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From Pyramids to Obscure Gods: The Creation of an Egyptian World in *Persona 5*

Abstract Within *Persona 5*'s modern Tokyo setting, imagined worlds are created that represent the cognitive processes of various characters. These 'palaces' allow the player to explore locations far removed from the game's real-world, contemporary backdrop. One episode creates an ancient Egyptian world. This article examines how this world has been produced and the different transmedial tropes and other influences that its developers have drawn upon. Many references are recognisable to a broad audience (pyramids, gods, hieroglyphs), while others reflect Japanese pop-cultural trends (in various manga and anime), including the mention of an obscure Egyptian god, Medjed. The intentionally fictitious nature of these 'palaces' means that the Egypt that appears in this game is not bound by the need to replicate an 'accurate' landscape. Instead, the developers were free to design a gamescape that combines multiple and diverse receptions of ancient Egypt.

Keywords Egypt, videogames, Persona 5, pyramids, gods

Articles

INTRODUCTION*

> "Those who plunder my tomb, why have you come?"
> Shadow Futaba, *Persona 5*

In contrast to ancient Greece and Rome, research on the reception of ancient Egypt is still relatively in its infancy. Often referred to as 'Egyptomania', important studies have focussed on literature, cinema, architecture, 19th century art, and heavy metal music.[1] Videogames and Egypt have received increased attention in recent years, primarily because of 2017's *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft), the publication of which has coincided with a surge in scholarly attention on videogames and the ancient world.[2] With the game's narrative taking place in the final decades of Ptolemaic rule of Egypt, before the conquest by Rome in 30 BCE, and prominently featuring famous figures, especially Cleopatra and Caesar, *Origins* appeals to multiple academic audiences, including those interest-

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1 On the term 'Egyptomania', a convenient definition is supplied by Taterka (2016) 205: 'any re-use or re-employment of elements and motifs taken from ancient Egypt independently of their original context'; see also Zinkow (2016) 195–6, who adds that Egyptomania is 'not the copying of Egyptian forms. It is the processing in the context of new meanings and functions, conscious or involuntary deformations, and the impositions of new, usually completely different layers of symbolism'. For recent studies on the reception of Egypt in different media, see, notably, Curl (2005), Dobson (2020a), Elliott (2012), Moser (2020), and Olabarria (2020), as well as the collected studies in Biedermann et al. (2015), Dobson (2020b), Dobson/Tonks (2020), Escher/Koebner (2005), and MacDonald/Rice (2003). See also the relatively new journal *Aegyptiaca: Journal of the History of Reception of Ancient Egypt* (first edition 2017). In July 2021, the conference "Do Ancient Egyptians Dream of Electric Sheep?" (University of Birmingham; organised by Leire Olabarria and Eleanor Dobson) explored the reception of Egypt in science-fiction.

2 In terms of monographs and edited volumes, see Clare (2021), Rollinger (2020), and Thorsen (2012), and the forthcoming studies in Draycott (2022) and Draycott/Cook (2022).

ed in the histories of Egypt, Greece, and Rome.³ Beyond *Origins,* the reception of Egypt in videogames has received much less attention.⁴

Set in modern Tokyo, *Persona 5* – released worldwide in the same year as *Origins* – does not immediately seem like an obvious candidate for such a study. The narrative follows a group of Japanese students who attend a high-school in one of the city's special wards, Minato City.⁵ Awakening to new powers, the students gain access to the Metaverse, a supernatural world created by humanity's subconscious desires.⁶ Within this realm, 'palaces' exist as spatial manifestations of an individual's own desires and distorted conception of the real world. Throughout the game, this group, led by the protagonist known by the pseudonym 'Joker', enters several palaces in order to steal the heart of their creators, thereby eradicating their corruption. In the process, they name themselves 'The Phantom Thieves'. These palaces are not bound by the temporal or geographic constraints of the game's primary setting, allowing for the creation of multiple, diverse worlds. Some of these worlds are contemporary, or even futuristic (art gallery, bank, factory, cruise ship), while others have a historical setting. The fourth palace, the result of the adolescent Futaba Sakura's cognition, is an Egyptian pyramid. Unlike the *Assassin's Creed* series, there is no attempt to produce

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3 The discourse has largely focussed on *Origin*'s educational value (in part because of the Discovery Tour add-on). Note, for example, the 'Playing in the Past' project at the University of Southampton (on which see, for example, Maguid 2021), as well as Casey (2021) and Poiron (2021), both of which appear in a special edition of *Near Eastern Archaeology* dedicated to archaeogaming, edited by Tine Rassalle. Other studies have focussed on the representation of historical figures in the game, e.g., Bondioli et al. (2019).

4 Note, however, the (as yet unpublished) work of Kate Minniti, presented at several conferences, including "Jackal Warriors and Laser Crocodiles: 30 Years of Egyptian Monsters in Videogames", presented at *Antiquity in Media Studies (AIMS)/Conference 2020* (11 December 2020).

