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AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF THE MARKETING OF JAPANESE ROLE- PLAYING GAMES

Comments on English Trailers of Shin Megami
Tensei V

ABSTRACT

Pyry Hakala: Audience Reception of the Marketing of Japanese Role-playing Games:
Comments on English Trailers of Shin Megami Tensei V
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Games developed in Japan are a historically notable part of the game industry. The genre of Japanese role-playing games has been studied increasingly in recent years, but there are still gaps in the field of study, such as angles related to fandoms formed around the games. Similarly, video game marketing, which includes trailers, has not received much scholarly attention, despite its importance in the industry. This thesis examines the marketing of *Shin Megami Tensei V*, a Japanese role-playing game, to English-speaking audiences, and how those audiences react to trailers on YouTube in the comment section. The main research question is: How are the English trailers of *Shin Megami Tensei V* received by their YouTube audiences? The aim is to uncover issues related to culture, fandom, and communication on social media platforms.

A total of 150 comments across the comment sections of three trailers were analyzed using thematic analysis. The method was chosen due to its compatibility with this type of data, such as its usefulness in qualitatively finding and tracking trends among a large dataset. Comments were studied, assigned codes, and finally combined into themes by the author.

This thesis identifies three main themes in the comments: First-timers vs. Veterans, Characters, and Demons. First, connections and tensions in the *Shin Megami Tensei* media mix are brought up by newcomers to the main series and its older fans. Second, the human characters of the game are commented on, with interpretation and expectations focusing on their role in the story. Third, the recruitable creatures of the game called *demons* are discussed, as users were excited about their favorites appearing in the trailers, as well as how they looked visually. Commenters mostly included fans, either those of *Shin Megami Tensei* or other Japanese media, and the reception to the trailers was positive.

Keywords: Video game, marketing, trailer, reception, comments, thematic analysis, Japanese role-playing game, JRPG, Game Studies, Shin Megami Tensei V

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service. No language models such as ChatGPT were used while writing this thesis.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Japan is a powerhouse in the video game industry, with influential companies such as Nintendo and Sony developing consoles and games, titles such as *Super Mario* (1985–) and *The Legend of Zelda* (1986–), as well as role-playing games like *Final Fantasy* (1987–) and *Pokémon* (1996–). In 2021, Japan was the “third-biggest games market worldwide” (Kuzuhara, 2021). Recognizable Japanese brands have historically dominated players’ minds with their colorful characters and strong cross-media marketing. Media franchises like *Pokémon* include globally successful games, TV series, movies, comics, and merchandise.

When putting Japanese games into a global context, there are many questions to be asked from a cultural point of view. What does it mean when a game is Japanese – does it imply certain things in terms of game content or marketing? How is the game received in foreign countries as opposed to Japan? And how can these aspects be studied without resorting to cultural essentialism?

This thesis studies a clash between cultures – Japanese games being marketed in English for English speaking audiences – and specifically examines the reception to that marketing. A thematic analysis will be conducted on YouTube comments that have been posted in the comment sections of three English trailers of *Shin Megami Tensei V* (2021), a Japanese role-playing game. While there are many other potentially interesting angles around the topic, video game trailers were chosen as a focus because they are a relatively understudied area. This is despite the fact that game trailers generally receive a lot of attention, some even garnering up to millions of views and thus serving as effective tools for marketing. For example, the Official *Minecraft* Trailer has 164 million views (Minecraft, 2011), the *Grand Theft Auto V* Trailer has 86 million views (Rockstar Games, 2011), and the *Battlefield 1* Official Reveal Trailer has 70 million views (Battlefield, 2016). While the most popular English *Shin Megami Tensei V* trailer on YouTube “only” has a bit over 880,000 views (Nintendo of America, 2020), it is still a lot considering the game has sold just over a million copies worldwide (Official ATLUS West, 2022).

Comments, such as ones in forum threads, have been studied more, though not as responses to video game promotion. Using comments as data appears to be much more common in the context of social media studies than in game studies (Rohlfing & Sonnenberg [2016]; Yodovich & Kim [2021]). YouTube is just one social network among

others, and there are many social media studies examining different platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Comment sections are important to study in a connected age when they serve as places where anyone from a variety of backgrounds can join and have discussions related or unrelated to the topic at hand. The behavior of commenters can range from friendly to trolls that are trying to upset others, and the content of the comments can be anything between short jokes and in-depth analyses. While singular comments may not always be the most fruitful as data, examining groups of them can reveal trends that provide interesting results.

Much like game studies is a multidisciplinary field, this thesis also draws from many different places. It is situated at a crossroads between the studies of Japanese games, marketing (specifically trailers), social media, and fandoms. Combining these different aspects into an organized whole is challenging, but also important in order to experiment with new types of research topics in the field.

This thesis consists of one main research question and five smaller sub-questions. The primary research question of the thesis is relatively open-ended, making room for long answers:

RQ: How are the English trailers of *Shin Megami Tensei V* received by their YouTube audiences?

The sub-questions are designed to be more specific and to give more context to the results and the main research question. They are as follows:

SQ1: Who are the audiences that are targeted and affected by the marketing?

SQ2: How is this game marketed, and what is shown in the trailers?

SQ3: How do the audiences respond to the marketing?

SQ4: What parts of the trailers are effective and why?

Finally, through the results of this study, the larger picture can also be considered. The final, conceptually distinct sub-question is:

SQ5: What can the results tell about the reception of English marketing of JRPGs in general?

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In Chapter Two I examine topics that are relevant to the research questions: role-playing games, the history of Japanese role-playing games, video game marketing as a whole, and finally, how Japanese games are marketed globally. Next, in Chapter Three, I delve more deeply into the problematic term of “Japanese role-playing game”, looking at how scholars have attempted to define it and how they have criticized it and its use. At the end of the chapter I give a working definition that will be used for this thesis.

The Fourth Chapter is about the data and method of this study. I start with introducing the case game and its marketing campaign. After that, trailer studies are briefly examined before moving on to the trailers of *Shin Megami Tensei V*, showing what is available for study and examining the contents of the three chosen trailers. The data, which is the comments, is then conceptually examined. Thematic analysis is evaluated as a chosen method, explaining the process of how I coded the comments and how I combined them into groups, eventually creating three themes. Finally, the ethical side of the study is considered.

The Fifth Chapter focuses on the findings, introducing the three main themes that I have chosen, while showing supporting example comments. The chosen themes are: First-timers vs. Veterans, Characters, and Demons. In the Sixth Chapter, by referencing previous research, I delve more deeply into the meaning behind the results and the fan discussion that is present in the comments. Finally, I conclude the thesis with the Seventh Chapter, reflecting on what the study accomplished, what its limitations were, and what could be studied further.

2 BACKGROUND

This chapter provides a context in which JRPGs circulate, and also gives an overview of video game marketing. It answers two questions: first, what is the context of JRPGs? Second, how are (Japanese) video games marketed? The background of the genre is examined here in preparation for discussing its definition, which will be done in the literature review. This chapter's background information is also important because the thesis studies audience reception, and this audience has different expectations depending on what and how much they know about the space it exists in. These expectations affect their views, and in turn, the results of this thesis.

In the first section, the meaning of the term “role-playing game” is considered. In the second section, the history of Japanese role-playing games, a subgenre of role-playing games, is examined to reveal its roots and meaning in the global game industry, while giving examples of influential games in the genre. Then, to approach the research question, the marketing of video games is introduced in the third section, moving from a broad overview to a historical example, and finally to the current landscape of marketing. The concept of media mix is also introduced, which is important when discussing *Shin Megami Tensei V*.

2.1. Role-playing games

This section briefly examines the genre of role-playing games (RPG) in order to move on to a specific subgenre, the Japanese role-playing game. There are many types of role-playing games (RPG), and they can be greatly different from each other. Tabletop RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) and live-action RPGs are considered the real-life manifestations of role-playing, where players often roleplay in a physical space, and then there are digital RPGs usually played on a computer or console (Zagal & Deterding, 2018, p. 19). The case game of this thesis, *Shin Megami Tensei V* (SMTV), is a single-player RPG, played on a video game console (exclusively on the Nintendo Switch as of this writing), so this digital form of RPGs is the focal point.

How should one define RPGs, then? Role-playing, playing the role of a character, can manifest in many ways: there can be complete freedom in character choice as well as activities that the player can do as the character, but the character could also be a specific individual with a defined backstory. Character progression seems to be a common thread

across most role-playing games, as the player chooses how their avatar develops during the game. This could happen through narrative choices and/or in the mechanical dimension by improving the character's skills. Multiplayer online role-playing games also complicate the definition, as interaction with other players is central, unlike in single-player games. Zagal and Deterding (2018) say that "Role-playing games" is a term used by many different groups to mean different kinds of play that focuses on characters in a fictional world (p. 46). They conclude their chapter on the term's definition that it is "pointless to capture an essential nature in a definition" (p. 48). As the RPG genre is quite broad and multifaceted, focusing on a specific subgenre provides a more stable ground for study. One such subgenre is the Japanese role-playing game (JRPG). The term JRPG will be defined and problematized at length in the literature review.

2.2. Historical Context of JRPGs

First, to understand the JRPG genre, it is important to examine where this perceived branch in RPGs originates from, while also introducing some of the most relevant games and their influence over the years. In other words, the section answers what is the historical context of JRPGs and what are some examples of JRPGs. There are some common influences that had an effect on many digital role-playing games, such as the fantasy world of *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) and the tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*. North American computer role-playing games such as *Wizardry* (1980) and *Ultima* (1981) heavily inspired the Japanese developers of the popular *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* series: they wanted to simplify the game for all audiences but also wanted to keep the character growth aspects when creating their respective games (Kohler, 2016, pp. 79–87).

Although there are many other influential and still existing JRPG series, *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* became "almost synonymous with the JRPG genre" (Bjarnason, 2022, p. 34), but for slightly different reasons. Koyama (2022, p. 22) notes that the first three *Dragon Quest* games "created a beachhead for RPGs in Japan and marked the starting point of history of JRPGs", and also greatly influenced the series' sequels and other JRPGs as they tried to differentiate themselves from the original trilogy. *Final Fantasy*, especially with the release of *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997, became a huge hit in the West¹

¹ The West in this thesis refers to North America, Europe, and Australasia.

thanks to its marketing, technological prowess, and darker style, something that *Dragon Quest* lacked (Madsen, 2020). These two distinguished series have represented their perceived genre in people's minds, *Dragon Quest* in Japan and *Final Fantasy* in Western regions, such as the USA and Europe.

