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Exploring Cultural Differences in Game Reception

JRPGs in Germany and Japan

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Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association
June 2019, Vol 4 No 3, pp 209-243
ISSN 2328-9422

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we present the first results of an ongoing research project focused on examining the European reception of Japanese video games, and we compare it with the reception in Japan. We hope to contribute towards a better understanding of how player perception and evaluation of a game is influenced by cultural

background. Applying a grounded theory approach, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of articles from German video game websites, user comments responding to articles, as well as Japanese and German user reviews from the respective Amazon online stores and Steam. Focusing on the reception of three Japanese RPGs, our findings show that considerable differences exist in how various elements of the games are perceived between cultures. We also briefly discuss certain lexical differences in the way players write about games, indicating fundamental differences in how Japanese and German players talk (and think) about games.

Keywords

Japanese games, reception, Germany, user reviews, QDA, grounded theory

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a rise in attempts to utilize the vast amounts of text on digital games available online, by using natural language processing (NLP) methods. Such bottom-up approaches have the potential to contribute towards a better understanding of “what we talk about when we talk about games” (Ryan et al., 2015). However, as with other media, the way players experience, interpret and evaluate video games is inextricably linked to their cultural backgrounds (Consalvo, 2006, 127, cf. Rohn 2009, 84-87), creating a need to examine exactly how the way players “talk about”, perceive, and evaluate games differ, based on a player’s culture.

This paper reports the first results of an ongoing research project, launched in November 2016. The main goal of the project is to examine the European reception of Japanese video games, broadly defined as games developed by Japanese developers, and to compare it with their reception in Japan. We hope to contribute

to a better understanding of how culture influences the way we experience, evaluate, think and talk about games.

In the scope of this study, we focus on a comparison of the German and Japanese reception of three Japanese role-playing games (JRPG), *Persona 5* (Atlus 2016), *Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel* (Nihon Falcom 2013) and *Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II* (Nihon Falcom 2014). To examine the “German reception”, we first analyze and contrast the way these three games are depicted in the professional German gaming media with how they are reflected upon in German user reviews. In a second step, we compare the German reception with reviews written by Japanese players. In contrast to Zagal and Tomuro (2013), we conduct a qualitative analysis of the content, combining a grounded theory approach with a qualitative content analysis, aided by QDA software. This allows us to employ a high level of granularity to account for subtle differences (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Schreier, 2014; Strübing, 2014).

Our choice of focusing on Japanese games occurs with a background of the perceived dichotomy of Japanese and “Western” (i.e. North American and European) games, that has taken deep roots in broader video game discourses, promoting a “binary perspective” (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2011, 84) on games, as well as on players. This dichotomy is based on notions of the uniqueness of Japanese games, (i.e. their “Japaneseness”). While the idea of “Japaneseness” has repeatedly been subjected to scholarly scrutiny (e.g. Consalvo, 2006; Navarro-Remesal and Loriguillo-López, 2015; Consalvo, 2016), the concept appears deeply ingrained in Japanese and Western players alike, affecting their reception of Japanese games. Research to understand the relationship between culture and game reception has mostly been directed towards the US and Japan (e.g. Ngai, 2005; Cook, 2009; James, 2010). Shifting our attention to Europe, we begin with an analysis of the German reception of Japanese games, with Germany being the biggest market for games in Europe (Newzoo, 2016). Iwabuchi (2002, 94) argues that the majority of exported

Japanese products are “culturally odorless”, to appeal to a wider audience (cf. Grau de Pablos, 2016, 12-18). Our decision to begin with a study of the JRPG genre is based on the perception of it being “uniquely Japanese” (Schules, 2015), possibly contributing to the difference in the Japanese and German reception.

We chose *Persona 5* due to its universal acclaim, and its contribution in reversing discursive trends of a declining Japanese games industry, unable to cope with Western players’ demands (e.g. Richey, 2014; Stuart, 2014; US Gamer Team, 2013; Byford, 2014). *Persona 5* was nominated in several categories in *The Game Awards 2017*, winning the title of Best RPG (The Game Awards, 2017). The recent success of *Persona 5* and other Japanese titles such as Nintendo’s *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017a) and *Super Mario Odyssey* (Nintendo 2017b), Platinum Games’ *Nier: Automata* (2017) and Koei Tecmo’s *Nioh* (2017), have led commentators to describe 2017 as the year marking the “renaissance” (Lennon, 2017) or “comeback” (Webster, 2017) of Japanese video games in the West, and the “year Japanese RPGs caught up to Western RPGs” (Leack, 2017). The critical and commercial success of *Persona 5*, having sold more than two million copies worldwide as of December 2017 (O’Connor, 2017), indicates a player base well beyond its predecessors and most other Japanese RPGs, allowing us to include the opinions of a diverse audience. Because of its release date in the West (April 4th, 2017) the game is also more strongly represented in our dataset than other JRPGs.

Our focus on the first two entries in the *Trails of Cold Steel* (ToCS) series is because of both their similarities and differences to *Persona 5*. All three games are marketed as JRPGs in Germany, and were released without a German localization. They share certain gameplay characteristics, such as a turn-based combat system and social simulation elements (i.e. continuous interaction with certain NPCs provides in-game bonuses and unlocks story events), as well as an art style reminding German players of Japanese manga and anime. As is common in wider Japanese pop

culture, *Persona 5* and *ToCS I* are set in a high school setting, the main characters being students. These similarities are also noted by German users, who often compare the games to each other. *Persona 5* was published for PlayStation 3 and 4 (2016 in Japan and 2017 in Germany). *ToCS I* and *II* were released for PlayStation 3 and PlayStation Vita (Japan, 2013/2014; Germany, 2016/2016). *ToCS I* was also published on Steam (2017). All three games were localized for Western markets after their release in Japan (“post-gold localization”), hinting at the developers’ primary focus on the Japanese market. However, while *ToCS I* and *II* are set in a fantasy world, *Persona 5* depicts a fictional rendering of real-world Tokyo. While *Persona 5* has received widespread commercial success in the West, *ToCS I* and *II* remain niche titles and consequently have far fewer user reviews written for them.