5 The game's 'perceptual realism' and how it replicates modern Tokyo is briefly discussed in Hutchinson (2019) 42.

6 *Persona 5,* which is part of the *Megami Tensei* franchise, was developed by P-Studio and released worldwide in April 2017 for the PlayStation 3 and 4 consoles, by publisher Atlus in Japan and North America and Deep Silver in Europe and Australia. An enhanced version of the game with new content, *Persona 5 Royal,* was released for the PlayStation 4 three years later, in March 2020, by Atlus and Sega (replacing Deep Silver). The material discussed in this study is common to both games, with *Royal* having relatively minor modifications to the relevant level design. The images published here are taken from my own playthrough of *Royal,* using the PlayStation's share feature.

a historically accurate or authentic Egypt. The cognitive world provides the perfect environment for exaggerated presentations. Instead, the setting draws upon broader references to ancient Egyptian culture that occur across media, the type of references that the in-game characters themselves would recognise.[7]

Each of the palaces reflects a particular aspect of their creator's life or character, some more literally than others. An artist who steals the work of his students creates an art gallery. The millionaire owner of a fast-food chain produces a factory. Futaba Sakura, though, has no overt connection to Egypt. We first see her in front of a computer, as she spies on the protagonist and his fellow Thieves. Instead, the connection is a metaphorical one. Futaba is blamed for the death of her mother, Wakaba Isshiki, who Futaba is led to believe committed suicide. After this event, she becomes a recluse, living in isolation and consumed by her own despair and guilt, and feelings that she herself deserves to die. She conceives of her room as a tomb, and what more famous tomb than the Great Pyramid of Egypt?

As a result of its intentionally unreal, imagined setting, *Persona 5* differs significantly from other videogames that are set in Egypt, either ancient or modern. The game does not aim to reconstruct the lived experience of individuals or communities in the real past, as is done in citybuilding games such as *Pharaoh* (Impression Games, 1999) or *Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile* (Tilted Mill Entertainment, 2004). The game's protagonists are not archaeologists or adventurers, like Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series, whose objective is to explore Egypt.[8] Even Futaba, whose cognition created this world, makes no mention of Egypt when in the game's main setting. While the use of a pyramid is sugges-

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7 The transmedial approach to ancient historical videogames that Clare (2021) advocates is particularly fitting for examining the construction of Egypt within *Persona 5*. See also the "reception of receptions" in videogames discussed by Lowe (2012) 55, who has also described videogames as "weathervanes of popular culture" (Lowe (2009) 70). Taterka (2016) 207 notes that, in many cases, products of "Egyptomania" "seem not to be inspired by any authentic Egyptian monument or source, instead referring to a general and common image of pharaonic Egypt that we all share" (cf. Zinkow (2016) 195–6). While Taterka presents this as a negative feature, hindering an overarching methodological approach to the topic, the comment aligns well with a transmedial approach that does not search for authenticity but for a wider understanding of the context in which such receptions are created.

8 Egypt is one of four zones in the original *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) and the main setting of *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* (Core Design, 1999), as well as *Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris* (Crystal Dynamics, 2014), which is part of the *Lara Croft* spin-off series of the franchise.

tive of a particular period of Egyptian history, there are no historical markers and no intention to simulate a specific time, unlike *Assassin's Creed Origins* (late Ptolemaic Egypt) or *Egypt 1156 BC: Tomb of the Pharaoh* (Cyro Interactive Entertainment, 1997).[9] Furthermore, Egypt does not feature in the game's marketing; it is not targeted at players interested specifically in engaging with ancient world cultures or heritage and archaeology. Unrestrained from such considerations, the game's developers are free to select and combine motifs and themes as they choose. *Persona 5* therefore provides an opportunity to examine the contemporary reception of Egypt at a broader level, to explore what elements are deemed central to the creation of an Egyptian world, as well as whether the game exhibits any specific responses (i.e., Japanese) to Egypt or adheres to common tropes.

In addition to examining the pyramid-form of Futaba's 'palace', and how a recognisable Egyptian world is built, what follows also examines how other features of Egyptian society and modern reception are presented in the game, including hieroglyphs, Egyptian gods, and alternative theories of Egyptian history.

FUTABA'S PALACE: BUILDING AN EGYPTIAN WORLD

Futaba's palace takes the form of a pyramid, an architectural design that – arguably without question – is the most iconic and heavily associated with ancient Egypt.[10] The size and quality of the pyramid is reminiscent of the three pyramids of the Giza plateau, especially the so-called Great Pyramid of king Khufu (reign ca. 2589–2566 BCE[11]), rather than the less well-preserved pyramids of the later Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom.[12] The pyramid has become a standard fea-

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9 One of the earliest videogames set in Egypt, *Riddle of the Sphinx* (Imagic, 1982), has a non-specific historical setting, drawing upon Egyptian motifs more broadly in its design.

10 In the same way that the Colosseum "betokens ancient Rome for modern audiences" and is integrated as an "indispensable piece" of Roman imagery, to the extent that it appears in games set before it was even built (Lowe (2009) 76–77), the pyramid seems to serve the same tokenistic role for Egypt. This observation, however, is impressionistic rather than based on a survey of its use in videogames.

11 For consistency, dates throughout this study are taken from Shaw (2000).

12 The literature on Egyptian pyramids is extensive; useful general overviews are provided by Lehner (1997) and Hawass and Lehner (2016).

ture of Egyptomania and the Egyptian Revival, especially in the West, but the Shimizu Mega-City Pyramid conceptual project for Tokyo Bay also highlights its influence in Japan.[13]

While the palace itself is a singular structure in the game, the pyramid and its entrance area are part of a larger gamescape. Arriving at the pyramid's entrance, the player has already viewed a cutscene of the party travelling across the desert. A survey of this entrance area reveals other stereotypical Egyptian structures, including obelisks,[14] a kiosk,[15] and a secondary entrance to the pyramid that more closely resembles those of the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings (as they are experienced today).[16] On the horizon, the outline of a settlement is also visible. As part of the mission to gain access to the pyramid, the player must travel to this city, a modern, not ancient city, which is suggestive of the real Giza City. In game, this city emphasises the age of the pyramid and that this created landscape is not new but is in fact a ruin.

