
THE AESTHETIC RESPONSES OF PLAYERS TO THE STORYLINE IN PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

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Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi respons estetik pemain terhadap alur cerita dalam gim video Persona 4 Golden. Penelitian ini menerapkan teori resepsi Hans Robert Jauss untuk menganalisis bagaimana pemain mengalami narasi gim melalui keterlibatan emosional, refleksi interpretatif, dan memori naratif. Metode deskriptif kualitatif digunakan, menggunakan kuesioner terbuka yang dibagikan kepada pemain dalam tiga kategori: mereka yang belum pernah memainkan gim tersebut tetapi familier dengannya, mereka yang telah menyelesaikannya sekali, dan mereka yang telah menyelesaikannya beberapa kali. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa respons estetik pemain dibentuk oleh ekspektasi mereka, resonansi emosional dengan karakter, dan kesan abadi yang ditinggalkan oleh peristiwa-peristiwa penting dalam cerita. Respons-respons ini menyoroti bagaimana penceritaan interaktif memungkinkan pemain untuk bersama-sama menciptakan makna dan mengembangkan hubungan personal dengan narasi.

Kata Kunci: Respons Estetik, Narasi Interaktif, Teori Resepsi, Persona 4 Golden.

Abstract: This study aims to identify the aesthetic responses of players to the storyline in the video game Persona 4 Golden. The research applies Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory to analyze how players experience the game's narrative through emotional engagement, interpretive reflection, and narrative memory. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, using open-ended questionnaires distributed to players in three categories: those who had not played the game but were familiar with it, those who had completed it once, and those who had completed it multiple times. The findings indicate that players' aesthetic responses are shaped by their expectations, emotional resonance with the characters, and the lasting impressions left by pivotal story events. These responses highlight how interactive storytelling allows players to co-create meaning and develop a personal connection to the narrative.

Keywords: Aesthetic Response, Interactive Narrative, Reception Theory, Persona 4 Golden.

INTRODUCTION

Interactive video games have emerged as a significant form of modern storytelling, combining narrative depth with player agency. Unlike traditional media such as novels or films, video games allow players to actively influence story progression, creating a unique interpretive experience. Juul (2005, p. 36) defines a video game as “a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts

effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.” Similarly, Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 80) describe video games as “systems in which players engage in artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome.” This dual emphasis on structure and interactivity highlights how games function not only as procedural systems but also as interpretive and narrative media.

This interactivity fundamentally changes the way narratives are experienced. Murray (1997, p. 152) emphasizes that interactivity grants players the “agency to participate in the unfolding of the story,” positioning them as co-authors rather than passive observers. Mateas (2001, p. 1) further defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of one’s decisions affect the game world,” underscoring that player decision-making is central to narrative engagement. In narrative-focused games, players’ choices determine character development, influence plot branches, and shape the emotional resonance of the storyline. Ryan (2001, p. 238) supports this perspective, noting that interactive narratives allow players to explore “private possible worlds,” where meaning emerges dynamically through choices and actions.

Persona 4 Golden exemplifies this potential of interactive narrative. As a remastered edition of the original Persona 4, the game blends daily life simulation, social interactions, and a suspenseful murder mystery. Its narrative depth is enhanced through Social Links, branching storylines, and moral decisions that encourage players to reflect on themes of identity, self-acceptance, and societal pressure. Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (2004, p. 5) define interactive narrative as “any narrative form where the user has influence over the flow or content of the story,” which aligns directly with the structure of Persona 4 Golden. Players are invited not merely to consume the story but to reconstruct it through their decisions and moral judgments, reinforcing the concept that meaning is co-created in interactive media.

