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Rules, Rhetoric, and Genre: Procedural Rhetoric in *Persona 3*

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Abstract

Released in 2008 for the Playstation 2, *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* is a roleplaying game with a diverse genre pedigree. It is a combination of dungeon-crawling RPG and social interaction "datesim," all wrapped up in the thematic trappings of occult mystery and Japanese popular culture. Using Ian Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric, this article examines how *Persona 3's* use of genre conventions and gameplay-based rhetorical frames construct the game's message, as well as how those structures can inform our understanding of genre for the digital game form.

Keywords

procedural rhetoric, persona, genre, role-playing games, persuasive games

Imagine a game focusing on a typical high school junior. He gets to hang out with classmates, make friends, and date the ones he fancies, take tests, and generally move through the everyday social and learning elements of school. Now complicate that scenario: he also has a special supernatural power, as do some of his classmates, that the rest of the world knows nothing about. In fact, if he doesn't deploy that supernatural power on a nightly basis, the world as he knows it is going to end . . . but he'd better spend some of those nights studying if he wants to pass that final exam and go out with his girlfriend on Sunday.

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This is the scenario in *Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3* (typically abbreviated *Persona 3* or *P3*; Atlus, 2007), a console role-playing video game with a long pedigree. It is the third in the *Persona* series, which is itself a spin-off of the *Shin Megami Tensei* series (and even that is a sequel to predecessor *Megami Tensei*). Only a small number of the *Megami Tensei/Shin Megami Tensei* (*Megaten* or *SMT*) games have been localized from the Japanese. *Megaten* games in general are known for their dark and disturbing tone and use of demonic and mythological references and settings; the *Persona* series also includes the eponymous "Personas" that the main characters have the power to use.

The game does employ many of the thematic conventions of its genre and series. *P3* uses a semidefined avatar: a main, player-controlled and player-named character whose actions the player decides upon, but whose appearance, gender, and general demeanor are beyond the player's control. Each main character (and even some villains) controls a Persona that grants him or her abilities in battle and certain statistical characteristics. The dungeon exploration side of the game includes the demonic/mythological thematic conventions common to the series.

However, the game is also slightly different from other games in the series. The primary point of departure is the split of the game into two main types of activity: the typical dungeon-exploring combat of the console RPG, and the social activity of relationship-building that is more common in dating simulation/"datesim" games (a genre that is almost entirely unrepresented in games available in the United States). The game makes these curious departures from the norm work by integrating them through character statistics. The better the main character's social links with others in the datesim side, the more powerful Personas he can summon and control in battle on the dungeon exploration side. Events in one side also affect events in the other, with the two having a constant tug of war for the character's (and player's) attention. For example, spend too many nights in the dungeon and the player will not have enough time to build academic skills and pass exams, which limits the ability to create new social links, which in turn can hamper performance in the dungeon.

The question this odd fusion begs is why the designers would make such a choice and what kind of implications that has for the text. Drawing primarily on Bogost's (2007) concept of procedural rhetoric, this study analyzes the relationship between these disparate styles and interrogates how *Persona 3* combines the game mechanics (ludic) elements with narrative and stylistic (thematic) elements from both genres to put forth certain ideological frames.

Shin Megami Tensei

One of the more popular video game series in Japan, the *Megaten* games were originally game adaptations of a novel by Japanese author Aya Nishitani, *Digital Devil Monogatari* (Kalata & Snelgrove, 2009) that dealt with humanity's sudden contact with demons through the medium of technology. The overarching thematic material in these games deals primarily with issues of the occult, mythology, and the

philosophical ideas present in a number of religions, ranging from Christianity to Buddhism. The story in the recently released *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor*, for example, deals heavily with the Biblical story of Babel and the events of the book of Revelation. The material in *Persona 3* draws on a number of traditions, from mythical Japanese legends to Norse gods and goddesses. *Megaten* games typically involve, in one form or another, mythological beings, specifically demons. In the "main" series of games—*Megami Tensei 1* and *2*, the *Shin Megami Tensei* games—the main character's companions are demons, contacted through various means and turned into allies (Ashby, 2004). In the *Persona* series, by contrast, demons are not active party members, but instead the human characters have "personas," spiritual expressions of their inner selves that manifest in the forms of mythological beasts and demons.

In many of the series' games, a significant theme is the player's decision to follow certain ideologies or "alignments," resulting in various outcomes depending on what choices the player makes as she or he progresses ("What is SMT," 2009). Alignments range from the *Dungeons and Dragons*-inspired law, chaos, good, and evil, to more abstract or faction-based results. *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne'*s story takes place in an embryonic reshaping of reality, and the actions of the player as she or he moves through the story determine what sort of world results in the end: one free of spiritual influence, one ruled by demons, or other options. The key thing is that the games foreground the effect on the world made by the moral and social choices of the main character through the auspice of the player. As is discussed below, this notion of choice also has its reflections in *Persona 3* as a major ludic and narrative frame.

Genre and Genre Theory

In terms of studies of film and television, genre is broadly considered a way of classifying like texts (Feuer, 1992). The broader issues extant in examinations of genre, particularly when it comes to genre film, center around what constitutes "like texts" and on what qualities of the text are genres created, maintained, and changed. Scholars such as Schatz (1981) and Altman (1984) have considered the implications of these questions not only from the standpoint of studying film but also considering the way that genre definitions and genre texts fit into culture at large.

