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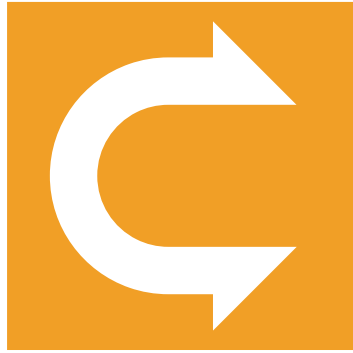
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Queer Immersion in Persona 4 Golden

Tommy Lim

Abstract

This paper focuses on two characters from the digital game *Persona 4 Golden* (2008, rev. 2012) who harbor shame around their queerness. During the course of the game, these two characters – Kanji and Naoto – undergo a form of “group therapy” and self-acceptance to resolve that shame. Throughout this process, *Persona 4 Golden* creates an immersive experience where players become and also assist the two characters in grappling with their shame. This interaction with shame is particularly effective when queer players immerse themselves in the game, as the objectives of confronting and reconciling with characters’ queer shame compound with their own journey of navigating their queerness. Consequently, queer players may find *Persona 4 Golden* to be therapeutic.

Introduction

In digital games, the *Persona* franchise is one prominent series in the subgenre of Japanese roleplaying games (JRPGs). Iterations of the *Persona* franchise generally follow a group of high schoolers who, when met with “shadows” – monsters seeking to harm humans – conjure “personas,” powerful manifestations of their personality that destroy shadows. *Persona* games model these confrontations between shadows and personas as turn-based battles where players determine commands that the high schoolers delegate to their personas. In addition to its gameplay, *Persona*’s rich storytelling and compelling array of characters have earned the praise of many critics and gamers.

Among the *Persona* games, *Persona 4 Golden* (P4G) warrants special interest due to its navigation of queer shame, specifically around the dilemma between rejecting or accepting one’s queerness. The broader inquiry this paper will explore is how P4G compounds its exploration of queer shame with its interactive nature as a video game. Within this inquiry is an investigation of how P4G explores the concept of queer shame on both the visual and ludological levels, affording audiences a chance to feel empathy for the characters’ shame in ways that can potentially be therapeutic for queer players. Additionally, the three gameplay elements of screen perspective, combat, and dungeon exploration serve to further immerse players in wrestling with queer shame.

Regarding P4G’s potentially therapeutic qualities, immersive features allow players to assume the perspectives of victims confronting their shame and the characters who aid in this confrontation. Players’ ability to assume these positionalities renders them central to someone’s confrontation of and triumph over their shame through group and self-acceptance. This experience empowers players – especially those who struggle with their queerness – to embody and find comfort in P4G’s gameplay and narrative.

My analysis focuses on two main characters from P4G – Kanji Tatsumi and Naoto Shirogane – over the course of three phases: a pre-confrontational phase where characters explore a dungeon to save Kanji or Naoto, a confrontational phase where Kanji or Naoto rejects their shame which results in battle, and a post-confrontational phase where Kanji or Naoto acknowledges their shame and reconciles with it.

Previous Analysis of the *Persona* Series

While this paper only analyzes P4G, other *Persona* games also explore queerness, though in arguably less prominent ways. In *Persona 2: Innocent Sin*, Tatsuya Suou – the main character – is able to choose one of four romantic relationships, two with girls and two with boys. While the player’s ability to choose queer storylines is arguably immersive, *Persona 2* is one of the earliest iterations that received less attention than P4G did. *Persona 3* and *Persona 5* also explore queerness, albeit superficially. Their presentation of queerness is peripheral, as most characters exhibiting non-heterosexual attractions are non-player characters (NPCs) with a couple of strings of repeated dialogue. A potentially queer character with greater prominence is Lala Escargot from *Persona 5*. Her deep voice and quaffed purple hair, as well as prominent makeup, imply Lala’s identity as a drag queen. However, *Persona 5* never explicitly confirms Lala’s status as

one, and she remains a side character.

That said, existing scholarship on other *Persona* games provides a strong foundation for analyzing the structure and themes of this series. For example, *Persona 3* has the same focus on selfhood, interpersonal connection, and gameplay as P4G. Todd Harper's analysis of *Persona 3* specifically discusses the significance of personas. More than a mere being that players must summon to engage in combat, the persona is a reflection of a given character's personality and storyline (Harper, 2011). Whether the persona reflects a character through their appearance or name, each persona is an analog to a character's identity.

As well as commenting on the persona's importance, Harper also discusses the rhetorical importance of gameplay in *Persona 3*. Central to Harper's analysis of *Persona 3* is his use of Ian Bogost's model of procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric establishes that "mechanics and theme combine to create modified simulations of actual rhetorical events; by changing the system of representation in a simulated way, the game makes a rhetorical argument about how things are" (Harper, 2011). In this regard, Harper explains how *Persona 3* enables players to freely interact with in-game characters and environments to diversify play. Harper explains how the interactivity of *Persona 3* offers a varied and involved experience for players.

In analyzing P4G, Ashley Pearson unpacks the Jungian language within P4G and other *Persona* iterations, particularly around the phenomenon of facing one's shadow. Similar to Harper, Pearson touches upon the immersiveness of *Persona* by explaining how P4G situates the main character within the mundaneness of high-school life. With obligations potentially arising from part-time jobs, romantic interests, friendships, and academics, the main character must decide what to decline and involve themselves in (Pearson, 2017). The Jungian language of "persona" and "shadow" became more prominent in P4G's main cast of characters. While Pearson admits that P4G offers a reductive representation of self as described by Jung, she explains that main characters undergo a process of "individuation – a psychological maturation of the self that unifies the aspects of the unconscious, such as one's shadow, with the ego and persona of the conscious mind" (Pearson, 2017). Here, Pearson explains a central, recurring event in P4G: the ordeal of reconciling one's unaccepted aspects of identity with accepted aspects of identity.