Game	Amazon_DE	Amazon_JP	Steam	Metacritic (Metascore)	Famitsu Score
Persona 5 (PS4)	4.3/5.00 (60 reviews)	4.3/5.00 (1,295 reviews)	-	93	39/40
ToCS (PS3)	4.8/5.00 (14 reviews)	3.4/5.00 (165 reviews)	95% positive reviews (of 1,330)	80	34/40
ToCS II (PS3)	5.0/5.00 (4 reviews)	3.3/5.00 (118 reviews)	-	90	31/40

Table 1: Overview of the critical reception of the considered games (as of February 1st, 2018).

Comparing *Persona 5* and *ToCS* also serves as an interesting case because of their respective critical evaluation (see Table 1). *Persona 5* was universally praised by the gaming media and holds a rating of 4.3/5.00 in the Japanese Amazon store. *ToCS*, while also being positively received by critics, received a worse score from Japanese users. However, in Western scores of aggregated user reviews (e.g. Steam), *ToCS* is perceived in a largely positive

way, with both games also holding higher aggregate scores on the German Amazon store than *Persona 5*. Including *Persona 5*, *ToCS I* and *ToCS II* in our analysis, provides us with a set of games with great similarities in respect to mechanics and (to a lesser degree) visual design and narrative elements. All of these have been praised by critics but are very different in their level of (international) recognition and commercial success. As such, our selection of games is close to a most similar case design, which makes it possible to more clearly identify and contrast the differences in their reception.

In the following sections, we will first briefly discuss the methodological framework of our study. Following this, we introduce our results by (1) comparing the German media with the German user reception, (2) contrasting the German and Japanese reception, and (3) discussing some lexical differences we encountered in our analysis. After discussing some selected findings, we present our conclusion.

METHOD

Data Gathering

Our dataset is drawn from nine German video game websites (see Table 2), chosen based on their popularity, i.e. viewer ratings (Statista, 2017; Alexa Internet, 2018). Maniac.de is included because of its strong focus on Japanese games and its function as a hub for player communities with preferences for Japanese games. All the included websites function as portals for game-related news and reviews. Four of them are related to printed gaming magazines, while Spieletipps also serves as a community to provide tips and cheats for games.

Source	URL	Print Media
4Players	www.4players.de/	No
Computer Bild	http://www.computerbild.de/	Yes (Computer Bild Spiele)
GamePro	http://www.gamepro.de/	Yes
GameStar	http://www.gamestar.de/	Yes
Gamona	http://www.gamona.de/	No
Giga Games	http://www.giga.de/games/	No
IGN	de.ign.com/	No
Maniac.de	https://www.maniac.de/	Yes (M! Games)
Spieletipps	https://www.spieletipps.de/	No

Table 2: Overview of the sources for the German media articles.

The data used in this study is part of a larger, continuously growing corpus of German games-related media items, and also includes analyses of non-textual media, like YouTube videos or Twitch.tv streams, traditional (printed) gaming magazines, and player communities. For this analysis, we draw on the full text of 166 German media articles (16 reviews), 1,060 user comments, written in response to these articles as well as 89 user reviews from Amazon.de and Steam (see Table 3) gathered between November 2016 and January 2018. In total, the dataset consists of 393,124 words. The analyzed user reviews constitute the totality of German language user reviews written on *Persona 5* and *ToCS* on the German Amazon website and Steam, as of February 1st, 2018. Our corpus of media articles includes all preview and review articles published on the indicated websites that include either the terms “Persona 5” or “Trails of Cold Steel”, as well as all news articles published between January 2017 and January 2018.

To contrast our findings with the German reception, we also analyzed 80 Japanese user reviews, taken from Amazon.co.jp, 40 for *Persona 5* and 20 each for *ToCS I* and *II*. As of February 1st, 2018, there were 2,996 Japanese user reviews for *Persona 5* and 283 for both *ToCS* games combined in the Japanese Amazon store, indicating their different levels of commercial success. We included the Japanese user reviews that appeared to be “most helpful” by other users, as they are more likely to represent the dominant Japanese discourse on the games.

	Persona 5			Trails of Cold Steel (I+II)		
	Amazon	Media	Comments	Amazon/Steam	Media	Comments
Germany	60	102	816	29	64	244
Japan	40	-	-	40	-	-

Table 3: Overview of the dataset used for this study.

Data Analysis

Methodologically, we conducted a qualitative content analysis (see Schreier, 2014) aided by MAXQDA, a software program for qualitative data analysis. We divided our text corpus into six different document groups based on the game, the origin of the content (professional media or user generated), and the country (Japan or Germany). As the inclusion of both *ToCS* games is primarily a means to have more data available to contrast with the vast amount gathered for *Persona 5*, and our prior analysis indicated that both games are commented upon in very similar ways, we have compiled them into one document group for easier visibility. The structure of our corpus makes it possible to compare German user reviews with German (professional) media articles and the German (user) reception with the Japanese one.

Employing a grounded theory approach (Strübing, 2014), we first proceeded with the manual open coding of the corpus using the “code in-vivo” function of MAXQDA. The resulting codes taken

directly from the text were continuously compared, subsumed into more abstract codes, and grouped into categories according to thematic proximity (axial coding). To allow for an easy comparison of the Japanese and German data, we decided on a system of low-level granularity codes below the categories, and sub-codes for higher granularity. Coding itself was carried out by two researchers independent of each other, who later compared and discussed the results and adapted the coding scheme based on mutual consent. In our analysis, we first compare the German user reception of *ToCS* and *Persona 5* with the discourse in the professional media articles. After that, we compare the German with the Japanese (user) reception.

Our dataset does not include a statistically representative sample of Japanese user reviews, nor does the qualitative approach taken in this study lend itself to a quantitative interpretation. The results presented below, such as the frequency of codes, should therefore not be understood as statistically significant or representative. Instead they are used to structure and visualize our qualitative findings.