At the most basic level, genre is what Feuer calls "taxonomy" (1992, p. 138): basic classification. Movies that share a set of qualities are grouped together in a genre. Movies that share commonalities with Broadway musicals are musicals; movies that take place in the American west are westerns, as Altman describes it. However, the above scholars (among others) argue that a merely taxonomic way of looking at genre is not sufficient. One of Altman's primary complaints is that genre is seen, from the outside, "as if they spring full-blown from the head of Zeus" (1984, p. 8). In that regard, the argument is that genre classifications are treated as naturally occurring rather than being cultural constructions.

Altman—as well as later scholars such as Mittell (2001), who speaks about genre in television—claim that analysis of genres must consider the ways in which historical and cultural contexts produce and reproduce them. Thus, genre is not only the base characteristics of a text but the industry context in which it was produced, the cultural climate in which it is consumed, and the like. This is what Neale is speaking of, broadly, when he speaks of genre being a process: "[i]n this way the elements and conventions of a genre are always *in* play rather than being, simply, *re*-played; and any genre corpus is always being expanded" (1990, p. 56). The notion of a genre being a continual process of the playing out of expectations and characteristics has resonance with the idea of a digital game as a process, noted below.

Study of genre in video games, however, has focused more on what elements of the text to consider than on the more nuanced considerations of genre theory for film and television. Wolf (2001) does acknowledge the work of Schatz when speaking of genre in the video game, and argues that analysis of genre in gaming should focus on "genres based on interactivity" (p. 115), but his interactive genres—built on what's "done" in the game—focus primarily on ludic concerns. Apperley (2006) takes a similar stance, arguing also for the need to examine what is done in a game rather than narrative concerns when attempting to build genres for them. In both authors' arguments, it is suggested that narrative concerns like story, theme, and character are not sufficient to the medium; that digital games, as something new and different, demand a way of looking at genre that is specific to their unique qualities.

By contrast, Kirkland (2005) considers that in the *Silent Hill* series of games, it is the thematic concerns of genre—particularly horror—that are in control of the game, and the mechanics are the subservient element. Because the *Silent Hill* games strive so much to incorporate the cinematic elements of film horror, he argues, the way that players actually physically move through the game is already set, and the mechanics are designed to fit that model. Thus, the games are relatively linear in scope, with little room for exploration, because the horror film narrative also moves from start to finish with little sidetracking. Kirkland argues, however, that understanding what players *do* in a game helps to make clear its motifs and rhetorical/ideological structures.

Rules, Fiction, and Player Engagement

This discussion of genre orbits a larger discussion on the formal aspects of the digital game, and where meaning in the game comes from. The connection between game mechanics, narrative themes, and ideology is one that has been explored by a number of game studies scholars coming from a variety of different perspectives. Conceptually, the video game text is broadly divided into the ludic dimension, or the elements of gameplay, game design, and game mechanics, and the narrative dimension, where story, character design, and other thematic elements are key.

Scholarship that examines the confluence of narrative and ludic concerns is considerable. In Jesper Juul's (2005) half-real model, the ludic aspect (the "rules")

are what makes a game to begin with, and the narrative aspects (the "fiction") contextualize and explain those rules; the rules are the "what" and the fiction is the "why" (or sometimes even "how"). McAllister's (2004) analysis of *Black and White* focuses on how the narrative of playing as a god who shapes and builds a mortal society combines with various in-game resource management aspects. The result is the conveying of certain ideologies and rhetorics about economics that bubble up out of the combination of rules and fiction.

Other research has considered ways in which the intersection of rules and narrative works on the level of player behavior. In my own previous work (Harper, 2006) I suggest a model where both mechanics and theme are influences that are subservient to the goals of the player. In that model, goal activity—what the player wants to do—is at the center of the meaning-making process. Like Juul, he takes a position midway between mechanical and thematic dominance, asserting that both bring their own structural constraints and concerns into the mix. Taylor (2006) speaks to something similar in her discussion of powergamers: players whose goal is to gain statistical advantage regardless of other concerns and for whom the game itself turns from the potential of a narrative experience into a logic puzzle of sorts. On the other end of the spectrum are cheaters, as explored by Consalvo (2007); she discusses players who "break" the mechanical rules through cheating, sometimes in order to consume narrative material without the interference of potential failure during gameplay.

Procedural Rhetoric

All of these models, however, focus on the consumptive act as the point of meaning creation, even if they put differing degrees of strain on where the greatest degree of influence is coming from. Effectively, without a player, a game does not exist nor take on form. Ian Bogost tackles the rhetorical end of this engagement in his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (2007). Bogost's model is called "procedural rhetoric;" the focus is on the use of models and simulations to act persuasively, a concept consistent with some of the earliest formative work in game studies under the banner of "ludology" (Aarseth, 1997; Frasca, 2003). In Bogost's model, mechanics and theme combine to create modified simulations of actual rhetorical events; by changing the *system* of representation in a simulated way, the game makes a rhetorical argument about how things are, rather than representing them directly.