Another connection between Jung and P4G is that of shadows. Pearson explains that the Jungian shadow represents one's "negative, undesirable, or unlived" qualities. The shadows' opposition to someone's established values results in a suppression of personal qualities associated with the shadow (Pearson, 2017). Most of P4G's playable characters enter the narrative with their shadow selves unreconciled with their conscious selves. This prompts characters to acknowledge their shadows, which results in the persona: the embodiment of a given character's reconciliation between their shadow and ego (Pearson, 2017).

Thomas Lamarre, like Pearson, analyzes how P4G prompts characters to engage in self-transformation. While Pearson explains a confrontation of one's undesired characteristics as a reconciliatory process, Lamarre explains it as a "psychic, therapeutic self-transformation" (Lamarre, 2017). Lamarre contextualizes a character's quest to unlock their persona around convalescence and self-revelation. Lamarre further distinguishes their thinking from Pearson by

understanding the shadow as a representation of their vulnerability. By not only acknowledging but avowing their vulnerability, individuals gain their persona (Lamarre, 2017).

Lamarre also discusses the relationship between an individual's struggle to confront their shadow and their group's cruciality in ensuring the individual's success in this struggle. As the story progresses, playable characters assist each other in acknowledging their shadows, resembling a group therapy session (Lamarre, 2017). While each character's shadow is unique in the negative qualities they embody, their friends assist in helping them gain personas and reinforce group camaraderie (Lamarre 2017). The effect that Lamarre identifies in a character's acquisition of their persona is clarity in who they are. Shadows result from characters' distorted perception of themselves: their initial self-perception is inaccurate because it omits their unwanted characteristics, and results in a shadow's manifestation (Lamarre 2017). However, the shadow dissipates when characters acquire personas, an embodiment of a truer perception of self that includes unwanted characteristics (Lamarre, 2017).

In this paper, I expand on this ongoing discussion of P4G by focusing on the relationship between gameplay, immersion, and audience. Rather than investigating the rhetorical significance of the game's ludic features, I examine how these features elevate the immersiveness of the game for the audience. For this paper, immersion refers to opportunities P4G presents through which gamers emotionally involve themselves in the game and the gameplay. I focus my analysis on the characters of Naoto and Kanji because their shadows manifest specifically due to issues of queerness. My analysis describes the relationship between their shadow selves and queerphobia, examining how these characters' struggle to acquire their persona deepens the interactivity of the game, especially for players who struggle or have struggled with their queerness.

Queerness refers to an inability to obey or fulfill cis-heteronormative roles. Compounding this traditional notion of queerness is Bonnie Ruberg's understanding of it as a counterhegemony entailing opposition to culturally imposed norms (Ruberg, 2018). I analyze how queerness appears in P4G through Kanji's and Naoto's status as queer characters, as well as the culturally imposed norms they oppose when reconciling with their queer shame. I also discuss how the immersive and therapeutic qualities of P4G enable queer players to similarly experience the characters' queer self-acceptance and opposition to opposed norms. The exploration of queerness within P4G is significant because numerous video game characters' flamboyance and androgyny queercode them, but their queerness is often used to a perfunctory, comedic effect. P4G centralizes Naoto's and Kanji's queerness, framing them within a narrative of self-acceptance as opposed to relegating it to a comedic trope.

Persona 4 Golden: Yu, Kanji, and Naoto

P4G centers around the main character, canonically known as Yu Narukami, although players may name him whatever they please. After Yu moves to Inaba, a fictional Japanese town, a string of murders ensue. Yu and his friends then investigate the murders, prevent the deaths of future victims, and identify the culprit. An essential part of their investigation is exploring the Midnight Channel, a parallel world populated by malevolent creatures known as shadows. Yu and his friends venture into the Midnight Channel, where the culprit traps the victims to kill

them later. By entering various dungeons in the Midnight Channel, the party finds potential victims, saves them by defeating the shadows, and guides them back to the real world. Central to the *Persona* franchise is the personas themselves. Many victims, after being saved from the Midnight Channel, receive an avatar they wield against shadows. These avatars are personas: the embodiment of one's reconciliation between suppressed and conscious self-identities.

The dungeons in the Midnight Channel are directly affected by the person trapped in them. The dungeon's form depends on the specific shame a victim is feeling, and Yu becomes friends with most of the victims he rescues. One of these friends is Kanji Tatsumi, the school delinquent. Kanji is one of the first people that Yu saves from the Midnight Channel and joins Yu's group of friends. Kanji has a brash personality, presenting himself as a punk kid with his bleached hair, all-black outfit, and shoulder skull tattoo. Consequently, Inaba citizens generally fear and scorn Kanji. Despite this, Kanji enjoys traditionally feminine hobbies like crocheting and sewing. Kanji explains that his hyper-masculine presentation stems from his fear of being seen as queer or feminine due to his hobbies. Another friend is Naoto Shirogane, a child detective who visits Inaba to assist in solving the string of murders. Ironically, Naoto becomes one of the victims, and Yu's party must save her from the Midnight Channel. Like Kanji, Naoto eventually joins Yu's friends and becomes a major character. Although a girl, Naoto's deeper voice and gender-ambiguous clothing lead many to misidentify her as male. Naoto's insecurity around her gender results in her masculine presentation, as she believes that presenting as masculine will result in her coworkers taking her seriously.

Analyzing Queer Shame & Self-Identity in P4G

As stated before, I analyze queer shame and immersion in P4G in three phases: pre-confrontational, confrontational, and post-confrontational. The pre-confrontational phase emphasizes aesthetic and ludological importance to Kanji's and Naoto's individual dungeons. Particularly, this section highlights how P4G complicates the players' task of traversing Naoto and Kanji's dungeons. The confrontational phase assesses the moment in which Yu and his party discover Kanji or Naoto in their respective dungeons. This assessment focuses on the dialogue exchanged between Kanji and Naoto to their shadows and the battle that ensues when Naoto and Kanji initially reject their shadows. Lastly, the post-confrontational phase examines the effects of Naoto and Kanji acknowledging their shadows as legitimate aspects of their identity. Specifically, this final phase analyzes the visual significance of the persona that results from Naoto and Kanji's reconciliation with their shadows.