Another important JRPG series to consider is the *Pokémon* series. It shares qualities with *Shin Megami Tensei*, such as the collection, training, and battling of monsters, but is also notable for its strong (worldwide) cross-media marketing, also known as the media mix, a concept which will be explained in the next section. The *Pokémon* franchise gives us an example of what it can be:

Pokémon is the most successful computer game ever made, the top globally selling trading-card game of all time, one of the most successful children's television programs ever broadcast, the top grossing movie ever released in Japan, and among the five top earners in the history of films worldwide. (Tobin, 2004, p. 3)

In Japan, the *Pokémon* media mix's economic and cultural role has been applauded. However, there are also more problematic undertones in the series' core idea: those of entrapment and exploitation of wild *Pokémon* (Allison, 2006, p. 204). These themes also partially apply to *SMTV*, but this topic will be revisited in the Sixth Chapter. *Pokémon* is also interesting because it is not often talked about as a representative of its genre – perhaps due to its popularity, the brand name is independent of genre discussion, and it can be argued that it is also not held to the same standards, such as innovation (Kobek, 2019).

2.3. Video Game Marketing

This section broadly examines what the marketing of video games means, moving from terminology to examples of different forms of marketing, and eventually to media convergence and media mix. Marketing is a broad concept, and video game marketing has many layers much like the products that are being sold. The marketing of video games is an activity that is focused on creating value for customers, including symbolical and cultural value, with advertising being a part of the overall marketing strategy (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016, p. 5). A game's marketing mix includes the price, place, product, and promotion, with promotion containing advertising, sales promotion, and public relations (p. 35). Promotion, specifically advertising, is the focus of this thesis, as it is the most visible part of the case game's marketing campaign and therefore strongly

incites the audience to react and comment on it. While advertising methods differ depending on the scale of a game and its marketing, trailers are common marketing tools for all video games (Švelch, 2015), as they can effectively contain a lot of information that the development team wants to communicate to the players.

There are many successful examples of marketing and promotion in the history of video games, but one is especially relevant to this topic. The marketing of role-playing games coming from Japan has a noteworthy moment in history from 1997 (when the term JRPG was not yet in use), when *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) had a large promotional campaign and enjoyed a very successful launch worldwide. The campaign in the US involved high-effort TV commercials that focused on graphics, while comparing and separating the game from movies. The visuals were also utilized in large magazine adverts and posters. In addition, there was a strategy guide and a website offering information on the game. Selling a million copies in under half a year in the US showed that JRPGs could sell well with enough marketing. The senior product manager of *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997, David Bamberger, thinks that the game created an installed base of RPG players, who would buy similar products in the future as well. (Craddock, 2017).

However, the promotion of video games has changed since the launch of *Final Fantasy VII*, with the internet and its large-scale availability. Before, magazine and TV ads of video games and consoles were quite common, but now, websites and channels play a large role. YouTubers and streamers are given newly released games by publishers, much like review copies are given to the press, to play and show to their viewers. Video as a marketing tool is extremely important: in 2020, 92% of marketers considered it an important part of their marketing strategy, and 88% said that this form of marketing has positive return on investment (Chaffey, 2020). The existence of sites like YouTube has naturally created a thriving platform for the previously mentioned video game trailers to serve companies' marketing needs. There are various books written about YouTube marketing and how to launch successful marketing campaigns by using the platform, such as works by Eagle (2019) and Miles (2014) among many others.

The above examples of different forms of marketing do not exist in a vacuum, but they instead combine into a convergence.

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory

behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2)

Media convergence “alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (p. 15). A relevant related term is participatory culture, which refers to the fact that consumers are now increasingly participating in media (p. 3). Participatory culture allows easy expression, engagement, and sharing of creations by members who feel connected to others and think that their contributions matter (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 5–6). Jenkins notes that because of media convergence and active, participatory users, media companies need to rethink their marketing decisions (Jenkins, 2006, p. 18).

One answer to media convergence is a marketing strategy called the media mix. The media mix “integrates different media forms through licensed character content” (Ito, 2007). The media mix is common and extremely relevant in Japan, where recognizable, re-emerging characters are part of marketing strategies (Steinberg, 2012). Japanese video games are bound to markets, and the media mix is a cross media strategy that characterizes this ecosystem (Picard & Pelletier-Gagnon, 2015, p. 3). A video game, such as a JRPG, is often only one part of the whole when it comes to franchises. The *Megami Tensei* (1987–) media mix is, while not as recognizable as behemoths like *Pokémon*, a long-standing mix that has still managed to gain traction both in Japan and globally, for example with the success of modern *Persona* (1996–) games, spin-offs of *SMT*. There are numerous manga, films, series, and albums that have been released under the *Megami Tensei* brand.

2.4. Global Marketing of Japanese Games

The marketing and selling of Japanese products to the West is something that is important due to differences in market sizes. An important example of Japanese marketing comes from the country’s own government. The Cool Japan initiative is a strategy that attempts to make Japanese culture, such as games, more attractive to non-Japanese audiences to increase economic growth (Cool Japan Strategy Promotion Council, 2015, p. 1). Iwabuchi (2015) criticizes this kind of pop-culture diplomacy for implementing a homogenized view of Japanese culture. While Japanese games may have their distinct style that can be off-putting to some in other countries, it can also increase interest for many, like those who are already in touch with communities surrounding Japanese phenomena.

Consalvo (2016) has studied how Japanese game companies have navigated the global landscape. Both of the historically important JRPG developers, Square and Enix, creators of *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* respectively, focused on making their games popular outside Japan from the start (p. 110). The global success of *Final Fantasy* may be the result of not only the marketing but also the products that have enticed audiences outside Japan. The two companies used different strategies to grow globally, and they opened subsidiaries in the U.S. and Europe in the 1990s (p. 111). *Kingdom Hearts* (2002) is a successful example of Square collaborating with a foreign company, Disney, to reach success and understand global audiences better (Consalvo, 2016, p. 112). The improvement of localization efforts, as well as game releases happening simultaneously worldwide, also indicate that Square Enix, the modern fusion of Square and Enix, values global markets highly (p. 117). With an influential company setting a high standard, others seem to follow suit. There is a connection between Consalvo's findings and *SMTV*, the case game of this thesis: its developer ATLUS similarly founded a subsidiary in North America (now called Atlus West) in 1991 to localize and publish Japanese games (Atlus, n.d.). The same subsidiary was in charge of the marketing of the game in the USA and Europe.

JRPGs by large Japanese studios are not usually marketed by using the term. Instead, the more generic "RPG" is used. This reinforces the idea that the term is usually used by fans and the media instead of game developers and marketers. Also, using such a niche term could alienate potential buyers, which is why it may not have been adopted in a large official capacity. The term is not normally used when promoting games inside Japan. There is only the rare exception to the rule, as with the relatively small Japanese developer Imageepoch fully embracing the term "JRPG" with the marketing of its games (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2022, p. 98). For Western markets, it could provide an efficient tool to reach niche audiences. For example, *I Am Setsuna* (2016), a game by a small development team Tokyo RPG Factory and published by Square Enix, has the following marketing text: "I AM SETSUNA introduces the authentic JRPG style of yesteryear to Steam!" (Square Enix Store, 2021). Square Enix marketed another game they have published, *Octopath Traveler*, as a JRPG on Twitter (Square Enix, 2020). If a game's projected sales are low, committing to a specific audience and using their terminology may be a viable marketing strategy. The term's meaning and use in non-marketing contexts will be examined more in the Third Chapter.

Comparatively smaller Japanese publishers and developers have made their games more approachable to international audiences. Atlus, the Japanese team behind the *Megami Tensei* series, had their first notable simultaneous worldwide release with *SMTV*. This is in contrast to their more popular game *Persona 5* (2016), whose original Japanese release happened almost 7 months before its worldwide release. This is important, as large differences in the timing of game releases mean that story spoilers can be abundant on the internet during the waiting period, but the difference in release times can also tell about publishers' stances on global markets. Toshihiro Nagoshi, the former studio head of the Japanese development team Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio making the game series *Ryu Ga Gotaku* (2005–) (*Yakuza* in the West), said that offering global releases of games is especially important “in an age where information is shared simultaneously” (Trahan, 2021). As simultaneously working with multiple localization teams during development can be quite laborious, this effort to please foreign fans with a simultaneous worldwide release implies that Atlus sees value in markets outside Japan.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter delves more deeply into previous research done on JRPGs, how to define them, and problems related to this. First, after a brief overview of the study of Japanese games, the first section introduces problems with defining JRPGs, which has puzzled scholars for years. The problematic approaches are examined in the following order: first, defining the genre through the country of origin; and second, through traditional game design traits. This problematization leads to the second section, where the issue is reframed through a solution proposed by Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson (2022). A working definition of JRPG is also introduced. Understanding what the genre means is relevant for the sub-question of this thesis: What can the results say about games of the genre in general?

Some important research has been conducted on JRPGs. The recently published book *Japanese Role-Playing Games: Genre, Representation and Liminality in the JRPG* edited by Hutchinson and Pelletier-Gagnon (2022) gathers a variety of viewpoints from experts in the field, including ones from Japan. However, the editors declare that the genre has received relatively little scholarly attention, especially compared to Western genres (pp. 1–2). Other recent notable works on JRPGs, Japanese games, and their cultural meaning include Hutchinson (2019), Zagal and Deterding (2018), and Consalvo (2016), which are referenced in this thesis.

3.1. Problems with Defining JRPGs

The term Japanese role-playing game (JRPG) has been used in different conversations and contexts, and defining the subgenre is problematic if not impossible. Some might claim that only the country of origin matters, or that the gameplay or story structure is what define the genre. In many ways, discussion on JRPGs has also been dependent on other subgenres such as computer role-playing games, as well as games developed outside Japan. Pelletier-Gagnon (2018, p. 146) notes the release of *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997 as the moment since when North American journalists started comparing Japanese role-playing games to their Western counterparts. The first time the term JRPG appears to have been used in a publication was Eurogamer's 2004 review of *Tales of Symphonia* (2003), with its use becoming more common afterwards (Pelletier-Gagnon, 2018, p. 140). Aside from the media, the term appears to have been mostly used by fans instead of marketers or developers (Schules et al., 2018, p. 114).

