

'We Will Take Your Heart': Japanese Cultural Identity in *Persona V*

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Abstract

The videogame *Persona V* (Atlus 2017) presents itself as a critical breakdown of Japanese society, taking on its political, economic and societal systems and examining how contemporary issues pertaining to *karoshi* (work-related suicide), *hikikomori* (shut-ins), *taibatsu* (corporeal punishment), fraud and corruption intersect with- and flow from the presupposed 'Japanese' culture of conformity, *tatemaie* (public façade) and seniority-based hierarchy. Through Hall's (1989) notion of cultural artefacts as mythmaking devices which seek to offer narrative resolution to societal anxieties, this paper explores how *Persona V* discursively produces its image of Japanese national identity by taking on topics from Japanese public discourse and media frenzies. The paper seeks to interrogate the ideological function at the heart of the game, arguing that as both an artistic expression and a product of a multibillion economic export industry, the game does more than simply offer a societal critique. Rather, read within the context of cool capitalism, nation branding and Cool Japan, its choices for narrative solution become a means through which the boundaries of Self and Other, normativity and national identity are broadcast and consumed by a domestic and international audience of millions, influencing the social imaginary about what 'Japan' and 'Japaneseness' constitutes.

Introduction

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall once noted that he sometimes found himself forgetting that the narratives in the popular TV shows he watched were not, in fact, a somewhat distorted reflection of the real state of American society (1989, n.p.). Rather, of course, those stories are highly construed discursive representations of societies which centre particular perspectives and are influenced by, reflect and produce particular cultural ideologies. Hall stated, "they are functioning much more as Levi-Strauss tells us myths do. They are myths, which represent in narrative form the resolution of things, which can't be resolved in real life. What they tell us about is about the 'dream life' of a culture". While Hall never directed his attention to videogames, clearly they too represent a particular vision of society.

The Japanese videogame *Persona V* (Atlus, 2017) centres on Tokyo, where a group of vigilante students sets out to reform the nation by defeating corrupt politicians,

mafia and businessmen who stand in for cultural anxieties that plague Japanese public discourse. This paper seeks to interrogate the ideological function underneath the mythmaking of *Persona V*'s representation of Tokyo. As a Japanese videogame, created by Japanese videogame producers in a specific time and place, *Persona V* can be approached as a cultural artefact, which makes a particular argument for what 'Japan' as a nation, and 'Japaneseness' as an identity, might mean. This takes on particular significance in the post-3/11 context in which the game was produced, in the years between 2011 and 2017. Director Katsura Hashino has stated in an interview with 4Gamer that the game was originally intended to be about looking outwards through a backpacking adventure, but after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake with the subsequent tsunami and nuclear meltdown, the game instead became an introspective text examining post-tsunami Japan (personacentral, 2016). This raises questions about how *Persona V* imagines the relation between trauma, public discourse and pre-existing cultural discourses surrounding 'Japaneseness'.¹ As Hutchinson notes, videogames are

¹ 'Japaneseness' is approached throughout this paper as a social construct, as well as a slippery concept that is best considered, as Consalvo notes, "a

signifier that can be deployed strategically in a multitude of ways" (2016, 354). In order to avoid reifying or essentialize the concept, social



“artistic expression, which can teach us much about the culture in which it was formed” (Hutchinson 2019, 2). As forms of artistic expression, they are able to critique societal problems, address cultural anxiety and alleviate some of it through humour and redemption; and offer alternative futures. At the same time, however, videogames are *also* the product of a multibillion dollar export industry, whose interests may lie closer to the political establishment than the goal of artistic subversion. In this paper, I examine how this paradoxical tension sits at the heart of *Persona V* and how it offers a societal critique drawing on contemporary Japanese anxieties, yet is simultaneously complicit with the logic of neoliberal cool capitalism. In other words, how the game dreams particular cultural dreams, and in doing so, makes an argument for what contemporary Japan is, was, and should be.

Exploring Corruption in Tokyo

In *Persona V*, you play as a teenage boy who transfers schools to Tokyo after he is put under probation for preventing a powerful politician from assaulting a woman. The game’s opening image is a clear statement: being righteous in this corrupt political system gets you in trouble, so you best keep your head down. That overarching theme is visually amplified as the player is introduced to Tokyo’s subway system at the start of the game and encounters lines of perfectly queued up salarymen waiting for their metro. While a well-known sight to those who have visited these platforms in reality, the game’s version puts particular emphasis on their perfect faceless conformity, hunched over and obediently shuffling into the cars.

The player is soon introduced to their new high school - *Shujin* Academy, a homonym for ‘prisoner’ Academy - where they are faced with a second morally corrupt adult: the local sports-teacher Kamoshida, who verbally and physically abuses his students. As in earlier *Persona* games, *Persona V* represents reality through two dimensions: the communally-shared perception of the world, and the subjective, metaphorical ‘cognition’ called the Metaverse,

which is carried within the minds of certain individuals. The player soon stumbles into Kamoshida’s cognitive version of *Shujin*, a palace in which he rules as king and holds the students prisoner in torture cells. The player teams up with two of his victims: Ryuji, who was subjected to corporeal punishment, and Ann, who is the subject of the teacher’s perverted desires. After Ann rejects him Kamoshida sexually assaults her best friend, leading to the girl’s attempted suicide. In the face of these injustices, the three starter characters must reject their compliance, sealing a contract with their ‘Persona’, a cognitive manifestation of their rebellious spirit, with whom they will battle these corrupted hearts.

