

Emptiness and Technology – Caring for Each Other in the Japanese Role-Playing Video Game, *Persona 5 Royal*



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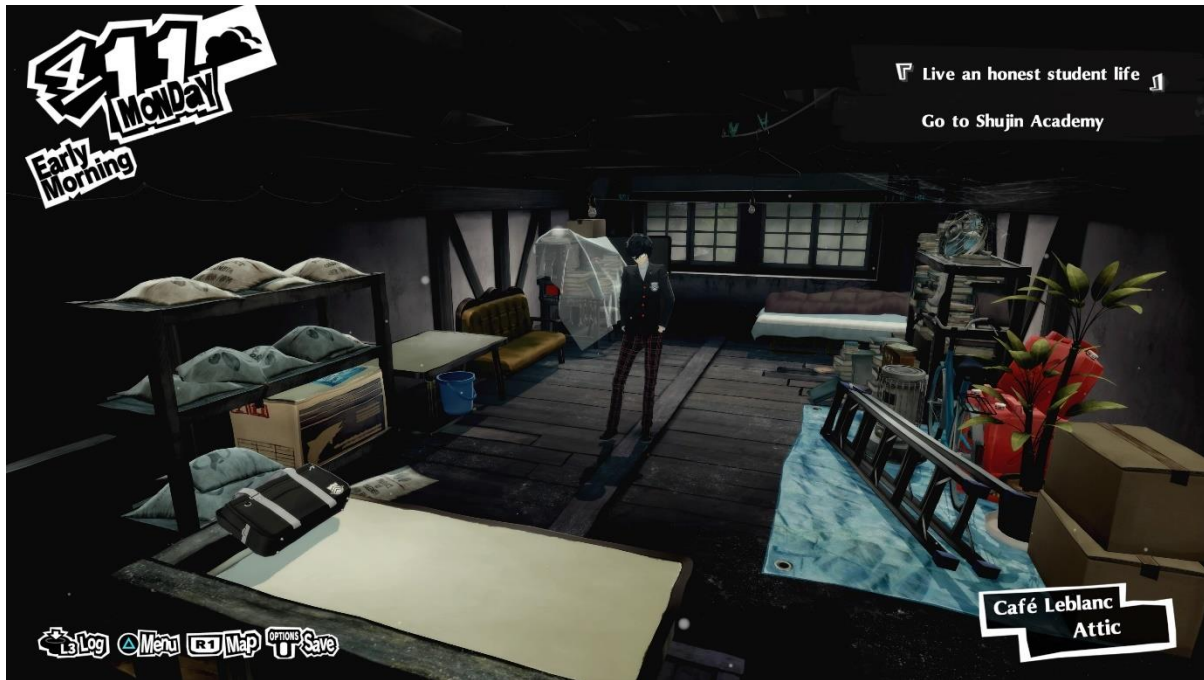


Figure 1: A still image of the player-protagonist standing in (my) room: the attic above Café Leblanc – his home for his year of probation in Tokyo – at the beginning of the Japanese Role-Playing Video Game (JRPG), *Persona 5 Royal* (Atlus 2019).

Rehabilitation and Kare Raisu – Introducing *Persona 5 Royal*

On the day of my awakening, I got dressed for my first day of school in a dusty Tokyo attic. I looked down at the school crest on the black uniform jacket that was handed to me the day before. Shujin High School (秀尽学園高校) – A school of excellence: the irony.

I sat down on the bed and thought about dreams.

Last night, I dreamt of a jail; not unlike the predicament I find myself in, in the present moment. Looking at the unyielding expanse of the attic – the paint peeling off the walls, revealing a grey concrete that goes well with the rest of the room; the splintered wooden beams hanging menacingly above me on the ceiling, crossing over one another like prison bars: a panopticon – I couldn't help but wonder if I am staring back at the unconscious of a juvenile under probation for a crime he didn't commit.

Rehabilitation.

The prisoner in me occupying space in my dreams as well as in real life – that is the irony of Shujin (囚人).¹

Castaway from my hometown, a place of familiarity to the capital city, a place where no one belongs. The principal made it clear yesterday that if I so much as stepped a foot out of line, I would be kicked out. No ‘second’ chances. I got to keep my head down and get through the year.

My drowsy eyes turned their attention to the eyesore of a desk in the top left corner of the room, topped with miscellaneous knick-knacks that obscured a bright red toolbox and covered in a dirty clear tarpaulin. Even after cleaning profusely over the last two days, parts of the room are still caked in a thin layer of dust.

