

From Misfit to Guide: Toward a corrective depiction of Otaku and Hikikomori in Japanese videogame Persona 5

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Abstract

In the last four decades, 'otaku' and 'hikikomori,' namely popular culture enthusiasts and reclusive shut-ins, have been at the center of a heated debate in Japan concerning their social alienation. On the one hand, public opinion and mass media consider them individualistic nonconformists who selfishly disregard their interpersonal obligations, thus posing a threat to the cohesion of the nation. On the other hand, cultural critics, social scientists, and professional psychiatrists argue that their isolation may actually be the consequence of the current disgregation of the relational ties and of a consequent psychological state of constant anxiety and dejection. The article explores the complex ways the computer game Persona 5 goes against the view held by many Japanese in favour of the latter's explanation. To this end, the article applies the method of cultural studies on the portrayal of a specific character in the game, Sakura Futaba, as a case study. Ultimately, the article aims to demonstrate that Persona 5 constructs a revisionist representation of 'otaku' and 'hikikomori' on the base of a thorough knowledge of contemporary Japanese societal problems, a revaluation of the pop culture fan and the hermit's condition and abilities, and a newly defined vision of sociability.

Keywords: Japanese studies; cultural studies; videogame studies; Otaku; Hikikomori

Introduction

In Japan, a large part of the population has often voiced its concerns about *otaku* オタク and *hikikomori* 引きこもり, respectively avid consumers of popular culture and hermits. According to many troubled witnesses, the former dedicate themselves completely to their hobbies and the latter live in their private bubble, both risking to be self-absorbed and relationally inept. As a result, those worried citizens go on to say, *otaku* and *hikikomori* might fail or refuse to assume their social responsibilities, potentially destroying the cohesion of the nation. Such a dismissive view finds ample space in public opinion and mainstream media, that commonly depict the two phenomena as a modern disease born from individualism, excessive affluence, and permissiveness (Kinsella, 1998: 290-294).

Recently, however, an overflow of animated TV series, comic books, and videogames has seen the emergence of a corrective narrative aimed at going against this conception. *Persona 5* (*Perusona go* ペルソナ5; hereafter, *P5*), a role-playing game developed by Atlus, written by Yamamoto Shinji, Tanaka Yuichirō, Hashino Katsura, and first released in Japan in 2016, contributes to the new wave of revisionist productions by elaborating the experiences of these vilified categories through a character named Sakura Futaba 佐倉双葉, who belongs to both.

After the tragic death of her mother, named Isshiki Wakaba 一色若葉, for which Futaba feels responsible (an alleged suicide caused by a maternity neurosis) crushed by a guilty conscience Futaba quits school, severs as much as possible any ties with the outside world, and segregates herself in her bedroom. In other words, she lives as a *hikikomori*. Forcing herself to stay in her chamber, Futaba gathers an unparalleled knowledge of computers and hacking and hoards books, *manga*, *anime* CDs, magazines, and figurines. Given her antisocial way of life and her penchant for technology, comics, and related merchandise, Futaba may be considered to be not only a *hikikomori* but an *otaku* as well.

Her condition is further represented thanks to a supernatural element. In *P5*, there exists alongside the ordinary world an alternate reality known as "Metaverse" (*isekai* 異世界, literally a "different world"), another plane of existence that manifests the projection of people's distorted perception. When a person's viewpoint becomes particularly twisted, it creates in the Metaverse a so-called "Palace" (*Paresu* パレス), a place where their wrong notions take form. In Futaba's case, her chamber appears in the Metaverse as a pyramid inhabited by her doppelganger, which has the aspect of a pharaoh's mummy. This narrative device shows that she sees herself as a living dead. In her warped opinion, this is a well-deserved punishment for

having killed her mother. Thus, she deems her life as a *hikikomori* an atonement for her sin.

Nevertheless, Futaba manages in the end to regain control over her life. Thanks to the game protagonists, a group of teenagers collectively known under the nickname "The Phantom Thieves of Hearts" (*Kokoro no kaitōdan* 心の怪盗団), who possess the unique ability to enter the Metaverse and modify the warped worldview of the Palaces' owners, Futaba finds out that she is not responsible for her mother's death and was instead framed by a powerful politician, named Shidō Masayoshi 獅童正義, who had Wakaba murdered and then blamed the woman's death on Futaba, to throw suspicion off himself. By healing from her guilt, Futaba awakens to new powers both in reality and in the Metaverse where she can use her *otaku*-esque hacking abilities and reinterprets her past as a *hikikomori* as a protective cocoon that helped her accept Wakaba's loss. In this manner, Futaba turns her perception of herself as an *otaku* and a *hikikomori* as a positive part of her identity.

Through Futaba's personal story, *P5* echoes the main points of the counter-discourse that attempts to go against the negative view on *otaku* and *hikikomori*. In particular, this counter-discourse argues, as we will see more in detail below, that *otaku* and *hikikomori*'s supposed alienation might be the consequence not of behavioral flaws, but of deep socio-cultural changes that have been affecting the country. Secondly, it tries to show that pop culture enthusiasts and recluses possess instead a solidarity conception about interpersonal relationships, strategically useful technological skills, and heightened self-awareness, qualities appropriate to face the challenges of a society in rapid transformation.