Procedural rhetoric works on a similar sense to the idea of constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987; Tate, 2005). While constitutive rhetoric works by adapting, changing, or reifying concepts of identity *inside* a particular sociocultural and/or political context, procedural rhetoric lets the identity categories stand and instead changes the *system* in which they operate in a simulational way. To draw a contrast, consider Tate's discussion of the "failed" constitutive rhetoric of white lesbian feminism. A constitutive rhetorical response, from a persuasive point of

view, would focus (as Tate did) on the various ways in which the definition of feminism and the lesbian as "woman-identified woman" (p. 15) are defined and the ways in which subjects attached to that group are rhetorically interpolated. Although it is difficult to fully develop a procedural rhetorical response in this context, a possibility might be a web-based game in the vein of *September 12* (Newsgaming.com, n.d,), where the player assigns a dollar value to particular feminist identities and then sells them through a fake used car lot; the mechanics of economy (much as McAllister argued with *Black and White*) combined with the rhetorical structure of lesbian/feminist identity create a type of persuasive environment separate from (but including) representation.

Method

Textual analysis is the obvious choice for a study of this nature, as it seeks to evaluate how both content-based and contextual factors can result in possible interpretations rising from the text (McKee, 2003). Somewhat atypically, this analysis was performed on a "fresh" play of the game; that is to say, data were collected on a first run of the text, where the player has little to no foreknowledge of what will occur beyond their exposure to extratextual influences. That being said, some degree of "replay" was involved, particularly in the game's ending scenario; the first playthrough specifically chose the "bad" ending, then was reset to finish the game with the "good" ending path ("bad" and "good" here being used loosely, per console gaming slang on the subject).

Methods for analyzing games, and arguments for how it should be done, are varied. Consalvo and Dutton (2006) in particular note that while more quantitative methodologies for examining games are well established, qualitative methods have not been so strongly so. They suggest a framework that moves from the very specific—what objects exist in the game world? How does the player interface affect gameplay?—to the "most nebulous" (¶ 33) in the form of the researcher's gameplay experience. Yet while there are disagreements on exactly how it should occur—consider Aarseth (2003) and Kücklich (2007) and the opposite ways in which they characterize the role of cheating in game analysis—the common element in methodologies for studying games is that they must be played and experienced to be understood.

This analysis drew heavily on both Juul (2005) and Bogost (2007) as theoretical frameworks. Both of these scholars' works point to an intersection of narrative or thematic content and ludic/procedural content as having considerable importance. For Juul, this intersection is the sun around which the game form itself orbits; for Bogost, the crux point of procedural rhetoric is how ludic and narrative content are combined to convey ideological information. Accordingly, most of the data points in the textual analysis focused on those types of intersections. This is not to say that the rest of the text was ignored; thematic areas emerged that were either entirely narrative or entirely ludic, for example.

However, as Elfriede Furisch (2009, p. 244) notes, "[a]ccordingly, media content is not just raw material that can only be authenticated in specific audience readings. It is the task of the analyst to evaluate the possibilities of the text under investigation." In this instance, the primary area of focus was the game's potential for producing rhetoric in a procedural way, per Bogost, and so intersectional points between narrative and ludic content formed the primary points for analysis.

Results

Performing a textual analysis of a video game is a complex matter due to both the density of the text (which includes the narrative as well as ludic dimensions) and the ability of the text to change based on player choice. This analysis focuses primarily on the major procedural themes of *Persona 3*—choice, Persona-as-identity, and time—as these are the primary avenues for ideological content in the game itself.[1]

Choice

One of the major themes in *Persona 3* is the power of choice. Whether it is the ability to choose your destiny or the destiny of mankind, or simply how the player wants to spend the afternoon once classes are over, choices and consequences of those choices are everywhere. Primarily, it is the main character that embodies choice so fully because of his status as a semi-tabula rasa for the player.

The sun around which *Persona 3* orbits is the main character that the player names and controls (hereafter called "the Hero" rather than "the player" to distinguish the two entities). He is male, 16 or 17 years old, a junior and recent transfer student to Gekkoukan High School in the city of Iwatodai. Compared to the other characters in the series, the Hero is "special" in a number of ways; his capabilities (both in the fiction and in the ludic content) are above the norm and he serves a particular purpose in the story that no other character in the game can. The Hero is part cipher, part tabula rasa; the player knows little about him at the start of the game and, barring one important fact revealed in the transition between November and December of 2009, learns nothing about his past. He never independently speaks, responding only from preset lists at the player's command.

The Hero's initial Persona is Orpheus, the self-described "master of strings." His characteristic attitude is ambivalence or disinterest; he rarely smiles or even speaks and constantly has a music player around his neck on a lanyard that he listens to while walking. Unlike other characters, he is not limited in his choice of favored weapon and can equip whichever he likes, though his initial weapon is a one-handed sword.