After introducing these two dishonourable men in the tutorial phase of the game, *Persona V* then sets out to explore a host of different forms of corruptions, abuses and injustices which it connects to different parts of its representation of Japanese society. Over time, the team of rebellious teenagers start identifying as the ‘Phantom Thieves’, a band of juvenile delinquents whose mission it becomes to fight their oppressors and reform society.¹ This paper will highlight a number of these corruptions and how the game seeks to alleviate the social anxieties they address through them, in order to then deconstruct the claims the game makes about ‘Japan’ through them.

As the player moves through Tokyo, while boarding the metro or passing people by in the street, they catch glimpses of the thoughts and conversations expressed by the Tokyoites, which reveal the desires and anxieties that live amongst them. They express things like, “the economy sucks and the news is depressing” and “aren’t there any honest politicians out there?”. These seem to be expressions of the Japanese social imaginary (Taylor 2004), and are consistent with the image that has often been painted of contemporary Japan, one perhaps summarized best by the opening sentence of Manzenreiter & Holthus’s *Happiness and the Good Life in Japan* (2017), where they write: “Japan of the early 21st century may not be seen as a prime example of a happy people” (1).² They point out that, “the

constructs like ‘Japan’ and ‘Japaneseness’ are presented in quotation marks.

¹ *Persona V* can be read as part of a long tradition of Japanese cultural texts that depict rebellious youth culture delinquency (*yankii*) and rebellion against oppression by society and corporations. The motif can be found in literature like Tanaka Yasuo’s *Nantonaku, Kurisutaru* (Somehow, Crystal, 1980), songs like Yutaka Ozaki’s *Juu-go no Yoru* (a Night at 15, 1987) TV dramas like Kinoshita Keisuke’s *Chichi yo haha yo!* (the young rebels, 1980) and *manga* like Otome Katsuhiro’s *Akira* (1982-1990) and

Wada Shinji’s *Sukeban Deka* (1976 - 1982). Aesthetically, however, *Persona V*’s band of rebels is closer to the motif of the gentleman thief than the image of biker gangs traditionally associated with *yankii*. Interestingly, though, one of the Thieves’ Persona does manifest as a motorcycle. In their intention, moreover, the Thieves’ are less punk and more reformist. For more on *yankii*, please see Igarashi (2009), Nanba (2009)

² Taylor’s (2004) concept of the social imaginary consists of, “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with

rapid aging of society, shrinking household incomes and savings, rural depopulation and economic decline in peripheral regions, the dismantling of the welfare state and the widening of the social gap, plus an increasingly nationalist stance of Japan's foreign policy threatening peace at its borders and its harmonious relationships with neighbours abroad and minorities at home, are painting a rather gloomy picture" (ibid). These macro-economic developments translate into fears and worries within the social imaginary, which are then mediated through public discourse. Topics of anxiety include the increasing cases of workplace-induced depression, numbers of suicides and death through overwork (*karoshi*), the mounting fear of solitary death (*kodokushi*), and people withdrawing from society (*hikikomori*) (ibid).

Persona V addresses these societal tensions by locating them in key representative figures whose corrupted hearts stand in as sites for moral panics within contemporary Japan. Kamoshida, for example, represents the issue of *taibatsu*, the corporeal punishment of students by their teachers, as well as anxieties surrounding sexual assault and teenage suicide. While *taibatsu* has been a site of moral panic since the 1970s (Miller 2012, 81), renewed anxiety arose in 2012 after the suicide of a 17-year old high-school student in Osaka following severe beatings by his coach Hajime Komura.³ The year before, a similar media frenzy had taken up around Masato Uchishiba, a former Olympic gold medal winner turned school gym teacher who raped his student.⁴ These were the years of *Persona V*'s early development, so it is no stretch to imagine the media coverage influenced the writing. As Hall noted, a function of popular fiction is its ability to offer narrative solutions to societal tensions through its cultural mythmaking. In the case of *Persona V*, resolution comes in the form of former victims Ann and Ryuji being allowed to beat Kamoshida up. After defeat, the corrupted man experiences a 'change

of heart', suddenly aware of his evil and stating, "I am an arrogant, shallow and shameful man". Defeating Kamoshida produces an affect of satisfaction, a type of wish-fulfilment through which sites of contemporary Japanese anxiety found in its public discourse are alleviated.

Despite the game's disclaimer at the start of the game that it is a work of fiction⁵, many of the figures seem to be influenced by real life events that caused a media frenzy around the time of *Persona V*'s production. The corrupt painter Madarame, for example, has an entire oeuvre created by the pupils he abuses, which seems to reference Mamoru Samuragochi, the allegedly deaf Japanese composer who was exposed for having had all his pieces ghost-written by another.⁶ Madarame's confession after his change of heart moreover seems to be a parody of the infamously intense apology made by the politician Ryutaro Nonomura, with waterfalls of tears streaming down his face.⁷ The greedy blackmailing crime lord Kaneshiro seems to be based off of the likeness of Tsubasa Yozawa, a self-made millionaire who has been mocked in the media for his boastful lifestyle.⁸ Similarly, the corrupt CEO of chain company Okumura Foods physically resembles Miki Watanabe, the CEO of izakaya chain Watami, a famous example of a 'black company', defined by its exploitative sweatshop style employment system.⁹

In the cognitive worlds that the Phantom Thieves enter to change the hearts of these men, it becomes clear that what corrupts them are the excesses of capitalism. They have formed obsessions with accruing more wealth, more fame, more power. The game makes it clear that they are able to do so specifically because they have the ability to manipulate the supposed conformity-driven mindset of other Japanese people. In Kaneshiro's cognition, people are walking ATMs wandering through Shibuya; in Okumura's, his workers are rendered as expendable robots that will kill themselves for their boss, referencing *karoshi*. The game

others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (23).

