

Exploring Cultural Differences in Game Reception: JRPGs in Germany and Japan

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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 comparing it with the reception in Japan. We hope to contribute towards a better understanding of how players' perception and evaluation of a game are influenced by their cultural background. Applying a grounded theory approach, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of articles from German video game websites, user comments, written in response to these 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. 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, the way players interpret and experience video games is inextricably linked to their cultural backgrounds (Consalvo 2006, 127), creating a need to examine how exactly the way players “talk about”, perceive and evaluate games differs, based on a player's culture.

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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 the 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 (Schreier 2014, Strübing 2014).

Our focus on Japanese games occurs before the 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 objected 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 towards 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, Germany being the biggest market for games in Europe (Newzoo 2016). Our choice to begin with a study of JRPGs is based on their perception as a “uniquely Japanese” (Schules 2015) genre, possibly contributing to a greater difference in the Japanese and German reception of them.

Our choice of focusing on *Persona 5* is 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), has 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.

Our focus on the first two entries into the *Trails of Cold Steel* (ToCS) series, is because of both, their similarities and dissimilarities 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, as well as an art style reminding German players of Japanese anime. *Persona 5* and *ToCS I* are set in a high school setting, the main characters being students. 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*, remains a niche title, also evident in the number of user reviews written on each game. *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).

Comparing *Persona 5* and *ToCS* also proves to be 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, receives a worse score by Japanese users. However, in Western (Steam) and German scores of aggregated user reviews, *ToCS* is perceived in a largely positive way, both games holding a higher aggregate score on the German Amazon site than *Persona 5*.

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 over the critical reception of the considered games (as of February 1st, 2018)

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 preliminary study is part of a larger, continuously growing corpus, of German games-related media items, also including analyses of non-textual media, like YouTube videos or Twitch.tv streams, traditional (printed) gaming magazines and player communities. The data is gathered, indexed and summarized by a group of five student assistants, located in Germany. 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 term “*Persona 5*” or “*Trails of Cold Steel*”, as well as all news articles published between January 2017 and January 2018.

To contrast our findings for 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 are 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, indicated 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 over 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 open coding of the corpus, using the “code in-vivo” function of MAXQDA. The resulting codes, taken directly from the text, were then compared, categorized and subsumed into more abstract codes, according to thematic proximity. We then proceeded with the selective coding. To allow for an easy comparison between the Japanese and German data, we decided on a system of low-level granularity codes, which we call categories, and sub-codes of higher granularity. Coding itself was carried out by two researchers, independently from each other, later comparing and discussing the results and adapting the coding scheme. 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.

RESULTS

Codes and Categories

The first result of the analysis are the resulting codes themselves. On a broad level, it was possible to categorize all statements in the corpus, that stand in relation to one of the games into the following nine categories:

- *Audio-Visual*, including all comments that were made in concern to 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 sub-code *characters* in the category *Story/Scenario*.

- *Rules/Mechanics*, includes all comments, made in concern to the games' mechanics or rules. This includes what most German users refer to as "gameplay" and Japanese users as "systems" (*shitemu*).
- *Story/Scenario*, delineating all comments made about the games' setting or story. This includes comments made about the characters in the game.
- *External*, comments, that refer to the larger contextual frame or ecosystem in which the games exist. 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 one of the games are compared with other games, either its direct predecessor(s) or completely different titles.
- *Japaneseness*, subsumes all statements, that are made in relation to the Japanese nature of a game.
- *Detaildness/"Craftsmanship"*, refers to comments made about the "attention to detail" put into a game or the idea of games as product of "craftsmanship". This can be seen to refer to what Zagal and Tomuro (2013, 5) refer to as "polish".
- *Preview*, delineates comments in which expectations towards the games are voiced before they were released.
- *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 towards coding, the categories we arrived at are directly derived from the textual expressions evident in our corpus. The sub-codes displayed in figure 1 (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.

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 our document groups (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*.