RESULTS

Codes and Categories

The first result of the analysis is the various codes. On a broad level, it was possible to categorize all statements in the corpus, that relate to one of the games, into the following nine categories:

Audio-Visual includes all comments that were made concerning the visual look of the game or its sound design, especially its soundtrack. Not included are observations concerning voice acting, which were, depending on their context, sorted into *localization* or the *characters* sub-code in the *Story/Scenario* category.

Rules/Mechanics includes all comments, made regarding the game mechanics or rules. This includes what most German users refer to as “gameplay” and Japanese users as “systems” (*shitemu*).

Story/Scenario delineates all comments made about the game setting or story. This includes comments made about the characters in the game.

External relates to all comments that refer to the larger contextual frame or ecosystem in which the game exists. Comments that are not targeted at a game’s content or rules, but instead focus on its broader reception or surrounding commercial structure are sorted into this category.

Comparison refers to statements in which the games are compared with other games, either direct predecessor(s) or completely different titles.

Japaneseness includes all statements that are made in relation to the Japanese nature of a game.

Detailedness/Craftsmanship refers to comments made about the “attention to detail” put into a game or the idea of games as the product of “craftsmanship”. This refers to what Zagal and Tomuro (2013, 5) refer to as “polish”.

Preview delineates comments in which expectations towards the games are voiced prior to release.

Positive and *Negative* are used as markers to signify the context in which other categories are used. Thus, they were devised to overlap with other codes, creating an easy way to identify in which context passages coded with other codes were used.

As we employed a bottom-up approach to coding, the categories we arrived at were directly derived from the textual expressions evident in our corpus. Higher granularity codes (themselves the result of subsuming codes closer to the text) are generally more

suitable units of analysis. The superordinate categories mentioned above are constructs to more easily visualize and structure our findings. The *Rules/Mechanics* category, for example, consists of codes such as *Gameplay/System (General)*, *Social Simulation*, *Difficulty*, *Time/Pacing*, *Minigames*, *Dungeons/Level Design*, *Combat System* or *Controls*. Sub-codes for *Minigames* would be statements like “Fishing was fun” or “the batting game was too hard”.

German Gaming Media and User Reviews

MAXQDA offers the ability to visualize how often codes overlap. By using the codes *Positive* and *Negative* as markers for the context in which other codes were used, it is possible to create an intuitive visualization of how the evaluation of the games differs across the groups under investigation (see Figure 1 and 2). The biggest difference between the content of the professional media articles and the user-generated content lies in the greater frequency of text coded as *Negative*. User reviews and comments tend to display a greater variety in their evaluation of both *Persona 5* and *ToCS*.

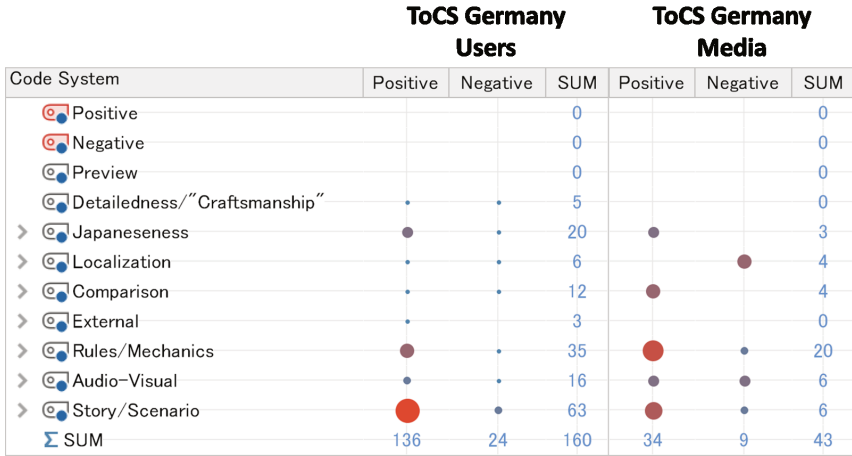


Figure 1: Comparison between the MAXQDA code-relation matrixes of German media and user reception of ToCS using the Positive/Negative codes as demarcations for context. The size of the dots is calculated based on the relative frequency of code pairings inside a column.

Examining the differences for *ToCS*, it first becomes apparent that the localization of the games is perceived as predominantly negative in the user reviews and comments. While the professional reviews criticize the lack of a German localization, they still emphasize the “outstanding” localization by the games’ American publisher, XSEED Games. In contrast, such praise was not evident in the analyzed texts generated by users. Instead, they focused solely on the lack of a German localization, with many comments, written in relation to professional articles, arguing that the lack of a German translation for text-heavy games like *ToCS* is one of the main reasons preventing them from buying the games. Aside from the localization, negative statements against *ToCS* were also seen in relation to its visual presentation, with some users criticizing the “anime look” and its perceived technological inadequacies in comparison to newer titles.

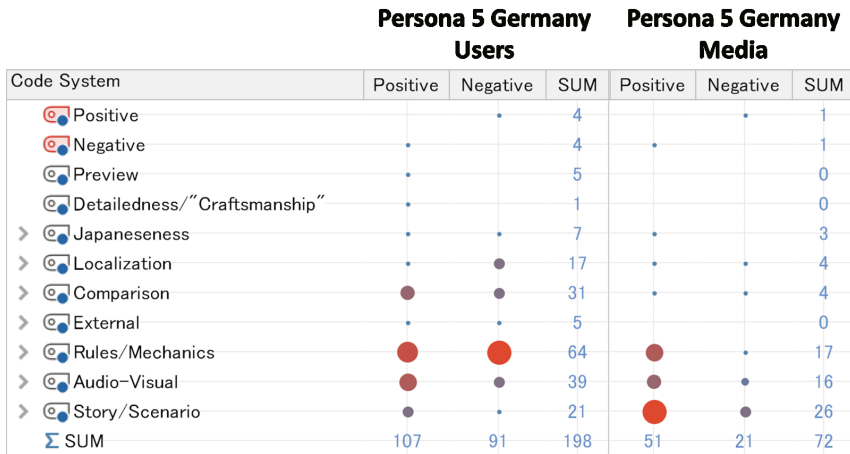


Figure 2: Comparison between the German media and user reception of *Persona 5*.