The article is organized in two parts. In the first section, I will provide the reader with an overview of the *otaku* and *hikikomori* phenomena and I will attempt to demonstrate that Futaba concomitantly belongs to both categories. In the second half, I will take a closer look at the character's storyline in the game to show how *P5* painstakingly constructs a positive redefinition of what it means to be a pop culture fan and a reclusive shut-in.

Background

The Linguistic and Social Meaning of 'Otaku'

The term *otaku* indicates those individuals who consume products of popular culture such as *manga*, *anime*, figurines, videogames, computers, technology, science fiction, train models, and so forth. Etymologically, *otaku* お宅 means "your residence," and it can be used as a formal second-person pronoun. Starting approximately in the early 1980s, the word was appropriated by pop culture fans to employ in conversations among

themselves (Morikawa, 2013: 56-57). The reason why they singled out this oddly elegant-sounding pronoun is usually explained with a reference to its double connotation that marks their supposed antisocial behaviour, since it simultaneously indicates someone who is not accustomed to close friendships and therefore communicates with their peers in an impersonal and business-like manner, and someone who spends most of their time on their own at home (Dela Pena, 2006: 10-12).

On an individual level, according to Thiam Huat Kam's analysis, *otaku* might be considered a demeaning label used to indicate those persons who are judged to fail to keep certain rules of conduct. Together these norms constitute the "social common sense" (*shakaiteki jōshiki* 社会的常識) that people use to determine if someone is or is not an *otaku*, accused of breaking any of the rules or all four (Kam, 2013: 152-157):

The reality rule: *otaku* is generally conceived as someone who, given their complete immersion in play and relaxation, in fantasy, has lost touch with "reality" (*genjitsu* 現実), a notion under which Kam's informants designate a set of relational roles and obligations typical of contemporary Japan as a capitalist society, such as responsibilities, social life, school, and work (Kam, 2013: 159-161). Futaba breaks the rule when she drops out of school, failing to live up to her interpersonal expectations as a student and to engage in academic pursuits.

The communication rule: people must be sociable and able to effectively share their opinions, information, and interests with others. Here, *otaku* is applied to anyone who downplays, ignores, or refrains from forming relationships and maintaining communication (Kam, 2013: 161-163). Futaba breaks the rule when she isolates herself and gathers knowledge about computers and hacking in the seclusion of her chamber.

The gender rule:ⁱ it posits a strict distinction of pastimes as purportedly adequate for boys and girls, men and women. *Otaku* may not follow consumption as gendered and trespass into the sphere designated as exclusive to the other gender (Ibid: 163-165). Futaba breaks the rule because she collects figurines of warriors usually purchased by young boys. In *Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight* (*Perusona 5 danshingu stānaito* ペルソナ5ダンシング・スターナイト), a rhythm game spin-off of *P5* released in Japan in 2018, a male cisgender protagonist named Sakamoto Ryūji 坂本竜司 displays one of the same figurines in his bedroom, too. Moreover, technology is generally viewed as a male occupation, so Futaba interacts in forums and chat rooms only with older men to the point she incorporates in her language certain expressions, for example "What on Earth is that?" (*nanda korya* なんだこりゃ) and the blunt imperative form

yare やれ, that the other teenage male characters deem peculiar to middle-aged men.

The majority rule: the compulsion to indulge in what is consumed by many, if not most, people. Consumption is a collective act and reinforces a sense of belonging to a group and society (*Ibid*: 165-167). Futaba breaks the rule when she collects extensive knowledge about the deep web and hacking, far more advanced than the abilities required for school or work and potentially threatening, for she employs it to operate as a cracker and alter data of dangerous corporations. By breaking all four rules, Futaba can be said to incarnate the quintessential *otaku*.

Degrading Socio-cultural Connotations of 'Otaku'

As a consequence of their supposed alienation, the *otaku* has been associated with a range of negative stereotypes ever since the contemporary use of the word was first popularised in an essay titled *A Study of Otaku (Otaku no kenkyū オタクの研究)*, written by journalist Nakamori Akio in 1983. In his article, Nakamori draws a caricature of the *otaku* as the unpopular highschool boy linked with a wide number of pejorative attributes: the prototypical *otaku* is bad at sports, is ugly because he is either too skinny or plump, wears thick glasses, unfashionably cheap clothes, and has a shy and introverted disposition, so he escapes loneliness by obsessing over his passions (*Morikawa, 2013: 56-57*).