³ See: <https://japantoday.com/category/national/student-commits-suicide-after-being-beaten-by-school-basketball-coach>. Accessed 29-09-2020.

⁴ See: <https://japantoday.com/category/crime/prosecutors-urge-5-year-sentence-for-former-judo-champion-over-rape-charge>. Accessed 29-09-2020.

⁵ At the start of *Persona V*, the game demands the player agrees to a contract, stating: 'this is a work of fiction, similarities between characters or events to persons living or dead in your world are purely coincidental'. Interestingly, the game does not allow the player to access the game if they

do not sign the contract, reinforcing the sense that the game indeed has consciously referenced figures and therefore requires legal disclaimers to cover itself.

⁶ See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/06/world/asia/japan-mamoru-samuragochi-beethoven/index.html>. Accessed 29-09-2020.

⁷ See: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/07/19/national/media-national/politician-nonomura-weepers-world-laughs/>. Accessed 29-09-2020.

⁸ See: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/11/16/national/media-national/paths-to-pay-dirt-are-many-and-varied/>. Accessed 29-09-2020.

⁹ See: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2012/06/17/national/watami-under-scrutiny-after-karshi/>. Accessed 29-09-2020.

moreover does not shy from commenting on the liaison between industry and politics. Like Miki Watanabe, CEO Okumura tries to leverage his power to enter politics. While he is ultimately stopped by the Phantom Thieves, his real life counterpart Watanabe was in fact elected to the House of Councilors in 2013, representing the Liberal Democratic Party led by former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe.¹⁰ While the game never explicitly names the names, it seems to get as close as it can within a fictionalized space.

The Culture of Compliant Harmonious Silence

Goodman (2012) writes that, “among the key underlying assumptions about Japaneseness are the ideas that the Japanese are group-minded, harmonious and consider hierarchical relations more significant than horizontal ones” (160). In addition, Japan has been described as a ‘high ritual society’ (Goodman, quoted in Lewis 2020, 16), meaning that there is a significant pressure to act in the way that is prescribed as ‘correct’.¹¹ Throughout the world, the player finds messages about these supposedly normative workings of Japanese society, as on a folder in *Shujin Academy* that reads: “True freedom lies within the constructs of society”. *Persona V* goes to great length to convey the sarcasm of this message, instead arguing that these ‘Japanese’ qualities pertaining to conformity, harmony and seniority-based hierarchy in fact only lead to corruption and suffering. While navigating through Tokyo the player runs into numerous moments of dialogue exemplifying this message, as when a figure titled ‘insolent subordinate’ is overheard saying, “we should probably look into it, but we can also just let the low-ranking scrubs handle it”, and another titled ‘Slouching Office Worker’ laments, “my boss is just the worst, all he does is dump overtime on me while he dashes off at five. I wish the Phantom Thieves would work their magic on him...”. The Phantom Thieves, who stand for individualism and rebellion, seem to be the antithesis to this ‘Japanese’ conformist mindset.

An important aspect of *Persona V* is found in its social link system, in which the player must form connections with people in the game and help out with their struggles. All of the arcs revolve around being exploited, bullied or neglected in some way. The students’ homeroom teacher Kawakami, for example, is forced to work multiple jobs to pay off her blackmailer, a guardian who blames her for the death of her former student who, it is inferred, died in a car crash because of exhaustion. It is later revealed that the true motive behind her extortionists’ blackmail is to pursue a hedonistic lifestyle, one that they originally forced the deceased student to pay for, likely leading to his exhaustion and subsequent death. Other arcs include a *shōgi* player whose mother is using her to gain fame, a doctor being scapegoated by a superior for a disastrous medical trial that led to the death of a young patient and an ex-yakuza whose son is threatened by his former colleagues. In all of these stories the Japanese are represented as struggling to speak up for themselves and suffer in compliant harmonious silence and allowing others to take advantage of them. Whenever a new member joins the Phantom Thieves, they awaken their ‘Persona’, a cognitive manifestation of their rebellious spirit with whom they sign a contract. Lewis (2020) reads the rebellious contract, which includes physically and painfully tearing off a mask that seems attached to their skin, as an allegory for the Japanese division between *honne*, honesty and *tatemae*, the compliant public persona expected of Japanese people.¹² The game implies that only by embracing *honne* the Japanese can truly self-actualize within a system built against them.

Wakamono Mondai, Japan’s Youth Problems

A further insightful locus for the game’s central critique is found in the politician Tora, a disgraced former National Diet member who spends his time campaigning outside of Shibuya Station.¹³ Addressing the pressures of contemporary society, he states, “the reason so few people care about their fellow man is because so few have the

¹⁰ See: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/07/22/national/politics-diplomacy/watami-boss-watanabe-ex-osaka-gov-ota-win-seats/>. Accessed 29-09-2020.