A more pronounced difference between professional and user reception can be seen for *Persona 5*. German user statements appear to be more often critical of the game than the German gaming media. The biggest point of contention in the professionally written articles and reviews related to the game's characters and their interactions, which were perceived as not leaving enough room to depict "normal" adolescent conversations, being instead predominantly focused on their role as "phantom thieves". In contrast, belonging to the *Rules/Mechanics* category, German players' criticism first and foremost deals with the game's long duration (more than 100 hours for a playthrough) and subsequent perceived lulls in the story midway. The long duration was seen to be hard to integrate into the limited amount of free time available to the users. In relation to this, much criticism was aimed at the restrictive design for saving the game state. *Persona 5* employs a system of "safe rooms" in its dungeons, similar to save points in other games. Many players expressed dissatisfaction with the distance between these safe rooms, and their inability to save between them, which was seen as incompatible with players' lifestyles. With *ToCS*, some users also expressed disapproval of

the game's "anime style", a complaint that cannot be found in the professional media articles.

In both cases, for *ToCS* as well as for *Persona 5*, the discussion of the games in the professional media and in user reviews and comments focused on the same topics and evaluated the game largely in the same way. While user statements tended to cover a wider variety of opinions than were present in the professional gaming media, especially in regard to negative views of the game, the similarities are nevertheless more pronounced than the differences. In particular, user reviews on Amazon were shown to be thematically close to professional gaming media reviews, with similar standards of evaluation. While stylistic differences exist, user reviews cover most of what is written in professional reviews, while providing a platform for opinions deviating from the mainstream. In the sections below, when examining the differences between the German and Japanese reception, we therefore refer simply to the "German reception", and only differentiate between user and professional content when it is necessary for the analysis.

Japan and Germany

Comparing the frequency of codes in the different document groups provides a first impression of the differences evident in the reception of the games in different cultural contexts. One of the most obvious differences can be found in the general evaluation of the games. While the respective frequency of the *Negative* and *Positive* codes is not necessarily an indicator of a game's overall evaluation, the codes still provide a rough estimate of how much space in (user) reviews or comments is allocated to the discussion of perceived negative or positive points of a game.

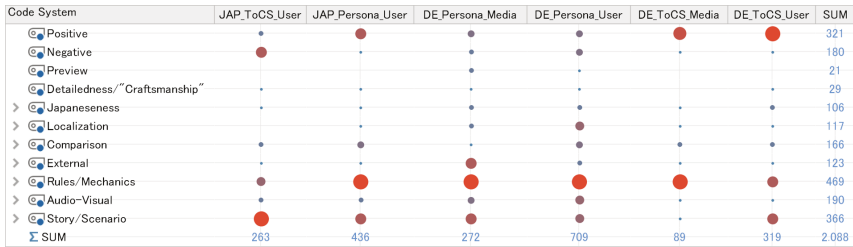


Figure 3: MAXQDA code matrix showing the frequency of codes for all document groups. The size of a dot signifies the relative frequency within a document group.

As Figure 3 shows, the only document group in which more text segments were coded *Negative* than *Positive* is the group consisting of Japanese Amazon user reviews of *ToCS I* and *II*. Generally, this is consistent with the overall rating for the games (see Table 1), as aggregated Japanese user reviews show a worse score than the German ones. It can also be noted that German user reviews and professional media articles on *Persona 5* include more text parts coded as *Negative* than the Japanese counterpart. Another fundamental difference between the Japanese and German reception can be seen in the high frequency of the *localization* code in the German sources, especially in the user-generated texts about *Persona 5*. 84 out of 709 coded text segments in this document group were written in relation to the game's localization.

Aside from the *Positive/Negative* demarcation, the category with the greatest frequency in all document groups, except for the Japanese user reviews on *ToCS*, is the *Rules/Mechanics* category, indicating the large amount of space allocated to the discussion of gameplay and mechanics. The *Audio-Visual* category appears with greater frequency in the German sources for *Persona 5*. In contrast, the *Story/Scenario* category appears very prominently in the Japanese user reviews on *ToCS*, but comparatively less frequently in the other document groups, especially the German media articles on *ToCS*.