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the *otaku* sparked a moral panic among concerned Japanese or, as Sharon Kinsella (*1998: 313-314*) aptly calls it, an *otaku* panic, a nervous discourse that reflected the worries of contemporary social scientists about the fragmentation of modern society and the effect of the mass media on this change. Cultural critics of the time interpreted the *otaku's* relational disconnection and interest in popular culture as an extreme form of "individualism" (*kojinshugi* 個人主義) that may tear apart Japan's social fabric. Younger generations, and *otaku* in particular, were thought to be so preoccupied with their personal well-being and focused on the consumption of cultural goods and leisure as to become dysfunctional and relationally incompetent. Intellectuals feared that youth would fail or stubbornly refuse to contribute to society by not carrying out their obligations and duties to family, company, and country, causing the decay of a once close-knit civil society (*Kinsella, 1998: 290-294*). In other words, *otaku* were blamed for being the alleged cause of the major characteristics and problems of a late industrial society, a conception still present in today's public opinion and mainstream media.

Redemption of the 'Otaku'

The new millennium brought about a fundamental reevaluation of the *otaku*. In *Introduction to Otakugaku (Otakugaku nyūmon オタク学入門, 1996)*, Okada Toshio, self-proclaimed King of *Otaku* or *Otaking*, defined *otaku* as "new-type humans" (*shinjinrui 新人類*) that present an evolution in human perception. Thanks to the advent of new recording technologies, Okada argued, viewers developed a new form of connoisseurship that demanded a superior competency in reading pictures. Specifically, they began seeing the image in *anime* productions as multisensory and comprising an array of modalities of sound, voice, and music. In other words, *otaku* saw the image as an extension of the superplanar image and in exploded view. For his table of contents, Okada provided a clear example of this new concept: he employed a globe, a telescope, and a toggle with the parts labeled as different topics, items that can be seen at the same time with all the bits at once apart and together (**Azuma, 2009: 4-5; LaMarre, 2009: 144-149**).

More generally, in the 1990s, the ubiquitousness of technological devices made the masses technologically more capable, thus relatively normalising the *otaku* (**Iida, 2000: 428**), and the transnational *anime* boom and the success of related commerce partially defused the media panic about *otaku* as sociopaths (**LaMarre, 2009: 152-153**). Instead, they finally came to be perceived as informed experts possessing a postmodern sensibility and a refined knowledge of pop and cyber culture and technological fluency (**Azuma, 2009: 7-8, 17-19, 25-29; B-Ikeguchi, 2018: 247**).

The Linguistic and Social Meaning of 'Hikikomori' and its Relation with 'Otaku'

A second category Futaba belongs to is that of *hikikomori*, usually translated into English as "social withdrawal." Etymologically, the word derives from the compound verb *hikikomoru*, which comprises the two characters for "to pull back" (*hiku 引く*) and "to seclude oneself" (*komoru 籠る*). As a verb, it is employed when an individual leaves the group and lives in self-segregation. As a noun, it was coined in the latter half of the 1990s by Japanese psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki in his book titled *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End (Shakaiteki hikikomori: owaranai shishunki 社会的引きこもり: 終わらない思春期, 1998)*, where he tentatively defined *hikikomori* as someone who has ceased to go to school or work for more than six months and has stayed at home for most of this time (**Hairston, 2010: 311-313; Kato, Kanba et al., 2019: 427**). The noun can refer both to the phenomenon of self-incarceration and the individual who lives in seclusion. *Hikikomori* can then be loosely described as a person

who has developed a psychological fear of personal interaction with the outside world and thus rejects their social roles by becoming a recluse.

Do the figures of *otaku* and *hikikomori* overlap and, if they do, to what degree? As regards their core concepts, they may not. In fact, hermits are not necessarily fans of popular culture, while fans of popular culture can compartmentalise their hobbies in their private sphere and otherwise interact with others in public life (**Hairston, 2010: 313**). Nevertheless, they share an important characteristic in that both are commonly regarded, especially in public opinion and mass media, as individualistic misfits who, rejected from contemporary society, do not assume the traditional roles expected from them and retreat in a protected environment (**Kormilitsyna, 2015: 15-23**).

Seen under this light, being an *otaku* or a *hikikomori* might mean occupying two points on a conceptual spectrum of social withdrawal: whereas an *otaku* feels disconnected from ordinary society and spends most of their time alone cultivating their passions, a *hikikomori* feels even more disconnected and lives in complete segregation. Therefore, the categories seem to coincide in that these persons cannot, to a varying extent, find their place in the roles and commitments that Japanese society has traditionally molded for them, and so they retire in their personal space and activities to release the pressure in their comfort zone. Futaba represents an example of the convergence of *otaku* and *hikikomori*, for she is a hermit who retains a slight amount of interaction with the outside world through technology and the consumption of cultural goods.

The Socio-economic Explanation

Modern cultural critics typically view the categories of *otaku* and *hikikomori* as two phenomena that are an expression of the rapid socio-economic changes that Japan has been undergoing for the past four decades. In fact, in the last 1980s, the labour model of lifelong jobs gave way to flexible labour and the deregulation of the market economy and in the early 1990s the Bubble economy burst (**Allison, 2012: 345-346**). Japanese society has been slow in getting up with the sociological and psychological effects of these transformations. To this day, the old model of the post-war era of high economic growth and middle-class lifestyle is still the norm, and social adulthood remains based on having a family and landing a permanent job (**Ibid: 360-362**).