In terms of Lowe's typologies of past landscapes in videogames, this setting has elements of his second category, 'Heritage', that is, "ruined in the modern day, in the same forms in which modern audiences encounter them in real life".[17] Masonry is collapsing in places, and it is difficult to determine if certain sections are in the process of construction or repair.[18] Overall, though, it mainly conforms with his fourth category 'Fantasy'.[19] In this situation, games present "unreal versions of antiquity" – ruinscapes in which ancient monuments (both

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13 The Shimizu Mega-City Pyramid, which is projected to be constructed by 2110, is briefly discussed in Van Mead (2019). On the use of the pyramid in Western Egyptomania, see, e.g., Curl (2006) *passim.* and Humbert (2003).

14 On obelisks, see, e.g., Habachi (1977). The location of the obelisks, standing monumentally in isolation in the desert, contributes to a fantasy landscape of expected architectural features.

15 A small, open temple with supporting columns. The kiosks in the game are particularly reminiscent of the kiosk traditionally ascribed to the Roman emperor Trajan (98–117 CE) at Philae, but most likely begun under Augustus (30 BCE – 14 CE); see Arnold (1999) 235–236.

16 Today, the entrances to the tombs in the Valley of the Kings (tombs of the pharaohs of the New Kingdom, 16th–11th centuries BCE), are clearly delineated by brick walls that cut into the valley's cliffs. The Theban Mapping Project (https://thebanmappingproject.com) is the best source for high-quality images of these entrances.

17 Lowe (2012) 59.

18 Lowe (2012) 59–66.

19 Lowe (2012) 72–76.
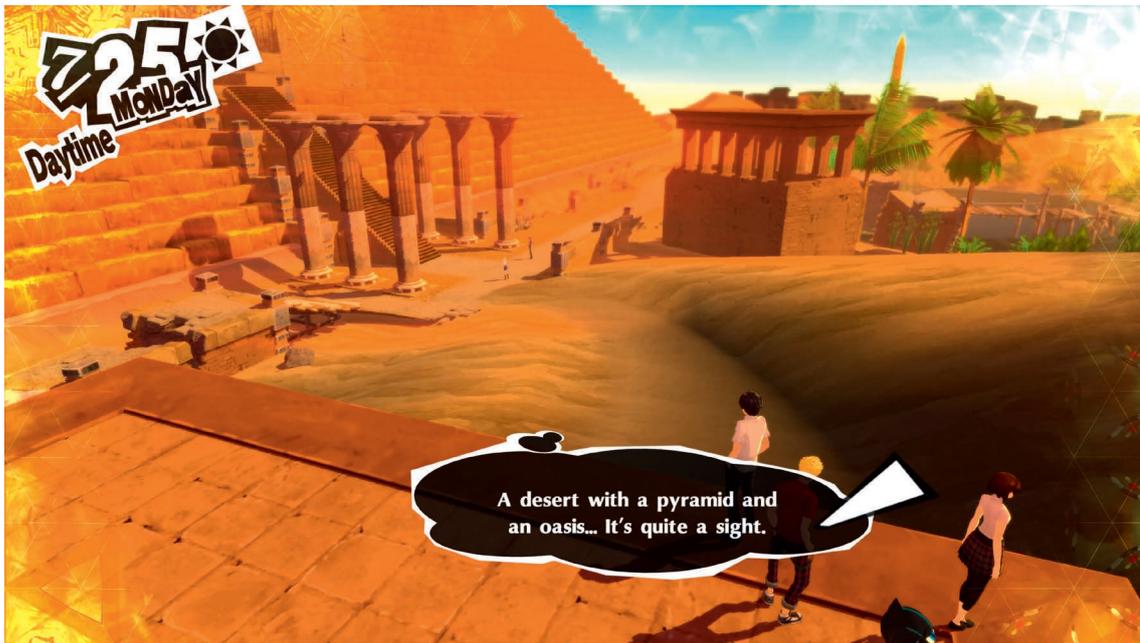
Figure 1 The pyramid entrance (*Persona 5 Royal.* PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

ruined and intact) are reconfigured to create something new. While not conforming with any actual landscape, it is entirely recognisable. The final scene of this episode of the game also results in another type of past landscape in Lowe's typology: 'Destruction', or ruination 'on demand'.[20] Encountering and then defeating the final boss results in the mostly intact pyramid collapsing. Futaba has confronted her personal demons and thus her palace is no longer required.

It is not only the exterior setting that contributes to building this Egyptian world. Once access is gained to the interior, both generic Egyptian references and more overt pyramid references continue. The key route from the entrance to the ultimate objective, referred to in-game as the 'pharaoh's tomb', is an almost impossibly tall, narrow corridor, referred to as the Great Corridor in the game, which is suggestive of the Grand Gallery of Khufu's pyramid.[21] But progress along the corridor is not straightforward. It is blocked at multiple places, and so

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20 Lowe (2012) 67–71.