¹¹ This paper does not seek to reify the assumption of Japan as ‘collectivist’. Rather, its aim is to identify what cultural imagery, stereotypes and sociological concepts in order to analyse how *Persona V* argues for its representation of ‘Japan’. While the idea that the Japanese are ‘collectivist’ is a classic viewpoint, academics like Takano (2008) and Yamagashi (2002) have contested it. Moreover, when using Hofstede’s

model of cultural dimensions, it emerges that while Japan is certainly less ‘individualist’ than some countries in the West, it is not much different from countries like Austria, Spain and Turkey. See: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>.

¹² Much like the concept of Japan as ‘conformist’, this paper does not seek to reify these concepts. For further reading on the concept of *honne* and *tatemae*, see: Naito & Gielen (1992), Davies & Ikeno (2002), Sugimoto (2010).

¹³ Tora is described as having been part of the ‘Kuramoto Children’ 20

energy to do so". However, while the game does portray adults as suffering at the hands of conformist pressure and their in-built *tatemaie*, it can easily be gauged from the different story arcs in which young people die from exhaustion, suicide and wrongly executed experiments, that the brunt of the pain is put on the shoulders of the young. Tora addresses the contemporary precarious situation of the Japanese youth, stating: "while our society appears to be prosperous, many young people are quietly suffering. They lack jobs, security, savings...". Toivonen & Imoto (2013, 62-63) note that the early 2010s marked a turning point in public discourse surrounding so-called 'moral panics' related to the pathologies of the Japanese youth, as the concept of *wakamono mondai* (youth problems) emerged in Japanese media. *Wakamono mondai* serves as a general umbrella term for a set of labels including *otaku* (the obsessive fan of *anime*), *hikikomori* (withdrawn people who do not leave their house anymore), *NEET* and *FREET*-ers (young people who do not work or only work temporarily rather than committing to regular employment) and *parasite singles* (young people who continue to live at home with their parents instead of starting their own families).¹⁴ These labels describe different ways in which Japanese youth have seemingly opted out of participation in a society under extreme pressure, and *Persona V* readily explores them. The Phantom Thief Futaba, for example, is both *otaku* and *hikikomori*, and has locked herself away after she could no longer face going outside in the wake of her mother's death. Through a redemptive arc in which Futaba can avenge her mother and several humorous interactions with the Phantom Thieves, including a scene in which Futaba only agrees to go outside only when wearing a gigantic *kokeshi* doll head to conceal her face, she slowly manages to reintegrate into society. Through such humorous interaction, the game offers narrative resolution to cultural anxiety surrounding *wakamono mondai*.

Toivonen & Imoto note that Japanese societal worry over its youth's pathologies has been exacerbated through Japanese media frenzies, often in the wake of a violent incident involving a single, withdrawn individual, after which the issue becomes provoked and morally laden in the

public discourse (2013, 74). The media representation often frames Japanese youth as lazy or without proper work ethic (ibid). However, as Mathews notes, "these new choices of young people often do not reflect their own free will, but rather their limited possibilities within an increasingly unfavourable economic environment" (2012, 237). This, too, seems to be the point that *Persona V* is making.

At the same time, Mathews blames the precarious position of the young on, "the worldwide sweep of neoliberal ideology, whereby governments increasingly abdicate responsibility for providing for their citizens' welfare and well-being, and happiness becomes a fundamentally individual responsibility" (ibid). The narrative solution *Persona V* offers for Futaba's problem can certainly be read as adhering to a neoliberal logic as well, as it portrays her process of healing and rehabilitation into society as the result of awakening to her individuality through the shape of her rebellious Persona.

Having examined several key figures within *Persona V*, it emerges that the game takes the stereotypical notion of the Japanese as a people characterized by conformity and compliance to its extreme, banging the player over the head with examples of abuse and suicide as a result of this culture. This criticism finds its crescendo in the game's end-boss, when it is revealed that the apathy of the beaten-down Japanese people has collectively given rise to a God-like creature who believes the people yearn for a totalitarian rule in which they will never again have to think for themselves.

The discursive image of 'Japaneseness' presented here certainly follows cultural stereotypes. However, as Manzenreiter & Holthus point out, these stereotypes are, "not always substantiated by sheer numbers" (2017, 1). Instead, much of the anxiety surrounding conformity, overwork and check-out youth is driven by the public, mediated discourses and media frenzies. The game's rendering of Japanese society as oppressive to individual freedom is consistent with- and adds onto these media stereotypes, but at the same time is able to state a clear social critique which it bolsters with a hopeful vision of Japanese youth. They are rebellious go-getters who do not

years ago, a group of politicians under the 'Liberal Co-Prosperty party' (an obvious reference to Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)). Tora was wrongfully accused of embezzling funds, and kicked out of the party. In the game's present, the Kuramoto Children are seeking re-election and, as becomes clear throughout the story arc, are still as corrupt as before. This too seems to be a reference to a 2012 occurrence, when the 'Koizumi Children' (小泉チルドレン, *Koizumi Chirudoren*) were up for re-

election. See: Babb (2013).