But those who do not possess economic stability and its status symbols, a number constantly on the rise, experience several conditions that Anne Allison summarises under the umbrella term of social precarity: an insecurity in life material, existential, and relational that spreads to the

multiple ways in which unstable work destabilises daily living (**Ibid: 348-349, 356-357**).

Social precarity dissolved the old emotional world of the Japanese. During the post-war economic boom, the corporate system capitalised on the affective relations of heteronormative homelife in a model known as "my homeism" (*maihomeism* マイホーム主義). This previous model turned the home into a site of consumption and, consequently, into a breeding ground for hyper-productivity in the way of workaholic husbands, industrious students, and sacrificial mothers (**Allison, 2006: 70-71**). So sutured to productivity, families have been lacking in the education of the heart, that is to say, broadly speaking, family members may not be willing and able to communicate affectively (and effectively) with one another.

The economic crisis worsened this emotional inexperience turning the old model into the current one, called "individualistic" (*kojinshugi*), characterised by the fragmentation of the family core of the household. This brings millennial Japanese to lead an individuated life, spending much of their time alone, to be focused on their personal desires, and to be detached from the relationships and commitments that formerly grounded the culture (**Ibid: 70-71**).

The disgregation of relational ties and the economic insecurity can lead to a range of pathological symptoms. This condition might be experienced in terms of disbelonging as in expressions of disaffiliation and unrootedness, in sensations of ineptitude, isolation, defeat, anxiety, and loss. Youth are especially vulnerable to labour precarity and prone to these psychological repercussions (**Allison, 2012: 352-355**). As a result, as sociologist Miyamoto Michiko relates, Japanese youths are today not as much as anti-social but rather non-social, in that they do not take part in society. Citing a survey conducted in 2007 with subjects aged 18 to 24, she noted that 25.000 interviewees identified as full-blown *hikikomori*, and 70% of respondents said they had the "sentiment" (*shinjō* 心情) of being a *hikikomori* (**Ibid: 352-355**). Social withdrawal might have become a structure of feeling or ordinary affect for Japanese today.

Futaba's story

Futaba's 'Hikikomori'

At the beginning of her storyline, Futaba lives with Wakaba, a young single mother who works as a researcher. After Wakaba passes away, Futaba retrospectively reconstructs their relationship as frustrating for both of them. Futaba remembers constantly asking for attention and care from her mother who, exasperated, denied her necessities. In the end, Wakaba commits an apparent suicide by jumping under a speeding car, in front of a terrified Futaba. According to a suicide note that is later found, Wakaba

supposedly took her life because of a maternity psychosis caused by Futaba's excessive need for attention. As a result, Futaba's relatives blame her for her mother's death and distance themselves from her. Neglected by her biological father and relatives, her custody is given to a man named Sakura Sōjirō 佐倉惣治郎, a close friend of late Wakaba's. Futaba moves to his house but, blaming herself for her mother's suicide, ashamed of her greediness that purportedly brought about Wakaba's death, and worried that she may similarly hurt those around her, she segregates herself in her bedroom. Succinctly put, the cause of Futaba's *hikikomori* might be found in the complex relationship with her mother.

In Japanese sociology, the relationship that ties a caregiver to a child is usually interpreted through the concept of *amae* 甘え, commonly translated into English as "dependence," namely the presumption on others to be indulgent and accepting (Behrens, 2004: 2-3). This dynamic is based on two complementary roles, the child who enjoys the indulgence received, and the caregiver who indulges them. Mutually satisfying *amae* can be achieved only when the two persons in question both agree on their roles. If that doesn't happen, for example, when the child is under stress and their necessities become extreme, or the caregiver doesn't meet their needs, *amae* behaviour might become increasingly disruptive (Behrens, 2004: 2-3; Fogel, Kawai, 2006: 7-8).

In this regard, psychiatrists Alan Fogel and Kawai Masatoshi distinguish between a positive *amae*, which is emotional and acceptable and includes a desire for closeness and intimacy, and a negative *amae*, called instrumental or disruptive and covers being selfish, clingy, making deals, acting abusively, and making unreasonable demands (Fogel, Kawai, 2006: 7-8). According to the false suicide note, Futaba's mother took her life because of a maternity neurosis caused by a disruptive *amae* relationship with Futaba, who demanded too much of her.

The way P5 constructs Futaba's *hikikomori* is strongly reminiscent of expert Matthew Bowker's thesis about this state. In his opinion, reclusion can be originated in losses or deprivation of *amae*. According to him, the child whose need for an indulgent relationship has been unmet may fear the frustration of their immediate necessities and, more fundamentally, the negative psychic consequences of becoming aware of such desires and of the possible inability to fulfill them. As a result, the individual with dissatisfied longing for *amae* might internalise a prohibition against such demand to avoid the pain of failing to achieve it and might believe it to be shameful, monstrous, and inappropriate. Consequently, the person may think *amae* to be a severe form of sickness and, by possessing it, to be a frightening carrier of a contagious disease (Bowker, 2016: 31-36).