Pre-Confrontation

The responsibility of saving Kanji and Naoto does not rest on either of them alone. Rather, the existing cast of characters band together and save them from their dungeons. During the pre-confrontational phase, Yu and his friends traverse the dungeons to rescue Kanji and Naoto. The player's mobility is an integral aspect of gameplay in Kanji's and Naoto's unique dungeons. Players control Yu with an analog stick that determines how Yu navigates dungeons. Direct control over Yu's motion undergirds the immersive experience of the game. Players must move within dungeons themselves with Yu as their avatar.

Kanji's dungeon takes the form of a men's only sauna titled the "Steamy Bathhouse." While the Bathhouse's interior features corridors, saunas, and steam, the antechamber is a changing room. A changing room door leads into the interior. As the player descends into the Bathhouse, the steaminess increases to the point where details of the dungeon are harder to see. A more saturated, grainier display indicates an increase in steaminess.



Fig. 1. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 17 - Steamy Bathhouse*, 2015

The visual details of Kanji's dungeon invoke a sensual tone when compounded with P4G's text. When players venture into a certain point in the Bathhouse, a conversation with shadow Kanji commences. Shadow Kanji conjures up a sign stating "MEN ONLY!!! Kanji Tatsumi IN Rosy Steam Paradise," accompanied by images of a heart and roses (*Persona 4 Golden*, 2012). Shadow Kanji himself contributes to the menacingly sensual tone of the dungeon, as he dons a *fundoshi* – a traditionally male Japanese underwear – as well as a perpetual smile and blush. From the Steamy Bathhouse's qualities, it becomes clear that Kanji's dungeon is a manifestation of his shame. The imagery of steam, nakedness, and male bodies establish the sensual tone reflecting Kanji's inner femininity and queerness.

The Steamy Bathhouse is immersive for the player because of the aesthetic and thematic elements constructing the journey through the dungeon. Steaminess imaginatively functions as a metaphor for Kanji's distortion. Players' increasing difficulty in perceiving the contents of their screen reflects players' increasing proximity to Shadow Kanji, whom players meet at the bottom of the dungeon. The player – although not directly playing as Kanji – assumes Kanji's position of experiencing his distortion. Players cannot see inside the Bathhouse, similar to Kanji's refusal to acknowledge his femininity and queerness.



Fig. 2 and 3. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 17 - Steamy Bathhouse*, 2015, *Persona 4 Golden - Part 18 - A Man's World*, 2015

The synonymy between steaminess and sexual promiscuity reveals a figurative interpretation of steaminess. Saunas entail scantily clad guests, and the bathhouse's men-only status brings specific attention to male bodies. Shadow Kanji embodies the steaminess of the bathhouse: his exposed muscular physique and hedonism express the sensual atmosphere the steam facilitates.

Quite different from Kanji is Naoto's dungeon, called the "Secret Laboratory." Reminiscent of a science-fiction secret base, characters note how the Laboratory resembles a secret base that could be in kids' sci-fi TV shows. The antechamber resides in a forested area as a bunker entrance replete with satellite dishes. Due to the dungeon's security system, players embark on a scavenger hunt to find the IDs that grant them access to the Laboratory's depths.



Fig. 4. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 58 - Secret Laboratory*, 2015

The Laboratory's interior is futuristic and metallic. Splatters of neon green on the floors and walls (presumably radioactive sludge) appear throughout the dungeon. The Laboratory also features control rooms equipped with buttons, screens, and levers. The lowest floor of the room – Shadow Naoto's abode – features a surgical table where comically large lights, a drill, and rotary saw loom directly above it.



Fig. 5 and 6. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 58 - Secret Laboratory*, 2015, *Persona 4 Golden - Part 61 - Shadow Naoto*, 2015

Similar to Kanji, Naoto's dungeon represents her shame through its aesthetic and ludic features. Naoto's shame around gender prompts her to compensate by projecting a calculating, masculine demeanor. The Secret Laboratory's highly technological environment embodies this performed and desired demeanor. The myriad screens, buttons, and metal surfaces reflect Naoto's need to appear unemotional and technical so she receives respect in her profession. The surgery room is the primary manifestation of Naoto's shame around being female. The drill and saw above the surgery table suggest the idea of gender reassignment surgery, the anatomical transformation to emulate maleness that illustrates Naoto's desire to become a man.

Immersion in the Secret Laboratory comes in the puzzle-like nature of Naoto's dungeon. Naoto's dungeon features a locked door requiring multiple IDs to unlock. Given that the Secret Laboratory is a spatial manifestation of Naoto's shame around her gender, its obstacles indicate how Naoto is unwilling to disclose her shame to others, even if at her own expense. In this way, the underlying theme of saving these people from themselves is evident. Shadow Naoto is locked away in the Laboratory, and this echoes how Naoto suppresses her youth and femaleness through her masculine self-presentation. Players' task to scavenge for items that provide access to Shadow Naoto creates an immersive challenge. For example, the loudspeaker contributes to the Laboratory's security system and calls the player a trespasser who must leave. The vilification of the main characters – and effectively, the player controlling them – forms another point of immersion. When characterized as an intruder, players must fulfill their role of successfully trespassing into the Secret Laboratory and saving Naoto. The confrontation of shame is evident in how the Laboratory threatens and hinders players from exploring it.

Confrontation

When Yu reach the farthest depths of a given dungeon, they battle a shadow holding a victim hostage. Prior to Yu battling the shadows, Kanji and Naoto converse with their shadows. In both conversations, Kanji and Naoto deny that the shadows are manifestations of their shame, and thereby denounce claims that the shadows reveal any true insight into their characters. Spurned, the shadows transform into monstrous manifestations of their shame which the party of characters must defeat.