¹⁴ "NEET" (ニート, *niito*) denotes young adults aged 15-34 who are "Not in Education, Employment, or Training", whereas "FREET" (フリーター, *furitā*) derives from 'freelancer', those who are not in full time deployment. For further reading, see: Toivonen (2011), Schmidt-Altmann & Eswein (2015).

give in to the apathy of *wakamo mondai* and instead reject their *tatemaie* in order to gain strength via the personification of their individuality and *honne*.

Disaster and Rebuilding Narratives

As noted in the introduction, *Persona V* was initially slated to be a game about exploring the world. However, in the wake of the Tōhoku disaster, the game instead became an internal mediation on Japan. So far, the paper has found that the game locates key issues in its cast in order to offer narrative resolution for them, which it has taken from contemporary Japanese public discourse, with particular references to media frenzies between 2011 and 2014, the game's early production period. From these findings, the question emerges how the game then addresses the two major occurrences of this period: the Tōhoku disaster and the second rise of former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe.

The major antagonist within *Persona V* is the politician Masayoshi Shido. Slated to become the next prime minister, it turns out that many of the earlier corrupted hearts that the Phantom Thieves encountered were linked to Shido's political agenda to overturn the current establishment. Like the Phantom Thieves, Shido too is occupied with reforming the nation, expressing his nationalism by stating "now is the time to rebuild this crumbling nation!", "our government is littered with scandals [...] such a disgraceful past must be discarded!", "our beautiful home will be acknowledged as the best in the world!" and "one that others bow to!". His agenda holds parallels with the ultranationalist ideals of *Nippon Kaigi*, Japan's largest far-right organization whose goals include promoting patriotic education, revising the history of Japan's role as aggressor during WWII and revising the constitution to permit Japan to maintain military force (Mizohata 2016, 1).¹⁵ Much like the other corrupt figures in *Persona V* seem to reference real-life figures, it is quite plausible to read Shido as a comparison to former Prime Minister Abe, a member of *Nippon Kaigi* who, like Shido, swept back into politics with a landslide victory built on a nationalist agenda. *Persona V* casts Shido as not just any evil politician but a distinctly Japanese one, rendering his cognitive palace like the National Diet building, a landmark for Japanese politics. The game makes its political statement most clearly in the boss fight that

ensues when it shows rows of identical-looking Diet members against a backdrop of Japanese flags, clapping for Shido as he takes on a monstrous form, while one of the Phantom Thieves members looks at them in disappointment, and states: "You are a disgrace to Japan."

Shido's cognitive palace, the National Diet building, is set on a large ship that is steering through a flooded Tokyo. Such imagery certainly recalls the Tōhoku flooding, and does not seem coincidental. Gill, Steger, & Slater (2013) note that in the wake of the Tōhoku flooding and nuclear disaster, two framing devices emerged in Japanese public discourse in order to cope with and rationalize the disaster (15). These narratives revolved around *tensai*, natural disaster, the idea that this had been a show of nature's destructive power to which the Japanese had collectively fallen victim, and *jinsai*, manmade disaster. They note that the 'natural' disaster of the earthquake and tsunami were quickly contrasted with the 'manmade' disaster of the Daiichi nuclear plant's meltdown, which came to be attributed to negligence, corporate greed and cover-up by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) (19-20). Shido's palace is moreover not the only time the game represents the danger against Japanese civilisation via the metaphor of the flood: when the corrupted deity encroaches on Tokyo, it does so through red stained water that floods the streets. This imagery of natural disaster is clearly and consciously traced back by the game to man-made choices, the *jinsai* corruption found in all corners of *Persona V*'s representation of Japan.

Persona V as a Corporate Product

As a cultural artefact, *Persona V* is thus deeply critical and anxious about the society from which it emerges, representing many of its core systems as fundamentally broken and presenting narrative solutions through themes of recovery and rebuilding by focusing on the young. However, while these themes may seem the result of a game which denounces the Japanese government, the second part of this paper will argue that these are in fact not necessarily in opposition to the political aims of the establishment. Valaskivi points out that two months after the Tōhoku earthquake, the Japanese government published the *Creating a New Japan* proposal.¹⁶ In this

¹⁵ For further reading on *Nippon Kaigi*, see: Sugano (2016), Yoshifumi (2017).

¹⁶ The 'Creating a New Japan' proposal is no longer available online. However, from other documents, like the annual Intellectual Property

Strategic Programs display similar efforts to artificially create 'Japaneseness', as in the 2005 document which states their objective is: "promoting the creation of a new Japan Brand with the objective of spreading a Japan brand to the world, [...] which will be applied to

report, rebuilding the nation after the earthquake was connected to enhancing the international 'Japan Brand' through developing its creative industries and making use of popular culture in public diplomacy (2013, 487). Since the early 2000s, the Japanese government has been investing heavily into accumulating 'soft power' (Nye 2004), power constituted through a nation's culture and values being admired and found attractive by other nations. These efforts have come to be known under the Cool Japan Brand Strategy. Iwabuchi has pointed out that in order to produce and enhance a positive image of national 'Coolness', the Japanese government has come to rely on the output of Japan's creative and popular culture industries, like the *anime* and videogames industry (Iwabuchi 2015, 422).¹⁷ In other words, these media texts contribute to the meaning of 'Japan' and 'Japaneseness' under the aesthetics of Cool Japan.¹⁸ Valaskivi writes, "Cool Japan is a social imaginary that brings together the aims of the Japanese government, the perceptions (and contradictions) of the national and transnational fans and fan groups, the aspirations of the (trans)national media, the business of the content industry, and various interests of artists and producers" (488). Seen in the context of this ongoing cultural discourse, the need arises to question how *Persona V*, as not only an artistic product but also a Japanese pop cultural media text created by a corporation at the heart of the content industry, engages with nationalist soft power aesthetics and ideology.