His role as the "semidefined avatar" is important to how *Persona 3* functions on a rhetorical level in regard to the power of choice. On one hand, the narrative of the game does not function if the Hero has too much that is already defined, and so the

player gets something approaching the bare minimum: his gender, his physical appearance, an *idea* (as imparted by the discussion of nonplayer characters [NPC] about him) of his capabilities and personality. However, for the most part the Hero is open to player development. The player names the character, and through his or her choices the Hero's various abilities develop in particular ways, both personally and socially. A player who chooses to have the Hero constantly study in the library after school and go to sing karaoke at night is going to develop a high Academics score (with titles ranging from "Average" to "Genius") and a high Courage score (similarly, from "Timid" up the levels to "Badass"). Similarly, the hero may instead choose to socialize with other Gekkoukan students instead and develop Social Links: ties with specific individuals that are ranked on a 1–10 scale gauging how close a bond the Hero has developed with that person or persons.

More to the point, the Hero's major power in the combat mechanics of the game is his ability to shift Personas as needed in combat. This is atypical; the other heroic fighting characters use only one Persona (though for each of them, this Persona goes through a transformation at one point). The Hero, however, can equip anywhere from 8 to 12 Personas at any given time and switch between them as needed; he is thus considerably more versatile and powerful than his allies, most of which have very specific strengths and weaknesses due to their use of a single Persona. In fact, this chameleon ability to change his combat statistics (which are derived from the character's Persona) on demand is central to the combat system's tactical element; ally characters are not only narrow in focus but are also outside of the player's direct command; the Hero can offer suggestions ("Heal and support," "Conserve magic power," "Attack full strength," etc.) at best. The narrative constructs this ability to shift Personas at will as being a result of a traumatic event from the Hero's past; at age 5, the Shadow of Death was sealed inside him by a Shadow-fighting robot named Aigis (who later becomes an ally; see below). As he grew up with Death living inside him, the Hero developed this power as a result. Curiously, there is a second individual who can use multiple Personas: an incidental NPC named Elisabeth. However, the reason for her power is not fully explained because of her limited role in the narrative.

That said, there are considerations working against the idea of the Hero as the perfect blank slate on which the player can paint himself or herself. The issue of gender is the most obvious; female players of *Persona 3* are forced to play a male main character. In fact, the game's roots in Japanese dating simulation and anime influences means that, typically, plot situations, humor, and even combat equipment are based on gender; the Hero accidentally seeing Yukari naked and her subsequent embarrassment or being forced to peek at the female protagonists in the hot springs of Kyoto by his male ally Junpei are examples of such. The Hero is also light-skinned (he, as well as the other characters, actually have a very Caucasian appearance rather than a Japanese one; surprising, given the game's heavy use of Japanese culture), able-bodied, and athletic.

The primary arena in which the player has a choice in the personality of the character is the Hero's responses to outside stimuli. When other characters interact with the Hero, the player is typically given from 1 to 3 possible preworded responses, each with varying emotional tones; this is standard in both the role-playing and the datesim genres that *Persona 3* draws on. However, for the most part, it also makes the idea that the player has shaped the personality of the character by choosing a given response something of an illusion. While this is certainly understandable—the technology for fully simulated human interactions that respond dynamically is far beyond the current curve, video games or no—on an ideological level it limits the ways in which the Hero can develop at the player's whim.

More importantly, there is a second factor that can drive these choices beyond simply reacting "in character:" the gameplay consequences of each. Social Links are perhaps the most common example of this. By developing Social Links (bonds) with other characters, the Hero can empower his ability to create new Personas relevant to the Social Link. Thus the line between "developed social bond" and "combat effectiveness" is quite easy to draw: the better your bonds, the more effective your Personas ... and as previously stated, the Hero's ability to switch Personas in combat is the lynchpin of the combat system. Most Social Link building situations are a series of the choice-making situations described above. One option is to simply react how the player would like his or her controlled character to react in any given situation. Another option, however, is to choose the most effective response for building the Social Link, and these two are not always congruent.

For example: the Hanged Man Social Link is a young girl named Maiko who plans to run away from home so that her divorcing parents will have to reconcile to find her. When she announces this to the Hero, he can respond by asking her to calm down, encouraging her choice, or warning her not to do anything hasty. A player who wants to respond as being prudent or caring for Maiko's safety might suggest her not to do anything hasty; however, this choice will actually *lower* the Hero's relationship to Maiko (who sees him as a traitorous adult). By contrast, encouraging her plan pleases her and increases the relationship between the two. Similarly, to develop the Chariot Social Link with athlete Kazushi, the Hero must encourage him to constantly exercise on a knee that is in need of surgery, rather than suggesting he care about his injury first.

This can create a strong tension between character-building and game success; in a way, the game creates a dominant code by rewarding favored answers with statistical improvement. If the Hero acts in a way consistent with game designer vision, he is rewarded with (literal) power. This tension between decision making and narrative structure that Consalvo (2007) and Taylor (2006) discuss in their player typologies and that tension has implications for the effectiveness of this procedural rhetoric. Consider Taylor's powergamer: she or he is always going to choose the option that provides statistical advantage rather than following the narrative. A Consalvo-style cheater may use a game guide to micromanage his or her in-game choices to any of a

variety of ends (see also Harper, 2006). These represent oppositions to that dominant code and may produce commensurately different responses to the procedural rhetoric.