21 The Giza Project at Harvard University includes a digital reconstruction of the interior of Khufu's pyramid, which allows the user to explore the Grand Gallery (as well as the most

divided into sections, progression through which is only possible by navigating the adjoining areas (or dungeons, in gaming terms) and solving puzzles. 'Pharaoh's chamber' is the most secret and most protected part of the tomb. Here, it should be stressed that the pharaoh in question is Futaba herself, whose Shadow form, which the characters encounter at several points, appears in royal regalia, as discussed below (see also figures 3 and 5). The female gender of the pharaoh is not mentioned at any point by the characters; it is accepted without question and it is notable that her tomb is the 'pharaoh's chamber', not the 'queen's chamber'. As Futaba is not portraying a historic figure, there seems to be no need to justify the feminisation of this role, which stands in stark contrast to the overt masculinity encountered in many ancient history videogames.[22]

The puzzle-solving aspects of these dungeons are also evocative of other aspects of pyramid complexes, echoing Herodotus' description of the mortuary temple of Amenemhat II's second pyramid at Hawara as a labyrinth:

> "I have seen it myself, and indeed words cannot describe it; if one were to collect the walls and evidence of all other efforts of the Greeks, the sum would not amount to the labour and cost of this labyrinth ... this maze surpasses even the pyramids. It has twelve roofed courts ... There are also double sets of chambers, three thousand altogether, fifteen hundred above and the same number underground. We ourselves viewed those that are above ground, and speak of what we have seen, but we learned through conversation about the underground chambers; the Egyptian caretakers would by no means show them ..." (Hdt. II 148.1–5; trans. A. D. Godley)

Not only does such a description (albeit concerning a mortuary temple, rather than the interior of a pyramid) lend itself to a dungeon-crawling adventure, it also contributes to the air of mystery of such a space, with its inherent secrecy.[23]

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up-to-date bibliography of studies connected to the pyramids at the Giza Plateau); http://giza.fas.harvard.edu.

22 On masculine stereotypes in classically-themed videogames, see, for example, Lowe (2009) 80–82. A small number of female pharaohs are attested throughout Egypt's history, some of whom are better known than others, whose reigns have received mixed historiographic approaches; see, most recently, Cooney (2018).

23 A 'dungeon-crawler' refers to a game-type in which the characters navigate a labyrinthine environment comprising a series of connected rooms (or dungeons), in which they encounter enemies, traps, puzzles, and treasure.

The palace's defences move beyond such architectural features and ancient descriptions. Broader pop-cultural motifs are also drawn upon, principally spike traps and rolling boulders that thwart the player's progress. Just as Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Last Ark* (1981; dir. Steven Spielberg), the characters outrun the boulder.[24] But, unlike the film, there is never a sense of imminent doom, of being crushed by the boulder, as the action takes place within a cutscene.
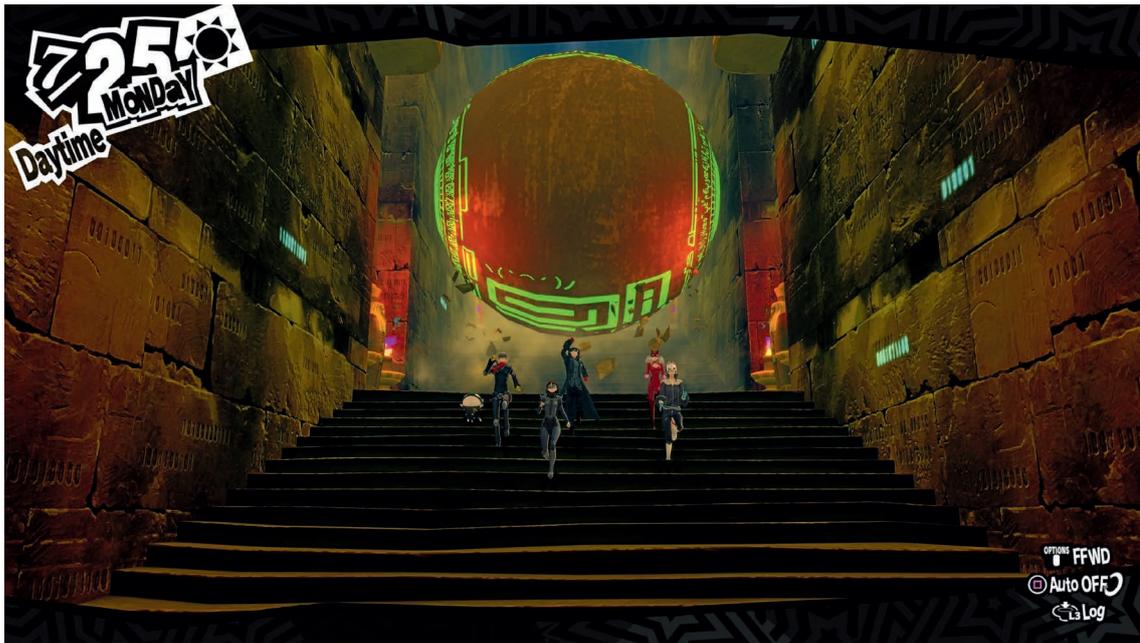
Figure 2 Escaping the boulder trap (*Persona 5 Royal*. PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

Inside, the whole palace is sparsely populated, with only three main object-types found throughout: anthropoid stone sarcophagi, canopic jars, and ceramic vessels of various shapes. The last of these categories does not contribute directly to the game play, and unlike vessels in other games they cannot be

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24 This aspect of the game draws upon transmedial archaeological tropes, rather than any historical evidence. Not only can Clare's (2021) transmedial approach to ancient Greece and Rome in videogames be applied to other areas of the ancient world, it is also applicable to the presentation of archaeology and archaeologists. On the representation of both, see, for example Clack/Brittain (2007), Holtorf (2007), and Reinhard (2018) chapter 2.

smashed.[25] A number of the larger and less commonly encountered canopic jars do, however, contain collectibles.[26] Canopic jars were an important part of Egyptian funerary practices. As part of the burial equipment, they were used to contain the desiccated internal organs of the deceased, which were removed during the mummification process. A full set of canopic jars consists of four vessels, and the best-known versions have lids representing four protective deities, the Four Sons of Horus.[27] Three of these deities are encountered in the game: Imsety (human head), Duamutef (jackal head), and Qebehsenuef (falcon head), which in the game are respectively referred to as 'human face vase', 'dog face vase', and 'bird face vase'. For reasons that are not clear, the baboon headed Hapy does not appear. If the developers had wanted to avoid obvious associations with Thoth, who appears in the game in his baboon form (as discussed below), a 'monkey face vase' would have been a possibility, especially as Anubis appears in multiple forms throughout this level.