Fig. 7 and 8. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 19 - Shadow Kanji*, 2015, *Persona 4 Golden - Part 61 - Shadow Naoto*, 2015

An interesting facet to these conversations – aside from the dialogue – is the “camera work”. During both conversations, the player shares the point of view of Yu and the party, who look on as they witness Kanji or Naoto reject their shadows. The use of perspective is crucial because it places the player within the perspective of Yu and the party, who are saving Kanji and Naoto. Indeed, this becomes another point of immersion. By having the screen’s perspective within the crowd, a player is not merely observing a storyline unfold but is directly involved in it. Even more, it blurs the distinction between the player and the characters they control. The player feels like one of the characters themselves, one of many in a crowd attempting to save Naoto and Kanji from themselves.

Shadow Kanji transforms into a monstrous form that players must battle. In this form, Shadow Kanji has his arms crossed over his chest, with the lower half of his body submerged in a bed of roses. Armor that is reminiscent of a bodybuilder encases this bed of roses. The right half of this armor is gray, with the other being black. The armor holds two gold male symbols on either hand. Thorny, leafy vines protrude from the bed of roses and wrap around the armor’s arms. On either side of Shadow Kanji are Tough Guy and Nice Guy, who appear as bodybuilders with facial hair. Like Shadow Kanji’s armor, they are both muscular and feature gray and black halves to their bodies. During the battle, all three figures assume flexing positions.



Fig. 9. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 19 - Shadow Kanji*, 2015

Shadow Kanji's transformed appearance represents Kanji's shame around his femininity and queerness. The juxtaposition between the bed of roses and the muscular armor embodies Kanji's conflict between his stifled femininity and outward projection of masculinity. The thorny vines protruding from the bed of roses characterize his inner femininity as something insidious. Shadow Kanji complicates this insidious understanding of femininity as he lies in the bed of roses. With his arms crossed over his bare chest, Shadow Kanji's delicate pose embodies Kanji's femininity, while the thorny vines indicate how Kanji is critical of his femininity.

Focusing on Shadow Kanji's armor and the Tough and Nice Guys, their musculature and visually dichotomized aesthetic illustrate Kanji's desire to project masculinity over femininity. All three figures feature black and white halves, which could embody the separation Kanji recognizes between himself and his shame. Kanji separates his hidden side of being feminine and queer from aspects of himself he accepts. The musculature of these figures – accompanied by their flexing poses – represents the part of Kanji he accepts: his boyish rowdiness. The contrast between the bed of roses and the three figures could illustrate Kanji's desire to overcompensate for his femininity. This is further indicated by how Shadow Kanji's armor wields two male symbols as weapons. While these weapons could represent Kanji's inclination to display his masculinity violently, they could also suggest his attraction to men.

Shadow Naoto transforms into a flying robot that players must defeat. Shadow Naoto takes on a mechanistic form, where Shadow Naoto's right half is evidently more robotic than her right half. The right half exhibits a steel frame with blue coils appearing where her joints are. The left half is more reminiscent of Naoto's standard appearance, with the exception of black skin. The black skin is juxtaposed with the gray metal that constructs the right half of Shadow Naoto's face.

Shadow Naoto also holds futuristic guns in both hands. Shadow Naoto's jetpack and foot-rocket allow her to remain afloat. During this battle, Shadow Naoto's robotic appearance is matched by her mobility.



Fig. 10. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 61 - Shadow Naoto*, 2015

Similar to Shadow Kanji, Shadow Naoto's transformation embodies Naoto's shame, although hers has more to do with shame around gender. Shadow Naoto's transformation envisions what Naoto could look like post-surgery, with her robotic appearance erasing her female gender. A motherboard of buttons replaces her chest, and her body is more indicative of a steel marionette than the body of an adolescent girl. Shadow Naoto's clothed half reinforces the erasure of femaleness. The clothed half resembles what Naoto usually wears, which fools people into thinking she is a boy.

Closely related to Naoto's insecurities around gender is her toxic commitment to professional success: Shadow Naoto's robotic design illustrates Naoto's shame around femaleness as she perceives it as a detriment to her success as a detective. Shadow Naoto's movement is mechanical. The mechanical, emotionless motion represents a counteraction to the connotation of over-emotivity attached to the female gender. Since Shadow Naoto articulates that being a girl is detrimental to her profession as a detective, the robotic movements demonstrate an effort to appeal to patriarchal expectations of professionalism. In all, Shadow Naoto is an exaggerated projection of masculinity and professionalism that Naoto already presents: by becoming masculine and robotic, Naoto can exist in her workplace as the ideal worker.

Shadow Kanji and Shadow Naoto are some of the strongest enemies in their respective dungeons. The shadows' strength enriches gameplay, as battles against them are harder than battles previously fought in their dungeons. When fighting them, players choose up to four

characters to fight the shadows with. Shadow Kanji and Shadow Naoto also have unique attacks which are deadlier than attacks executed by weaker enemies. Shadow Kanji's and Shadow Naoto's unique skill sets – compounded by their unique designs – make their battles unique and especially challenging for the player.

A major point of immersion in P4G's confrontation of shame is the battle system. The player must confront a victim's manifestation of shame in the context of combat. Even more, confrontation is quite literal: by using melee weapons on hand (swords, knives, fans) and destructive magic spells, players must strategize how to defeat Shadow Naoto and Shadow Kanji. By directly involving players in a battle against someone's shame, P4G thoroughly immerses players in its presentation of shame and holds them responsible for its resolution.