Persona as Identity and Mirror

As previously stated, in *Persona 3* and in the *Persona* series of games in general, the Persona is a reflection of the self. When creating Personas (by fusing one or more existing ones together), the Personas typically respond by asserting that they are, in some way, coming from within the Hero (two such lines are "I'm a part of you; remember that!" or "I was born from thee, and shall walk with thee."). However, beyond a simplistic notion of the Persona as a supernatural "super-self," the game uses different Personas to make commentary about characters, their links to each other, and their role in the game and in society.

Other than the Hero, the protagonists of *Persona 3* are the members of S.E.E.S;[2] they serve as his family, friends, and allies in combat. In contrast to the Hero, who is primarily controlled by the player and develops (partially, as discussed above) in relation to his or her choices, the members of S.E.E.S are quite static. They cannot switch Personas in combat and tend to center on a handful of critical and defining personality traits. Examining the different characters in S.E.E.S and their relationships with their Personas gives a good picture of the base level of linkage between Persona and self.

These heroic characters are actually quite narrow in focus compared to the Hero and can be linked into rough groups. Both Mitsuru and Yukari, for example, are young women dealing with their relationships to their fathers. Akihiko, Shinjiro, and Ken are all linked by the death of Ken's mother in the earliest incarnation of S.E.E.S. Junpei and Aigis share a strong connection to the Hero, either in the role of best friend (Junpei) or by sealing Death within him 10 years ago (Aigis). Fuuka tends to stand on her own as a social outcast struggling to fit in, while Koromaru, as a dog, is usually ignored in terms of the story after his introduction.

The link between Personas and individual personality (and the otherness of the Hero's ability to switch them at will) becomes more evident through the lens of S.E.E.S. Their Personas and abilities tend to strongly reflect the user, both thematically and statistically. Yukari's initial Persona is Io; the visual representation of which is a woman who looks strikingly like Yukari chained to a stylized bull's head (per the Greek myth). Io specializes in magic (particularly healing) and has weak physical statistics. Yukari, a supportive and caring individual who nevertheless is constrained by her father's legacy, thus gets a Persona that suits her. Shinjiro's Persona, Castor, makes a duet with Akihiko's Persona, Polydeuces as the twins of the Gemini constellation, in accordance with their strong friendship. Ken, who initially seeks revenge for the death of his mother, has a Persona named Nemesis that specializes in holy-based magic that kills the target instantly. These are only a few examples; with nine characters (not counting the Hero) and a total of 16 Personas between them, the list could go on for quite some time.

Second, each character in S.E.E.S except Shinjiro (who dies midway through the game) and Koromaru eventually has some sort of personal epiphany—typically sparked by loss—that unleashes the true power of his or her Persona. Shinjiro's death, for example, triggers the change of Akihiko's Persona from Polydeuces to Caesar, thanks to Akihiko's newfound resolve to defeat the Shadows in place of his departed friend. Caesar, compared to Polydeuces, has significantly better statistics and learns much improved magic and abilities. Both Yukari and Mitsuru's awakened Personas come from revelations concerning their departed fathers' intent for their daughters' lives; Yukari's in particular is notable due to the change of Io to Isis and the removal of the "chained girl" motif; the personal change is reflected, naturally, in the Persona. Junpei's Hermes becomes Trismegistus, shifting from the blithe trickster to the keeper of wisdom and hermetic knowledge, once he experiences a true loss and brush with mortality for the first time in his otherwise carefree existence.

At the same time, this is all contrasted to the Hero and his seemingly endless array of possible Personas. This distinction makes an ideological break between the Hero and the members of S.E.E.S, both in terms of the characters' given roles in combat and in the story. It is implied that the Hero is "special" somehow even before it is revealed why he can change Personas at will (due to his brush with Death), and his chameleon ability to change the inner self reflects on what his purpose is in the first place. For example, consider the "awakening" of Personas, as each S.E.E.S member experiences it. As previously described, these situations are typically loss-related (the deaths of Shinjiro, Junpei's love interest Chidori, and Mitsuru's father spark four of the seven total; Fuuka's involves the loss of a friend and Yukari's is related to her dead father) and emphasize that through surviving loss the character matures into a new, more powerful self ... but that new self is merely an enhancement of existing traits rather than a shift in a new direction. These individuals can never be more than they are; the game ideologically traps the members of S.E.E.S into their characteristic roles forever.

The Hero is not so fettered, but in the process he loses some definition of self. Presumably, the "choice" of Persona the player favors influences this read, but the role of game mechanics must again be emphasized here. It may be that in order to obtain a game benefit, the player must choose to use a Persona she or he is not comfortable with *ideologically*. Consider the Personas Lucifer and Satan, extremely powerful high-level Personas that have the potential to trivialize the combat portion of the game with their extremely powerful abilities. The trick, of course, is that in order to utilize their power you must "become" Lucifer or "become" Satan, to adopt their Persona. Depending on the player's subject position, this may or may not be comfortable. Comparatively speaking, another "ultimate" Persona for the Hero is called Messiah; while it is not as powerful as the Lucifer/Satan combo, it is still exceptionally powerful ... and comes with different and, perhaps, more "acceptable" ideological ties.