Standing up, I take a deep breath. At first, the dust particles entering my nostrils created an uncontrollable urge to sneeze. Waiting for the urge to subside, my nose picked up on the prevailing smells of the air – the musty old books and decorations that share this space coalescing with a lingering trace of coffee and spices wafting up from the café below – an odd mix of scents compounded by the smell of the copious amounts of cleaning liquid I used to scrub the floors.

From the window, I can hear a faint hum of people in the alleyway outside – murmuring conversations and brisk walking as people take a shortcut to wherever they need to be in the morning. Moving to Tokyo, I expected the place to much louder, so much so that it would be difficult to fall asleep at night. But I was pleasantly surprised. In spite of the izakaya (居酒屋) next door and the evening bathhouse across the street, the evenings are rather bearable. Living in the city may not be so bad after all.



Figure 2: A still image of the player-protagonist eating curry rice for breakfast and expressing his thoughts on the flavours of the dish in Café Leblanc before his first day of school in Tokyo at the beginning of the JRPG, *Persona 5 Royal* (Atlus 2019).

¹ Depending on the tonal phrasing, Shujin could denote exhaustive excellence as in 秀尽 or prisoner as in 囚人. With these two meanings being separated by a slight tonal difference, I cannot help but wonder if the game is implying that being a student is akin to being a prisoner, or if it is an explicit reference to the player-protagonist's status as a delinquent under probation.

It takes me 12 long paces to reach the other side of the room where a wooden staircase leads down to the back of the café. Halfway down the stairs, the hum of people outside is replaced by ambient music and the sound of the television blaring the morning news: the aftermath of a train crash a couple of days prior – the next episode in a series of freak accidents that has been happening throughout the country.

The smell of the coffee and spices becomes more pronounced with each step. Turning the corner, I step into café and looked around. This is Café Leblanc: the pride and joy of my guardian in Tokyo, Sojiro Sakura (佐倉 惣治郎). The warm orange lighting caressing the light oak walls and the vinyl flooring provides a sharp contrast to the dreariness of the attic – the pristine counter-tops and tables without a speck of dust. The coffee is already dripping, and the curry is already bubbling away. Lining the shelves on the left side wall are jars of coffee beans, each labelled carefully – the Jamaican Blue Mountain, Kenyan AA, Brazilian Bourbon, Panama Esmeralda Geisha... and many more coffee beans of varying qualities, shapes, and sizes. On the right are the diner like booths where small groups of people can congregate. These booths are not occupied often because of a lack of foot traffic in the alley way of a residential area – those who come are regulars, usually older folk or the occasional coffee connoisseur looking for a fix.

Standing behind the counter in front of the shelves of coffee beans, Mr. Sakura surveys his domain like a hawk, with a stern countenance, he stands slightly awry as he looks at my uniform. He beckons me over towards a bowl of curry rice (チキンカレー – kare raisu) and asked me to eat it before the customers come in. I stare at the plate with a confused look. Why would he provide breakfast for a delinquent like me? With the trouble I seemed to have caused him when I had to register with the school yesterday, I thought that he would just leave me to fend for myself. And why am I offered curry for breakfast? I have never really heard of anyone eating curry rice for breakfast. Noticing Mr. Sakura's disapproving gaze, I decide to stop this train of thought and quickly sit down to take a small bite of the curry.

The curry is amazing. With each bite, the complex layers of flavour underneath a bold spiciness dance around my tongue. The rice is a vehicle for the fruitiness of the apple, the bitterness of the coffee, and the countless spices that I could not name from taste alone – all making up the poignant richness of the umami sauce. This is truly unlike any curry I have eaten before. Before I knew it, the plate is empty, and my stomach is full. As a lonely kid hung out to dry by my family and friends back home after my false assault conviction, the warmth of the curry makes me feel ready to face my new environment head on. I cleaned my plate and said thank you to Mr. Sakura before heading out towards the train station. After all, who knows how long the journey will take, and I don't want to be late for my first day of school.

Emptiness

Going into my fieldwork in June 2021 on emptiness within the Japanese Role-Playing Video Game (Known henceforth as JRPG), *Persona 5 Royal* (Known henceforth as *P5R*), the moment when Sojiro Sakura provides curry rice to the player-protagonist for breakfast was impactful as it gives the player-protagonist a temporary

reprieve from the displacement we experienced to that point in the virtual world (Atlus 2019). Mediated by the curry rice, what may seem like an insignificant act of care shown by the player-protagonist's guardian allows the player-protagonist to form relation in the new environment that we find ourselves in. Perhaps it is my focus on emptiness that makes me attentive to the acts of care – both by the player-protagonist and others within the game – that signals potential futures in their presence and absence within the virtual world. Care provides the player-protagonist with the platform to imagine a world beyond the emptiness of relation that we found ourselves in at the beginning of the game/fieldwork.