Futaba's story closely matches Bowker's description. In her recollection of the years spent with her mother, she remembers being frustrated in her exigency for *amae* and her demands being so extreme they dramatically caused Wakaba's suicide. Thus, she creates a mystification of herself as unworthy of love and is convinced to be abnormal, disgraceful, and dangerous for the disastrous consequences of her exaggerated need for *amae*.

As Bowker goes on arguing, at this point the individual who has introjected a prohibition against *amae* might become a reclusive shut-in. Facing the conundrum posed by the ambivalence about their demand to be loved but disfiguring such longing as hideous, the disappointed person may live secluded as a desperate attempt to enter a protective cocoon from which they might one day emerge as worthy of indulgence and care. Nonetheless, the profound sense of humiliation that the individual has erected like a wall as a defense mechanism against their early frustration brings them both to strive to fulfill and to sabotage their struggle for *amae*. As a consequence, the hermit may not redeem their deprivation but could rather repeat it (Bowker, 2016: 38-44). Seen under this perspective, *hikikomori* may be considered at the same time as a claim to indulgence, an escape from a sorrowful condition, and a self-incarceration.

Additionally, living in isolation exacts a heavy toll on those who are close to the individual, too. In fact, while the person reenacts their lack, they share it with others by visiting their suffering upon them. As a result, family members caring for a recluse are relegated to providing them, materialistically, with meals, clothing, shelter, and other basic necessities, making them responsible for their survival and, by implication, for their *hikikomori* state as well. Emotionally, the individual deprives the caregiver of personal and psychological interaction with the *hikikomori*. Locked out of the hermit's bedroom, both literally and figuratively, family members and caregivers are left in utter confusion, often incapable of understanding what precipitated the seclusion, wondering if it is a punishment for some misdeeds, or whether it will lead to greater physical or mental sickness, suicide, or violence (Bowker, 2016: 41-44). Thus, *hikikomori* may be said to constitute both a self-victimisation and a victimisation.

The Impact Futaba's 'Hikikomori' Exerts on the Other Characters and the Player

P5 depicts the effects isolation produces on the game characters firstly through Sōjirō, Futaba's guardian, and secondly through the group of protagonists. As Bowker explains, in front of Futaba's *hikikomori* Sōjirō is given no other choice but to be her caregiver tasked with her material exigencies. Thus, he provides her with shelter, clothes, books about her passions, and, especially, meals. In the game, Sōjirō accomplishes his

primary role as a father figure, mostly in connection with food. He derives his income, which he uses to support both Futaba and him, from his bistrot, and in central moments of the story he cooks a special curry that was Wakaba and Futaba's favourite dish, thereby re-establishing the lost emotional bond between mother and daughter. Despite his best efforts, though, Sōjirō feels unsure about the effects his actions may have. Particularly, he worries that by indulging Futaba he might unwillingly be worsening her dependence on him. However, he continues to provide for her in hopes that she may one day exit from her self-incarceration and resume her life and school career.

In this regard, Sōjirō's behaviour is remindful of Ellen Rubinstein's research. In her essay, the expert draws attention to the fact that some parents, when the anticipated life course of their segregated children is disrupted, use narrative about onset, withdrawal, and recovery as a significant way to bridge the gaps between expectations and reality, creating a sense of continuity despite changed circumstances. In so doing, they employ narrative strategically to manage expectations and either portend or foreclose future possibilities (Rubinstein, 2016: 642-644). Similarly, Sōjirō uses this approach to justify his continued caregiving of Futaba and maintain hope for the future.

When the group of protagonists is first contacted from Futaba, they, too, have to deal with the uncertainty and instability of her *hikikomori*. Futaba reaches out to them via a messaging platform under a mysterious alias and abruptly opening and closing communication as she deems fit, with no further explanation. Futaba's way of communicating is characteristic of *hikikomori*: she does not meet with them in person, her identity disclosed to both parties; on the contrary, she takes advantage of the Internet and the possibility to retain, in a passive-aggressive fashion, her anonymity as well as the possibility to start and end communication at whim.

Interestingly enough, Futaba's behaviour puts the player in the same shoes as the protagonists. In fact, one of the main features of computer games as a medium is their interactivity, namely the need for the player to respond to the game's inputs. Nevertheless, Futaba withholds information at will and repeatedly denies the player's agency, making them unable to proceed with the story until she resumes contact with the other characters. In this manner, *P5* simulates a fractured interaction with a *hikikomori*. In other words, *P5* creates what in videogame studies is commonly referred to as procedural rhetoric, i.e., when a game utilises mechanics and gameplay to create a persuasive reproduction of real-world processes (Bogost, 2007: 57; Lewis, 2020: 12).