An interesting and necessary angle when discussing the genre is the relationship between cultures and where the term JRPG is used. This differentiating term appears to be prevalent in Western countries (such as the USA and Europe) where Western RPGs are commonly played. An important counterpoint to this is to ask what do Japanese developers, marketers, and players think of this differentiation and whether they use it at all. In 2013, most Japanese gamers were still unaware of Western RPGs, despite increased localization efforts (Siliconera staff, 2013). Japanese companies do not call their games JRPGs, which is usually not seen in the country, instead using the more general “RPG” (Koyama, 2022, p. 25). Naoki Yoshida, director of Final Fantasy XIV and Final Fantasy XVI, has said that the development team does not consider their games JRPGs when developing them, but rather just RPGs. He refers to a time 15 years ago when the term JRPG surfaced, and notes that it was even used discriminatorily to divide the worse or outdated Japanese RPGs from Western RPGs. (Skill Up, 2023). Aside from a few examples that will be mentioned in this thesis, the term is mainly used in countries outside Japan.

Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson (2022, p. 14) say: “The JRPG structures its knowledge on two axes – the conventions and dynamics of the digital role-playing game on one hand, and the Japanese production context on the other.” This dichotomy is relevant when it comes to attempted definitions of JRPGs. One way the genre has been attempted to be defined is seemingly logical, as it comes from the term itself: the idea is that the games are simply *Japanese* role-playing games. However, using the country of origin as the only guideline is problematic for a multitude of reasons. Would a game developed in the US by ethnically Japanese people be a JRPG? Or one made by Europeans living in Japan? How many Japanese people in a development team do there need to be for the role-playing game to be “Japanese”? Wherever a game originates from, there are global influences at play that can influence its development. Commonly attributed Japaneseness can, in fact, be the result of the *mukokuseki* approach, which attempts to make a Japanese product culturally odorless, or stateless, to become more attractive to global audiences (Iwabuchi, 2004, p. 61).

The angle of nationality in the definition has further problems. Western indie developers are creating games whose mechanics and visuals resemble those of JRPGs (Koyama, 2022, p. 25): *RPG Maker* (1992-), a game development tool with multiple iterations, offers, with its default settings and assets, a template to create a seemingly traditional

“JRPG”. This connection, a mimicry of the genre’s essence, is apparent to many when looking at various games that have been made with it. Since many of the creators behind the games are not Japanese, this gives credence to the idea that the term refers to a style or tradition instead of it being a geological pointer. As an example from the other end, *Dark Souls* (2011) is a real-time action game with aesthetics influenced by the European medieval period. Still, it is also a role-playing game from Japan. There are disagreements about whether the game should be classified as a JRPG or not, and this case, among many other examples, highlights some key problems with the classification.

Another way to define JRPGs is through traits, or design traditions, that games in the genre supposedly share. Most games in the previously mentioned *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Quest*, and *Pokémon* series contain turn-based battles and anime-style aesthetics, but these should not necessarily be required for a game to be included in the categorization. Visual elements, for example, are easily copied, regardless of game genre (Schules et al., 2018, p. 114). Similar traits arise as Koyama (2022) argues that the genre was solidified as games attempted to differentiate themselves from the three first *Dragon Quest* games by focusing on visuals, more complex battle systems, and whole parties of characters (p. 31). Traits have also been identified by comparing JRPGs and Western role-playing games. JRPGs usually have more confined fantasy worlds, defined instead of customizable characters, cartoony instead of realistic art, and limited narrative choice instead of multiple paths and choices (Schules et al., 2018, p. 114). There are some obvious problems with this method of categorization: What are the traits? How many of these traits does a game need? How clear are the boundaries, and are some games more “JRPG” than others? Creating a strict, restrictive system for classification seems unwise, as it diminishes games’ unique qualities and games who innovate by shooting for hybridization of game genres.

3.2. Towards a Solution

The previous section showed examples of why the term JRPG is flawed, even damaging at worst. Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson (2022) summarize the situation in the following way:

...while the JRPG label brings our attention to different aspects of digital gaming, it also comes with assumptions and structural biases that can potentially pose prejudice to efforts for a more diverse understanding of videogames from a transnational perspective. (p. 14)

As the approaches introduced in this chapter are problematic and there is no great way of defining the genre, the term is mostly a social construct, an imperfect tool for discussion in video game culture. Attempting to claim that a JRPG is always a certain way is erroneous. Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson (2022, p. 15) consider not only traits, but also narrative structures, images, motifs, and themes as factors in games that signal to the player that they are playing a JRPG. A more helpful and appropriate way to define these games is through looking at a singular game and seeing how it compares to traditions, conventions, and tropes in the genre. Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson (2022) say that JRPGs are “defined in a circular fashion, with the ‘fit’ of individual texts in the category determined by comparison to other, already-existing texts” (p. 5). What this means for this thesis is that confirming the case game *SMTV* adheres to the conventions, and is similar to other JRPGs, leads to its justified use as a representative of the genre. Then it can contribute to the discussion of JRPGs as a whole. This examination of how well the game fits the genre will be done at the start of the next chapter.

Despite all the problems with defining JRPGs, a definition is still preferable as it is a very relevant term for the topic. For the purposes of this thesis, an incomplete, working definition of JRPG is: A digital role-playing game whose design traditions come from Japanese development teams, but whose exact boundaries are intangible.

4 CASE GAME, DATA, AND METHOD

This chapter will explain how the study is conducted, what tools are used, and what is the targeted dataset. The first section introduces the game and its marketing campaign that the data is an important part of, highlighting why it was selected. The second looks at trailers, examining how they have been studied before, and moving on to available English trailers of the case game, and the three whose comment sections were chosen. Their contents will be briefly examined. The third section examines the data, in this case, internet comments, and why it is suitable for the topic. The fourth section describes thematic analysis and how it will be used to study the data. The last section considers the ethics and issues of studying user comments.

4.1. Case Game and the Marketing Campaign

Shin Megami Tensei V, developed by Atlus, is part of the *Megami Tensei* series, released for the Nintendo Switch on November 12, 2021. The game plays similarly to its predecessors: the player recruits demons, which are mechanically much like the monsters in *Pokémon* but based on mythologies and religions from the real world, to use them in turn-based battles against other demons while navigating an apocalyptic environment. Another similarity to the rest of the series is in story: there are choices and resulting branches based on an alignment system that lead to multiple endings: Law, Chaos, and Neutral, plus a hidden extra ending. The franchise, including its spin-offs such as the more popular *Persona* series, has been considered a family of JRPGs for core audiences due to its in-depth mechanics and sometimes harsh difficulty. *SMTV* is the first release in the main *Megami Tensei* series on the Switch, with the fourth installment having been released for the Nintendo 3DS in 2013. Fans have used the term “mainline” to separate the main series from spinoffs, and while this definition is unofficial and unclear, this thesis uses it to separate numbered *SMT* entries from the *Persona* series; more on the difference between these two in section 5.1.

The newest entry is a relatively clear example of the genre with its turn-based battles, lengthy campaign, story themes, and anime-like aesthetics seen on characters and demons, with wide eyes and colorful hair and outfits. The storyline of *SMT* games also often contains the JRPG trope of teenagers killing God, which this game would seem to follow in some manner according to the trailers. While these are merely traits and tropes, they are examples of how the game “fits” (Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson, 2022, p. 5)

the idea of the genre – it shares many similarities with series like *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, much more than with non-JRPGs like *Super Mario* or *Grand Theft Auto V*. Fans and journalists also consider the *SMT* series to be a JRPG (Szpytek, 2022; Carter, 2013), and their opinion holds weight because the genre is a social construct.

The marketing campaign of *SMTV* is interesting because it seems quite ambitious considering the niche status of the series. Since the announcement trailer on July 20, 2020, there have been a total of eleven videos (trailers and a recorded live stream) of the game on the *Official ATLUS West* channel (Official ATLUS West, n.d.). However, the official Japanese channel *atlustube* (atlustube, n.d.) released a demon showcase trailer daily since June 17, 2021, and continued to do so until several days after the game’s worldwide release. Therefore, there are over 200 trailers for the game, which is a noticeably greater number than what is typical for most game marketing campaigns. As all trailers have also been translated by fans and posted on English news sites, there is a lot of data available for studying the marketing and the reception to it. Sega, the publisher of the North American version of the game, said after the game’s release that the marketing of their titles has been “very successful” and that *SMTV*’s sales have been “quite good” (Reggy, 2021).

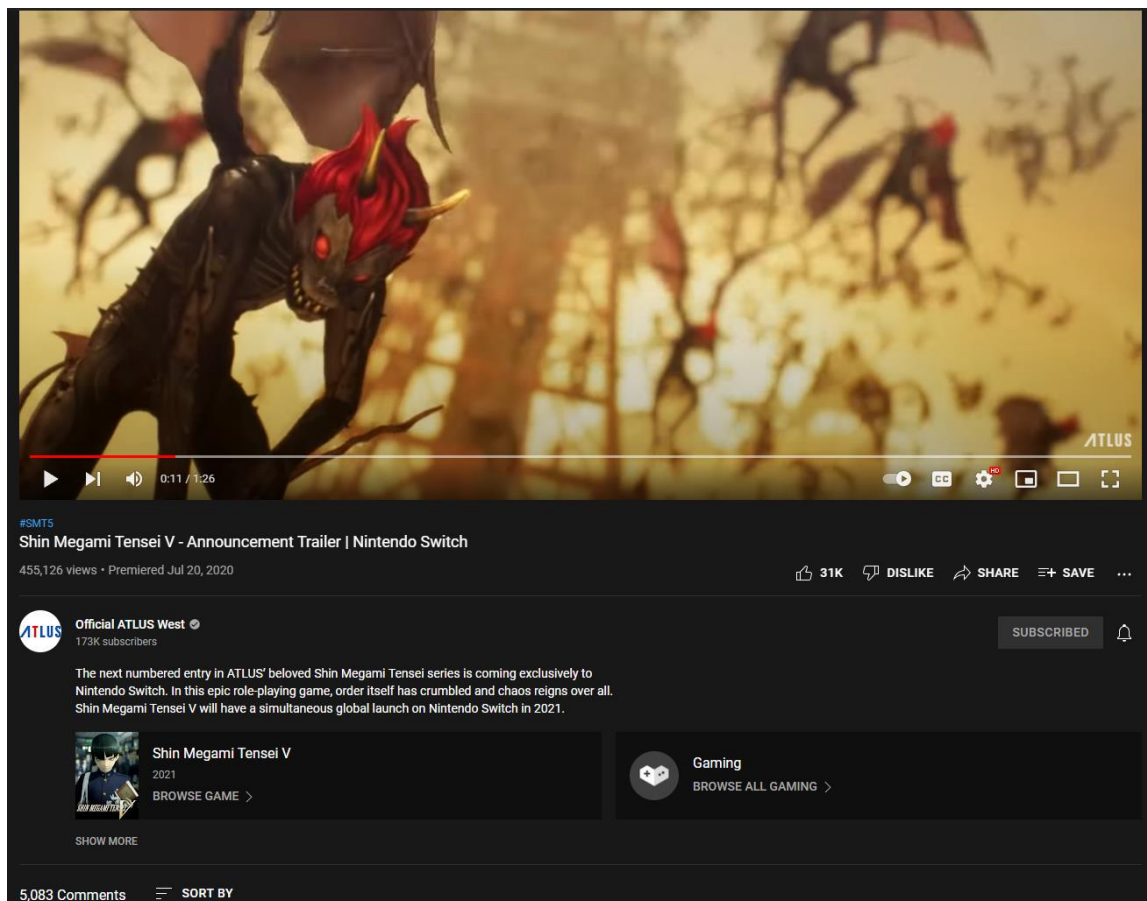


Figure 1. The most popular trailer of *SMTV* out of the ones uploaded by the Official ATLUS West channel on YouTube. (Official ATLUS West, 2020)