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Code System	JAP_ToCS_User	JAP_Persona_User	DE_Persona_Media	DE_Persona_User	DE_ToCS_Media	DE_ToCS_User	SUM
Positive	•	•	•	•	•	•	321
Negative	•	•	•	•	•	•	180
Preview	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Detailedness/"Craftsmanship"	•	•	•	•	•	•	29
Japaneseess	•	•	•	•	•	•	24
Oldschool	•	•	•	•	•	•	11
Anime	•	•	•	•	•	•	3
Belongs to JRPG	•	•	•	•	•	•	39
For (J)RPG Fans	•	•	•	•	•	•	20
Reception in Japan	•	•	•	•	•	•	5
Interest in Japanese Games	•	•	•	•	•	•	4
Localization	•	•	•	•	•	•	103
Synchronization	•	•	•	•	•	•	14
Comparison	•	•	•	•	•	•	0
Predecessor	•	•	•	•	•	•	108
Others	•	•	•	•	•	•	41
Persona-Trails	•	•	•	•	•	•	17
External	•	•	•	•	•	•	0
Critical Acclaim	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Franchise Entry	•	•	•	•	•	•	21
Branding	•	•	•	•	•	•	13
Back-to-Games	•	•	•	•	•	•	6
Platform	•	•	•	•	•	•	23
DLC	•	•	•	•	•	•	14
Real Life	•	•	•	•	•	•	2
Commercial Success	•	•	•	•	•	•	8
Developer	•	•	•	•	•	•	15
Rules/Mechanics	•	•	•	•	•	•	0
Gameplay/System (General)	•	•	•	•	•	•	87
Social Simulation	•	•	•	•	•	•	42
Immersion/Accessibility	•	•	•	•	•	•	17
Trophies	•	•	•	•	•	•	3
Controls	•	•	•	•	•	•	12
Fun	•	•	•	•	•	•	15
Quality of Life	•	•	•	•	•	•	11
Difficulty	•	•	•	•	•	•	12
Balancing	•	•	•	•	•	•	4
Time/Pacing	•	•	•	•	•	•	108
Minigame	•	•	•	•	•	•	1
Dungeons/Level Design	•	•	•	•	•	•	38
Visual Novel	•	•	•	•	•	•	1
Combat System	•	•	•	•	•	•	93
Openness/Freedom	•	•	•	•	•	•	23
Quests	•	•	•	•	•	•	2
Audio-Visual	•	•	•	•	•	•	0
Animated Sequences	•	•	•	•	•	•	3
Soundtrack	•	•	•	•	•	•	58
(Art)Design	•	•	•	•	•	•	89
Sensory Overload	•	•	•	•	•	•	4
UI	•	•	•	•	•	•	12
Graphic/Technology	•	•	•	•	•	•	24
Story/Scenario	•	•	•	•	•	•	150
Gender	•	•	•	•	•	•	6
Originality	•	•	•	•	•	•	9
Setting/Topics	•	•	•	•	•	•	81
Characters	•	•	•	•	•	•	111
Protagonist	•	•	•	•	•	•	9
Σ SUM	263	436	272	709	89	319	2.088

Figure 4: MAXQDA code matrix with frequent categories shown.

Taking a closer look with a higher level of granularity (see Figure 4) allows for a more differentiated analysis. The relative prominence of the *External* category in the German media reception of *Persona 5* is largely due to the many references made to the critical acclaim of the title by the gaming press, including articles about The Game Awards 2017. The *Rules/Mechanics*

category, when regarded in detail, shows interesting results as to the thematic range of topics discussed in user reviews and media articles. In general, Japanese user reviews tend to be more detailed in their evaluation of a game's mechanics, discussing topics such as balancing the effect of different difficulty levels on a player's experience, minigames included in a game, and its controls. For example, eleven Japanese user reviews commented positively on the button mapping employed in *Persona 5* during combat, praising it as intuitive and elegant, something that is completely absent in the German reception of the game.

Looking at the *Story/Scenario* category, further differences between the Japanese and German reception become apparent. First, conforming to the code of *Gender*, the lack of an option to choose a female protagonist was discussed by German users and the media. This discussion was absent in the Japanese user reviews. The code *Setting/Topics* code refers to statements pertaining to either the setting in which a game's narrative is placed, or the broader topics discussed in it. Especially among German users of *Persona 5*, a great overlap was seen between these two nominally different categories, as they discussed the setting of the game (Tokyo), and tied it together with a discussion of how serious topics presented in the game, such as sexual harassment, are related to the Japanese setting; thereby providing a look at how Japanese society is perceived by German players and gaming media.

A last point of difference that can be gleaned from this matrix is the great frequency with which the coding *Time/Pacing* appears in the German (user) reception of *Persona 5*. Again, these two nominally different categories (duration of playthrough and pacing of content and story) are de-facto used conjointly by many players. As stated above, the great length of the game was mentioned very frequently, often together with a discussion of which parts of the game feel too protracted. Several German users have referred to problems with the pacing in the mid-to-late game. While they do not elaborate on their understanding of pacing, it seems to

generally describe a feeling of repetitiveness in gameplay and lulls in the story. While *Persona 5*'s long duration was also noted in Japan, criticism was exceedingly rare.

Code System	ToCS Japan			ToCS Germany		
	Positive	Negative	SUM	Positive	Negative	SUM
Positive		•	2			0
Negative	•		2			0
Preview			0			0
Detailedness/"Craftsmanship"		•	1	•	•	5
Japaneseness		•	1	•	•	23
Localization			0	•	•	10
Comparison	•	•	23	•	•	16
External		•	6	•		3
Rules/Mechanics	•	•	39	•	•	55
Audio-Visual	•		18	•	•	22
Story/Scenario		•	75	•	•	69
Σ SUM	40	127	167	170	33	203

Figure 5: Comparison between the MAXQDA code-relation matrixes of the Japanese and German ToCS reception using the Positive/Negative codes as demarcations for context.

There are also pronounced differences in how Japanese and German users evaluate the games (see Figure 5). In the German reception of *ToCS*, the *Story/Scenario* category is predominantly used in a positive context, while it is decidedly negative in the Japanese user reviews. Another difference that becomes apparent is the mostly positive context of the *Rules/Mechanics* category.

Japanese users frequently criticize the story of *ToCS* as being repetitive and stereotypical, with characters that lack depth and appear to be unnecessary to the story. The game was often compared unfavorably to its predecessors in the *Legend of Heroes* series, especially in regard to the perceived drop in quality of character dialogue. Furthermore, great criticism was levelled at the dissonance perceived between the settings of both games (military academy and civil war) and the plot, which, according to the Japanese users, fails to convey the severity and hardships of war, being too naïve in its presentation. Lastly, the ending of both games was seen to be unsatisfactory and an unnecessary

cliffhanger. In stark contrast, the game's story was almost universally praised by the German gaming media and users alike. The plot was seen as interesting, the characters as well developed, and the setting intriguing. One user compared the game's story to the popular drama, *Game of Thrones*, in its complexity; a polar opposite to the reception by Japanese users.