Procedurally, this use of the Persona as a mirror of the self is an example of Bogost's idea that rather than shifting the *representation* (see the above discussion

of constitutive vs. procedural rhetorics), a procedural argument shifts the systems in which representations are created. Rather than forcing the player (and by extension the Hero) into a single path and moving characters around him, *Persona 3* establishes the terrain through these fixed friendly characters and then allows the player to navigate around them—both narratively and ludically—by making the *Hero* the focus of change and adaptation.

Time

Although not as key a factor as choice or Persona/identity, time does play a strong role in *Persona 3*. The game works on a simulated calendar of the Japanese public school year, starting in April of 2009 and ending somewhere between January 1 and March 31 of 2010. The game uses the flow of time as a narrative and gameplay control; each day has a limited number of dayparts in which to act, and most major plot points are tied to specific days of each month.

The concept of time as a limiter is the most prevalent in the game. Each day consists of seven dayparts, some of which pull double duty: Early Morning/Morning, Daytime, Lunchtime, Afternoon, After School, Evening, and Late Night/Dark Hour. A typical "day" in *Persona 3* involves moving through each of these parts in order, with school taking up the majority. The most important dayparts are After School, Evening, and Late Night, as these are when the player has control over the Hero's actions. As per the Japanese school schedule, classes go from Monday to Saturday, with Sunday as a holiday.

Social links and time work together. As noted, Social links are needed to boost the Hero's ability to create powerful Personas, but building a relationship takes time, which is a limited resource. While it is possible to get every Social link to rank 10 (the maximum) in a single playthrough, this is generally speaking highly unlikely unless the player totally eschews playing in a "natural" way and micromanages every last possible second of free time available to the Hero ... and even then, some luck is involved. Thus, the player is forced to prioritize some relationships over others depending on a variety of factors: whom the player likes, what types of Persona the player enjoys using, and when the NPC for that Social Link can be met. Since every NPC has his or her own schedule of days when s/he is available, planning is crucial.

And of course, the school setting forces demands on time as well. Most Social links are tied to students of Gekkoukan, for example, but during the week before exam periods (of which there are three), all students are so busy studying that they do not have time to spend with the Hero at all. Once exams actually begin, there is no time for socialization *period*; the Hero moves from one day of testing to the next, frequently blowing an entire week of time in one go. Some Social links are also dependent on the Hero's three scores in Academics, Courage, and Charm; the only way to raise those is to perform a number of activities such as studying in the library (Academics), seeing a marathon of romantic movies (Charm), or singing karaoke at

the mall (Courage). Of course, if the player is spending time developing the Hero's own abilities, she or he *is not* spending time building social relationships.

If it sounds complex, that is because it is ... but in a sense it is also sending a message about budgeting time. The game uses mechanics—particularly Social Links and the Personas they empower—to enforce a particular way of budgeting time. It is entirely possible to play *Persona 3* without building a single link (though some, like Fool, Death, and Judgment, are automatic) ... but it is going to be considerably more difficult than the alternative. Further, if the Hero is to be a hit socially, the player needs to develop him; if the Hero is not charming, Yukari will not be interested in him. If the Hero is not highly Courageous, then team manager Yuko will not look his way.

Above and beyond that, however, is time functioning as a Sword of Damocles. For the first 7 months of 2009, S.E.E.S focuses on defeating powerful Shadows that only appear when the moon is full (e.g., every 30 days). Thus, time is constantly moving forward and the game cares little if the player is prepared or not; the game's difficulty is not adaptive, so a powerful monster remains so regardless of the characters' levels of statistical power. Once the plot reaches December 2009, a second deadline is added in the form of Nyx's arrival and the (literal) end of the world.

This use of calendar time is actually quite unusual in modern console role-playing games, and in *Persona 3* it seems to indicate the inescapability of the moment. While doomsday devices are commonplace—meteors about to impact the planet, an evil demon about to recite the spell that destroys humanity, and so on—they frequently exist in a sort of frozen, eternal now; the future is inevitable but a distant country. One could take the equivalent of 100 in-game years in *Final Fantasy VII* to eventually stop its villain because time is not important in that game's theme and cosmology. In *Persona 3*, failing to defeat Nyx on January 31, 2010, really does result in the end of the world. Of course, the relationship between in-game time and real-world time is more abstract; a player can spend 15–20 hours exploring Tartarus during the Dark Hour if she or he wishes, and that individual Dark Hour will technically last forever until the character ends it by leaving Tartarus.

This fluidity of time creates an ideology where every moment counts in the context of the one big event of the "good" ending: the Hero's death in order to seal Nyx away for good. This mythic calendar year—the school year—suddenly becomes a microcosm for life itself. The Hero is "born" (revealed to us at the beginning, a more or less blank slate as discussed above), he "lives" (fights, develops links with others), and then dies. On some occasions, time moves slowly (e.g. the Dark Hour and exploration) and sometimes it seems to breeze by so past one does not recall exactly what happened (exam weeks or even a week in which the characters volunteer to do menial work where the entire 6 days blow by in one go). But the constant deadlines and inevitabilities remind the player that time itself is always moving forward and suggest certain discourses about how that time should be spent.