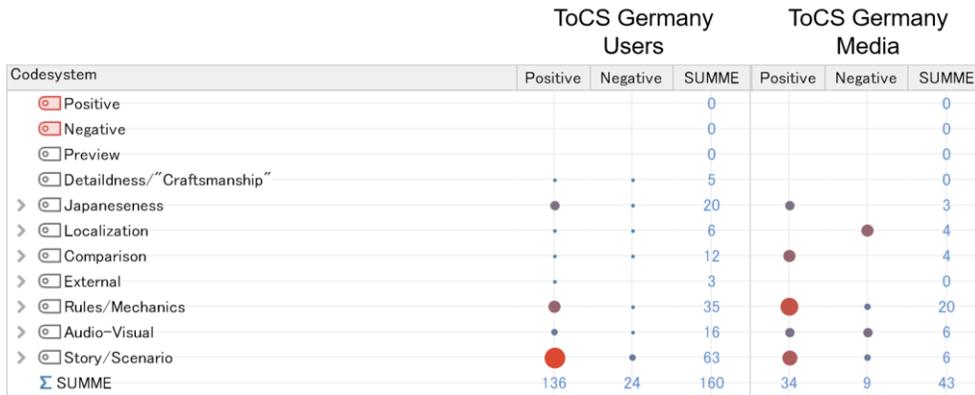


Figure 1: Comparison between the MAXQDA code-relation-matrixes of German media and user reception of ToCS, using the *positive/negative* codes as demarcations for context. The size of the dots is calculated based on the relative frequency of code pairings inside a column.

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 depicted in the analyzed texts generated by users. Instead they solely focus 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.

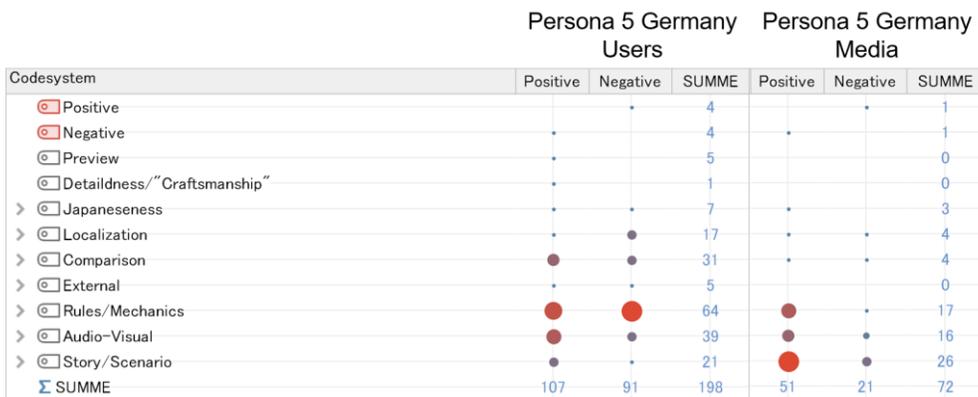


Figure 2: Comparison between the German media and user reception of *Persona 5*

A more pronounced difference between professional and user reception can be seen for *Persona 5*. German user statements are significantly more often critical of the game than the German gaming media. The biggest point of contention in the professionally written articles and reviews, was in regard 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 category *rules/mechanics*, German players’ criticism first and foremost deals with the games 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 of saving the game state. *Persona 5* employs a system of “safe rooms”, similar to save points in other games, in its dungeons. Many players expressed dissatisfaction at the distance between these safe rooms, and their inability to save between them, which was seen as not being compatible with players’ lifestyles. *ToCS* some users also expressed disapproval of the game’s “anime style”, which cannot be seen 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 comment focuses on the same topics and evaluates the game largely in the same way. While user statements tend to cover a wider variety of opinions than present in the professional gaming media, especially in concern to negative views on the game, the similarities are nevertheless more pronounced than the differences. Especially user reviews on Amazon have shown to be thematically close to professional gaming media reviews, with similar standards of evaluation. While stylistic differences exist, user reviews do cover most of what is written in professional reviews, while providing a platform for opinions deviating from the mainstream. Below, when examining the differences between the German and Japanese reception, we therefore refer colloquially to the German reception and only differentiate between user and professional content when 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 codes *negative* and *positive* is not necessarily an indicator of a games overall evaluation, they still provide a rough estimate about how much space in (user) reviews or comments is allocated towards the discussion of perceived negative or positive points of a game.