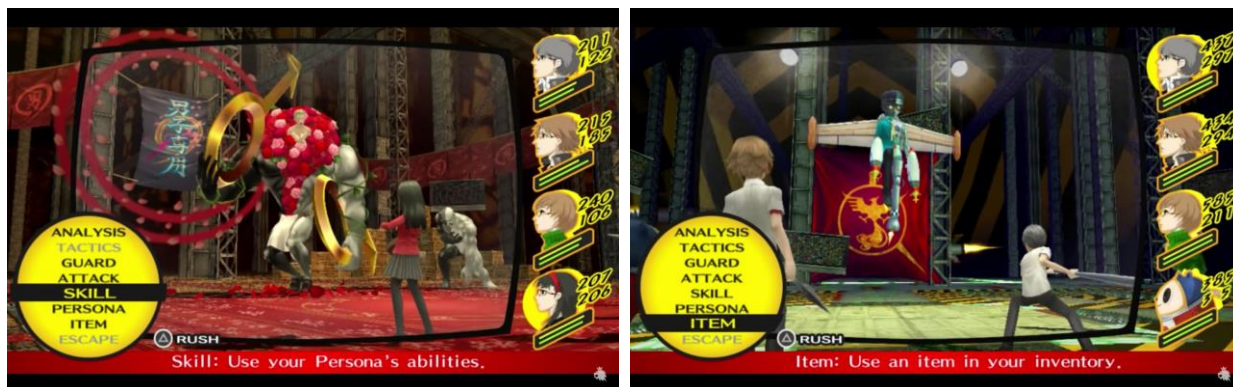


Fig. 11 and 12. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 19 - Shadow Kanji*, 2015, *Persona 4 Golden - Part 61 - Shadow Naoto*, 2015

Even the unique attacks that Shadow Kanji and Shadow Naoto deal out are immersive and a source of shame. Shadow Kanji's attack known as "Forbidden Murmur" specifically poisons male party members, while his "Roar of Wrath" specifically enrages female party members. Shadow Kanji's gender-selective attacks further illustrate his shame. "Forbidden Murmur" could allude to his desire to stifle undesired attraction towards men, while "Roar of Wrath" could allude to his frustration over girls ridiculing him for his femininity. Even more, Shadow Kanji's unique attacks further involve the players because they control the characters who suffer from these ailments of poison and rage. With regards to Shadow Naoto, her unique move "Mute Ray" inflicts severe damage to a single character, as well as disabling their ability to use magic, a status known as "silence". The theme of silence in Shadow Naoto's attack represents Naoto's need to mute her gender identity to receive professional recognition. Like Shadow Kanji, the fact that this special attack harms playable characters – and, consequently, the player's chances of winning the battle – creates the immersive experience of confronting shame as it compels the player to strategize ways to survive the shadows' offense.

A similarity between either battle is that both shadows will state something about a character's shame when they have surpassed a threshold of damage. Shadow Naoto produces statements about her desire to surgically alter Naoto's body: "No, no that will never do! Patients must lie still for me to drill proper holes into them" (*Persona 4 Golden*, 2012). Shadow Kanji makes

sexually suggestive comments: “So big and strong...You want this...Come with me” (*Persona 4 Golden*, 2012). In either case, both shadows express frustration over their victims’ inability to acknowledge them: Shadow Naoto asks, “why won’t you acknowledge me,” while Shadow Kanji exclaims, “You don’t accept me! You’ll never accept me” (*Persona 4 Golden*, 2012). These exclamations also speak to the society that makes them feel ashamed. Naoto speaks to how her femaleness prevents her from receiving professional recognition. On the other hand, Kanji expresses frustration over the Inaba community’s inability to respect his feminine traits. The shadows’ comments provide further insight into their true desires. Despite their hostility, desperation for acceptance drives the shadows. This truth complicates the emotional landscape of the battles: while players must defeat these shadows, they also realize the sad truth that shadows merely desire recognition from the people they originate from, Kanji and Naoto. This emotional complexity deepens the players’ emotional involvement, consequently reinforcing the immersion of the game.

For queer players, battling these shadows requires them to fight against horrific embodiments of Kanji’s and Naoto’s shame around queerness. Battle provides form and structure to the intangible and emotional process of grappling with queerness: fighting these shadows becomes an observable, quantifiable effort to destroy the shame that prevents characters from acknowledging their queerness. Queer players may consequently find it therapeutic to engage in a medium that enables them to battle against queer shame in such an explicit manner.

Post-Confrontation

Upon defeating Shadow Kanji and Naoto in battle, a conversation follows where Kanji and Naoto acknowledge the existence of their shadows and the shame they embody. After reconciling with the shadows, they dissipate into a shining tarot card that bursts into multiple pieces, and from this explosion, a Persona appears.

During the conversation with their shadows, Naoto and Kanji reluctantly acknowledge them and the shame they represent. Naoto and Kanji even acknowledge their shadows as parts of themselves while the other characters look on. Crucially, the perspective of this conversation is that of the crowd of characters.



Fig. 13 and 14. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 19 - Shadow Kanji*, 2015, *Persona 4 Golden - Part 61 - Shadow Naoto*, 2015

Similar to how the screen's perspective is significant when Kanji and Naoto spurn their shadows, it is also significant when Kanji and Naoto reconcile with their shadows. With the screen's perspective being the view of the crowd of characters, the player perceives the situation as the in-game characters would. Effectively, players – who controlled the characters to defeat the shadows – become characters of the game themselves. The screen's perspective transforms players into observers of Kanji and Naoto's acknowledgment of their shame. Players may recognize their importance in defeating the shadows and saving Kanji and Naoto from rejecting their own shame.

The therapeutic element in observing Kanji's and Naoto's reconciliation with their shame is that players become part of the support system for these characters. Although this is evident throughout the journey of entering a dungeon to save either character, the player is able to witness the fruit of their actions: a once-victim successfully acknowledges their queerness. This phenomenon is an especially therapeutic moment for queer players, as they become a kind of support system that once empowered them to acknowledge their queerness or one they currently need as they continue to grapple with their queerness.