4.2.Trailers

In game studies, the theory of paratext (Genette, 1997) has been used as a core concept when examining trailers (Švelch, 2015). Genette (1997) explains that the paratext is a zone between the text and the outside, and contributes to a better reception of the text by the readers (p. 2). Švelch (2015) defines video game trailers as follows: “any official audiovisual paratext that informs the viewer about the existence of a particular video game” (pp. 17-18). A typology by Švelch (2015) divides these video game trailers into three categories. Performance trailers include staged player interaction, transmedia trailers are cinematic additions to the game’s fictional world, and interface trailers are interactive experiences for the watchers of the trailer, for example through choices that can be clicked in the video (Švelch, 2015, pp. 19-20). Out of these three, performance trailers appear to be most common, offering glimpses to actual gameplay or in-game cutscene footage. It is also the most economical choice, as the content already created for the game can be used for promotion. Games with smaller marketing budgets may not

have visually rich cinematic trailers that contain exclusive footage made for just that trailer. According to Švelch's typology, the trailers studied in this thesis are performance trailers.

As video game trailers have received little attention from scholars, examining a study of film trailers is acceptable: they share their forms and functions as tightly packed promotional videos. Gray (2010, p. 52) underlines the importance of trailers: they create meaning for those that see it, even if they do not engage with the promoted material itself. They also serve the consumer because watching all films is an impossible task, and watching trailers can save people's time through the efficient combination of interpretation and judgment (p. 52). Trailers have power, as they can even lead the viewer astray by encouraging wrong expectations in the viewer, becoming wholly different texts (p. 63). One example of this among game trailers is that of *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), which gave the impression that players would get to play the game as Solid Snake, the protagonist of the first game. In truth, he is the playable character only in the game's short intro, and most of the game is played as the new character Raiden. Gray notes that the meaning of trailers may be growing, as their number and viewership numbers are constantly increasing (for example, on YouTube) (p. 71). Keeping these points in mind, we move on to the available trailers of *SMTV*.

Table 1. All videos related to *Shin Megami Tensei V* posted on the Official Atlus West channel, as of March 6th, 2022 (Official ATLUS West, n.d.).

| Name | Date | Views (rounded up) | Comments |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------------|----------|
| Announcement Trailer | Nov 29, 2017 | 281k | 2381 |
| Announcement Trailer (PEGI) | Nov 29, 2017 | 43k | 307 |
| Announcement Trailer | Jul 20, 2020 | 457k | 5029 |
| Gameplay Trailer | Jun 21, 2021 | 84k | 1112 |
| Story Trailer | Jul 15, 2021 | 257k | 2524 |
| Bethel Trailer | Aug 12, 2021 | 53k | 809 |

| | | | |
|------------------------|--------------|------|-----|
| Nahobino Trailer | Sep 8, 2021 | 75k | 523 |
| English Cast Reveal | Sep 29, 2021 | 77k | 803 |
| World in Ruins Trailer | Oct 28, 2021 | 117k | 922 |
| Launch Celebration | Nov 11, 2021 | 28k | 117 |
| Launch Trailer | Nov 12, 2021 | 23k | 206 |
| Influencer First Look | Nov 22, 2021 | 10k | 144 |
| Accolades Trailer | Jan 26, 2022 | 79k | 551 |

The trailers whose comments will be analyzed are the Gameplay Trailer (Official ATLUS West, 2021a), Story Trailer (Official ATLUS West, 2021b), and the World in Ruins Trailer (Official ATLUS West, 2021d). One reason for the choices is the number of comments per trailer for the largest possible amount of data. Variety among the trailers is also important to increase the chances of there being different types of comments, and these trailers have different roles judging by their names: the gameplay, the story, and potentially a combination of the two near the launch of the game (World in Ruins Trailer). Most of the other videos have more miscellaneous topics and fewer comments. Looking at the dates when the videos were posted, the first two Announcement Trailers are much older compared to the other trailers, and could therefore be considered to be outside the main marketing campaign leading up to the game's launch. Another problem with announcement trailers is that they generally do not show much, and information is still very limited, leading to more general and unfocused comments.

Examining the contents of the chosen trailers should help answer the sub-question on what is shown in the trailers. To be noted is that all of the three trailers are voice acted in Japanese, placing an emphasis on subtitles for English speaking audiences. The Gameplay Trailer's first third is spent on story exposition, leading up to the moment the protagonist obtains superhuman powers. This is when the gameplay portion starts – he is shown traversing different environments in a three-dimensional world, avoiding hostile demons. Eventually he attacks one, and this leads us into a large section of the trailer where battles are shown. There is almost no screentime spent on navigating the menus,

but instead we are shown many attack animations by various demons and the protagonist. The trailer then enters into a calmer section, when conversations with demons and a shop menu are shown. The trailer ends after a brief story portion. The trailer contains two music tracks and very little dialogue.



Figure 2. A screenshot from the Gameplay Trailer, showing the battle screen, including enemies, a list of party members, selectable skills, and other UI elements. (Official ATLUS West, 2021a)

The Story Trailer is surprisingly similar in its structure: it begins and ends with story scenes, but also portrays a lot of gameplay scenes such as world traversal and fights against demons. However, there are many more story scenes, and the ones chosen are more dramatic: some of the scenes and dialogue imply the death of one or more characters. There are many of the protagonist's companions that are shown. In addition, there are more songs that can be heard, and they are more varied.

The World in Ruins Trailer also contains the story-gameplay-story structure, but the trailer goes more in-depth into the game's systems. The narrator talks to the audience directly, explaining various mechanics, focusing especially on those that are new to the series. There is guiding text in addition to the subtitles and in-game user interface, and it is used to highlight important concepts that are related to the new mechanics. This trailer that was published closer to the game's launch than the other two seems to communicate clearly to the audience what it is they are going to experience when playing *SMTV*.



Figure 3. A screenshot from the World in Ruins Trailer, showing how the audience is guided with edited text and keywords. (Official ATLUS West, 2021d)

4.3. Data

The data that the method will be used on are YouTube comments, including replies to them. From three trailers, the top 50 comments will be collected and analyzed, adding up to a total of 150 comments. “Top” here means the first comments when scrolling down from the video. YouTube has been chosen because there is an official channel by the game’s developer/publisher Atlus where trailers have been posted (Official ATLUS West, n.d.). The channel’s name implies that these are the videos targeted towards Western audiences, which would include English speakers. This makes the channel’s content relevant to this thesis. To understand differences in regional marketing, it should be noted that there is also an official Japanese YouTube channel of Atlus, which includes over 200 trailers of *SMTV*, most of which have not been officially translated (atlustube, n.d.).

At the moment of conducting the study, YouTube comments can be sorted in two ways: “Top comments” or “Newest first”. As this thesis is interested in the reception to marketing, most notable before a game’s launch, “Top comments” is the more relevant choice. However, how this sorting algorithm works has not been publicly revealed by YouTube. It could be removing very negative comments if they break the terms of service. It could also move certain types of comments lower, which would decrease the chances of me seeing them. In my own study, I have found that comments can get

reordered quickly, with the same trailer's two top comments switching places across two different sessions, with one day between those sessions. Using a sorting system without certainty of its operation is not preferable, but may be necessary when studying YouTube comments. Regardless of the algorithm, comments that are high up for one person should be relevant in that they are also seen by many others.

When examining the data, it should be noted who are behind the comments. To not only watch a trailer of something but also comment on the video usually indicates a level of interest. Many of the comments are possibly from fans of the series, awaiting the next instalment of their beloved franchise. When examining the reception to the trailers, the comments are what can be seen, but much remains hidden that cannot be studied with the same tools. Many of those people that the marketing is not effective on, whose reception is neutral to negative, are not heard due to the lack of comments.

4.4. Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis is a qualitative method that focuses on coding and themes to categorize the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe it as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns inside a set of data, useful for psychology but other fields as well (p. 79). It targets a larger data set instead of a specific data item while the researcher considers suitable themes (p. 81). When choosing what is a theme, much personal judgment from the researcher is required as statistical prevalence of one data type does not automatically make it a theme, but the research question(s) should instead guide the selection (p. 82). The different phases of thematic analysis are: reading and making initial notes of the data, coding features of the data set, combining codes and data into themes, reviewing these, defining and naming them, and finally producing a report (p. 87). My study will follow these steps, with user comments serving as the data whose codes and themes I will make decisions on.

I conducted my own study as follows. After gathering the top 50 comments from each trailer, adding up to a total of 150 comments, I inserted them as documents into the program ATLAS.ti. Using the program, I assigned codes for each comment, and eventually code groups in order to combine some similar codes into categories. The codes were not decided beforehand, but were created according to what the comments contained. At first, I examined comments individually, but after understanding the whole dataset, I returned to already examined comments to rename existing codes or to add new

ones that had emerged during the examination. There were a total of 34 codes and 6 code groups, which I eventually combined into three themes that seemed the most interesting from an academic point of view.

The codes were created according to what was talked about in the comments; for example, the code “inside joke” was given to comments that included a joke that referenced something specific that only someone knowledgeable about *SMT* could know. A single comment could have multiple codes assigned to it. For example, the short comment below had three different codes.

Oh good, they translated the better trailer

The comment was assigned the code “localization” due to it referring to official translations, “marketing” as it commented on trailers, which are a part of the marketing, and “other *SMTV* trailer” as it pointed towards another trailer instead of just the one whose comment section it was posted on. While all three of these codes are conceptually close to each other, I opted for more codes rather than fewer to not lose any nuance that the comments might contain.