In the *Rules/Mechanics* category, several other differences can be recognized. First, the code that appears most frequently in both the German and Japanese reception is *Combat System*. Japanese user reviews paint an ambiguous picture of it. While it is generally seen as possessing tactical depth and being one of the stronger points of the game, there were also diverging voices regarding its difficulty, balancing, tempo and the ability to customize the characters' abilities. The sequences of "mech-combat", in which the player controls a giant robot-like being instead of the usual characters, were mostly criticized, with users voicing their dissatisfaction at the similarities to the normal combat-system and criticizing its place in the story. In the German sources, the turn-based combat system of *ToCS* is universally praised. It is perceived to provide tactical depth while maintaining its dynamic. The sequences of mech-combat were seen as a "nice change of pace", while the social-link system in the game is attributed with providing "an easier linkage between social elements and the combat system than *Persona*".

The games' elements of social simulation are also viewed differently, being positively perceived in Germany and more critically perceived in Japan. Japanese users criticized the restrictiveness of having to spend "bonding points" to view social events with non-player characters, making it impossible to view all character events in a single playthrough. The character events were also seen as not having any influence on the greater story, just being a "bonus" without any real relevance, especially as decisions made in *ToCS I* were seen to be insufficiently reflected in *ToCS II*. Again, the German reception here was more benign, with the social elements of the game being favorably compared to the

Persona series. Several users also praised the “interesting” stories that can be glimpsed by spending “bonding points”, indicating a desire to become more familiar with the games’ characters

While Japanese users generally perceived *ToCS I and II* as inferior to their predecessors in the *Trails of* series, especially in regard to story and characters, German users and media alike painted them in a more positive light, acknowledging the “grand scope” of the narrative and the advances in technology, design and combat mechanics when compared to prior titles. German users also attested to the game having an “attention to details, lacking in most modern RPGs”, referring to it as being a successor to the “good old age of great Japanese RPGs”.

The differences in the German and Japanese reception of *Persona 5* are far less pronounced (see Figure 6). One observation lies in the comparatively higher frequency of text passages coded as *Negative* in the German source material. This is most clearly recognizable in the *Rules/Mechanics* category, which coincided 44 times with a *Negative* code, and 37 times with *Positive*. A closer look shows that a substantial amount (19) of the intersections between *Rules/Mechanics* and *Negative* are concentrated on a single topic, *Time/Pacing*, which was discussed above.

Code System	Persona 5 Japan			Persona 5 Germany		
	Positive	Negative	SUM	Positive	Negative	SUM
Positive			0			5
Negative			0			5
Preview			0			5
Detailedness/"Craftsmanship"			13			1
Japaneseness			8			10
Localization			0			21
Comparison			27			35
External			16			5
Rules/Mechanics			121			81
Audio-Visual			40			55
Story/Scenario			76			47
Σ SUM	262	39	301	158	112	270

Figure 6: Comparison between the MAXQDA code-relation matrixes of the Japanese and German *Persona 5* reception by using the Positive/Negative codes as demarcations for context.

Aside from the *Rules/Mechanics* category, there are more similarities than differences in the evaluation of *Persona 5*. Comparatively, the *Audio-Visual* category appears to be discussed more prominently in Germany. While the visual depiction in Figure 4 somewhat misleadingly depicts the *Audio-Visual* category as only slightly larger than *Comparison*, this is because of the strong influence of the *Rules/Mechanics* category in the column. Still, more passages in the dataset can be attributed to the *Story/Scenario* category than to *Audio-Visual*, while the German reception shows the opposite trend. Generally, *Audio-Visual*, in a positive context, denotes the unique visual design of *Persona 5*, perceived as ground-breaking in Japan and Germany alike, the quality of its graphical user interface, especially during combat, as well as its universally praised soundtrack. Generally, while the visual design of *Persona 5* was praised in both countries, it was more broadly discussed in the German sources, and praised in a more outspoken way, as the “best visual design ever”. Criticism touches on the technological presentation of the game, with its textures being perceived as “last-gen” and not “up-to-date” by several German and Japanese users. In addition, some German

players were uncomfortable with the “anime-style” graphics, preferring a more photo-realistic style.

The lack of a German *localization* was another point of frequent criticism by German users, especially in light of the commercial success of *Persona 5*, which, in the eyes of the users, delegitimized ATLUS’ decision to not include support for other languages. While dissatisfaction with the English-only localization was voiced in German Amazon user reviews and media articles alike, it was especially common in the comment section of the media articles, with several users stating that they would not buy the game without at least a German translation of the text. The quality of the English localization was also questioned.

Lexical Differences

The analysis of the Japanese and German sources also brought up the question of lexical-semantic differences between German and Japanese users. German and Japanese are vastly different languages. However, when talking about their play experience, Japanese and German users alike often use English terms. For example, some of the most frequent words used in the German texts are “story” and “gameplay” (see Table 4). While “story” (*sutōrī*) also appears in Japanese user reviews, the word “scenario” (*shinario*) is often used instead. The word *gameplay*, while existing in Japanese as *gēmupurei*, is only used once in Japanese. In contexts where German users refer to “gameplay”, Japanese players use the term “system” (*shisutemu*) instead. In contrast, “System” is used in German exclusively in the combination “combat system”. In the Japanese user reviews of *ToCS*, the word “story” is more often used than “scenario”, while the opposite is true for Japanese user reviews of *Persona 5*.

Word	Frequency	ToCS_GER	Persona_GER	ToCS_JAP	Persona_JAP
Story	483	393	81	4	5
System	411	370	41	0	0
Geschichte	212	155	57	0	0
Gameplay	81	61	20	0	0
<i>sutōrī</i>	64	0	0	36	28
<i>shistemu</i>	52	0	0	17	35
Handlung	49	35	14	0	0
<i>shinario</i>	45	0	0	10	35
<i>monogatari</i>	43	0	0	17	26
plot	10	8	2	0	0
Szenario	2	2	0	0	0
<i>gēmupurei</i>	1	0	0	1	0

Table 4: Frequency of selected central terms to describe user impression of the games. Japanese terms are written in cursive.