The Cool Japan campaign can be seen as an extension of the concept of 'cool capitalism'. In his book on the topic, McGuigan (2009) points out that the idea of 'cool' goes beyond nationalism, and is closely linked to the development of consumer culture and neoliberalism. Cool capitalism, to him, is "the marriage of counter-culture and corporate business" (7), the way through which personal identity has become dependent on consuming the right products in the right way. While a ubiquitous term, 'cool' implies individualism, youthfulness and authenticity, and more importantly, as Pountain and Robins point out, it implies a rebellious attitude towards authorities (2000, 19). Moreover, McGuigan writes that, "the cornerstone of cool

capitalism [is] the capacity to incorporate critique - apparently, any kind of critique - and turn it around to the advantage of capitalism itself" (7). In other words, 'cool capitalism' holds the ability to incorporate critique, commodify it, and thus become cooler through the circulation of the resulting affects (Valaskivi, 429). Making deviant and countercultural elements become desirable and attractive certainly sounds familiar - it too is the corner stone of the affect that *Persona V* labours for via its rebellious teens and commodified forms of play.

Valaskivi points out that nation branding efforts focus on allowing those who consume it to truly 'live the brand' (490), as *Persona V* indeed allows the gamer to do by involving them in the ethics of 'Japan'. Through play, the game moreover functions as a form of virtual tourism, becoming both a roadmap for Tokyo as well as a commercial for its brands. The player becomes intimately acquainted with the city, visiting not only the stereotypical spaces like Shibuya Crossing and Akihabara but also neighbourhoods like Shinjuku, Kichijōji and Sangen-Jaya. The player moreover learns to navigate Tokyo's complex underground system. While doing all this traveling, they pass many shops based on real Japanese brands, like 'Tokyu department store', 'Super Potato' and 'Shibuya109'. These affect the player's sense of familiarity and are a welcome body of knowledge in order to attract inbound tourists. Moreover, while in school, the player learns about Japanese language, history and sports like *go* through quizzes, while outside of class-time they encounter all types of Japanese *yokai* in the Metaverse. These instances allow players to become acquainted and enchanted with material forms of 'Japaneseness' - as are all goals of nation branding. The Cool Japan campaign was set up with the hopes of generating mass revenue, having become a cornerstone of the economic plans of the coming decade (Seaton and Yamamura 2015, 7). The plan, in other words, is to "create a Japan boom" in foreign countries" (Valaskivi 2016, 70) and "turn anime fans into Japan fans" (Sugimoto 2013, n.p.). Moreover, as a transnational practice, nation branding revolves around the notion that the nation should develop into a better version of itself and

designs, functions, contents created based on Japanese traditional culture and adjusted to the contemporary lifestyle, e.g. Neo-Japanesque" (38). See: https://japan.kantei.go.jp/policy/titeki/kettei/050610_e.pdf. Accessed 29-09-2020.

¹⁷ For further reading on 'Cool Japan', see Daliot-Bul (2009), deWinter (2017) and McLelland (2017).

¹⁸ The Cool Japan campaign is not a unified government strategy, but

rather consists of a number of initiatives spearheaded by different government bodies. The campaign itself is considered by to have failed by certain academics (see, for example: McLelland 2017). However, in this paper I follow Valaskivi's definition of 'Cool Japan' as a social imaginary, referring to it as a nationalist cultural ideology and form of nation branding aesthetic that continues to pervade ideas about what 'Japan' and 'Japaneseness' entail.

become something that is more desirable and attractive to the outside world. In other words, the critique of hegemonic power structures, rebellious attitude towards authorities and call for social reform in *Persona V* are, in fact, right on brand with Cool Japan.

Gender, Race and Queerness within *Persona V*

While nation branding is a transnational practice, such efforts are also closely tied to domestic political aims, measures, and processes as well. Valaskivi writes, “through changing practices and circulation, a nation brand becomes much more than marketing measures directed towards other countries. It becomes a part of the social imaginary in the construction of national identity. [...] Practices of branding become the way to seek a common goal for the national project, *a way of affirming certain values and shunning others*. This is how branding becomes an internal project.” (490, emphasis mine).¹⁹ Although commercial nation branding is based on competition and comparison among nations, the effort is clearly also an internally directed project towards the nation itself, aimed at creating a stronger, more coherent sense of the national ‘Self’ and at building self-esteem.²⁰ In order for that national identity to take shape, a boundary must be created between ‘affirming values and shunning others’, in other words, between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. In the following, this paper will conclude how the game discursively shapes the boundaries of the nation and national identity through this process of selecting and framing, how, as Hall says, its ‘dream life’ of ‘Japaneseness’, is construed.