There are limitations and disadvantages to consider with thematic analysis. Due to its flexibility, the method requires an appropriate research question and careful analysis of the data. I had a lot of options on what to focus on, which lead to many choices that had to be considered. The method also lacks continuity compared to many others in the sense that the comments come from a variety of sources. This means that commenting on things such as language use and contradictions may not be as useful as it would be when studying a single piece of data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 96–97.)

This method works well when applied to social media content, as posts are made by real people on the platform. Comments can be made for a variety of reasons, and studying them requires a qualitative approach for the most representative results. As internet comments can also be quite ambiguous, using human judgment to divide them into specific categories may be necessary.

Thematic analysis has been used to study social media content before. There have been many studies where posts on Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms have been analyzed with the method. Those most similar to my topic are the ones that study YouTube comments. For example, Rohlfing and Sonnenberg (2016) thematically

analyzed comments on a video containing racial hate to find how online users respond to such materials. In a more game-centric study, Yodovich and Kim (2021) looked at comments on videos of the YouTube channel Girlfriend Reviews, to find how viewers interact with them. Thematic analysis was used with another method to separate comments that were useful to the research question.

Other methods were also an option, but they had some weaknesses that made them unsuitable for this study. Quantitative methods would not have captured the intricacies of comments made by people, and the results may not have been accurate. Interviews and surveys may not have gotten enough answers, as the game is not very popular months after its launch, and the marketing campaign was over by the time the study was conducted. Close reading would have possibly meant fewer comments to focus on, but gauging the overall reception to something requires a large amount of data.

4.5. Ethics and Considerations

YouTube comments could be viewed in two ways: as public, and free to be used in studies with all their information included; or as merely semi-public, not originally meant to be used in a study. This requires careful consideration of how the data should be handled. Anonymization of the users will be done so that no personal or identifiable information is found in the study, to protect their rights and to be in line with the Association of Internet Researcher's ethical principles (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 4–5.) as well as Europe's GDPR law. Usernames, avatars, and any content in the comments that could lead to identification will not be shown. Direct quotes are used to portray comments accurately, as they were posted.

There are multiple problems related to analyzing internet comments. They do not necessarily portray a user's true feelings on a subject, so the capability to gauge reception is not perfect. Users may not be sincere, and detecting irony and jokes is up to me as the researcher. Detecting deception and lies in general, even in face-to-face situations, is difficult for humans and the average person is only slightly better at it than if they tossed a coin (Vrij, 2008, p. 141). Also, deception does not always originate from the commenter, as organizations can hire people to represent their agendas in the form of viral marketing (Oh & Park, 2021, p. 390). To counter these issues, I will do my best to closely read and analyze the comments, while also acknowledging their limitations as data.

5 RESULTS

This chapter begins by making general comments about the findings. Then, the main themes will be introduced, supported by data. The themes are: 1. First-timers vs. Veterans, 2. Characters, and 3. Demons. These topics were prevalent across the three comment sections, but they were also chosen because many of the comments that discussed these topics were relatively long or nuanced. This increased their potential to produce interesting results after being analyzed. The topics also resonated with previous studies – for example, game characters have been examined by Blom (2020, 2022).

Nearly all of the analyzed comments were positive towards the trailer and/or the game, with only one case where the tone could be seen as neutral at worst. This may be the result of the algorithm: if most people that watch the trailer and engage with the comments section are fans, their dislikes of negative comments could effectively push those comments lower. There were not many long, complicated, or nuanced comments in the data, which could also imply that the algorithm favors simple and short comments. It could also mean that the environment that is the comment section of video game trailers values and pressures users to write short comments.

A general observation of the commenters was that their avatars and names were quite homogenous. Most had a picture of a game or anime character, or a name that referenced either form of media. Some users had specific interests which was visible as they commented on multiple trailers. For example, one user commented on the music of different trailers, while another made jokes on multiple comment sections.

The positivity combined with the fact that the same users commented on multiple trailers implies that those whose comments are shown at the top are fans of the marketed game. While this thesis only analyzed the top comments, it is possible that this concentration of fans continues across the whole comment section, depending on how the algorithm works. Regardless, considering their avatars and names, the fans in question appeared to have an interest in Japanese popular culture, such as other games and anime series as well. In other words, the fanbase of *SMTV* appears to be intertwined with other fanbases existing around Japanese pop culture.

A final general note on the comments that connects to Chapter Three's problematization of the term JRPG is that users did not talk about the game's genre. For example, there were no arguments whether *SMTV* is a JRPG. This could mean multiple things: that the

game's genre identity is clear and does not need to be discussed, or that the topic was not interesting enough compared to discussing the trailers and celebrating excitement. The genre label was not presented in the trailers, and it is possible that that inclusion by the marketers could have sparked conversation on the topic.

5.1. First-timers vs. Veterans

One of the main results was the connection between *SMTV* and *Persona 5*. *Persona* is a spin-off series that branched off from mainline *SMT* in 1996 with the release of *Revelations: Persona*. Some generalizations can be made about similarities and differences between the two series. Both are JRPGs with turn-based combat, and both contain many of the same collectable demons. The *Persona* games take place in Japanese high schools, with the game divided between normal school life and supernatural, combat-focused exploration. *Persona* is focused more on story and characters, with a large amount of time spent talking to the supporting cast. This is especially notable with later entries, as a major feature, Social Links (Confidants in *Persona 5*), has the player socialize and deepen bonds with their comrades while gaining rewards to aid in battles. In addition, *Persona* can be considered to be more accessible than the more difficult mainline *SMT* series (Fontes, 2019).

The *Persona* series has become popular worldwide, selling over 15 million units, with North American and European sales having exceeded expectations. *Persona 5 Royal*, the enhanced edition of the fifth installment, has sold over 1.8 million copies. (Romano, 2021). Comparing this number to the last reported sales of *Shin Megami Tensei IV*, 600,000 (Romano, 2016), and *SMTV*'s sales surpassing million copies sold (Official ATLUS West, 2022), the spin-off series may have overtaken the mainline series in modern popularity. This statistical difference between the series appeared to be common knowledge among the commenters, with some directly referencing it. Multiple commenters hoped that the success of *Persona 5* would have an effect on *SMTV*, both in terms of popularity and game quality.

I really hope this game explodes into popularity like Persona 5 did. They went ham with it, and SMT deserves it

This is probably the first SMT game where money really isn't an issue, the production quality is through the roof on this one. Persona 5 money is really doing work.

Multiple commenters said that this was going to be their first (mainline) *SMT* game, with many having only played *Persona* before. It seemed to be a trend that while *Persona* served as an approachable first foray into *SMT* for many, they were now ready for a different experience with a new mainline release on a popular, modern console. The Japanese school setting shown in the trailers, reminding of *Persona*, may also have been designed to attract these people toward the new release. Despite differences between the game series, all commenters were excited to try *SMTV*. One newcomer, while being transparent that they came from *Persona*, was wary of how they would be received by the existing community.

I've only ever played *Persona* games (call me cringe or whatever), and this will be my first mainline *SMT* game. I hope it's a good starting point, because it looks so incredible

The influx of new players was noticed and commented on by older *SMT* fans. Comments ranged from welcoming to ones that highlighted the divide between the two series.

This will probably be a lot of people's first *SMT* game. Welcome. I hope you have fun.

Smt to persona: Sit back kiddo. Let the grown ups shoe you how it's done.

As a new player expects hostility (“call me cringe or whatever”), and a presumably older fan implies that the returning mainline series is in some ways superior to the newer, more popular *Persona*, there is clearly some tension among the fanbases. The rhetorical construction that some games and gamers are more “real” or better than others, based on their meritocratic norms (Paul, 2018, p. 66,), appears to be on display here. Mainline *SMT* games can be considered more meritocratic than *Persona 5*, as they consist of much more fighting and leveling while arguably requiring more strategy to proceed through difficult sections in order to beat the games. The tension is also amplified by the difference in sales, and more recently, by the recurring comparisons to *Persona 5* in reviews of *SMTV*: fans of mainline *SMT* being angry at reviewers of *SMTV* often drawing comparisons to *Persona 5* (Jiang, 2021). There appears to be some elitism, patronization, or gatekeeping in the fanbase.

5.2. Characters

The importance of characters, typically central in JRPGs, could be seen in the comments. Especially the main character was focused on. His design, such as the long hair and lightsaber, as well as his overall attractiveness, was praised.

Can we talk about how the Nahobino struts his stuff while walking like a super model?

Aside from visual design, the hero's role in the story was speculated, and he was compared to previous protagonists of the series. For example, the protagonist of *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, Demi-fiend, is brought up due to his similar looks to the new protagonist, as well as due to their contrasting objectives (which can be interpreted from the story trailer of *SMTV*).

So demi fiend worked to be a true demon and now this nahobino is working towards godhood? Interesting

Naobino looks like demi fiend fused with aleph and a little bit flynn

The other characters were also a major talking point. The human characters, comrades of the protagonist, were talked about mainly in a neutral, speculative tone. Their school uniforms were praised, and the character designer's (Masayuki Doi) preference for color coding the humans was noted.

Doi really loves his Color Coded main characters. Atleast we know that they're definitely turning into those Gods seen on the boxart.

The roles of the characters was heavily speculated due to how previous entries of the series have handled story branches: during the story, the comrades usually develop towards a certain moral alignment, becoming representatives of different choices and endings. It was assumed that this new cast would also consist of dynamic characters (Blom, 2020), with player choices affecting their development and fates in the narrative. The large number of characters was thought to have an effect on the story in the form of many endings. The assumptions that the characters would have similar roles to those in previous *SMT* games substantiated that many commenters were knowledgeable fans of the series.

I want the cast to naturally transition into their alignment, Instead of just randomly becoming genocidal politicians.

As the characters' fates were speculated, there was a common joke that juxtaposed *Persona* and *Shin Megami Tensei*: the former promotes friendship, whereas the latter often requires the player to kill at least some of the protagonist's friends to advance the chosen story path. The fans seemed to be aware of the typical story structure and tropes of both series, which lead to referential remarks about the new characters.

Persona: Which of all of these characters do I want to hang out with? SMT:
Which of these characters do I not want to have to murder.

5.3. Demons

Demons in *SMTV* are collectable and trainable entities, much like Pokémon in the *Pokémon* games. Demons are repeatedly fought against, but they can also be recruited to the player's party through dialogue options during battle while they are still hostile, or by fusing two other demons together in an external menu. The demons' names and appearance are inspired by real-world mythologies and religions. They have some lines of dialogue in recruitment scenes, when they gain levels, and when they randomly reward the player with items. Player-controlled demons are designed to be disposable tools, as game mechanics such as weaknesses, skill inheritance, and demon fusion push the player towards changing their party composition often. However, demons in *SMT* games have different roles: Most of the game's bosses and quest givers are also demons, and these demons play a larger role in the story instead of being units the player can fight and integrate into their party. Overall, demons are a central and recognizable part of the series and the aforementioned aspects related to them are common in *SMT*.