Take-Mikazuchi is the name of Kanji's persona and materializes after Kanji acknowledges his shame around femininity and queerness as a genuine part of himself. Take-Mikazuchi is a robot-like giant wielding a golden thunderbolt as a melee weapon. Take-Mikazuchi's body is primarily black. Black fabric with white stripes is visible at its joints and covers its body. Metallic armor also covers Take-Mikazuchi's body, each piece emblazoned with a skeletal decoration that corresponds to the armor's location on the body (the chest plate displays a ribcage, the armor on the high displays a femur, etc.). The armor has a muscular definition. A technological aspect appears in the red and blue wires that run along Take-Mikazuchi's elbow region.



Fig. 15. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 19 - Shadow Kanji*, 2015

Take-Mikazuchi's virile appearance symbolizes Kanji's security in his own masculinity alongside his femininity. Shadow Kanji projects the lascivious image that Kanji fears people may view him as because of his femininity. Parallel to this, Take-Mikazuchi projects a masculine image of what Kanji truly views himself as after reconciling his queer shame. While he acknowledges the interest he may express in men and in his hobbies, Kanji understands that these traits are not at the expense of his masculinity.

While Take-Mikazuchi embodies Kanji's newfound confidence in his masculinity, it may also symbolize an admittance of Kanji's attraction toward men. Shadow Kanji speaks about his preference for male partners, even going so far as to say that the male protagonists would make for good boyfriends. Take-Mikazuchi's manifestation as a paragon of manliness may represent Kanji's queer sexual orientation as much as it represents Kanji's security in his masculinity.

Take-Mikazuchi's skeletal appearance further characterizes how Kanji reconciles with his shame. While Take-Mikazuchi's muscular body is armor-like in its sheer brawniness, the skeletal ornamentation contrasts this in its indication of what lies beneath the muscle. The skeleton symbolizes the vulnerability Kanji expresses in being honest about his feminine hobbies and possible attraction toward men. In addition to vulnerability, the skeleton serves to detach gender from Kanji's femininity. Take-Mikazuchi's pelvic region illustrates the bones that exist in that region, foregoing any illustration of genitalia. This anatomical ambiguity may represent the disassociation of his hobbies from misogyny. Kanji now indulges in his hobbies of sewing and painting without experiencing shame due to those hobbies' association with femininity. Indeed, the skeletal ornamentation reveals how much of Kanji's reconciliation is an internal one, but a legitimate one nonetheless.

The skeletal ornamentation throughout Take-Mikazuchi's largely black frame further illustrates the reconciliation that Kanji experiences between his masculinity and queerness. One of Shadow Kanji's aesthetic features is its dichotomized appearance where the left half of its body is black and the right half of its body is gray. Earlier on, this paper establishes that this dichotomy illustrates the division of Kanji's masculine and feminine traits, and his unwillingness to reconcile them. Contrastively, the white skeleton sprawled across Take-Mikazuchi's body illustrates the coexistence between his femininity and masculinity. Every segment of Take-Mikazuchi's body contains both black and white, illustrating not only reconciliation between his masculinity and femininity but a symbiosis between them. Take-Mikazuchi's musculoskeletal appearance illustrates a symbiotic relationship between Kanji's masculine and feminine qualities by establishing a relationship between skeleton and musculature. Take-Mikazuchi's black musculature represents Kanji's traditionally masculine outward appearance, while the white skeleton illustrates his inner femininity and hobbies he finally acknowledges but is still somewhat shy about. The visibility of both muscle and skeleton emphasize that these two elements – and the respective masculinity and femininity they represent – compose Take-Mikazuchi's body, and who Kanji is.

Sukuna-Hikona is the name of Naoto's persona and it materializes after Naoto acknowledges her shame around her gender. Sukuna-Hikona is the smallest persona in P4G. Sukuna-Hikona's weapon is a sword with a laser blade (akin to a lightsaber) that is longer than Sukuna-Hikona. Bandages cover Sukuna-Hikona's body. It has ankle-cut, brown leather shoes, as well as blue

shorts and a blazer that together look like a boy's school uniform. Beneath the blazer is a white collared button-down with a yellow tie. Sukuna-Hikona's headpiece/head features a distinctively insectoid aesthetic. The insectoid head is a more saturated blue than the uniform and is adorned with yellow antennae. Beneath the antennae are Sukuna-Hikona's eyes. The insectoid motif continues with Sukuna-Hikona's wings, which resemble those of a butterfly. Lastly, Sukuna-Hikona's body is wrapped in bandages, which are most visible in its hand- and leg-region, which are left exposed by its uniform.