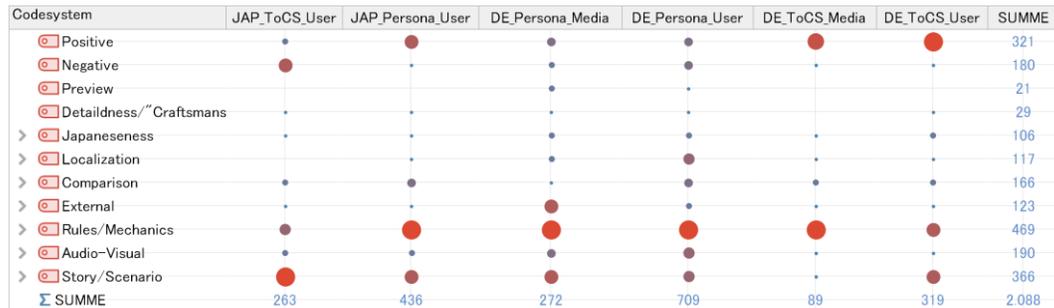


Figure 3: MAXQDA code matrix showing the frequency of codes for all document groups. The size of a dot signifies the relative frequency within a document group.

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 code *Localization* in the German sources, especially in the user generated texts in concern to *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 category *rules/mechanics*, indicating the great space allocated to the discussion of gameplay and mechanics. The category *audio/visual* appears with greater frequency in the German sources for *Persona 5*. In contrast, the category *story/scenario*, appears very prominent in the Japanese user reviews on *ToCS* but comparatively less frequent in the other document groups, especially the German media articles on *ToCS*.

A closer look, with a higher level of granularity (see Figure 4), allows for a more differentiated analysis. The relative prominence of the category *external*, 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 or its controls. For example, eleven Japanese user reviews have commented positively on the button mapping employed in *Persona 5* during combat in praising it as intuitive and elegant, something that is missing in the German reception of the game.



Figure 4: MAXQDA code matrix with frequent sub-categories shown

Looking at the category *story/scenario*, further differences between the Japanese and German reception become apparent. First, confirming to the sub-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 examined Japanese user reviews. The sub-code *setting/topics* 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.

There are also pronounced differences in how Japanese and German users evaluate the games (see Figure 5). In the German reception of *ToCS*, the category *story/scenario* 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 category *rules/mechanics*.

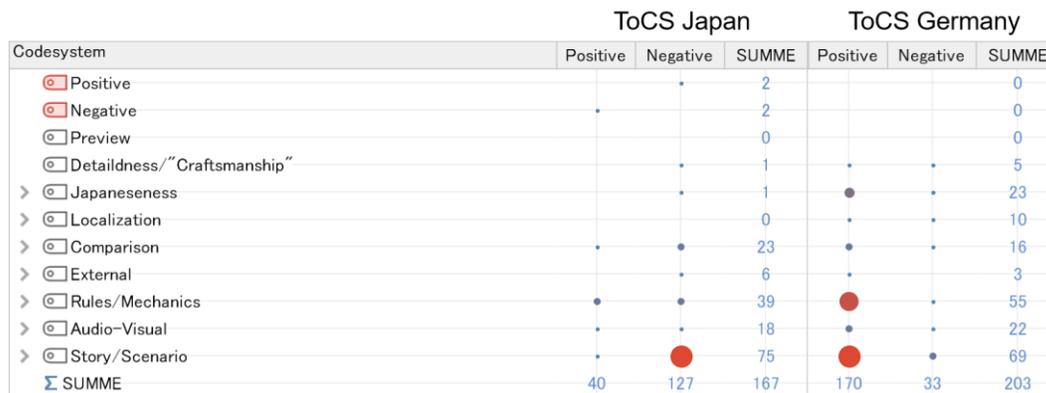


Figure 5: Comparison between the MAXQDA code-relation-matrixes of the Japanese and German *ToCS* reception, by using the *positive/negative* codes as demarcations for context

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 concern 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 to be 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 category *rules/mechanics*, several other differences can be recognized. First, the sub-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 in concern to its difficulty, balancing, tempo and the ability to customize your 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 are 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 critical 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 taken 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 praise the "interesting" stories that can be glanced by spending "bonding points" describing the desire to get 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 the game 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 Fig. 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 category *rules/mechanics*, 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* is concentrated at a single topic, *time/pacing*, which was discussed above.