The comments reflected the importance of demons. The previous mainline entry, *SMTIV* on the Nintendo 3DS, portrayed the demons as static 2D images without unique animations. A fan made a comparison and praised the visual upgrade.

Looks great! Nice to see the demons in 3D and not just cardboard cutouts.
Love that the player character has long hair.

As many of the same demons appear in multiple games, some have become staples and fan favorites. There are expectations and assumptions from the fans on which demons will be available in a new game. This was discussed in the comments, with fans hoping that specific demons would be included, and some being delighted that they saw their favorite in a trailer.

I'm so glad to see that Metatron is back

Alice in the game, definitely a one day purchase lmao.

Completely new additions to the demon roster were also celebrated.

alice minding her own place little red apeared HERE COMES A NEW
CHALLENGER!!!

In the above comments, a returning demon called Alice, as well as a new demon “little red” (in-game name Idun) are referenced. These specific examples will be revisited in the next chapter.

6 DISCUSSION

This chapter examines the results of the thesis in the context of previously published studies, and frames them in a way that answers the sub-questions: how do audiences respond to the trailers, and what parts of it are effective and why? The chapter also introduces new arguments that stem from this paper's findings. Firstly, discussion among fans is addressed and analyzed, focusing on who are commenting and why. Then, more specific topics, the themes that fans were discussing and seemingly felt were important, are approached: the franchise's media mix, as well as *SMTV*'s characters and demons. Discussing what fans are talking about is key to understanding what kinds of marketing resonate with them, and studying and analyzing the comments more gives us knowledge with which to address the main research question about reception: how are the English trailers of *Shin Megami Tensei V* received by their YouTube audiences?

6.1. Fan Identity and Discussion

As noted at the start of Chapter Five, most of the comments appeared to have been written by fans, so let us first examine what being a fan means, what they value, and how they converse. The comments fit well within previous studies on fan participation, such as the article by Jenkins (2006) where he uses the term participatory culture, which, as explained in section 2.3., refers to the fact that consumers are now increasingly participating in media. Fiske (1992, p. 39) categorized one type of the productivity of fans as textual productivity, one where texts are not created for profit and where they circulate only inside their own community. Even this relatively rigid and old definition resonates with internet comments and their context. Lamerichs (2018, p. 14) defines fandom as fan activities, or “interpretive and creative practices in which invested audience members engage”. While comments did include creative ways to communicate excitement, such as jokes and references, interpretation is an even more relevant term here, as it portrays what fans do when a new trailer for an upcoming product is released. Of course, internet comments on YouTube only represent one part of fandoms, and so this study gives a limited view of *SMT* fans, their practices, and their productivity.

The commenters appeared to mostly be fans of either *SMT* or other products of Japanese popular culture. Fandoms are important in supporting media mixes, and the internet has brought them together to celebrate their favorite franchises. Games are only a part of a larger whole, and anime, manga, toys, cosplay, and the social circles surrounding these

can increase each other's attractiveness. Closely related to fandom, otaku culture in the West plays a role in the global success of JRPG franchises. The term otaku could be translated as nerd or geek, and ingrained in it are notions of the person being, to some extent, a social outcast that is obsessed with their hobbies, usually having to do with anime and manga (Morikawa, 2012). The culture is a sort of counterculture, rejecting mainstream values by focusing on extreme fantasy through hobbies (p. 14). While the term originates from Japan, it can be used by people globally to identify and unite under it.

The general tone of the commenters was excited, and this correlates with previous research. In Lamerichs' (2018, p. 83) study, fans of the TV series *Sherlock* were interested in "sharing their passion of the series and interpreting the episodes". They discussed the setting, dialogue, and even wrote character studies and episode recaps (p. 83). In a similar manner, fans of *SMTV* publicly rejoiced in their anticipation of a new release, sharing their elation among others in the comment section while engaging in interpretative practices. Instead of episodes, these were trailers, part of a marketing campaign for the main product. Regardless, the trailers provided ample video material for interpretation: there are various characters, game menus, narrators, and scenes that are presented without much context. The uncertainty and speculation created by trailers that show just enough seemed to motivate fans to converse and engage with each other in the comment sections. Examples of fan practices in the comment sections will be examined further in the following sections.

YouTube can be seen as a network of production, a core concept of fandoms outlined by Lamerichs (2018, p. 30), and this framing can tell us more about the meaning of the YouTube comment section, which exists as an important part of the network. She describes networks of production as spaces which fan works share with the media industry, where fans share social protocols, terminology, and hierarchies among each other, and where they get awarded with social status for their participation (p. 30). While Lamerichs does not describe the concept much more than this, I would argue that YouTube, as a large website and a platform for content creators, exists as a network of production. Inside this network, fans, among other users, write, reply, and vote in the comment sections of specific videos. The reason why a YouTube comment section (a smaller entity than the whole platform) should not by itself be considered a network of production is that the users are not as permanent, and users' identities may not be as

meaningful to other users. There are many users and comments in different trailers' comment sections on YouTube, and perhaps due to the algorithm, the posts are shuffled around so that cases where the same commenter gains visibility in many different comment sections may be rare. This leads to looser hierarchies, and the (limited) value of a comment may therefore be determined more by its content than who posted it. A glimpse of hierarchy in YouTube's *SMTV* fandom was seen, however, as a two commenters referred to a community member's work (BuffMaister, 2021) on posting Japanese *SMTV* trailers with English translations:

Man, you guys are on top of this with the main trailers huh? It'd be kinda neat to see the daily demon showcases get put out in English as chunks. But even then Buffmaister is doing a good job too.

Buffmaister be like: *Hold my beer*

Referring to a community member by name tells about the commenters' close relationship with the fandom. In addition, this example shows that large contributions (BuffMaister posting translated trailers on YouTube) are valued highly, more so than comments. The video creator was referred to by name despite not taking part in the comments among the data, and BuffMaister's value in the fandom can be surmised from this. The value that a comment has in the community, as opposed to video(s), seems to be much lower. A comment that is judged as good by the fan community is awarded with upvotes, and at best, positive replies, even if the comment creator themselves may be unseen or forgotten in an instant by other users. In summary, the results indicated that fans do not appreciate comments on YouTube videos highly, while in contrast the posting of videos – in which precious information (translations) is communicated to the rest of the fandom – was awarded with social status.

Fanspeak, or a shared lingua franca, is prevalent in fandoms (Lamerichs, p. 238). Some of the comments had traces of otaku culture, as well as specific terms and concepts from the game series that showed the posters were familiar with either *SMT* or Japanese popular culture. Below are some examples of fanspeak from the comments. "Hoy" is a greeting used by a character in *SMTIV*, and the protagonist of that game is often referred to as "godslayer" in dialogue. "Agibarion" is a powerful fire skill in *SMTV*, used in this context to replace "fire".

HOY ! All aboard the Hype train my fellow godslayers !

This trailer is straight "Agibarion"

Ranalan's (2018) and Herianto's (2014) studies showed that users in a fan forum and a website providing anonymous discussion used more positive politeness strategies than negative ones. Indeed, the tone of discussion was positive, reinforced by excitement among fans:

I love how healthy this comment section is. Seeing us megaten fans together like this is so awesome. V better be godlike.

The environment, YouTube's comment section, contains fans who are seemingly strangers to each other share their excitement, and the common opinion to the trailer is positive (it was for *SMTV*'s trailers). While this thesis' results mostly seem to continue the trend of positivity in discussion, there was an interesting exception with one comment:

0:55 Twitter's meltdown and tears incoming.

The timestamp posted refers to a point in the Gameplay Trailer where the protagonist is addressed as "young man". The comment is probably connected to a popular topic during an early point of the marketing campaign when the fandom was still discussing the androgynous protagonist's gender identity. Some fans were not sure about the gender (Chadwick69, 2020) until Atlus' promotional material, such as YouTube trailers, confirmed him to be a male. By calling out "Twitter", referring to the social media platform and that part of the *SMT* fandom, tension between that side and YouTube's side of the fandom can be seen. The commenter seems to imply that Twitter users care (too) much about the issue, or at least more than YouTube users, and anticipates that they will react strongly.

6.2. Shin Megami Tensei Media Mix

This section focuses on a topic that was deemed important by multiple fans, the *SMT* media mix. Both *SMTV* and *Persona 5* belong in the *SMT* franchise, which has been supported by games, anime, figurines, and other products and releases. Judging by the comments (seen in section 5.1), fans are seemingly aware of not only the various parts of the *SMT* media mix, but also the power dynamics between them. For example, comments noted that the success and popularity of *Persona 5*, the previous big release of Atlus, must have an effect on both the popularity and budget of *SMTV*, and that budget translated into quality visible in the trailers. Another, more minor example is fans recognizing their

favorite demons and celebrating that they were chosen to be included in this game among a large number of potential ones from the media mix. As fans of Sherlock did with the TV series, comparing and connecting it with previous iterations of Sherlock Holmes (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 99), the commenters connected the upcoming game, as well as its trailers, to the larger *SMT* media mix. This implies that some fans have obtained the skills to understand meanings behind products and trailers, perhaps by navigating between different fandoms of Japanese popular culture, and familiarizing themselves in these marketing strategies. This is in line with Lamerichs' (2018, p. 101) findings, where fans displayed transmedia competence. Lamerichs goes on to describe fans as critical, independent thinkers (p. 237), and some of my results correlate with this statement, like the comments shown in section 5.1 where fans recognized the effect *Persona*'s success could have on *SMTV*. At the same time, most of the comments were short, and it was hard to determine whether the commenters were as "critical" or "independent" as Lamerichs' fans were. YouTube comments may not be the ideal data for judging this: it could be the case that longer, more critical comments are not favored by the algorithm, but currently, we have no way of knowing this.