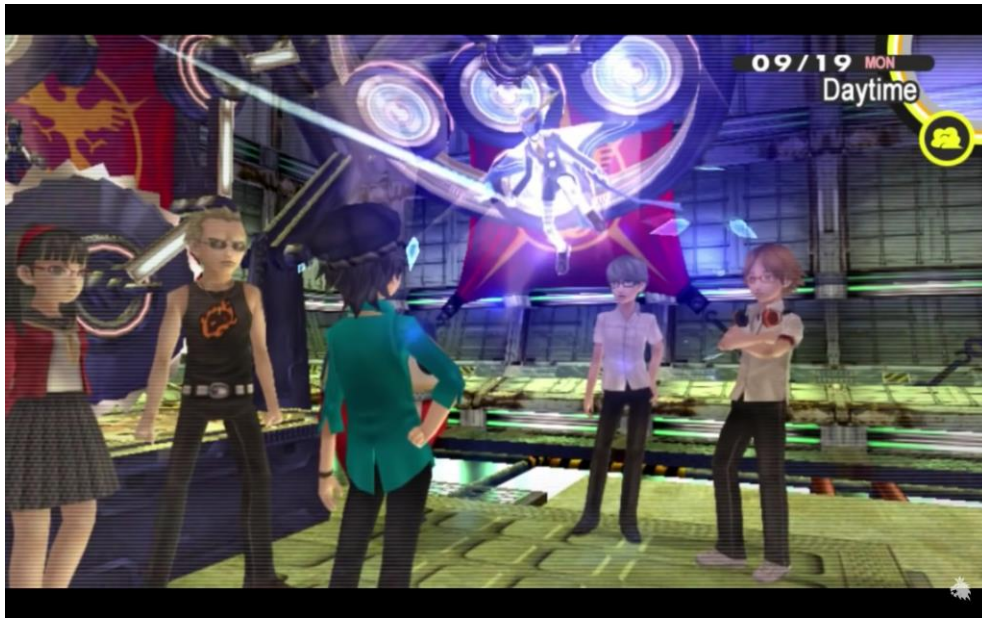


Fig. 16. JohneAwesome. *Persona 4 Golden - Part 61 - Shadow Naoto*, 2015

When comparing Shadow Naoto's robotic form to Sukuna-Hikona, there is a shift from mechanistic to life-like aesthetics. Sukuna-Hikona's insectoid and humanoid qualities contrast the robotic characteristics of Shadow Naoto and dispel the negative traits it embodied. Shadow Naoto represents an unemotive, masculine attitude that Naoto channels at work to gain respect. Sukuna-Hikona represents a shedding of this self-imposed behavior: its rapidly flapping wings and human-like movements are more life-like than Shadow Naoto's robotic gestures and appearance. This aesthetic transformation reflects Naoto's conviction to thrive in her detective work without turning herself into its dehumanized instrument.

Another significant aspect of Sukuna-Hikona's appearance is its bandages. The bandages exist beneath Sukuna-Hikona's school uniform, effectively hiding the persona's "true" appearance beneath. One reason for the bandages is to signify how Naoto is in a convalescent stage in her queer journey. Now having acknowledged her identity as a girl, Naoto may heal from her history of silencing that identity which resulted in her self-masculinization. On the other hand, another reason for the bandages may be the protectiveness and privacy she now has over her gender identity. The bandages illustrate her conviction to exist as a girl while still ambiguating how others perceive her gender identity. Sukuna-Hikona's appearance further

facilitates the visual ambiguation of Naoto's gender through its helmet, hiding the Persona's face. These two interpretations of what the bandages signify suggest that Naoto is now recovering from a harrowing journey that culminated in a resolution with her gender and that she now owes her gender to no one.

The continuity in Shadow Naoto's boyish clothes into Sukuna-Hikona's schoolboy attire represents a shift in Naoto's perception of her androgyny as it relates to her gender identity. Shadow Naoto's bisected appearance in being half-boy and half-android demonstrates how Naoto conflated her boyish presentation with negative traits of being unfeeling and excessively utilitarian. Contrastively, Sukuna-Hikona wears the schoolboy attire in its entirety. This change indicates that Naoto no longer attaches her androgyny to those negative traits. The continuity between Shadow-Naoto's and Sukuna-Hikona's outfits speaks directly to Naoto's reconciliation with queer shame. Naoto exhibits queerness in her non-traditional means of gender expression through clothing: despite being a girl, she opts to dress like a boy, effectively disobeying expectations around what a girl ought to look like. While her androgyny came from a place of shame, Sukuna-Hikona's schoolboy attire signals that Naoto's androgyny no longer does.

Sukuna-Hikona's diminutive stature provides further insight into how Naoto changes her attitude towards her status as a girl. As Shadow Naoto is one of the smallest shadows in P4G, Sukuna-Hikona is the smallest Persona. Sukuna-Hikona's tininess reflects Naoto's acknowledgment of her status as a girl. Naoto understands the disempowering reality of being female in the detective industry, and Sukuna-Hikona's size illustrates this disempowerment. In surrendering her mal-informed motivations to project manhood, Naoto accepts her girlhood and recognizes the misogyny tied to it.

When combining the imagery of Sukuna-Hikona's tininess with her sword, it becomes clear that Naoto's acceptance of girlhood is not entirely disempowering. In nearly absurd contrast, Sukuna-Hikona wields a laser sword that easily surpasses the length of its body. Indeed, the relatively giant size of the sword symbolizes Naoto's empowerment in reconciling with her gender identity. Sukuna-Hikona's schoolboy attire, smallness, and bandages speak to Naoto's journey in recognizing the difficulty in being a girl, her status as one, and its coexistence with her androgyny. The transformations that Naoto undergoes become her source of power, which are illustrated by Sukuna-Hikona's sword.

After Naoto and Kanji obtain their personas, both characters become playable and can summon their personas in combat. If players opt to directly control characters in combat, they can determine what action Kanji and Naoto perform during battle. These actions include using Take-Mikazuchi or Sukuna-Hikona to support players' characters or harm opponents. Even more, Sukuna-Hikona's and Take-Mikazuchi's inclusion in battle sequences causes them to "level up". Leveling up allows personas to access more powerful skills and enjoy higher "stats" (such as increased endurance from enemy attacks) during battle.

The game's feature of recruiting Naoto and Kanji is another crucial point of immersion. The act of reconciling their shame does not end in the single moment after players defeat their shadows but continues into how these characters repeatedly summon their personas during gameplay. Players not only control Take-Mikazuchi and Sukuna-Hikona but can level them up the more

players use Naoto and Kanji in combat. Effectively, Naoto's and Kanji's journey to reconcile with their shame immerse players through the combat system. Players directly use the personas to defeat enemies in combat, indicating that the ability to resolve one's shame is an ultimately triumphant and empowering experience.

This point of immersion is a primary therapeutic element in P4G. Once enemies, the shadows' transformation into a persona allows players to command manifestations of Naoto's and Kanji's ability to accept their queerness as parts of them. Queer players can repeatedly deploy Sukuna-Hikona and Take-Mikazuchi to fight new shadows, which reflects Naoto's and Kanji's sustained efforts to acknowledge their queerness. For queer players, they see characters use their queerness – as something they once suppressed – to become powerful. In controlling Naoto's and Kanji's personas, players access that power and commemorate the queer self-acceptance that sustains that power.