P5 uses other procedural rhetorics to also lead the gamer to understand both rationally and emotionally Futaba's life history and her psychological

condition. To advance in the Palace, the protagonists need to solve three puzzles in the form of a mosaic representing important moments of Futaba's relationship with her mother, namely Futaba speaking with Wakaba, Wakaba jumping under a car in front of a weeping Futaba, and Futaba listening to lawyers read Wakaba's fake suicide letter and declare the woman's death Futaba's fault, whose pieces are in disarray. The characters are tasked with reorganising those pieces so that they can witness how Futaba lost her mother. The puzzles perform multiple allegorical functions. On one level, they show the gamer and the protagonists Futaba's history, thus allowing them to form an empathetic affinity with Futaba. On another level, the state of disorder the mosaic is in metaphorically indicate Futaba's confusion on what really happened to Wakaba. On the one hand, in fact, Futaba accepts at face value the lawyers' words and consequently blames herself for her mother's suicide. On the other hand, though, Futaba understands that the lawyers' reconstruction of events is flawed and someone else is actually responsible for Wakaba's death. However, Futaba buries this realisation deep in her subconscious. The puzzles represent her need for clarification, honesty with herself, and external help. In this manner, the mosaic's procedural rhetoric portrays Futaba's confusion and the lies she tells herself, establishes the relationship between the characters, and shows that Futaba needs the protagonists' aid in facing the truth.

A third procedural rhetoric connects the characters' intervention with Futaba's *hikikomori*. To enter the pyramid's closed inner room, the Phantom Thieves need to actively alter Futaba's perception. The inner room's door reflects Futaba's bedroom door, that is always closed and thus fulfills a critical role in establishing Futaba's *hikikomori* condition both factually and symbolically. To open the inner room's door, then, the protagonists ask Futaba to open her bedroom's door, a gesture that initiates her process of social reintegration, which we will see in more detail below. The open door's procedural rhetoric depicts Futaba's need for external help and reconnection with others. In this way, *P5* uses the potential of the various systems of meaning extant within the computer game as a medium to simulate the main aspects of the *hikikomori* condition.

The Positive Revaluation of the Attributes of 'Otaku' and 'Hikikomori'

In a pivotal turn of events, the group of protagonists manages to correct Futaba's mystified vision of her past. By interacting with her memories and warped self-consciousness in the Palace, the player helps Futaba regain her true self and remember the real relationship she had with her mother. She learns she is not responsible for Wakaba's death and that her mother-daughter relationship was actually one of positive *amae*.

With such awareness, Futaba awakens to new powers in the conscience world that is the Metaverse, mastering how to employ her hacking abilities both in reality and in the alternate dimension. When she accesses the Metaverse, she can use a sophisticated and futuristic computer system to gather information about the Palace the characters are exploring and to alter the very fabric of the projection-world to lead The Phantom Thieves in their quest. In so doing, Futaba proficiently transfers her *otaku*-esque computer and hacking knowledge from the real world to the Metaverse in a way similar to Okada's thesis about the *otaku* as 'new-type humans' who possess an advanced perception. Thus, *P5* seems to endorse the argument about *otaku* as cyber-experts.

In a highly symbolic monologue, Futaba directly reflects upon the significance of her life as a *hikikomori*. Soon after she regains her memory, she confronts her doppelganger in the Metaverse. Her alter ego explains to her real self, as to the gamer who observes the scene as a spectator, that Futaba has lived self-incarcerated because of the ambivalence of her situation, as we have seen thanks to the mosaic's procedural rhetoric: deep in her heart, Futaba had known all along that her mother loved and cared for her and she would never take her life blaming her daughter. The doppelganger itself represents Futaba's subconscious where she had repressed such awareness. According to the alter ego's explanation, for Futaba living as a *hikikomori* served a double role: on the one hand, it represented a compliant capitulation to her mother's homicide; on the other hand, it served as a cocoon Futaba entered to defend herself while she was processing her grief and mastering the courage to accept the truth. In this way, *P5* portrays *hikikomori* as a protected environment where the individual can heal from trauma, work out their identity, and allow time for their inner growth.

The necessity for Futaba to accept her sorrow is made specifically evident in *Persona 5 Royal* (*Perusona go za roiyaru* ペルソナ5ザ・ロイヤル; hereafter, *P5R*), an enhanced version of *P5* first released in Japan in 2019 which inserts new material to the game in terms of secondary characters and story events. In the finale of *P5R*, a new opponent who possesses powers akin to a god asks the player to submit to him in exchange for happiness. Should the gamer accept, Futaba is able to reunite with the revived Wakaba and lead a blissful life with her mother. However, the game rhetoric constructs this choice as harmful to the protagonists because it requires giving their free will up. On the contrary, the game rhetoric presents holding the responsibility of one's decisions and taking their consequences, both good and bad, as the right choice to make. This means turning the enemy's offer down and, in Futaba's case, living with the loss of her mother, respecting her own life history, and accepting her new-found identity.