Do such semantic differences matter? Are there reasons why Japanese users seem to prefer using either the word “scenario” or “story”, depending on the game they are discussing? Why is the concept of “gameplay” so prevalent in German (and English) user reviews, but largely absent in the Japanese ones? While it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive answer as to how language can be an indicator of differences in the way we think about games, this might provide a fruitful avenue for further academic attention. Answering these questions satisfactorily would require a greater (random sample) dataset to rule out the possibility of selection bias and establish whether subtle differences such as the use of “story” or “scenario” are statistically significant.

The comparatively higher frequency of the word “story” in the ToCS reviews can possibly be attributed to Nihon Falcom’s practice of framing the titles as “story RPGs” in Japanese

marketing campaigns. The more frequent use of “scenario” for *Persona 5*, might also be linked to the broader discourse in the game. *Persona 5* was frequently praised for its “polished” state, emphasizing the skill of its developers. The use of “scenario” with its stronger connotation of artificialness, i.e. of it being created by a writer (a “scenario writer”, or *shinario raita*, is a common job description in the Japanese games industry), further emphasizes this link to the game’s developers.

Based on our dataset, the differences between the German “gameplay” and the Japanese “system” are hard to pin down. The more common use of “system” is possibly related to the, on average, greater analytical depth of Japanese reviews. For example, German players tend to praise the “great gameplay” of a game, without going into any more detail on which ludic aspect they are commenting on. Such comments are rare in the Japanese reviews, where “system” is mostly used in connection with a specific ludic element of the game, e.g. dungeon crawling or the combat system. By using the word *gameplay*, German players explicitly refer to the interaction between player and game (i.e. play), while the use of “system” does not necessarily carry such connotations.

DISCUSSION

How can we summarize the differences between the Japanese and German perception of *ToCS* and *Persona 5*? First, the comparatively huge gap between the Japanese and German reception of *ToCS* can, at least partially, be explained by structural factors among reviewers. *ToCS* still remains a niche series in Germany, indicated by lower media attention and less user reviews in total. Reviews on Amazon are thus more likely to be written by fans of the series, something that can also be seen in the many comparisons to the games’ predecessors. Players of *ToCS* also frequently refer to other (often considerably older) JRPGs, indicating their identity as fans of the genre. However, looking at

the Japanese user reviews, this also seems to be the case in Japan. Based on their findings, and referencing Nagai's (2005) assertion of the high value that Japanese players place on a game's story and character development, Zagal and Tomuro (2013, 5) argue that, "[since] Japanese players place more emphasis on story, their overall appreciation of a game is strongly dependent on the quality of its narrative." While this coincides with our findings for *ToCS*, and might be a possible contributor to the comparatively negative reception of its gameplay elements, it does not explain why the evaluations of *ToCS*'s story by German and Japanese users are completely opposite to each other (see table 5).

Code	Japan	Germany
Story	Repetitive, stereotypical, naively presented	Interesting, intriguing, of grand scope
Characters	Lacking depth, unnecessary to the story	Well developed
Combat system	Difficulty, problems with balancing and tempo	Tactically deep and dynamic
Compared to predecessors	Inferior story and characters	Improved technology, design and combat

Table 5: Summary of some selected codes and the context in which they are used in the German and Japanese user reviews on ToCS.

The overwhelmingly positive reviews *ToCS I* received on Steam, are indicative of a broad consensus among "Western" players on how to evaluate the game. Some of the negative points discussed in Japanese user reviews could have been mitigated by the often-praised localization of the games. For example, repetitive and unnatural dialogue, criticized by Japanese players, could have been improved by localization efforts. Also, the Steam version of the game boasts several gameplay improvements, such as the inclusion of an option to speed up the combat system. Still, this cannot fully account for the differences in perception of, for example, the setting or the character cast of the games.

Looking at the broader ecosphere of JRPGs in Germany and Japan leads to another possible explanation for the excellent reviews

ToCS received in Germany. While Japanese users enjoy access to a more varied selection of JRPGs, the genre, apart from some successful intellectual properties, often occupies a niche in Western markets. Comparatively few JRPGs are localized for a release in Germany, with most of them only receiving an English translation. By giving *ToCS* good reviews, German players possibly want to contribute towards raising the chances of other JRPGs being localized. This is consistent with several user comments, expressing fear that future parts of the *ToCS* series would not be published in the West if sales were bad.

On the other hand, Japanese players are able to choose between a greater variety of (competing) games in the genre. As such, their frame of reference is vastly different from that of the average German player. Elements that might be criticized as being stereotypical or lacking novelty by Japanese players could therefore still feel fresh to German players. A greater availability of JRPGs in Japan is, however, only one part of a vastly different media environment in both countries. JRPGs and other Japanese games are deeply integrated into the Japanese media mix (Steinberg, 2012). Characters are a central element of this media mix and often intentionally created to fit into existing molds and adhere to certain stereotypes, in order to satisfy the expectations of Japanese hard-core fans (cf. Azuma, 2009). *ToCS*, being primarily produced with the domestic Japanese market in mind, as evident in the long delay between the Japanese and Western release of the games, freely borrows from common tropes in Japanese pop culture, such as the main character being a “siscon” (i.e. unusually strongly attached to his sister) or the inclusion of giant humanoid shaped robots (“mecha”). While such tropes possibly appeal to Japanese hard-core fans, the prime target of related merchandise in the media mix surrounding *ToCS*, and therefore an important economic factor, are also more likely to be criticized by the broader Japanese player base, and could possibly contribute to the role of the games as niche titles in Germany.

In contrast to *ToCS*, *Persona 5* has been received mostly positively in both countries. According to several user reviews, the game has been a (re)entry point into JRPGs, or video games as such, for German and Japanese players. The broad range of opinions evident among German user reviews can be seen as an indication of the *Persona* series leaving the “JRPG niche” and attracting a broader range of players. Differences in the (user) reception of *Persona 5* were mostly apparent in regard to the game’s length. Interestingly, in the case of *Persona 5*, German user reviews tended to be more negative than Japanese ones. This could in turn be another indication of cultural differences in the evaluation of games, as the attraction of a more “mainstream” audience for *Persona 5* has brought with it players more critical of JRPGs, and who tend to give the game a lower score. In contrast, the games’ characteristics, like its anime inspired visual design, are more easily appreciated by the Japanese “mainstream”.