Discussion

What *Persona 3* offers is a text where ideology bubbles up from the fusion of ludic qualities and thematic/narrative elements. Personas themselves, the characters, the settings, even the statistical systems; all of these have particular ties to the narrative and in concert suggest certain ideological frames. In particular, *Persona 3*'s microcosmic view of birth, life, and death through the auspice of the Hero suggests a number of views on how life should be lived. It valorizes social contact, persistence in the face of despair, personal growth through self-knowledge, and ultimately, privileges acceptance of death over fear of death.

Interestingly enough, a fourth major theme—death and the life-journey—bubbled up from analysis. It is not discussed extensively in the results section, however, for a very particular reason. In attempting to describe the theme, I discovered that all of my examples from the text were *narrative* examples; while there were a small number of ludic elements that supported it (primarily, that the in-combat death of the Hero results in a game over, even if the other party members are still up and around), the concept of the game itself as a journey from birth to death was almost entirely narrative.

However, this narrative/ideological frame arose from the *procedural* frames outlined in the results section above. The game as a succession of personal choices that result in both narrative and statistical growth, the concept of a second self released through a symbolic death, even the idea of linear, inexorable time ... all of these work together to construct the life–death journey the Hero undertakes. Thus, while the ideas of choice, Persona-as-self, and time are certainly procedural frames, they may not be *rhetorical* frames; rather, each set of procedural themes contributes to the overall ideological character of the text, which in the case of *Persona 3* is easiest to grasp from ''outside'' as the narrative.

I make a distinction here somewhat between ''the story'' and ''the ideological argument'' because the game text as a whole treats them somewhat differently. Certainly, *Persona 3* presents a self-contained story: a young man becomes involved in various plots and then saves the world, resulting in his death. The marks of the rhetorical master frame—the journey from birth to death—are still there, but they are relatively weak on their own. Similarly, so are the ludic frames. Limited timeframes in which to complete game objectives and characters with varying and unique statistics are common, so their inclusion taken by itself means little.

Combining the narrative with the ludic gives the ideological content robustness. It makes more sense that the game presents an allegorical life journey when we realize the Hero is a tabula rasa the player fills in, when the inexorable march of time toward the literal end of the world has real in-game consequences, and when the ideological aspects of the characters in the narrative are reflected in what the game allows them to do in gameplay. In short, thematic areas that would on their own be considerably weaker are given substantive strength by combining the narrative and the ludic.

The result in *Persona 3* is a game that not only has a compelling narrative but which drives that narrative forward by attaching various procedural frames to it. Marrying gameplay to ideology makes the conveying of that ideology part of the experience, rather than something *attached to* the experience. Instead of a top-down fashion where the game has a specific story to tell irrespective of its ludic content, *Persona 3* weaves the story into the gameplay in subtle ways. It may be this particular quality of not just *P3*, but of most *Shin Megami Tensei* games (see above), that has made them so popular.

In that regard, *Persona 3* certainly is a genre game, though the genre in question might simply be "a *Shin Megami Tensei* game." My own previous work on meaning making in gaming refers to genre as a hybrid antecedent, an influence on gameplay that is rooted in both in-game (internal) and out-of-game (external) factors. This is similar to Neale's description of genre as a process, where the consumer of a genre text measures expectations on the "generic corpus" (1990, p. 56) against what elements the text decides to include or exclude from that corpus. Texts expand the body of technique in the genre by adding their own unique touches and qualities, which consumers then go on to use in evaluating future genre work. Thus, genre is never set in stone nor fixed; it is a constant cycle of adaptation and evaluation.

The previous discussions of genre in digital games mentioned above centered their arguments on which formal area—narrative or gameplay content—should get the most attention. However, what frameworks like procedural rhetoric suggest is that it may be more useful to consider genre as a way in which games and game designers structure their content. Remember that *Persona 3* draws on multiple genre traditions: the *Shin Megami Tensei* games (known for their dark tone, emphasis on the effects of choice, and focus on psychological issues), the *Persona* series (which give a particular structure—including the use of Personas—to the *SMT* superstructure), and even the broad level of console role-playing games, which are traditionally heavily story based.

Even within those two limited genres, however, there are narrative and ludic aspects to them all. Recall that *Shin Megami Tensei* games are known for both their narrative elements, like use of demons and the occult, and their ludic ones, such as the emphasis on developing a blank slate character through player choices. Console role-playing games have both common narrative tropes—the journey to save the world, the hero's journey, and the general primacy of a progressive storyline—and also mechanical ones such as numeric statistical representations and menu-driven combat systems ... generic elements themselves borrowed from another genre form entirely, the tabletop role-playing game in the vein of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Looking at *Persona 3* and attempting to determine its genre in a traditional way would simply look for the presence or absence of something. Does the game have menu-driven combat and a fantasy-based setting? Then it is a role-playing game. What the procedural way of looking at genre suggests is that instead of looking for the presence or absence of elements from a set genre list, we should consider the ways in which various common narrative and ludic frames are configured.

The same procedural theme can work in different ways depending on the genre of the text. Consider the idea of "limited time." In *Persona 3*, it serves a ludic function (limiting and shaping gameplay functions) and a thematic function (structuring the Hero's journey and framing the microcosm of the school year). "Limited time" is also at work in a sports game like *Madden NFL*, however; as with its nonvideo game counterpart, in *Madden NFL,* players have the same limited amount of time to make plays, score points, and the like. In one sense, time is working in the same way in both games: the player only has (*x*) time periods—be they dayparts and months in *Persona 3* or quarters and the play clock in *Madden*—to accomplish what she or he wants.