P5 illustrates the therapeutic function of *hikikomori* and the empowering aspect of the *otaku* by the symbolic meaning of the Hermit Tarot Card. In the *Persona* series, the characters are each linked to a tarot card that represents qualities of the protagonist associated. In this case, the Hermit card depicts an old man wandering alone under an endless sky. While melancholic, the figure gains new and unique abilities, indicated by the lamp he holds to lighten his path (Gray, 1970: 37). In Futaba's case, her newfound potential consists in her *otaku*-esque hacking skills she uses both in real life and in the Metaverse. There, she is known as Navi, the person who guides the group of protagonists. In the official English translation, she is called Oracle, further strengthening her association with occult powers. In other words, *P5* presents the self-seclusion of the *hikikomori* and the interests of the *otaku* not as a form of interrelational ineptitude but rather as a self-discovery path that leads to the acquisition of important abilities.

These remarks are consistent with the findings of different scholars studying the *hikikomori* state. For example, Ishikawa Ryōko (Ishikawa, 2007: 151-152; Heinze, Thomas, 2014: 159) suggests that reclusion should not be interpreted as a static condition of illness, but rather as a long-term and radical process of self-seeking. For her part, expert Ishikawa Satomi (2007: 24; Heinze, Thomas, 2014: 166) writes in her survey to the interviews she conducted with Japanese youth in the 1990s that the new generations exhibit a striking passion for self-knowledge, which is frequently referred to as "self-seeking" (*jibun sagashi* 自分探し), "self-realisation" (*jibun jitsugen* 自分実現), and "self-expression" (*jibun hyōgen* 自分表現). To this, Rubinstein (2016: 648-649) adds that some parents consider their children's path to recovery as a process akin to "spiritual awakening" (*satori* 悟り). By closely mirroring these researchers' opinions, *P5* portrays *hikikomori* as a mystical journey of self-discovery and *otaku* as a way to empower oneself.

As the story unfolds, the destruction of her distortion pushes Futaba to finally discard her *hikikomori* shell. Now that she knows the relationship with her mother was one of positive *amae*, Futaba gradually regains what Bowker defines as ontological security, that is, she casts aside her apprehensiveness to be rejected, shyly embraces that relatedness with others may be potentially gratifying, and establishes an emotional link with her impulses and needs (Bowker, 2016: 31-34). For this reason, she stops living in reclusion and exits her room and house to blend with people and acquire the interpersonal skills she hadn't developed so far.

To rejoin the community, Futaba receives help from the other characters, who little by little accompany her in the usual relational activities of Japanese teenagers, such as spending a day at the beach, attending a

school festival in preparation for her to resume school attendance, and working part-time at Sōjirō's café. The player's interactivity carries out an interesting role in Futaba's newfound sociality. In fact, the gamer can decide if the main character, the protagonist fully controllable by the player named Amamiya Ren 雨宮蓮,ⁱⁱ charismatic leader of the Phantom Thieves, should or not court her. In other words, the gamer is free to choose the romantic or platonic nature of Futaba's tie with Amamiya. Regardless of this option, the group of protagonists provides her with what Fogel and Kawai define as a bridging frame, namely a transitional situation effective in assisting a person through potentially difficult and chaotic times of change (Fogel, Kawai, 2006: 3-4). In so doing, Futaba undergoes a gradual process of social reintegration.

The aid Futaba gets from the other characters may be linked with the sociological concept of *tsunagari* 繋がり. Literally translatable as "connection," *tsunagari* can be defined as an ideal of solidarity adequate to the current times of social precarity (Allison, 2012: 350). Instead of trying to reconstitute the traditional family model, because it bore problems of its own, the Japanese younger generations are molding this new ideal that is post-identitarian and premised on mutuality (Ibid).

In *P5*, Futaba finds a circle of trusted friends and dear ones which seems antithetical to the nuclear family. In particular, Sōjirō is a guardian who's not biologically related to Futaba and was not romantically involved with Wakaba, so he appears to be very remote from the myhomeist model of the father as the child's biological parent. This point is further stressed in a subplot which involves Futaba's biological father. After neglecting Wakaba and Futaba, he returns in his daughter's life only to blackmail Sōjirō into giving him money so that he can pay off his many debts. In this way, *P5* complicates the myth about the undisputable positivity of biological parenthood in favour of a more nuanced vision of the caregiver as a person who effectively looks after someone, who may be a biological parent, such as Wakaba, but not necessarily, as in Sōjirō's case. The same can be said about the protagonists, who bond with Futaba thanks to the journey in the Metaverse where they experience her life story and thus empathise with her. Thereby, it is plausible to state that *P5* depicts *tsunagari* as a support network between a group of people who, contrary to myhomeism, cherish each other not so much because of a blood relation but rather thanks to an affective tie based on shared life experiences.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to demonstrate that, if we observe on a bird's-eye view Futaba's storyline in connection to the portrayal of *otaku* and *hikikomori*, we can notice that her life path undergoes a coherent process that moves from the degrading comprehension of these categories found in Japanese public opinion and mainstream media, which inherited this view from the late '80s and 90's theorists of the *otaku* panic, to their more nuanced reconsideration available in the theses of contemporaneous cultural critics, psychologists, and social scientists. To this end, I would propose, firstly, to retrace our steps and recapitulate the main characteristics of these conflicting perceptions of the topics at issue, so that, secondly, we can see how the main phases of the character's story engage in dialogue with the broader discourses about selfhood and sociability debated by the antagonistic notions of the two phenomena.