The content of these vases is less visceral than their real counterparts. They contain various 'treasures' that can actually leave the palace and be sold. In addition to some precious gems, these 'treasures' include 'torn papyrus' pieces, a 'sarcophagus bit', and even a 'canopic jar'.[28] While being evocative of Egypt in a general sense, the ability to remove such objects from the tomb also has an unsettling association with tomb robbery and the illicit trade in antiquities, which is mitigated only by the fact that the same practice occurs in all the game's palaces.[29] A direct reference to tomb robbery comes at the beginning of this epi-

25 On the intentional ruination of such artefacts in games, see Clare (2021) 49–52. Note that in *Persona 5,* the ability to use cognitive abilities to sense actual 'treasure' means that the player does not have to wantonly destroy their environment when the opportunity arises to do so. The decision to interact with the game's environments through smashing objects therefore reflects individual approaches to gameplay.

26 An additional object-type that I will not discuss here are treasure chests that are common to all palaces and contain higher-level commodities.

27 For canopic jars, see, for example, Dodson (1994).

28 The complete list of Egyptian 'treasures' found in *Royal* (which is more extensive than the base game) comprises a range of artefacts: Bastet statue, Ra mural, gold uraeus, mummy mask, jewel mummy (unlike the other items, what this is supposed to indicate is not clear), scarab charm, pillar piece, and bent staff.

29 Numerous important studies on looting and the illicit trade in antiquities have appeared over the past two decades, e.g., Brodie et al. (2008), Mackenzie/Green (2009), Renfrew (2012). Concerning papyrus manuscripts, recent high-profile cases involving The Museum of the

sode, when Futaba's cognitive version ('Shadow Futaba') informs the party that a map to the tomb has been stolen, and the party must track down the thief and retrieve it. The party is both the protector of the tomb's artefacts, but also their defiler, depending on whether the game's narrative or the game's mechanics are in question.

Figure 3 Map of the pyramid, retrieved from the bandit (Persona 5. PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

Returning to the first of the three objects mentioned above, the stone sarcophagi, these serve a couple of purposes in the game. On one hand, they are a functional part of the background, allowing the player to traverse to higher platforms. However, in a few instances they also form parts of puzzles and traps in the dungeons. When certain objectives are met, a trap is triggered by which a sarcophagus opens and a lumbering mummiform shadow emerges (an enemy, for which see below). The very position of the sarcophagi, standing upright, reflects their most common appearance in museum collections, where they are positioned

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Bible in Washington DC (see, e.g., Bishara (2021)) demonstrate clearly the ongoing and contemporary nature of this illegal activity.

vertically, both for economy of space but also so that the viewing public can see
as much of their decoration as possible.

Additionally, there are special artefacts that form part of the objectives. An-
thropomorphic statues of the god Anubis contribute to one mini-puzzle: the god
holds an orb in an outstretched hand that the player must remove and transport
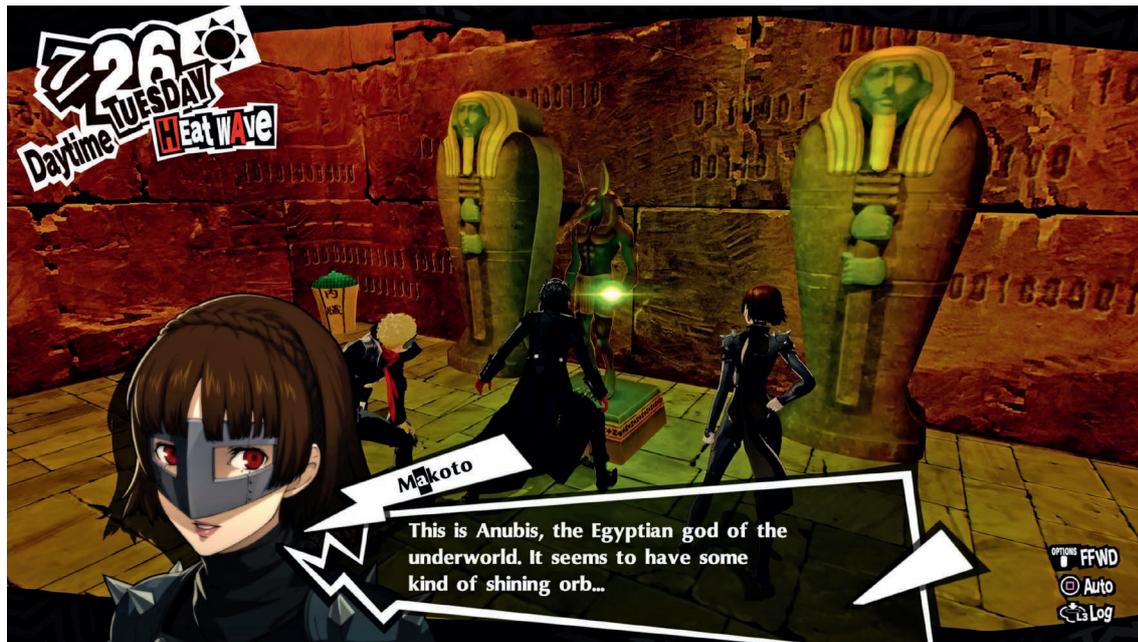
Figure 4 Anubis statue: "the Egyptian god of the underworld" (*Persona 5 Royal.*
PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

to another such statue. These statues are approximately human-sized, wear a kilt,
and have rippling muscles, as a buffed-up 21st century version of the type of mas-
culinity encountered in statues of pharaohs, which (with some exceptions) show
the kings as young, fit, and powerful, both physically and metaphorically.[30] On