Iwabuchi (2015, 428) argues that brand nationalism also leads to internal efforts to hide unwanted and uncomfortable elements that do not fit the desired picture. Looking closer at *Persona V*, the sense emerges that some of the recent macro-level developments in Japanese policy

and economy which sociologists and anthropologists like Manzenreiter & Holthus (2017) point out are filtered out of the picture of what ‘Japan’ looks like according to the game. For one, while certainly influenced by the Tōhoku disaster in its metaphors, *Persona V*’s rendition of Tokyo holds none of the fears surrounding nuclear energy, food toxicity or the environmental protest movements that took place in the 2010s. Moreover, it makes no mention of ongoing racial tensions and represents Japan as mono-ethnic, erasing the presence of minorities like the Ainu, Buraku and Zainichi Koreans in Japan.²¹ Most glaring, perhaps, in a game celebrating breaking away from society’s normative expectations, is the lack of presence and justice for Japanese LGBTQIA+.²² In two controversial scenes, one in Shinjuku and one on the beach, the player-character and Ryuji are approached by two effeminate, stereotypical gay men. The men take a liking to Ryuji, hitting on him through dialogue like, “I am going to eat you up!” and “I sentence you to... stripping!”.²³ In Shinjuku, Ryuji then gets dragged away screaming as the screen cuts to black. While the game uses humour to alleviate social anxiety in other spaces, like Futaba’s *hikikomori* rehabilitation, here it becomes humorous denigration that paints homosexual men as predators, a jarring microaggression which reifies a non-normative status for queer people in Japan.²⁴

What is more, Miller (2011) argues that the visuals endorsed by Cool Japan projects rely on a narrow and sexist kind of *kawaii* soft-pornographic imagery. This is true of *Persona V* too, as it condemns Kamoshida for sexualizing Ann but then continues to subject her to unnecessary sexualization itself throughout the game. This begins with her Phantom outfit, a red leather suit cut open to display her breasts and a whip for weaponry, which insinuates a distinctly BDSM-inspired aesthetic. While the narrative suggests she feels empowered by it, the impractical outfit clearly caters to a heteronormative male gaze. The male

¹⁹ While it is outside of the scope of the present paper to dive into the different ways in which *Persona V* has been perceived by the domestic and international market, such research is currently underway. For a preliminary report, see Brückner et al. (2019).

²⁰ On the definition of the Japanese ‘Self’ as defined via its Others, see: Gluck (1985), Tanaka (1993), Morris-Suzuki (1998), Clammer (2001), Oguma (2002), and Hutchinson (2011).

²¹ For more on Japanese minorities, see: Weiner (2009), Siddle (2011), Htun (2012)

²² Despite the popularity of *yaoi* and *yuri* (homosexual and lesbian *manga*) as well as the inclusion of queer people in popular works like *Sailor Moon* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, academics note that

homosexuality is still not normatively accepted in Japanese society (Tamagawa 2016, 160) (Dale 2020, 1).

²³ The dialogue options were changed for the revised *Persona V Royal*. However, it is only marginally different and retains the same micro-aggressive representation of queer men as predators. See: <https://www.polygon.com/2020/3/31/21199516/persona-5-royal-edits-changed-scene-ryuji-homophobia-controversy>. Accessed 30-09-2020.

²⁴ *Persona V* is not alone in its depiction of gay men and transgender women as camp, clownesque predators - the same stock trope occurs in many major *manga*, *anime* and videogames. Examples include the bath scene in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix 1997) and Bolson and Vilia in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017).

Phantom Thieves compete for her affection throughout the game, with one member referring consistently to her as 'lady Ann' and displaying jealousy when others help or protect her. Ann moreover has to strip down twice and pretend to flirt with men in order for the team to advance their goal, despite clearly being uncomfortable. In her analysis of femininity in Cool Japan representation, Miller points out that these commodified girl icons show how Cool Japan ideology is indeed a form of cultural mythmaking, with the girls being allowed a space of edgy coolness without actually disrupting gender norms and gender politics, writing: "these Cool Japan performances therefore naturalize women and girls as the objects of paternalistic control and desire" (2011, 22). In other words, while Ann, Futaba and their other fellow female characters are free to be cute and cool while rebelling against those who oppress them - signifying by extent how Japan is, or should be, a liberal society where people can express themselves - they are not free to disrupt the paternalistic, sexualizing gaze upon their bodies. This renders them little more than commodified, cooperative objects, a resource for selling the nation under cool capitalism.

New Medium, Old Story

Finally, Tamaki (2019) has convincingly argued that the repackaging of Japanese collective identity through Cool Japan culture in fact relies on techniques already found in the historical construction of purported 'Japaneseness' identity narratives, in which Japan on the one hand unambiguously compares itself with 'the West', while on the other seeking to construct its sense of Self as essentially unique by being both non-Western and un-Asian (2).²⁵ *Persona V* echoes this double identity structure in many ways. For one, it is striking to observe that in a game wholly dedicated to Japanese society, the manifestations of the Phantom Thieves' rebellious spirits, their Persona, are in all but one case based on European heroic and literary outlaw figures: Arsène Lupin, Zorro, Robin Hood, pope Joan, Carmen and Milady. The rebellious individualism of the heroes is thus implied to be an aligning with 'Western' values, but incorporated into the distinctly non-Western world of Japan. Other Persona designs in the Metaverse do draw on a plurality of religious and cultural imagery, but there is a clear bias in the amount

of imagery derived from Western and Japanese mythologies, religions and bestiaries. In geographical terms too, the game takes little interest in its direct borders, opting to locate its school trips in Hawaii and L.A., rather than distance-wise more logical places like South-Korea, Taiwan or Okinawa.