Given these characteristics, Hans Robert Jauss’s (1982) reception theory provides a compelling framework to analyze how players respond to and interpret the narrative of Persona 4 Golden. Reception theory emphasizes that meaning arises through the dynamic interaction between a work and its audience, mediated by concepts such as the horizon of expectation, aesthetic distance, and narrative memory. In the context of video games, these ideas explain how players’ prior knowledge, choices, and emotional investments shape their aesthetic experience. By examining players’ anticipations, emotional reactions, and long-term narrative reflections, this study contributes to the growing recognition of video games as contemporary

literary experiences where narrative meaning emerges collaboratively between the text and its audience.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research used a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze non-numerical data from players' experiences. Respondents are divided into three categories: (1) those who have heard of *Persona 4 Golden* and are interested but have not yet tried it, (2) those who have completed the game once, and (3) those who have completed it more than once.

The questionnaire was designed to capture three primary aspects of narrative engagement: (1) players' initial expectations of the game's storyline, (2) emotional and interpretive responses during key narrative moments, and (3) long-term memories or reflections about the story after gameplay. Each participant's answers were coded and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and unique experiences.

The analysis applied Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) reception theory as the primary framework. Central to this approach are the concepts of horizon of expectation, emotional resonance, and narrative storage. Horizon of expectation refers to the assumptions and anticipations players bring to the game before engagement. Emotional resonance captures the intensity of players' affective responses to pivotal story events. Narrative storage examines how elements of the story are retained and reflected upon after gameplay. By organizing responses around these categories, the study provides a comprehensive account of players' aesthetic reception.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis in this study is based on selected responses to the open-ended questionnaire from three categories of participants: those who had heard of *Persona 4 Golden* but never played it, those who had completed the game once, and those who had completed it more than once. The analytical framework applied in this study is Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory (1982), which emphasizes that aesthetic experience arises from the interaction between a narrative work and the audience's expectations, interpretations, and reflective engagement. In the context of video games, this theory highlights how players are not merely passive consumers but active participants in shaping the meaning of the story through their emotional reactions, moral choices, and memory of narrative events. By approaching *Persona 4 Golden* through this lens, the study can identify how the game's interactive elements foster unique aesthetic responses in

each category of players.

Within this framework, the analysis is structured around three key aspects: Player Expectations, Narrative Choices, and Narrative Storage. Player Expectations are rooted in Jauss's concept of the horizon of expectations, representing the assumptions and prior knowledge that shape how the story is first received. Narrative choices are rooted in Jauss's concept of aesthetic distance where they capture the moral and emotional decisions players encounter during gameplay, reflecting their active role in co-creating narrative meaning. Narrative Storage are rooted in Jauss's concept of aesthetic experience where it examines how players continue to remember and reflect on the storyline after gameplay, preserving emotional impressions and lasting connections. Together, these three aspects reveal how *Persona 4 Golden* creates a layered and enduring aesthetic experience, where expectation, decision-making, and memory combine to shape both immediate and long-term engagement with the narrative.

For clarity, the respondents are labeled according to their category, with Category 1 participants referred to as Respondent A (e.g., A1, A2), Category 2 as Respondent B (e.g., B1, B2), and Category 3 as Respondent C (e.g., C1, C2). This labeling ensures that the discussion of player responses remains clear and organized throughout the analysis.

Data 1:

How has what you've heard about the game (from friends, reviews, or online) shaped your expectations?

"I heard a lot of praise about this game, both from friends, reviews, and online forums. This certainly shaped my expectations that *Persona 4 Golden* would provide a deep and memorable narrative experience."

(Response question 4 from A1)

This response highlights the strong influence of social and mediated discourse in shaping a player's horizon of expectation before engaging with a video game. According to Jauss (1982), the horizon of expectation is not only formed through personal experience with similar works or visual cues but is also shaped by collective cultural knowledge and reception within a community. In this case, the participant's anticipation of *Persona 4 Golden* was built primarily on the positive discourse they encountered through friends, online reviews, and forum discussions. The consistent praise across these sources established the expectation of a game

with a deep, emotionally engaging, and memorable narrative, predisposing the player to approach the experience with heightened attention and anticipation. Such pre-release impressions function as a narrative frame, guiding the player toward expecting a high level of storytelling complexity even before they interact with the game firsthand.