SMT harnesses its media mix in specific ways that should be clarified further. I would argue that *SMTV* eloquently uses transmedia elements to garner the interest of fans of the existing media mix, but does not strongly present an apparent continual transmedia story. According to Jenkins (2007), transmedia storytelling refers to a process where a fiction gets spread across different channels to create a *unified* experience, and ideally, all of these parts contribute to the unfolding of *a* story. Most major *SMT* entries are marketed as self-contained stories, and no continual storytelling is implied. While the *SMT* games are mostly sequels in name only, each with their own, self-contained stories instead of a more unified front of contribution like *The Matrix* or *Star Wars* have (Jenkins, 2006), there are repeating transmedia elements. The series does have some continuation behind the main narratives which is often only slightly hinted at (for example, in *SMTV*, the state of the worlds, the returning antagonist Lucifer, and many other references have left fans speculating that *SMTV* is a sequel to *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*, taking place after the older game), but the most apparent connection in the media mix are the demons, a topic that will be examined in the last section of this chapter. Among trailer comments, fans seemed to be very interested in transmedia elements specifically, speculating how the new entry could relate to previous ones and whether their favorite characters or demons would reappear.

I'm happy for a new SMT game and a chance to absolutely SHIT out of Odin again. I'm really hoping they bring Nanashi and/or Flynn back.

This trailer is so good, it had a lot going on that makes you question the opportunities and choices that will be made during the actual story. Also got to see Lucifer appearing again, METATRON FIRE OF SINAI TOO.. I wonder if he's also going to play a big role again, this time around. These last few days are going to be the hardest

Other transmedia elements include almost all skills used in the series' combat, like "Fire of Sinai" mentioned above. In contrast, I would argue that mainline *SMT* characters are not strongly utilized as transmedia entities. Some characters are rarely used in multiple *SMT* games when it comes to games that are not narratively connected, although *SMTV* does have downloadable content that adds *Shin Megami Tensei III: Nocturne*'s main character as a boss and recruitable demon. Similarly, other *SMT* protagonists appear in other Atlus games as extra content, such as in *Etrian Odyssey Origins Collection* (Romano, 2023). However, outside of games, mainline *SMT*'s human characters do not have a strong presence (for example, as merchandise like accessories and figurines), especially compared to *Persona*.

6.3. Characters and their Role

Out of all of the commenters' reactions, praises, and theories towards the trailers, a large portion focused on characters. Why characters are so interesting (what do fans like?) and why they are prevalent in trailers (some video game trailers are even specifically titled "character trailers") should be discussed further. Also, examining what kinds of characters illicit responses from fans is at the core of this thesis. According to existing literature, game characters being deemed important by fans is not surprising. Blom (2020, pp. 3–4) argues that game characters shape our understanding of reality, reflecting our societies while also being an important part of transmedia practices. Dynamic game characters are characters who develop depending on a player's actions (Blom, 2020, p. 10). The dynamic human companions of mainline *SMT* stories have historically had very different fates depending on player choices and story branches: for example, in *SMTIV*, choosing dialogue options that value order and authority pushes the player towards the "Law" route and ending, causing the major character Jonathan to side with them, while changing the "Chaos" route representative Walter's role from friend to enemy. The opposite is true when choosing the chaos route, and these changes affect the scenes and

characterizations of Jonathan and Walter. The characters present in the trailers of *SMTV* were expected to be similarly dynamic by the fans as well.

With this many characters imma assume theres more than just three endings
with this smt game

An interesting angle to character discussion requires us to return to the comparison between the main *SMT* series and *Persona*. The dynamics between the two series (explained in section 5.1; for example, *Persona* is more popular and focuses on characters) have the potential to affect fans' expectations, but it may also lead to changes in marketing. While mainline *SMT* characters have often merely served as catalysts for the plot, *Persona* has been more character-centric due to how much focus the main cast gets in terms of screentime, depth, game mechanics, and transmedia presence. This difference could have interesting consequences to fan discussion and the merging of *SMT* fandoms. The *Persona 5* fans coming to try out their first mainline *SMT* game, who there appears to be many of considering comments and the game's popularity, may fixate heavily on characters while having high expectations of how they are written and how prevalent they are in the game. This could shift discussion to be more character-centric. Of course, from a marketing point of view, emphasizing *SMTV*'s characters in trailers could be a way to bring over *Persona* fans, regardless of how large a role they play in the game. The large fanbase of *Persona* could be a lucrative source of income if those people become fans of the rest of the *SMT* media mix. They already have familiar elements to latch onto between *Persona 5* and *SMTV*, such as the art style, same demons, and practically identical battle system. Selling them on the new game's characters could be the critical final step in getting *Persona* fans to buy *SMTV*.

An interesting follow-up question to ask when it comes to characters is whether *SMTV*'s marketing campaign is primarily attempting to sell this single product to the maximum number of people, or to convert *Persona* fans into *SMT* fans in a more lasting sense. Promising focus on good characters with trailers for a game that does not have that (in fact, some reviews of *SMTV*'s criticized its weak characters and their roles in the story (Flynn, 2021) may produce only short-term sales. Regardless, since commenters were interested in characters, one could argue that the trailers are simply showing fans what they wish to see, and showing condensed clips of the most interesting scenes and dialogue of the game's characters (I would argue that especially the Story Trailer does this) can hardly be called false advertising. Misleading it may be, and the situation brings up

questions about Atlus' intentions with their marketing, as well as broader ethical problems about trailers.

6.4. The Meaning of Demons

Intertwined with the topic of characters, demons should also be analyzed as they were another important part of the commenters' positive and excited reception of the trailers. Their roles in *SMT* were briefly explained in section 5.3, but they should be further explored due to their complex nature. These demons are not exclusively from Christian origins, but rather draw from many different religious and secular sources (O'Donnell, 2015, p. 156). These sources include but are not limited to Japanese folklore, Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American traditions, Norse mythology, and Sumerian mythology (p. 145). The collectable demons of the franchise appear in numerous games of the media mix, but also outside of it in various forms, such as plushies and other merchandise. When examining what kind of entities the demons are, it helps to juxtapose them with characters. Bertetti (2014, p. 2345) defines transmedia characters as "fictional heroes whose adventures are told across different media platforms, each one giving more details on the life of that character". This shows why the demons of *SMT* are (usually) not characters: they do not have their own adventures, instead being part of the player character's adventure.

One of the most important aspects of demons is collecting them, which normally means recruiting enemy demons through dialogue in battle. This recruitment process is designed to be engaging, with many different lines of dialogue across different demons that include humorous portrayals of their personalities. *SMT* games include a feature called the Demon Compendium, which tracks the demons that the player has collected, including a registration percent. Similar to the Pokédex in *Pokémon*, this database is, by design, made to be filled and motivates the player to collect more demons. Svelch (2018, p. 3) talks about the encyclopedic impulse, the "urge to control and contain the unknown" in a chaotic world, and calls it a colonizing move. In *SMT*, another motivating factor for collecting demons is the game mechanic called Demon Fusion, the act of combining demons to gain new demons (even ones unobtainable through normal recruitment). Owned demons are used in battle, and they gain experience points, levels, and skills when in the party. These types of utilization-oriented interactions are what most interactions between the player and the demons in a typical playthrough of *SMT* consist of. If we only

consider them, demons could mostly be described as tools or stand-ins for numbers and statistics, with little to no in-fiction agency.

Some exceptions do exist, however. There are demons that have their own small stories in the form of Sub Quests (*SMTV*'s name for side quests). For example, in *SMTV*'s The Spirit of Love Sub Quest, the friendly and interactable demon Apsaras asks the protagonist to kill the demon Leanan Sidhe. After reaching Leanan Sidhe, the protagonist talks to it and he can either carry out their original task and initiate combat or switch sides and instead fight Apsaras. The demon who the protagonist sided with then joins the party. Most of the game's Sub Quests are focused on combat, but the small snippets of dialogue they include portray the demons as beings that exist in the world, with their own lives and human-like personalities. Similarly, some of the game's bosses such as the demon Nuwa have a large role in the main story. These examples of demons that are a part of a story could be described as rigid or non-dynamic characters (Blom, 2020, p. 151), having mostly predetermined development.

Most of the demons are primed to be used as transmedia entities due to their mythological nature. The demons' names and visuals reinforce a player's assumption that these monsters are meant to be direct representations of their original or previous versions. Various mythological or religious figures from epics, legends, and folklore across the world are included in the series, and many are recognizable, through their names and designs, even without knowledge of *SMT*. The games eclectically equalize many creatures and figures (de Wildt & Aupers, 2020). What this means is that all religious, historical, folkloric, and even game-original demons are seen as "equally sacred and existent" in the game's world (p. 325). Regionally noteworthy figures could incite discussion among players from those areas. According to Sapach (2017, p. 64), the use of familiar characters may increase the player's attachment to them. The games generally do relatively little to insert personality into the demons, as described above, only having a few lines of dialogue for most of them and only including a select few in the game's main or side stories. As for their visual design, the freedoms taken by the artists can vary, but the representations are often true to at least one version of the corresponding mythological figure.

There are also multiple demon designs that fit common tropes seen in JRPGs and Japanese media mixes, and those demons appeared to be popular in the comments. While none of the demons match the iconic Pikachu from *Pokémon* in terms of popularity, many

are nonetheless beloved by fans. One demon that was mentioned in the comments was the prominent mascot demon Jack Frost that, like many Japanese mascots, also represents the company behind the franchise, in this case Atlus (Official ATLUS West, 2021c). This kind of character branding is trendy in the country, as cute characters act as unifying symbols of identity, appearing everywhere in urban Japan as commercialized goods (Allison, 2003, p. 387). As characters and mascots are important in Japan, they are in turn often utilized in media mixes. Steinberg (2012, p. ix) notes that media interconnectivity is an important feature of the character merchandising that is so prevalent in Japan. Here, a commenter is talking about a new version of Jack Frost they thought of, saying they would enjoy if the classic mascot would appear in the protagonist's (Nahobino) clothes, as this happened in *Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey* (2009): it had a Jack Frost wearing the Demonica suit that that game's protagonist uses.

Want to know what'd be cool? A Nahobino Jack frost, sort of like the demonica jack frost!

Jack Frost could be categorized as a yuru-kyara, a major force in Japanese markets, which are designed as “loose, easy, lazy, careless, half-hearted, lenient”, often anthropomorphic mascot characters (Wong, 2017, p. 4).

There is another popular Japanese character design trope among the demons that should be examined. Galbraith (2019, 2021) has done extensive research on the otaku subculture, such as conducting anthropological studies on people with intimate relations to manga and anime characters. The demons Alice and Idun that were enthusiastically mentioned by fans (as seen in section 5.3) represent the bishōjo, or cute girl, aesthetics (Galbraith, 2021, p. 3), amplified by large eyes (p. 126) and other cutesy features such as dresses. The excited comments focusing on these two show the effectiveness of catering to specific parts of a fanbase, in this example the group that is attracted to cute girl characters, and the potential effect it could have on sales. Using cuteness in marketing makes sense, as it catches people's attention and induces positive feelings (Nittono, 2016, pp. 89–90).