Queering Ambiguity

Although the analysis above posits that P4G presents queer narratives, it is crucial to note that the game never canonically establishes Naoto or Kanji as LGBT+ characters. The reluctance of P4G to queer Naoto's gender identity and Kanji's sexuality determined much of this paper's analysis of their queerness. As a result, this paper recognizes queerness in Kanji's hobbies and potential attraction to men, and never outrightly interprets him as a gay or bisexual character. Similarly, rather than addressing how Naoto is a transgender or genderqueer character, this paper frames Naoto's queerness around her androgyny and how her identity as a girl is compatible with her masculine self-presentation. While the queer analysis of this paper may indicate a lack of richness in the queer storytelling of this game, its ambiguity nonetheless allows queer readings into Naoto's and Kanji's characterizations. This section addresses points of ambiguity that ostensibly hinder queer interpretations of Kanji and Naoto, and how engaging in their stories still results in a queer experience.

The conversation between Kanji and his shadow prior to a battle with the latter only resituates Kanji's shame around a fear of rejection due to his effeminate hobbies, while his potential attraction towards men is left unaddressed. Shadow Kanji blames girls for his insecurity around sowing and painting and for questioning the integrity of his masculinity due to those hobbies. In spurning women, Shadow Kanji says that the alternative – men – are far better. Shadow Kanji's characterization of men as a superior alternative never establishes men as a superior romantic alternative, but only suggests that they are more accepting of his hobbies. Resultantly, Kanji's shame may not be centered around an attraction toward men, but the emasculation he endures from girls. The absence of discussion around Shadow Kanji's repeated show of interest in men – and its apparent resolution in Kanji's admission of his feminine hobbies – may invalidate the understanding of Kanji as a queer character. Rather, it may limit interpretations of Kanji's significance as a character who grapples with fragile masculinity and misogyny.

Despite the reluctance of this paper to outrightly characterize Kanji as an LGBT+ character, it is sufficient to understand Kanji as a richly queer character through his behavior alone. As a reminder, this paper understands queerness as a rebellion against culturally-imposed norms of what gender and sexuality ought to look like. Kanji rebels against the culturally-

imposed norm of being a straight man by enjoying feminine hobbies and bleaching his hair, two provable traits of his character. In aberrating from the expectation that straight men have “masculine” hobbies and avoid cosmetic changes like hair dyeing, Kanji becomes a queer character. This is all to say that while an interpretation of Kanji’s storyline as one of acknowledging internalized misogyny and fragile masculinity is valid, it is also reasonable to interpret his storyline as a queer one, especially when many LGBT+ gamers may resonate with Kanji’s queerness. Effectively, Kanji needs not become a canonically LGBT+ character to offer a legitimately queer storyline: his behaviors and shame and his journey in accepting them alone are sufficient.

Rather than demanding Naoto admit she wants to be a man, Shadow Naoto demands Naoto to admit she is a child. Shadow Naoto’s dialogue thus demonstrates that Naoto wants to become a man because she wants to become an adult. Consequently, when Shadow Naoto threatens to perform a “body alteration procedure” on Naoto, the procedure becomes important in its possibility of liberating Naoto from her puerility as well as her femininity. Infusing the discussion of Naoto’s gender with her age complicates the discussion of queerness because it suggests that Naoto may only dislike her status as a girl because of its childish connotation, and not because of internal conflicts with her gender identity. Even more, when Naoto formally acknowledges her shadow, she states that she does not desire to be a man but to accept herself for who she is. Naoto also recognizes that her desire to be a man comes from a place of seeking professional recognition. Thus, P4G frames Naoto’s idealization of maleness around standards of professionalism as opposed to a desire to be recognized as the gender she truly identifies with.

Naoto exhibits queerness through the actions of her shadow, as well as in her commitment to maintaining her androgyny, and not in any explicit affirmation from the game that she is a trans or genderqueer character. The element of the body alteration procedure that Shadow Naoto attempts to force onto Naoto alludes to the idea of a sex change, more appropriately known as a gender-affirming surgery today. Many – although certainly not all – trans people seek these surgeries to physically resemble their internal gender identity. Effectively, Shadow Naoto’s desire for Naoto to undergo one creates an opportunity through which trans and genderqueer gamers immerse themselves in Naoto’s narrative. Beyond that, an understanding of queerness as a rebellion against culturally-imposed norms on how gender and sexuality ought to look resonates with Naoto’s androgyny. In presenting in a traditionally masculine way despite identifying as female, Naoto is a queer character that queer audiences – who dress in a way that departs from cultural expectations of what a gender ought to look like – may relate to.

At the root of both Naoto’s and Kanji’s storylines is a fear of rejection. Shadow Naoto and Shadow Kanji demonstrate this fear by stating “why won’t you acknowledge me,” and “Won’t someone, anyone, please accept me,” respectively. Kanji and Naoto exhibit a fear of becoming outcasts, something that queer gamers who endure queerphobic spaces may empathize with. If not for any other reason, the ambiguity with which P4G characterizes Kanji and Naoto as LGBT+ characters does not hinder queer interpretations, as queer gamers may immerse themselves in the characters’ fear of social rejection.

Conclusion

P4G's ludic experience compounds the visual experience by effectively providing players with immersive features to interact with Kanji's and Naoto's shame. The player's ability to freely navigate through dungeons, the need to face off against Kanji's and Naoto's shadows and the eventual reward of playing as Kanji and Naoto (and their personas) create an interactive experience of confronting and overcoming shame. Specifically, players can interact with shame around queerness, and how players may mirror the characters' therapeutic experience of overcoming their shame. Players save Kanji and Naoto from the violent manifestations of their queer shame by controlling a group of good samaritans. Assuming the position of the good samaritans allows players to experience a kind of support and reinforcement they may not access in real life. Additionally, the players' access to Naoto and Kanji – and their personas – allow players to become the very characters who reconciled their queer shame with their self-identity. Players thus assume two crucial positions in one's process of resolving queer shame: that of the support system that accepts the victim for who they are, and that of the victim who eventually accepts themselves as well.

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