The influence of these external narratives also demonstrates how audience reception is socially mediated, an idea central to reception theory. When a player enters a game already aware of widespread acclaim or hears repeated assertions about its storytelling depth, their horizon of expectation narrows toward expecting profound thematic content and impactful character arcs. This predisposition affects the way the narrative is experienced: moments of emotional resonance or narrative tension may be amplified because they confirm the anticipated quality, while less dramatic segments may be interpreted as deliberate pacing rather than narrative weakness. By the time the participant began playing, the game was already framed in their mind as a “memorable narrative journey,” showing how pre-existing discourse can significantly prime a player’s aesthetic engagement. In Jauss’s terms, this illustrates how communal reception history contributes to shaping the individual horizon of expectation, which ultimately influences how the story is interpreted and valued during gameplay.

Data 2:

When did you first play Persona 4 Golden, and what do you think is the main problem or challenge that the characters are facing in the story?

“at 2020, Honestly, with how upbeat the story and how colorful the theme were, my initial assumption was the story would have a big emphasis on wholesomeness, akin to that of the Pokemon series. It’s a big surprise to me how quickly the story went from the life of a high school student to murder mystery, how its bright atmosphere suddenly turned into dark and gloomy. Here I’m not saying that they were completely omitting the shounen aspect of its storytelling; it’s still there, but not something I expected from that kind of JRPG. As for each of the characters’ personal challenges, my expectation was similar to other slice of life stories that I’ve read: friendship, love, and family. Although those issues were still present in its storytelling, however much like I previously mentioned, gender and sexuality issues were not something I could foresee from my initial impression.”
(Response question 1 from B5)

This response provides a clear illustration of how the horizon of expectation operates in

shaping a player's initial perception and subsequent reception of a video game narrative. In Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) reception theory, the horizon of expectation encompasses the audience's preconceptions, prior experiences with similar genres, and assumptions formed through promotional materials, visual cues, and cultural familiarity. For this participant, the initial horizon was heavily influenced by *Persona 4 Golden*'s bright visual palette, anime-inspired character design, and seemingly cheerful atmosphere, which collectively suggested a lighthearted and wholesome gaming experience. The respondent explicitly likened their expectation to a game similar in tone to the *Pokémon* series, where themes of friendship, love, and family are central, and the storytelling rarely ventures into darker territory. This expectation reflects a genre-based assumption common in JRPGs with slice-of-life elements, where the primary focus is on character bonding and school-life activities rather than on tension or danger.

However, the sudden narrative turn toward a dark and suspenseful murder mystery disrupted this horizon, creating what Jauss terms aesthetic distance—a gap between the anticipated experience and the actual narrative encountered. This rupture in expectation required the participant to reassess their understanding of the game's tone and themes, shifting from a casual, comfort-oriented mindset to one of heightened emotional engagement and critical reflection. By juxtaposing moments of bright, shōnen-inspired adventure with darker explorations of identity, societal pressure, and even issues of gender and sexuality, *Persona 4 Golden* actively subverts the initial horizon of expectation, prompting deeper narrative involvement. This process reflects one of the central mechanisms of reception theory: when a work challenges an audience's preconceived notions, it generates a more meaningful aesthetic experience, as the player is drawn into actively negotiating and reinterpreting the unfolding story rather than passively consuming it.

Data 3:

What decisions did you make that felt most impactful, and why?

“The decisions towards the ending of the game where you have to choose whether to kill namatame or spare him and learns about the actual truth, it felt especially impactful because as you get attached to the characters and what happens to them you also sort of feel the emotions that they feel so as the other characters shown to have an intense rage towards namatame so does you as the player, but it makes this decision even more impactful that choosing not to kill namatame rewards you with a really engaging story bits where you sort of learns the truth about the story piece by piece.”