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30 The strength of the king was praised in hymns, as a hymn to the Middle Kingdom pha-
raoh Senwosret III (1870–1831 BCE) shows. The king is described as powerful, with physical
acts representing his political power; he "clasps both lands with his hands" and "grips foreign
peoples in his arms" (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UC 32157); translation from
Wildung (2002) 203, in his overview of the image of pharaoh in Egyptian sculpture. The most
recent edition of the hymn is Collier and Quirke (2004) 16–19. On the presentation of mas-
culinity more generally in Egypt, that is, beyond the body of the king, see Robins (2008a).

first encountering one of these Anubis statues, Makoto Niijima – the grade-A student in the group – announces to the party: "This is Anubis, the Egyptian god of the underworld …" This identification of Anubis – even if the stated association is not accurate, as Anubis is connected with the deceased rather than the afterlife[31] – provides this information for the player unfamiliar with Egyptian gods. This information also makes it clear that Anubis' presence is not arbitrary but entirely suited to this environment and both the death of Futaba's mother and Futaba's own suicidal thoughts. These Anubis statues, together with inscribed stone stelae, the other interactable object in these dungeons, also contribute to another aspect of Egyptomania found within the game: alternative histories, which are discussed below.

Moving beyond these smaller, interactive objects, colossal statues are also encountered in certain places. Colossal Anubis statues are located within the level's safe rooms (the only areas in the palace where you can save and transport to other safe rooms or the entrance) and in some dungeons, providing background decoration. The final dungeon contains even larger statues, this time of seated pharaohs, which fill the entire cavernous space, contributing not only to the aesthetic of the Egyptian theme but forming part of the traversable space as well.[32] Of the two colossal statues, which may be an intentional reference to the Colossi of Memnon on the west bank of Thebes (opposite modern Luxor),[33] the one on the left is complete while the other is still unfinished (or is in a state of repair), covered in scaffolding. Within the game, their presence is so impressive that upon seeing them one of the party, Ann Takamaki, remarks, "Seriously. This almost feels like a trip abroad or something." The level of detail is certainly

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31 Anubis is connected with the embalming process and with preparing the deceased for their journey to the afterlife. On his various functions, see the succinct overview provided by Duquesne (2012); see also Duquesne (2005), which examines Anubis and other Egyptian jackal divinities.

32 In this respect, whether intentionally or not, the game recalls a scene in the 1954 film *Valley of the Kings* (dir. Robert Pirosh), in which we see men scrambling over the colossal seated statues of Ramesses II that form the façade of his temple at Abu Simbel. That is, when it was in its original location, before the construction of the Aswan High Dam and its relocation during the UNESCO-sponsored Nubian Rescue Campaign in the 1960s to what is now the western bank of Lake Nasser.

33 Built during the reign of Amenhotep III (1390–1352 BCE), they originally flanked the entrance to his mortuary temple; see Fischer-Bovet (2012) for a concise overview of their later history and association with the Trojan hero, Memnon.

enough to convince the characters of the authenticity of this created ancient Egyptian world.

As well as artefacts and monumental constructions, two-dimensional art is also used in the level, not only for purposes of world-building but also as a central part of the narrative. After successfully navigating each of the dungeons along the game's version of the Grand Gallery, the player must solve a sliding puzzle before opening up the next section. The three scenes show episodes from Futaba's life that led to her current, shut-in status. The style is immediately recognisable as imitating Egyptian scenes, both those found on tomb walls and on funerary texts on papyrus.[34] Of the latter, the Book of the Dead is a particular source of inspiration for the scenes. In terms of the production of *Persona 5*, this influence is not surprising. Not long after the game went into development in 2011, a major Book of the Dead exhibition – *Journey through the Afterlife: Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* – opened in the Mori Arts Centre Gallery in Tokyo, running from 7 July to 17 September 2012.[35] This exhibition had other impacts on Japanese popular culture, as will be discussed further below, in the section on Medjed.

The figures in these scenes generally conform to the typical Egyptian style and canon of proportions, including a physiologically impossible mix of front-on and profile body positions, with frames drawing upon classic motifs, and empty spaces filled with columns of hieroglyphic script.[36] Of the three scenes, one is particularly notable. In the first scene that the player encounters, Futaba sits on a raised dais, wearing Egyptian costume and royal regalia (including a ureaus, a broad collar, long white skirt, and gold bracelets and armlets – the costume that the cognitive version of Futaba wears when you encounter her in the palace), and holding a staff. Behind her is a dark blue bird, with a white face and turquoise and pink tail and crest feathers. Except for the crest, the bird is suggestive of a falcon, the bird associated with the god Horus. In front of Futaba stand

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34 On the use of recognisable images or imagery from antiquity in videogames, see, for example, the art style employed in *Apotheon* (Alientrap, 2015). On this game's use of Greek material cultural, in particular Greek pottery, in its creation of a recognisable ancient Greek environment, see Clare (2021) 58–65.

