

Chapter 15

Is the News Cycle “Real”?

A Case Study of Media “Phandom” and Agenda Setting in *Persona 5*

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ABSTRACT

This chapter features a game from the Shin Megami Tensei series called Persona 5. This chapter examines how the case of role playing video game Persona 5 depicts agenda setting through the use of an in-game audience-oriented polling systems and comment system in order to understand to a greater degree the ways in which games contribute to our understanding of media processes and explores the idea of fandom as integral to the agenda setting process. The case chapter addressed in this manuscript represents a unique narrative featuring a daily life simulator, a turn-based Japanese role-playing game (JRPG), and complex in-game media vehicles to drive the story.

INTRODUCTION

Persona 5

As video games have become increasingly more accepted into the mainstream, so have the complexity of the stories that are presented in them (Tucker, 2012). Gaming has addressed complex topics within Universalizability, Utilitarianism, Game Theory, amongst many other theories that exist within the visual and interactive narrative of a video game. Additionally, Bogost (2008) has indicated that video game narratives have more complexity than any other medium due to their interactivity. The case study

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addressed in this manuscript represents a unique narrative featuring a daily life simulator, a turn-based Japanese role-playing game (JRPG), and complex in-game media vehicles to drive the story.

This chapter features a video game from the Shin Megami Tensei series called *Persona 5* (Atlus, 2017). It is the fifth installment of the *Persona* series, which contrasts dark and disturbing themes with tales of developing friendships and light-hearted banter among Japanese high school students. While the tone has lightened in the last two entries in the series, the *Persona* series also includes the eponymous “Personas,” summoned creatures, like Pokemon, that grant the characters special powers to battle enemies in an alternate world (known in *Persona 5* as the “metaverse”). All of this terminology and worldbuilding only indicates the degree to which this is a constructed world that depicts a highly mediated Tokyo and in which the high school students featured a constantly working to assess the reality around them. Central in *Persona 5*, is the social media in the game’s world. As the protagonist group, known as the “Phantom Thieves,” defeats the first antagonist, a student and fan submit a blog which has a poll regarding the approval of the group. As the Phantom Thieves defeat more antagonists, media exposure and fandom grow as does the approval on the “Phansite.” The Phansite is an in-game blog that fictional fans interact with each other concerning the Phantom Thieves actions, the Phantom Thieves justifiability for their in-game actions, and a poll discussing the existence of the Phantom Thieves. As the game states, you are allowed to progress through the narrative as you become more prevalent in the general public’s cognition. Therefore, the theme of this chapter is to determine how *Persona 5* uses its in-game narrative to illustrate agenda setting as the Phantom Thieves grow in popularity.

Research indicates increasingly that media literacy is at a disturbingly low level (Potter & Christ, 2007). People draw knowledge of media processes from a variety of sources, including entertainment media artifacts such as *Persona 5* (Ferrucci, 2018). This chapter would like to argue that as a result of *Persona 5*’s popularity and widespread appeal (Romano, 2018, May 14), it serves as an ideal case to understand how the media process of agenda setting is communicated. It showcases a fictional array of happening, reported by fictional news and interpreted by fictional fans. Prior research has shown that such popular culture artifacts accomplish a great deal in modeling our relationship with institutions in society (Ferrucci, 2018).

Agenda setting is a vital concept in media literacy as helps explain the natural operations within journalism and distinguishes a shared set of news values from the more troubling concept of collusion. This chapter proposes to examine how the case of *Persona 5* depicts agenda setting through the use of an in-game audience-oriented polling systems and comment system in order to understand to a greater degree the ways in which games contribute to our understanding of media processes. Largely, the chapter finds that the nature of *Persona 5* reflects the agenda setting process, with the in-game poll and comments helping identify the relationship between news media and not just what fans think about but also what they think.

Theoretical Framework - Fandom

Being a “fan” means participating in a range of activities that extend beyond private personal involvement and extending into public displays of emotional involvement. There are a plethora of ways that fans can be involved including in participating in dialogue about the subject, buying merchandise, subscribing to publications, joining fan clubs, etc. (Bielby, Harrington, & Bielby, 1999). This involvement with discussion makes fan groups to be incredibly social, especially considering the advent of technology to foster fan group conversations (Jenkins, 1992; Perreault, 2015). As online involvement has influenced

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