Codesystem	Persona 5 Japan			Persona 5 Germany		
	Positive	Negative	SUMME	Positive	Negative	SUMME
Positive			0		•	5
Negative			0	•		5
Preview			0	•		5
Detaildness/"Craftsmanship"	•		13	•		1
Japaneseesness	•		8	•		10
Localization			0		•	21
Comparison	•	•	27	•	•	35
External	•	•	16	•	•	5
Rules/Mechanics	•••	•	121	•••	•••	81
Audio-Visual	•	•	40	••	•	55
Story/Scenario	•	•	76	•	•	47
Σ SUMME	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 category *rules/mechanics*, there are more similarities than differences in the evaluation of *Persona 5*. Comparatively, the category *audio-visual* appears to be discussed more prominently in Germany. While the visual depiction in Figure 4 somewhat misleadingly depicts the category *audio-visual* as only slightly larger than *comparison*, this is because of the great influence of the category *rules/mechanics* in the column. Still, more passages in the dataset can be attributed to the category *story/scenario*, 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 of not including 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 being questioned.

Lexical Differences

The analysis of the Japanese and German source material 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” (*sutori*) 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

being used once. In contexts where German users refer to “gameplay”, Japanese users use the term “system” (*shisutemu*) instead. “System” in German, in contrast, is almost exclusively used in the combination “combat system”. Interestingly, in the Japanese user reviews to *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 to why Japanese users seem to prefer using either the word “scenario” or “story”, based on which game they are discussing? Why is the concept of “gameplay”, so prevalent in German (and English) user reviews 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 possibly might provide a fruitful field for further academic attention.

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 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 is conclusive with our findings for *ToCS* and might be one possible reason that contributes to the comparatively negative reception of its gameplay elements, it does not explain why the evaluation of *ToCS*'s story by German and Japanese users is completely opposite from each other.

Looking at the broader ecosphere of JRPGs in Germany and Japan leads to another possible explanation for the excellent *ToCS* received in Germany. While Japanese users enjoy access to 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, most of them only receiving an English translation. By giving *ToCS* good reviews, German players possibly want to contribute to 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.

However, this too cannot fully explain the overwhelmingly positive reviews *ToCS I* received on steam, indicative of a broad consensus among "Western" players on how to evaluate the game. Possibly, some of the negative points discussed in the Japanese user reviews could have been mitigated by the often-praised localization of the games. For example, repetitive and unnatural dialogues, criticized by Japanese players, could have been improved by localization efforts. Still, this cannot fully account for the differences in perception to, e.g. the setting of the game. As such, the differences in how *ToCS* is perceived in Germany and Japan suggest the existence of fundamental differences in how the games' story is evaluated in Japan and Germany.

In contrast to *ToCS*, *Persona 5* has been received mostly positive 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 for the *Persona* series leaving the "JRPG niche" and attracting a broader range of players. Differences in the (user) reception on *Persona 5* where mostly apparent in concern to the game's length. Interestingly, in the case of *Persona 5*, German user reviews tend to be more negative than Japanese ones. This could in turn be another indicator for the 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, tending 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".

An unanswered question remains in concern to the differences between Japanese professional and user reviews on *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 dissimilarities in terms of player base and critical reception, as well as their similarities in concern 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, e.g. 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, except for subtle differences, especially apparent in German criticism of the game that could not be found in the Japanese user reviews. Japanese user reviews tended to be more systematical in their dissemination of games, mentioning topics like button mapping, minigames, or balancing, that were not discussed in such detail in the German reception. Our results also suggest, 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 Steam are predominantly critical of the game. Several possible explanations to this phenomenon have been briefly discussed but fail to provide a satisfactory answer. However, it 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, 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 words "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 on 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, story 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 Japanese and German reception. In the long term, we will also conduct player interviews and play tests with German and Japanese players.

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