35 The Mori exhibition was based on the British Museum exhibition of the same name that ran from 4 November 2010 to 6 March 2011; see the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Taylor (2010).

36 Egyptian art has been the subject of numerous studies; see, for example, Robins (2008b), Schäfer (2002), Smith (1998).

Figure 5 Wall scene in the style of the Book of the Dead (Futaba and anthropomorphic lawyers) (*Persona 5 Royal.* PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

three anthropomorphic figures with bird heads wearing suits, a combination of modern and ancient features. The real-world clothing identifies these three men as lawyers, with the first holding out a roll of paper to Futaba. The rolled form echoes that of papyrus documents, but the narrative context indicates that the contents are entirely modern, referring to the death of her mother. Along the top row of the scene, a series of gods sit, with the seven located above Futaba holding the hieroglyphic sign for life (the ankh), perhaps a subtle marker that Futaba continues to live, while the three anthropomorphic men are associated with death. Together, the scene is highly reminiscent of vignettes found in various copies of the Book of the Dead.[37] Of further note, the signs that accompany these three scenes are taken from the actual hieroglyphic script, rather than being connected with the hieroglyphs found throughout the rest of the palace (discussed below). A cursory look reveals that a small repertoire of signs is repeated in different combinations, creating a suggestion of authenticity without an attempt to create (or replicate) meaningful text.

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37 Taylor (2010) *passim.*

FUTABA'S HIEROGLYPHS

The hieroglyphs on the sliding puzzle wall scenes appear only fleetingly (depending on how quickly the player completes the puzzle) and are somewhat indistinct. However, their overall air of accuracy stands in stark contrast to the main hieroglyphic script found throughout Futaba's palace. On doorways throughout the interior, which are designed to resemble the style of actual false doors,[38] this script glows green, pulsating in intensity, and is arrayed in vertical columns to imitate the monumental arrangement of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Close inspection reveals them not to be ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, or even an approximation of such, but instead symbols of the modern world mainly derived from maths and economics. That is, they are symbols associated with the real Futaba, in terms of her technological prowess. In addition to these symbols, the walls inside the pyramid are also sporadically incised with short binary strings, again echoing Futaba's programming skills.

This use of images plays on the visual aspect of hieroglyphs, with their recognisability contributing towards the authentic feeling of the setting, while simultaneously connecting the two in-game worlds (the Metaverse and the real world).[39] Beyond these functions, the use of modern symbols echoes wider public understandings of and discussions around Egyptian hieroglyphs. Recently, the increasing use of emojis in modern written communication has led to comparisons between their use and hieroglyphic writing systems (primarily Egyptian). Between 16 December 2019 and 4 July 2021, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem held an exhibition, 'Emoglyphs: Picture-Writing from Hieroglyphs to the Emoji', that presented the metamorphosis of picture-writing from antiquity to modern times, using objects from Egypt set against a background of contemporary emoji use.[40] The graphic nature of the former and its ability to convey meaning (or, at least, intent) makes comparisons between the two alluring. However, it is a false analogy, which largely reflects misunderstandings of the complexity of the

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38 For false doors, which provide a cultic focus on non-royal tombs, see, e.g., Snape (2011) 38–41.

39 Note that, in Futaba's bedroom there is a poster showing the hieroglyphic alphabet (single consonant signs) on the back of her door. This poster is the only reference to Egypt within her room, and is partly obscured during most of the scenes in which it is visible.

40 Ben-Dor Evian et al. (2019).

hieroglyphic writing system.[41] Nevertheless, the use of recognisable symbols in place of the Egyptian writing system aligns with modern popular perception of it. Substituting ancient pictures for modern ones is therefore unproblematic to a general modern audience.

Furthermore, the reduction of the script, through removal of phonetic and grammatical content, to recognisable symbols alludes to the idea of universal language. While *Persona 5* is set in modern Tokyo, and the use of kanji, hiragana, and katakana scripts in the 'real world' of the game is context appropriate, the use of a universal script within the Metaverse helps further distinguish it from the main setting. Beyond this, the idea of a universal language comprehensible

Figure 6 Scene showing the false door with pulsating hieroglyphs and the collection of treasure (*Persona 5 Royal.* PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

to all periods and peoples was part of the general fascination with the Egyptian script before its decipherment in 1822 by Jean François Champollion.[42] At this time, connections were drawn between the ancient Egyptian and Chinese writ-

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41 A very concise overview of the Egyptian writing system is provided by Manley (2012).

42 Hornung (2001) 131.

ing systems, with the latter also being newly introduced to western audiences. While these connections and the notion of a universal language are founded on misunderstandings of both systems, the nature of the symbols used in Futaba's palace means that the general impression that they create is understandable to any player, regardless of their own language.

SHADOWS, GODS, AND MONSTERS

Alongside pyramids and hieroglyphs, two of the best-known aspects of ancient Egyptian culture are mummies and gods. The enemies that patrol this and all other palaces (referred to as shadows within the game) come in two forms, one humanoid and the other canine. The guard dogs do not exhibit Egyptianised features, with only slight variations present in their presentation across the palaces. The humanoid guards, however, are clearly intended to represent mummies, with bandages, a hunched posture, and elongated limbs, but mummies that owe more to common pop-cultural (especially horror) representations than actual preserved Egyptian human remains.[43] Upon encountering these shadows and initiating combat, whether by surprise attack or by being surprised, their true form is revealed. During combat, if the player meets various requirements, they can convince the monsters to lend them their power, at which point they join the player as personas (hence the game's title).

