, few of us think twice when creating avatars of ourselves for online profiles. We recruit "friends" with whom to go on online adventures or play online games, empathize with digital photo essays from strangers we have never met, and accrue virtual cultural capital in the form of "likes," "views," or "retweets" for the content we create and post. All of these ludic elements have become normalized activities within our current digital lives.

In this brave new gameic world, video game players might have a more developed critical perspective on the links, gaps, and elisions between our real and represented selves. Furthermore, as the games referenced in this project have demonstrated, players may also learn more about themselves and others through the games they consume. As cutting-edge research in the social sciences, medicine, and the humanities all attest, video games offer a wealth of possibilities for providing positive physical, emotional, and cognitive benefits to the people who

play them. Japanese pop culture is a particularly fruitful site for looking at these sorts of interactions owing to the ubiquity of game experiences within everyday life and the ways in which video games exist in a transmedia ecology in Japan alongside manga and anime. Further studying video games will help us recognize the importance of the medium within the received history of Japanese pop culture, as well as provide new insights into the ways in which Japanese users affectively engage with technology.

For those who said video games were dead after the industry crash of 1983, today's gameic landscape must seem incredible. Japanese design gave the industry an extra life with its memorable characters and play experiences. Along the way, it found new and interesting ways to engage players. As gameic simulations and interfaces become more integrated with everyday life, gaming will cease to be an observable subculture, something to be highlighted for its difference, and instead become synonymous with culture—another tool immediately thought of when the goal is to tell stories about the human condition, educate students, or work through personal problems or national traumas. For those of us who have grown up alongside our favorite game characters, this has always been the potential we have recognized in the medium. It is exciting to see that this new game is just beginning.

<div align="center">

GAME OVER

CONTINUE?

♦ YES   NO

</div>

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