Both of the above examples of demons, yuru-kyara and bishōjo, represent popular design tropes in Japanese popular culture. Japanese cuteness is important in global business with large revenue (Allison, 2004, p. 36). Judging from the results of this thesis, these character design tropes seem to garner positive reception from fans, specifically those who are already familiar with them. However, it is important to ask how non-fans would receive

these characters. Are different forms of (Japanese) character designs an effective force in selling *SMTV* to new players, maybe even ones who are not familiar with Japanese popular culture and tropes associated with it? And if that is not the case, is the marketing strategy simply to please the existing fanbase, or to also attract other fandoms of Japanese popular culture who are drawn to these designs?

Now that it has been established what demons are, the fans' relationship with them can be further discussed to deepen our understanding on why they are a focus in the game's marketing and why fans respond to them so positively. As noted before, callbacks to familiar mythological and religious figures through visual design, as well as character aesthetics such as mascots and cute girls, can increase the demons' likeability among fans. However, the demons are not simply looked at in the games. While watching the trailers and commenting on them, existing fans expect to collect and utilize the shown demons in various ways, as they have in previous games of the series. The collecting mechanic in *SMT* (and other games such as *Pokémon*) can be considered compelling because it "successfully satisfies the needs not only of the collector, but of the database animal, and the individual (consciously or unconsciously) that is seeking symbolic or literal immortality" (Sapach, 2017, p. 72), referring to the fact that players find meaning in filling their collections of monsters and showing them to others. The concept of the database animal originates from Azuma (2001/2009), who describes with it the players' animalistic consumption of collectable (cute) characters and creatures, while pointing out their disregard for the backstories of those characters (Sapach, p. 68). The medium of videogames simplifies the collection process, which is suitable for shorter attention spans (p. 72).

Allison (2006, p. 204) writes (while talking about *Pokémon*) that capitalism is animated with "playscapes whose logic masters new frontiers by 'getting' indigenous creatures and converting them into possessions, powers, and pals." This also applies to *SMTV*, but there is the added layer of religious ethics that more deeply problematizes player interactions with demons. Combined with the previously discussed eclectic equalization of demons (de Wildt & Aupers, 2020), their portrayal as religious or mythological figures is diminished when they are utilized as tools, or disposable materials by the players. Švelch (2018, p. 4) writes about cataloging monsters in role-playing games: "'encyclopedic containment' decidedly objectifies them, eliminating their unknown and sublime features". In essence, the fans' relationship with demons is, by design, distant, even if the

fans look forward to utilizing the creatures. While no critique of this sort was presented in the comments, the reason may be that the commenters are fans, and they know what to expect from the franchise. Demons are such a core concept in *SMT* that hiding them by not showing them in trailers would be nearly impossible. This leads to the same conclusion that some of the demon designs pointed towards: the marketing clearly and boldly shows the game's contents, probably because it tries to appeal mainly to existing fans instead of a massive audience with a multitude of sensibilities. According to the results, the fans are pleased.

7 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to find out how the English trailers of *SMTV* are received by their YouTube audiences. While working towards that goal, I explored concepts such as trailers, fandom, and culture while presenting previous research on these and other related topics. My own thematic analysis showed that comments were positive and excited, most notably discussing the *SMT* media mix and different types of characters (human and demon companions) shown in the trailers. These topics being prevalent was unsurprising, as they are an important part of the JRPG genre that *SMTV* belongs to. In this chapter, I will first answer the sub-questions to give more context on the audience's reception, and after that, the main research question.

SQ1: Who are the audiences that are targeted and affected by the marketing?

The audiences that were targeted by the promotional trailers were mainly fans of either the main *SMT* series, the media mix surrounding it (which includes products such as the popular *Persona* games), or Japanese media in general. This was noticed by examining the commenters' profile pictures as well as specific comments that referenced topics that implied belonging to a fandom of Japanese games or series. The contents of the trailers, such as which demons were shown, also seemed to target existing fans instead of a wider audience.

SQ2: How is this game marketed, and what is shown in the trailers?

As explained in 4.3, *SMTV* was marketed with different types of trailers that show characters in different scenes and gameplay portions such as battles, customization, and exploration. The parts of the videos focusing on battles highlighted a large number of demons with detailed animations attacking with their abilities. The story scenes and dialogue that were shown were quite revealing, but should not necessarily be considered spoilers as they were presented without context. All trailers included different music tracks from the game, as well as dialogue from different characters which did not necessarily match the scenes that were concurrently shown in the trailer. The clearest focus that the game's marketing had was characters and demons – there were not only a large number of them in the three examined trailers, but the hundreds of trailers published by Atlus' Japanese YouTube channel (atlustube, n.d.) that each introduce a demon support this argument. This study focused on comments on three specific YouTube

trailers posted on the Official Atlus West channel, although there were many other trailers on other channels, as well as presence on social media.

SQ3: How do the audiences respond to the marketing?

The audiences responded to the marketing positively, as fans talked about what they saw in the trailers, analyzing and interpreting the limited number of scenes they were shown. They praised the visuals of the game, noting an increase in budget for the series. They were also impressed with the number of trailers, and therefore, were pleased with the relatively strong marketing campaign that *SMTV* had.

The comment sections also included metacommentary on the *SMT* fandom. The fans responded by talking about their own statuses as parts of the fandom: some commenters told this was going to be their first mainline *SMT* game, some having only played *Persona* games, whereas some older fans of mainline *SMT* welcomed the new fans. In these ways, audiences responded to the marketing by discussing the changing fandom that they themselves belonged to in the comment sections of the trailers. In other words, not all responses were about what the marketing showed.

SQ4: What parts of the trailers are effective and why?

The parts of the trailers that could be considered effective marketing, judging from topics that engaged multiple commenters, were characters and story. Many commenters engaged with these topics, motivated by excitement and the need for interpretation.

SQ5: What can the results tell about the reception of English marketing of JRPGs in general?

While nothing definitive can be said as the JRPG genre is full of different kinds of games, *SMTV* is a good candidate for representing JRPGs: it shares many conventions such as turn-based battles, a party of characters that can be leveled up, anime-style graphics, and story tropes. Using the idea of “fitting” by Pelletier-Gagnon and Hutchinson (2022, p. 5) – comparing the game to previous games that are considered JRPGs – I would argue that *SMTV* clearly fits inside the socially constructed idea of the JRPG genre. Fans and journalists have also branded the game and the series as a JRPG (Szpytek, 2022; Carter, 2013). Many important issues in the results also seem to be important for Japanese games in general. As mentioned earlier, media mixes and characters seem to be interesting to fans. What ties these two together is recognition: fans react positively when they

recognize familiar characters, names, and tropes. The marketing of JRPGs seems to be tightly interwoven with fandoms. Leaning on characters and media mixes, for example through cross-promotion of characters from other games and franchises, may be a key aspect of JRPG marketing. Cross-promotion through characters has the potential to combine different fandoms: it can bring over fans of other Japanese products or franchises who see a familiar character.

RQ: How are the English trailers of *Shin Megami Tensei V* received by their YouTube audiences?

The answer to the main question draws from previous answers (SQ1–4). The YouTube audience that posted comments consists mostly of fans, and they reacted positively to the trailers. While there are a lot of things shown in the trailers, characters and demons were strongly focused on. Commenters especially enjoyed interpreting characters and story, anticipating events that are hinted at in the videos. The fans excitedly discussed their favorite returning demons from the *SMT* media mix. Not all comments talked about the game or the trailers – some commenters said that this was going to be their mainline *SMT* game, and they were welcomed warmly by others. Aside from substantial comments, there were also many jokes and references that affirmed that the commenters belonged to the fandom.

There were multiple limitations in this study. The commenters being fans was a crucial part of the comments, and the results, so seeing comments from non-fans would have been interesting and could have produced more varied results. How would non-fans have reacted to trailers that seemingly target fans? One possible way of achieving this would have been to examine trailers from other sources; for example, the Nintendo of America's YouTube channel (Nintendo of America, n.d.) posted the same trailers, but they garnered more views than those posted on Atlus' own channel. The more popular channel could have produced more varied comments, and more interesting topics could have emerged. Even so, to comment on a YouTube trailer implies some level of commitment – perhaps a different type of data would have been needed to hear from non-fans.

Another limitation has to do with culture. While it is an important topic when discussing and trying to define JRPGs, the cultural aspect was missing from the results. It is not known what culture the fans in this thesis' results are from, only that they can communicate in English. Fans behave and participate differently depending on their

culture (Lamerichs, 2018, p. 232). It would have been interesting to see how culture affects fans' (and non-fans') perceptions of the marketing and the prevalence of specific, more culturally loaded elements like the demons. Finding more about the commenters could be achieved with a different method, such as a qualitative survey.

Finally, perhaps the largest problem with using YouTube comments as data is the site's enigmatic algorithm. As it is not known how top comments are organized for users, and the fact that the order changes even for the same user, the algorithm complicates issues related to comments' value and visibility among users. Other problems with YouTube comments are similar to those posted on other social media platforms: the comments are generally short and their content is seldom interesting for research. However, as pointed out in Chapter One, video game trailers and the reception to them are understudied, and YouTube is the best option for a thesis examining this topic. Also, while single comments may not contribute to research, groups of them can reveal more fruitful trends and themes.

This thesis most notably contributes to the understudied topic of video game trailers. In addition, it contributes to studies of Japanese games by examining a Japanese game's English marketing, and the reception to that, using thematic analysis to study YouTube comments – a combination of topic, method, and data that is rare, if not the first of its kind in the field. Another contribution is to fan studies, and this thesis' findings correlated with Lamerichs' research (2018).

As for future research, there are still aspects specific to video game trailers (for example, how is interactive gameplay communicated to viewers) that should be studied more. The lack of research is partially understandable due to other trailers (such as movie trailers) serving a similar role, and many studies having been done on those, such as by Gray (2010). Video game marketing and promotion could also be studied more from a tighter perspective, like examining the marketing campaigns of specific games. Studying the reception to video game trailers, which this thesis did, can also be done in many unexplored ways, using a variety of methods while researching a plethora of topics.

If similar topics related to the marketing of Japanese games are studied in the future, different methods and data may prove useful. Knowing more about the people affected by marketing would probably benefit research a lot, so using a survey might be one of the better options. Another important aspect to consider is language – are there linguistic differences in the marketing depending on regional factors, and are there general

differences in the reception to marketing? Also, a scholar proficient in both Japanese and English would be able to study the differences between Japanese and English marketing, as well as their reception, to produce culturally interesting results.

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