However, are the rhetorical uses of time in these two situations comparable? In *Madden*, the concept of time is situated primarily in rhetoric of "realism;" because actual football has these temporal dimensions, its representation in the video game should also have them. On the other hand, *Persona 3* makes no claim to realism at all; the inclusion of time as a procedural theme here suggests that the game's designers included it (when it is, as previously noted, often absent from the genre) *for a specific purpose*.

The difference is that *Persona* and *Madden* are two very different types of games with different influences. Sports games in general tend toward faithful replication of real life systems; *Persona* comes from a tradition of both horror-influenced fantasy narratives (as a console role-playing game) and of a space to play out fantasy relationships (as a datesim). Thus the same procedural frame—in this case, limited time—is refracted through the prism of genre (and almost certainly other factors not discussed here as well) and gives rise to the potential for multiple readings of the same basic concept.

Conclusion

Persona 3 fairly clearly combines the procedural with the narrative in order to present a certain ideological frame. As this study illustrates, Bogost's procedural rhetoric provides a useful framework for analysis of games, particularly their ideological and cultural content. As various scholars discussed above have noted, the crux point of analysis for games is gameplay. Themes that arise from intersections of narrative and ludic frames—the procedural moments of Bogost's system—represent moments in gameplay where there is great potential for ideological arguments.

Accordingly, it also suggests new ways of conceiving genre in video games, a contested territory that mirrors early arguments in game studies about the nature of games as either "interactive" traditional narratives or nonnarrative simulations. Genre is strongly at work in *Persona 3* on multiple levels, as described above, and it cannot be separated from the mechanics *or* the narrative. Both the cinematic genre of Kirkland and the ludic genre of Apperley are involved here, and each has their own distinctive effect on the game's presentation. *Persona 3*'s use of various procedural frames and narrative elements in combination suggests that in classifying genre merely examining the narrative or the ludic alone is not enough; the ways

in which the game rules express certain concepts—such as the difference between sports games and RPGs in using time to express either "realism" or "tension"—may be a more effective way to think about game genres.

Since the initial writing of this research, there have been two sequels to *Persona 3*; one is actually an "expansion" for *P3* called *P3:Fes*, which includes the entire original game with expanded content, as well as an "epilogue" that continues after the death of the player character. The other is *Persona 4*, a self-contained sequel. A comparative examination of *Persona 4* would be particularly interesting, as the game appears to build on and refine the systems used in *P3* while telling a different story. Such an analysis could consider if the link between ludic frames and rhetorical frames stays consistent within the series.

Future research may wish to apply this concept to games that do not appear to have a strong rhetorical frame built in. As both the game itself and the designer commentary in *Art of Persona 3* (2007) suggest, this game had ideological expression (if not rhetorical persuasion) built into it from the ground up. Would the same apply to something equally modern, but with a different narrative structure? Consider another popular game series, *Katamari Damacy*; the series has a relatively weak narrative and its primary draw is its novel mechanical gameplay and "cute" thematic presentation. If the concept of procedural rhetoric is to be extended outside the realm of persuasive games, however, it should be able to hold even in such a situation; I suggest *Katamari Damacy* because I believe it *does*, in fact, follow similar structures regarding themes of togetherness and community. While *Persona 3* does suggest that the framework has merit outside the field of persuasive games, it is only one star in an increasingly diverse cosmos of games; future studies can and should build on this to make the approach more robust.

Notes

1. Here I identify a few of the important terms as the game defines them that are useful in understanding the procedural systems that are described in the results section:

   (i) *Personas* are manifestations of a living being's inner or true self; they take the form of stylized mythological figures (gods, demons, monsters, etc.) and grant their masters supernatural abilities. A Persona is called forth by a gun-shaped device called an "Evoker;" the Evoker is pointed at the body and the trigger pulled, calling forth the Persona for a brief time.

   (ii) *Shadows* are monstrous beings that prey on the living. They emerge during the Dark Hour, a nebulous time period between 12:00 a.m. and 12:01 a.m. each day that only Persona users and Shadows can perceive. They are the standard enemy of *Persona 3* and the Hero and company spend most of the game attempting to defeat various Shadows.

   (iii) *Tartarus*, the "Tower of Demise," is what Gekkoukan High School becomes during the Dark Hour. In ludic terms, it is a 200+ floor

randomly generated dungeon where the lion's share of the game's combat play takes place. Thematically, it is a Tower of Babylon full of Shadows meant to receive Nyx when she descends to start the Fall; in *Art of Persona 3*, the designers liken Tartarus to the human psyche.

2. The "Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad," a partial send-up of an after-school activity group. In this case, the "activity" of S.E.E.S is the destruction of Shadows. The S.E.E.S roster consists of the game's protagonists: the Hero, Takeba Yukari, Iori Junpei, Kirijo Mitsuru, Sanada Akihiko, Amada Ken, Fuuka Yamagishi, the dog Koromaru, and the robot Aigis. Former member Aragaki Shinjiro temporarily joins between October and November by the game calendar.

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Bio

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