

# CARING ABOUT EACH



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# OTHER IN



## EMPTINESS AND TECHNOLOGY IN JAPANESE SOCIETY THROUGH VIDEO GAMES

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Figure 1: A still image of the player-protagonist visiting a maid café in the Japanese Role-Playing Video Game, *Persona 5 Royal* (Atlus 2019). An example of the marketisation of intimacy that has become a prominent feature in Japanese society (Allison 2013).

In a recent forum, Dzenovska and Knight (2020) highlighted how emptiness could allow us to understand how global capitalism and state power has worked together to isolate and marginalize people. In Japan, in the aftermath of the natural disaster induced crisis in 2011, a loss of trust in the state led to many residents questioning the government when they said that the nuclear crisis in Fukushima was under control (Allison 2013). Precarity led to many desperate workers seeking employment in the radiation-heavy Fukushima at the cost of their health (Allison 2013).

As Dzenovska's (2020) research highlights, what is empty is not truly empty - it just may be full with things that are indicative of precarity. By treating the world of *P5R* as socially rich rather than just a projection of our feelings (empathy) into technology (Turkle 2011; 2021), I found that the world of *P5R* can function as a heterotopia: a world within a world (Foucault 1984). This world is not a mere representation of the 'real' world but is also a reality in itself - giving a space for us to ponder what it means to be human. It is through socializing within *P5R*'s world that relations of precarity become clear (See: Figure 2).

The pandemic has led us to socialise more online than ever before. Video Games like *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and *Among Us* have received a lot of attention as places where people hung out while they were locked indoors (Khan 2020; Stuart 2020).

Technology has undoubtedly changed the way that we socialise, but it has also led us to be more disconnected from one another - disconnected from what it means to be human. In her important work, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle (2011) talks about how the development of technology has led to more interconnectivity on a practical level, our reliance on technology to mediate social relations has led us towards social habits that breed anxiety and loneliness.

My work follows Turkle (2011) in examining emptiness (on a social and personal level) in video games as a technology medium. I chose to focus on the Japanese Role-Playing Video Game, *Persona 5 Royal*, (*P5R*) because of its connection to Japanese Society - a place that has embraced the modernisation projects of the 20th and 21st centuries (Atlus 2019). The director of *P5R*, Katsura Hashino, notes in an interview that *P5R* intends to be a social commentary on post-3/11 Japan - when an earthquake and tsunami hit Japan in March 2011 (Bailey 2017). It is the anxieties of the modern day that *P5R* addresses - whether it is the marketization of intimacy (e.g. maid services and cafés), social isolation (e.g. hikikomori), or social justice (Allison 2013, See: Figure 1).



Figure 2: A still image of the player-protagonist hanging out and joking around with his friend, Kasumi Yoshizawa (芳澤 かずみ) - one of the many examples of social relations in the Japanese Role-Playing Video Game, *Persona 5 Royal* (Atlus 2019).