When the game does acknowledge its Asian neighbours, it moreover does so with a certain level of disdain. Hong Kong is mentioned in passing during the arc involving the former yakuza Iwai, who threatens to be sucked back into the underground system because Hong Kong mafia stole from a naïve local Japanese yakuza. While both are mafia, it is the non-Japanese who is painted as truly corrupt. A second microaggression is found in the dialogue that unfolds when the player takes Phantom Thief member Makoto on a date to Tokyo's China Town, where she mixes up China and Vietnam. Confusing spring rolls as being of Chinese origin, she remarks, "Oh well... China and Vietnam are right next to each other." While subtle, these representations of Japan's neighboring nations can be interpreted as culturally insensitive at its best, and discriminatory at its worst.

The rhetoric that *Persona V* poses is thus that 'Japan', for all its internal problems, is a unique Asian entity which is aligned with the West. In the wake of Cool Japan, Iwabuchi (2019, 15) argues, Japanese pop culture serves both as a form of self-promotion and as a mobilization of nationalism for the purpose of selling and profit. While the game takes an explicit stance against Shido's nationalism, it is simultaneously complicit in nationalistic Cool Japan efforts as it seeks to produce a mythological image of 'Japan' as youthful and rebellious, glittering cool. Shido uses the media to influence people's ideas about him and his agenda, which in reality is not altogether far away from what *Persona V*, as a corporate media text, also seeks to achieve with regards to the ideas about 'Japan' and 'Japaneseness' it puts forward. In other words, while the Phantom Thieves seek to capture the hearts of corrupt figures, *Persona V* itself is mostly interested in capturing the hearts of its fans.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has argued that at the heart of *Persona V* lies a tension between social artistic critique and

²⁵ Iwabuchi writes: "Japan's modern national identity has, I would argue, always been imagined in an asymmetrical totalizing triad between 'Asia,'

'the West,' and 'Japan.'" (2002, 7). See also: Hutchinson (2011, 2019), Miyake (2015), Herfs (2020).

corporate interest. On the one hand, the game goes through great length to call out real politicians, businessmen, teachers and other figures who were the subject of scandal during the primary years of the game's production. It also expresses cultural anxiety surrounding *tensai* and *jinsai*, using the metaphor of the flood to squarely place responsibility of Japanese suffering on its broken systems and culture of conformism, through which it is the youth that suffers the worst. However, the game is simultaneously a cultural artefact produced within a content industry that has become a source for nation branding over the last decade. Moreover, as McGuigan points out, under cool capitalism such counter-cultural societal critique is not only possible, but is the corner stone of the (nation) brand. As such, the game can be read as part of 'mild *yankii* culture' (Harada 2014), in which *yankii* (youthful rebel) culture becomes meshed with conservative values.²⁶

The game's 'cool' and 'critical' choices for narrative solution contribute to the domestic and international social imaginary surrounding ideas about 'Japan' and 'Japaneseness', which are broadcast and consumed by a public of millions. Crucially different however is that, unlike earlier forms of identity narratives like *nihonjinron* literature²⁷, videogames, as ludic devices, supplement representation with the phenomena of action, interactivity, choice and agency (Galloway 2006, 71-72). Through play, gamers become implicated in the events of the games, and thereby their attendant power dynamics and cultural ideologies (Shaw 2010, 423). As such, they can truly 'live' the brand of contemporary Japan, imagining themselves as affiliated with its past, present and future, as well as entangled in the deeper processes of normative notions and images of Self within the social imaginary on what is and is not 'Japan' and 'Japanese'. As Valaskivi points out, "nation branding in practice works precisely by highlighting certain decided, desirable features that are considered national features. These highlighted features are often ones that have already been recognised in the public opinions of other nations" (497). As such, cultural stereotypes surrounding *otaku* and *hikikomori*, as well as workplace depression and high suicide rates - issues that

have long been part of the domestic and international public discourse on 'Japan' - can be addressed, whereas issues surrounding LGBTQIA+, internal racism against minorities and the aftermath of the Tōhoku disaster cannot. Moreover, recognizing these exclusions, it emerges that *Persona V*'s 'Japan' aligns with neoliberal rhetoric as well as the aesthetics found in Cool Japan branding ideology: 'Japan' is rendered as unique and simultaneously Western and un-Western, a homogenous mono-ethnic society, with commodified unthreatening femininity under a patriarchal gaze and without queer sexuality. The game seeks to form videogame fans into 'Japan fans' (Sugimoto 2013), but despite its progressive, rebellious aesthetic, the game's mythological version of 'Japan' turns out to be deeply conservative.

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²⁶ Further research on this topic is necessary, but as it is outside the scope of the present paper to fully tease out the relationship between *Persona V* and other Japanese works that are part of 'mild *yankii* culture', I would like to tentatively suggest that similar problems and paradoxes exist in the rebellious, anti-authority message of the *Final Fantasy* series whilst it continues to simultaneously rely on conservative values with regards to

gender (see Glasspool 2016), race and nationality (Huber 2005) and militarization (Lauteria 2011).

²⁷ *Nihonjinron* is literature dedicated to theories about the supposed unique identity of the Japanese. For further reading on *nihonjinron*, see: Dale (1986), Mouer and Sugimoto (1986, 1995) and Befu (2002, 2008).

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