As said above, the negative understanding of the *otaku* and *hikikomori* groups articulates its main point in individualism. According to those who support this proposition, consumers of popular culture and reclusive shut-ins prioritise their hobbies and the permanence in their comfort zone because of a complete absorption over their own needs. As a consequence, they are thought to lead an alienated life and to disregard their social obligations, be it a bold refusal to assume their responsibilities or a gradual inability to develop the expected relational skills. On a bigger scale, *otaku* and *hikikomori* are accused of the erosion of the social bonds that has been occurring in the Japanese nation. As a result, pop culture enthusiasts and hermits are blamed for being the cause of the disgregation of the interrelational ties brought about by their individualism, seen as a behavioral flaw.

In direct opposition, the positive understanding reverses this cause-effect correlation. In the opinion of those who endorse this view, *otaku* and *hikikomori* are seen not as the origin of the current state of social disconnection, but rather as its product. As we observed above, a number of researchers and essayists argue that the categories of pop culture enthusiasts and recluses may be considered as the fringes of the Japanese society which suffer the most from the rise of flexible labour, the deregulation of the market economy, and the burst of the Bubble economy. These factors, in turn, might have influenced the emotional world of the population, that now leads an individuated lifestyle. Therefore, the positive understanding proposes that pop culture consumers and hermits might not be responsible for the erosion of the social cohesion, brought about by individualism as a personal flaw, but rather their individualism may be an outcome of the socio-economic crisis faced by the country in its stage of late capitalism.

On the heels of this reconsideration, certain authors have reinterpreted the supposed defects of *otaku* and *hikikomori* as qualities. For instance, Okada defined the former 'new-type humans' who present an evolution in human perception, developed thanks to their ability in using technology. More generally, pop culture fans have often been labeled as cyber-experts. Similarly, Ishikawa Ryōko reports that self-incarceration might be best understood not as a chronic condition of illness, but more accurately as a long-term process of self-seeking, an ideal that inspires, as Ishikawa Satomi recounts, a large fraction of the Japanese youth. According to these experts, *otaku* and *hikikomori* embody the new consciousness and abilities developed thanks to the latest technologies and the inner longings of the younger generations.

P5 introduces this representational evolution in the character of Futaba. As we saw, Futaba's storyline begins with the recollection of the supposedly disruptive *amae* relationship she established with her mother, a bad tie caused by Futaba who, allegedly, demanded too much attention from Wakaba and didn't notice the high toll she exacted on her, because she was exclusively focused on the fulfillment of her own desires. After Wakaba's death, Futaba segregates herself in her chamber where she focuses only on her interests to chastise herself and to accommodate to her perceived faulty interrelational skills, in fear she may wound others again. Thus, being an *otaku* and a *hikikomori* emerges as a punishment and, simultaneously and paradoxically, a necessity for a person so egoistical they can hurt those around them.

It is important to note, however, that such mystification of the mother-daughter's bond is actually forged by the old generation. It is the politician Shidō who spreads this interpretation of the facts, which takes hold on the girl's relatives and then on Futaba herself. According to this reconstruction, Futaba is deemed a person so individualistic she caused her mother's suicide. In this way, the older generation paints Futaba according to their disparaging vision of the younger generation and their behaviour.

Nonetheless, Futaba soon discovers the deception and this changes her self-perception. Remembering her true, positive relation with Wakaba, she reinterprets her *hikikomori* not as a self-punishment, but rather as a long-term process of healing from her mother's murder. Analogously, she now considers her *otaku* interests as powerful tools and her need of sociality as best answered by the *tsunagari* concept. Through this series of deceptions and truth-findings, the game rhetoric discredits the negative understanding by showing it as an evaluation of events that alters the facts *a posteriori*, whereas it endorses the positive understanding as being

closer to the personal experiences of *otaku* and *hikikomori* and to their sensibilities and capabilities.

To conclude, *P5* enters the discussion about the *otaku* and *hikikomori* phenomena by presenting the debate as a conflict between the old generation, the upholder of what could be called the negative understanding, and the younger generation, the herald of the positive one. Ultimately, *P5* declares the positive understanding the winner of the dispute for being more adherent to the life experiences and the potentialities of being an *otaku*, revaluated as a pathway to empowerment, and a *hikikomori*, reconsidered as a pathway to therapeutic self-seeking.

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ⁱ Kam specifically refers to a masculinity rule, I took the liberty to change its name into a general gender rule to better fit the topic at hand.

ⁱⁱ The main protagonist does not have a name in the game, as the player can choose it; however, he is called Amamiya Ren in the animated transposition of the game, titled *Persona 5: The Animation* (*Perusona go ji animēshon* ペルソナ5ジ・アニメーション, 2018-2019), so I use this name for clarity's sake.