(Response question 7 from B4)

This response reflects how narrative choice in *Persona 4 Golden* produces both emotional engagement and reflective distance, two core elements of the player's aesthetic experience. The participant identifies the late-game decision of whether to kill or spare Namatame as particularly impactful because it emerges from a moment of intense emotional alignment with the in-game characters. After spending hours building bonds with the Investigation Team, the player feels the same anger and desire for vengeance expressed by the characters, creating a heightened sense of immersion. However, the decision point forces the player to step back from raw emotion to consider the long-term narrative consequences, generating what Jauss (1982) terms aesthetic distance, the space where immediate emotional reaction gives way to thoughtful evaluation. In this case, the game leverages narrative choice to transition the player from a reactive state to a reflective one, deepening their engagement with the moral complexity of the story.

The respondent's description also illustrates how aesthetic distance enhances the transformative effect of narrative choices. By resisting the immediate urge to execute Namatame and instead choosing to spare him, the player is rewarded with a richer, more revealing sequence of story events that gradually uncovers the true mastermind behind the murders. This process of withholding judgment and embracing reflective distance aligns with Jauss's idea that deviations from expected responses create opportunities for expanded aesthetic experience. The initial horizon dominated by emotional outrage and a desire for swift justice is challenged by the narrative design, which rewards critical evaluation and patience with deeper narrative insight. In this way, *Persona 4 Golden* uses its branching decision points not only to shape the plot but also to cultivate a layered reception process, where emotional immersion and reflective distance coexist to create a memorable and meaningful storytelling experience.

Data 4:

How has playing *Persona 4 Golden* influenced your perspective on video game storytelling?

"The best way to tell a story is to touch the heart of a player and make him like he is in the game with the characters as real and you can tell if it when you become sad that the game ended and you miss the characters heavily"

(Response question 9 from B3)

This response illustrates how playing *Persona 4 Golden* reshaped the participant's perception of video game storytelling by highlighting the power of emotional immersion and character attachment. The player reflects that the best narratives "touch the heart" and make them feel truly present in the game world, a reaction that aligns with Jauss's (1982) reception theory, where the audience's aesthetic experience deepens as initial expectations evolve into active engagement. *Persona 4 Golden* achieves this through its blend of daily life simulation, social bonding, and mystery-driven progression, allowing the player to develop meaningful connections with the characters. By the game's conclusion, the sense of sadness and longing described by the participant demonstrates that the narrative successfully bridged fiction and reality, creating an impactful aesthetic experience. This emotional resonance is further amplified by the game's interactive storytelling, where the player's choices and participation transform them from a passive observer into a co-creator of meaning, reinforcing how video games can deliver uniquely memorable and emotionally charged stories.

Data 5:

Which character(s) did you feel most connected to, and how did this connection affect your choices?

"The character of Yosuke and Kanji in particular i think i felt the most connection with, the struggles that they have and the character development path that they have to went through i think felt real but still manage to be told in a interesting way, i also found their character traits to be very interesting and unique and this connection are reflected through my choice as those two character are one of the first characters that i decided to maxed out as it gives me a better look to their stories and character development."

(Response question 6 from B4)

This response illustrates how narrative storage emerges from the player's emotional connection to specific characters, in this case Yosuke and Kanji. In Jauss's (1982) reception theory, narrative storage refers to the accumulation of narrative meaning that a reader (or a player) retains, shaped by their experiences, emotional attachments, and interpretive engagement throughout the story. The participant's identification with Yosuke and Kanji stems from the relatability of their personal struggles and the authenticity of their character development arcs. By describing these characters as "real" yet still presented in an engaging, stylized manner, the player demonstrates that their reception of the narrative is not only guided

by plot events but also by the personal resonance of the characters' growth. This emotional investment lays the foundation for narrative storage, as the memories and reflections on these characters become an integral part of the player's long-term narrative experience.