Emptiness can be experienced in its multiple iterations within *P5R*. When listening in on people's conversations and/or talking to people in *P5R*'s Tokyo, I got the sense that the pursuit of popular consumption trends has eclipsed larger aspirations as a main driving factor for people's lives. On the flip side, the player-protagonist and our friends go against the status quo in favour of pursuing a justice that drove our actions. Juxtaposed with each other, one can see how an overwhelming emptiness drives people's experiences within *P5R*'s virtual world - whether it is the emptiness of the general public as they are manipulated by entities jostling over control of Japan (and the world) or the (my) circumstantial emptiness of the player-protagonist and our friends' lives who constitute as those in the 'margins'. I think that the experiences of emptiness of the two groups can be understood through exploring care as relation.

Contemporary interest in emptiness within western academia derives from conversations with Buddhist thought in philosophy and the social sciences, and a connection between experiences of emptiness and modernity (Appadurai 1986; Elvin 1986; Franklin 2012; Lin 2014; Van Gordon et al. 2017; Dzenovska and Knight 2020; Van Gordon et al. 2021). In anthropology, the focus is more on the latter than the former. Whether it is Augé's (1995) proposition that super-modernist locales such as airports or hotels should be considered as 'non-places' because they do not hold significant meaning or Miller's (1995; 2012) and other anthropologists work on commodity and material culture, a conception of emptiness or lack thereof has been ever-present in enquiries about modernity.

The study of modernity has shifted how anthropologists view emptiness as an analytic. In an Aristotelian manner, emptiness in western academia has traditionally presumed that nature has inherent *horror vacui* – fear of emptiness – and therefore, resists the formation of vacuums – the void (Mortelmans 2005). Anthropology has applied *horror vacui* to the human desire to decorate and fill a void (Mortelmans 2005). In this sense, anthropology presumes that 'emptiness' is empty a priori by implying that emptiness is only a subject of interest when filled. As a direct critique to this perspective, Dzenovska and Knight (2020) points out that we must dismiss the language of emptiness and show that nothing is truly empty. In Dzenovska's (2018; 2020) fieldwork in the Latvian countryside, she describes how although people utilise language of emptiness and observe emptiness in the landscape, this is indicative of larger dynamics in a post-socialist transition towards global capitalism. This transition has left behind people and places which contributes to emptiness as a lived experience (Dzenovska 2018; Dzenovska 2020)

Key to anthropological concerns about emptiness is its transitory qualities. This is something that Augé (1995) touches upon when he posits the ephemeral nature of non-places. It is the transitory experience of post-socialist places and other places left behind by the global capitalist order that makes them salient locales to explore experiences of emptiness (Dzenovska 2018; Dzenovska 2020; Gille 2020; Hromadžić 2020; Knight 2020). Attentiveness regarding transition requires the recognition of that emptiness can function as a space between “the old world that is ending and the new world that is not yet visible or intelligible” (Dzenovska and Knight 2020). In this sense, emptiness as a “spatiotemporal coordinate” is realised through understanding the violence in the past that precedes the transitional state and the potentially radical futures that the analytic conveys (Dzenovska and Knight 2020; Manley 2020; Mathur 2020, Lynteris 2020).

Finding care in *P5R*

P5R was released in Japan in 2019 and worldwide in 2020 for the PlayStation 4 as the definitive edition of *Persona 5*, that was released in 2016. In the aftermath of the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami that shook up Japan, *P5R* was designed with the social situation of post-crisis Japan in mind (PlayStation.Blog 2016; Bailey 2017). The game’s world follows a high school protagonist that transfers from his hometown to Tokyo because he is on probation a false assault conviction. After being thrown into the distorted realm where each antagonist’s desires manifest in manners that displays their criminal or morally depraved activities. The protagonist’s friends, who banded together to form ‘The Phantom Thieves’, unlock their ‘Personas’ – based around fictional, mythological, or historical figures, through accepting their own sense of justice. The ‘Personas’ are then used to combat monsters called ‘Shadows’ in the distorted realm accessed through a smartphone app. The Phantom Thieves go into the distorted realm – the metaverse – to change the antagonists’ hearts and make them confess of their crimes.