Persona 5 and *ToCS* both display “Japaneseness”, albeit in different ways. *Persona 5* does so in a very direct fashion. Players can explore different portions of Tokyo, closely modelled after their real-world counter-parts. They are also provided with (highly stylized) insights into Japanese society, such as school life. It is obvious that this can cause differences in how the game is interpreted by German and Japanese players. Some references might be hard or almost impossible to understand for German players, such as some of the questions the player is asked in-game during class, which are often closely related to Japanese culture. However, the societal problems the game focuses on, like bullying or sexual harassment in schools, are also relatable to a German audience. Furthermore, the “Japaneseness” in *Persona 5*, rather than being a hindrance, appears to be a contributing factor to its success. The Tokyo setting is often praised in the German reviews, with many players feeling that they have learned something about Japan via the game.

In *ToCS*, Japaneseness is not as overtly displayed as in *Persona 5*. The game is set in the fictional “Erebonian Empire”, in a period

reminiscent of early modern Europe. The empire shows some parallels to pre-World War I Germany, being a military powerhouse under the control of the “blood and iron chancellor.” While at first glance this appears to confirm Iwabuchi’s (2002) notion of a culturally “odorless” product, a closer look reveals several layers of “Japaneseness” in the game. As mentioned above, the characters and story are closely related to common tropes in Japanese pop culture. German players strongly identify *ToCS* as “Japanese” based on these elements, as well as the aesthetics and gameplay elements, like the turn-based combat system. Still, while *Persona 5* in some respects poses potentially higher barriers for players unfamiliar with Japan than *ToCS* (e.g. the quizzes during class), it enjoys far greater commercial success and critical acclaim. This confirms Consalvo’s (2016, 178) observation, that “Japaneseness” is mostly deployed as a rhetorical mechanism, enabling game developers to shift the blame for an unsuccessful release on unbridgeable cultural differences.

An unanswered question remains in regard to the differences between Japanese professional and user reviews of *ToCS*. While we did not include Japanese professional reviews in our analysis, the official review of the *Shūkan Famitsu*, the most widely read Japanese games magazine, has repeatedly been criticized by Japanese users as being far too lenient. This might indicate a rift between Japanese users and professional domestic games media, which does not seem to be as pronounced in Germany, where user opinions appear generally closely aligned to the professional discourse.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we set out to analyze the German reception of three JRPGs, chosen because of their differences in terms of player base and critical reception, as well as their similarities in regard to elements of gameplay and setting. Our findings show that the way *Persona 5* and *ToCS* are discussed by German users is mostly

consistent with how they are depicted in the German professional media. However, some topics that were not explicitly discussed in professional articles have received greater attention by players, for example, the long playtime of *Persona 5*. User reviews also tend to depict a greater variety of opinions on a game. This is more pronounced in the reception of *Persona 5*, with its more varied player base, than in *ToCS*. In contrast to general critical acclaim and commercial success, *ToCS* is almost universally praised in German user reviews, while more criticism is apparent in user reviews on *Persona 5*. Although this can partly be attributed to a smaller, more cohesive player base, the difference is nevertheless surprising.

Comparing the German discourse on the games with the way they are perceived in Japan yields a more complex picture. The evaluation of *Persona 5* in both countries shows great similarities with only subtle differences, which were especially apparent in German criticism of the game, and which could not be found in the Japanese user reviews. Japanese user reviews tend to be more systematic in their discussion of games, mentioning topics like button mapping, minigames or balancing, that were not discussed in such detail in the German reviews. Our results also imply that the long play time of *Persona 5*, often criticized in German user reviews, is not perceived as negative in Japan. This suggests different attitudes and expectations towards a game's content and duration.

A fundamental difference exists in the way *ToCS* is evaluated in both countries. German (user) reviews appear overwhelmingly positive, while Japanese users on Amazon are predominantly critical of the games. Several possible explanations for this phenomenon have been briefly discussed but fail to provide a satisfactory and comprehensive answer. However, the current evidence strongly hints at the existence of profound differences in how stories in games are received by players from different cultural backgrounds. Culture provides a frame of reference, in which a game's narrative elements are understood and linked to

each other. The Japanese frame of reference is influenced by the specific Japanese “media mix” (Steinberg, 2012; Schules, 2015). A game’s story is not only seen in comparison to other games, but to a whole ecosphere of content, spanning diverse media like anime or manga. This frame of reference does not fully exist in the West.

Another point raised in this study concerns a more fundamental level of communication: language. We noted several lexical differences in the way German and Japanese players write about games, perhaps the most striking being the difference between the use of “gameplay” in German, and “system” in Japanese. While “gameplay” connotating the interaction between player and game, is a central concept in the German reflection about video games, Japanese players talk about “systems”. There were also some indications of a differentiated use of the terms, “scenario” and “story”, in Japanese.

We consciously employed a qualitative approach in our study, trading a more representative sample size for higher analytical granularity. While this was necessary to provide a close examination of the differences in game perception, such an approach also has its drawbacks. Our examination was limited to the reception of three games, belonging to the same genre. JRPGs are often seen as being particularly expressive of Japanese cultural elements, but they do not represent, by any means, a majority of Japanese games. Examining how player perception of a game is influenced by cultural background requires the analysis of the German and Japanese reception of a broader range of games developed in Japan. Therefore, we plan to continue this research project by including a wider, more representative variety of Japanese games chosen based on comprehensible criteria, such as genre, commercial success, design and gameplay. We will also extend our analysis to include Japanese professional game reviews and articles to allow for a more valid comparison of the Japanese and German reception, and we will conduct player interviews and play tests with German and Japanese players. Employing Ulrike

Rohn's (2009, 2011) model of lacunae and universals to contextualize our results could also prove fruitful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper originated from a collaborative research project by Cygames Research and Keio University, and was financially supported by Cygames, Inc.

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