The response also reveals how narrative storage influences player choices during gameplay. The participant's decision to prioritize maxing out the Social Links of Yosuke and Kanji reflects the desire to explore their stories more deeply, thus reinforcing the bond already established through emotional connection. This choice demonstrates how narrative storage operates as a feedback loop: emotional attachment encourages further engagement with specific storylines, and the insights gained from these interactions enrich the player's internalized narrative experience. By investing in these characters, the player not only unlocks additional story content but also internalizes the lessons and emotions derived from their arcs, ensuring that the impact of the narrative extends beyond the immediate gameplay session. In this way, *Persona 4 Golden* transforms individual character connections into enduring narrative memories, exemplifying how video games can create personal and lasting aesthetic experiences through narrative storage.

Data 6:

Did any part of the game (storyline, visuals, character development) particularly enhance your engagement with the narrative?

“As I’ve previously stated, I love the overall storyline of the game as well as its characterization of the casts. Although one part of the story did catch my interest the most during my playthrough, which is how boldly they handle the gender and sexuality narrative through Kanji and Naoto. I found this interesting because unlike nowadays where the talks of the topic are pretty common in the gaming media; for a game that was originally released in 2008 this was surely an unexpected finding for me, in a good way of course. Another part of the game that I love as much, is of course the wonderful music and soundtracks they put in the game which I still give a listen to every now and then.”
(Response question 5 from B5)

This response highlights how specific elements of *Persona 4 Golden*'s storyline, character development, and music can enhance the player's engagement with the narrative. The participant emphasizes that the game's exploration of gender and sexuality through the characters of Kanji and Naoto was particularly striking. This reaction demonstrates how

moments of unexpected thematic depth can capture a player's attention and create a more meaningful aesthetic experience. As Jauss (1982) notes, when a work challenges a player's initial horizon of expectation, it can generate heightened engagement and reflective interpretation. In this case, the player's discovery of complex social topics in a game they expected to focus primarily on mystery and friendship prompted a deeper emotional and intellectual investment. The inclusion of memorable music and soundtracks further reinforces the engagement by enriching the atmosphere, creating strong sensory associations that extend the narrative experience even after gameplay ends, evidenced by the participant continuing to listen to the soundtrack outside the game.

This response also aligns closely with Jauss's concept of the historical life of the work, which examines how a text or game is received differently across time due to evolving cultural and social contexts. The participant explicitly recognizes that the game's handling of gender and sexuality felt bold and surprising for a title originally released in 2008, a period when such topics were far less common in mainstream gaming narratives. Their positive reception reflects how the work gains new layers of significance when re-experienced in a later cultural moment where discussions of LGBTQ+ representation are more prevalent. This temporal awareness situates *Persona 4 Golden* within a living reception history, where the game's themes resonate differently for contemporary players than they might have for its original audience. By connecting emotional engagement with the evolving cultural context, this response illustrates how a game's narrative impact can be enriched through both immediate aesthetic experience and its historical trajectory of reception.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the aesthetic responses of players to the storyline in *Persona 4 Golden* are shaped by a dynamic interplay of expectation, emotional engagement, and narrative memory, as framed by Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory. The findings demonstrate that players approach the game with horizons of expectation influenced by prior knowledge, visual impressions, and community discourse. These expectations are often subverted by the game's narrative twists, such as the transition from a lighthearted school-life atmosphere to a suspenseful murder mystery, creating a meaningful aesthetic distance that heightens engagement.

Emotional involvement emerges as a central factor in players' aesthetic distance. Narrative choices, particularly those carrying moral weight such as the decision regarding

Namatame, invite players to reflect critically on their emotions and the consequences of their actions. This reflective engagement strengthens a deeper connection to the story, as players co-create meaning through their decisions. Additionally, strong attachments to characters like Yosuke, Kanji, and Naoto enhance narrative storage, allowing memories and impressions of the game to persist long after gameplay ends.

Persona 4 Golden exemplifies the capacity of interactive narratives to deliver profound and lasting aesthetic experiences. By intertwining player agency with thematic depth, the game transforms its audience from passive observers into active co-authors of the story. This study affirms that video games, as a form of modern storytelling, not only entertain but also evoke emotional resonance and personal reflection, solidifying their place as a meaningful medium for contemporary literary and cultural analysis.

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