As Dzenovska and Knight (2020) notes, what is empty is never truly empty – it is just full of things that are “less than ideal”. The experiences of emptiness that I felt as the player-protagonist may be due to a lack social relation due to displacement and marginalisation – but the quality of displacement and marginalisation is in itself signifying the presence of a force – the uncontrollable trend of neoliberal progress. In her work, Turkle (2011) notes that this existential emptiness that we feel in modern society is due to us replacing what is means to human with technology – whether it is robots in care homes, or sex robots – what is it means to care for one another.

I understand the irony of taking a video game seriously as a social world when the technologies it relies on is very much a part of the marketisation and technologization of intimacy that Turkle (2011; 2020) describes. The social relations that we experience in the game call upon the empathy of the player (as a self) to interact with the people in the virtual world in a caring manner. Whether it is laughter (See: Figure 3), or sadness, these emotive responses that we feel, as players, from the people in the virtual world – in some ways, simulations created by computer graphics and wider narratives – are not real in the sense that it does not come directly from a human. Even in virtual worlds where the people interacting with ‘real’ persons, there

still exists a distinction between the ‘real’ and virtual. Turkle (2011) and Boellstorff (2008) both talk about *Second Life*, a large online virtual world where people hang out and create communities through their avatars. In Turkle’s (2011), she brings up the example of a person having a second relationship (marriage) in *Second Life* that is separate from his real wife and family. This ability to have multiple personas online is also why many people consider the virtual to be separate from the real with the virtual being an ‘escape’ from reality.



Figure 3: A still image of the player-protagonist hanging out and joking around with his friend, Kasumi Yoshizawa (芳澤 かすみ) - one of the many examples of social relations in the Japanese Role-Playing Video Game, *Persona 5 Royal* (Atlus 2019).

But as Turkle (2011) notes, these demarcations between the real and the virtual are not so pronounced – our constant connections with our devices such as smart phones means that the virtual is very real. Our intertwining with our technologies can be seen saliently in *P5R* as smart phones are a key part of our interactions with our friends and others. It is not uncommon for us to receive messages during class; we check our phones underneath the desk to see ‘The Phantom Thieves’ group chat inundated with messages as we are planning a heist or talking about wider events that are happening in life and the school. Social media also forms an important part of the decisions that our group makes when deciding who to target – one of the constants on the loading screen is a bar that shows the public opinion of the Phantom Thieves which fluctuates depending on our actions and associated ramifications.

In the game’s world, we also see the dangers of an overreliance on technology. As we generally followed the social media in targeting people for heists after a couple of successful heists earlier in our time as the Phantom Thieves, we were open to the manipulation of outside powers who were controlling the public discourse on our group. This almost leads to our downfall when these powers engineered a social media for us to target the CEO of Okumura Foods, Kunikazu Okumura, and blamed his subsequent death on us. If we do not disconnect from the technologies that we rely on so much, we may forget what it means to

care for one another. It is easy to be caught up in our own bubble (as the Phantom Thieves did) on social media and not be cognizant of a bigger picture.

So why am I searching for care in a 'virtual' world if I am well aware of the consequences of an overreliance of technology as a medium of communication and social relation. I think that taking the 'virtual' world as 'real' in itself is a moral imperative. We already do the opposite when we take the place the virtual and the real in inseparable relation as is the case when we talk about a reliance on technology in our daily lives. This where the self comes in – what does it mean to be in a world? A virtual world like that of *P5R* allows us to understand the ambiguity of the self: how we form value frameworks and understandings of freedom (Beauvoir 1962).

Perhaps we can consider the self in this context as an abjected self – one that is not accepted in what we consider as normal – real – full (Kristeva 1982). Along this vein, caring for the abjected self, in the context of the world of video games, becomes a way for us to understand what it means to be empty. Placing ourselves in the transitory position of emptiness – where beginnings and ends are open and not meant to be articulated – allows us to understand what it means to care for one another (and indeed ourselves).

At the beginning of the work, I situated everyone in the world of *P5R* by talking about the player-protagonist's displacement and subsequent forming of relation when they eat the curry rice for the first time. For me, the curry rice is a nexus of care – both from personal experience outside the game's world and the experience of me as a player protagonist inside the game's world. These lived experiences are intertwined the 'real' and 'virtual' in a manner that places an emphasis on the experiences of the self in the virtual. When I am in the game's world, I am forming new relation with the surroundings, just as the player-protagonist is accustoming himself to Tokyo. The curry rice offers a familiar feeling of care while opening us to other possibilities.

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