Most of the personas throughout the game are drawn from various world cultures and religions/mythologies. One of the exceptional features of the Egyptian gods is that they also occur within the Egyptianised world of Futaba's palace. In this level, three Egyptian gods are encountered, Isis, Anubis, and Thoth (gods and mythological figures from other cultures that also appear here include Anzu, Lamia, and Mot from Mesopotamian, Greek, and Caananite mythology respectively). Two other gods can also be generated through other means, a mechanism called fusion. Horus, who is fused from non-Egyptian personas, and Seth, who is the most powerful of the Egyptian personas and is generated by combining all four of the other Egyptian gods. For the most part, these gods are clearly

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43 Mummies are so popular in the modern imagination that it is redundant to list examples of their appearance in media here. On mummies and Egyptomania, see most recently Nielsen (2020) chapter 6, especially pp. 119–126 for their appearance in film and popular culture.

identifiable by their iconography, but their divine inspiration is also manifest in the abilities that they wield. Unlike the other Egyptianising elements discussed above, the appearance and presentation of these gods is not new to this instalment of the *Persona* series. They each appear in at least one of the previous games, including *Persona 3* and *4,* while other Egyptian deities appear in earlier games.[44] As these gods are not particular to this game and are not intentional world-building features, what follows will only provide a brief description, highlighting how iconographic elements have been adapted to character design, not only visually but also in terms of game play. Their key attributes, as perceived by the developers, are also revealed by the initial names that these shadows have when you first encounter them: Isis is 'She of Life and Death'; Thoth is 'Chanting Baboon'; and Anubis is 'Bearer of the Scales'.

Isis is in human form, wearing a long, white Egyptian dress with long feathered sleeves that give her an avian appearance, reflecting her association with birds. On her brow is a uraeus and atop her head is a hieroglyphic sign, a throne, which is one element in the writing of her name and serves to identify her among other goddesses. While she can attack using elemental magic, she is mainly a support character, able to cast protective magic on her allies, reflecting her associations with healing and magic – one of her Egyptian titles is *weret hekau,* 'Great of Magic'. As we read in the *Great Hymn to Osiris:*

> "His sister was his guard, she who drives off the foes,
> Who stops the deeds of the disturber by the power of her utterance.
> The clever-tongued whose speech fails not, effective in the word of command."[45]

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44 Salvador (2015) table 1 provides the attestations of Egyptian gods in all games within the series. A point for future consideration is why these gods were selected for inclusion within the series and whether, for example, their presence reflects their popularity specifically in Japan or more broadly. Note that Salvador's study is intended for a gaming audience and consists mostly of overviews of the evidence for the gods and how their appearance within the game reflects their key features. For those unfamiliar with Egyptian gods, Wilkinson (2003) provides an accessible survey of the iconography, mythology, and worship of deities from the early pharaonic period to the Roman period.

45 Translation from Hollis (2019) 110 as part of her study on Isis, primarily during the Old Kingdom; for a complete translation of the Hymn, see Lichtheim (1976) 81–86. Isis remained popular throughout the pharaonic period (see Münster 1968), and also across the Mediterranean world during the Hellenic and Roman periods (see Nagel 2019, Takács 1994, Witt 1971).

Unlike Isis, who in antiquity is primarily shown in human form, Thoth is depicted variously as an ibis-headed human, an ibis, or a baboon.[46] It is in this last form that he appears in the game, with a symbol of the moon on his head, which is typical of Thoth through his luna association. He sits cross-legged on the floor, reading a book, and his attacks are magical in nature, employing psychokinetic spells. Both the book and these psychic attacks reflect Thoth's role as god of wisdom and learning. The depiction of Horus is similarly straightforward. He appears as a falcon, shining as bright as the sun – to the extent that it is difficult to determine his form. This link with the sun is emphasised by the category of personas to which he belongs (the sun), and he wields bless magic, emphasising his purity and righteousness as the living king of the gods.

In contrast to these gods, all of whom show clear and simple allusions to the Egyptian originals, Seth seemingly bears no connection to the actual Egyptian god. He appears as a giant winged serpent, rather than the range of animals he is associated with in Egyptian religion (including donkeys, hippos, and the so-called 'Seth'-animal).[47] Throughout the *Megami Tensei* series, this form evolves from a snake in Seth's first appearance. The use of a snake may be through Seth's connection with the demon Apep (also known as Apophis), from whom Seth protects the barque of the sun god Ra as it travels through the underworld at night. As Egyptian gods throughout pharaonic history could assume multiple and quite different forms, be part of seemingly contradictory traditions, and adopt various roles, they lend themselves to such creative modern re-imaginings. Nevertheless, his other attributes in the game reflect the strength for which Seth was renowned, with attacks that can instantly kill or cripple the opponent.

Finally, Anubis appears in anthropomorphic form, as a jackal-headed man, as he does in statues elsewhere in Futaba's palace, as previously discussed. In contrast to ancient depictions of the god, Anubis's human body is the same colour as his dark jackal head – this is quite a typical feature of modern presentations of Anubis, for example, in *Gods of Egypt* (2016; dir. Alex Proyas). He wears a white kilt, a broad collar, and a headdress and holds a set of scales, connecting him with his appearance in the weighing of the heart scene in the Book of the Dead. In this scene, perhaps the best known among all those in Egyptian funer-

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46 For Thoth, see, for example, Stadler (2012) and, for a more detailed examination, Stadler (2009).

47 For the various mammalian associations of Seth, see, for example, de Maret (2005) and Vandenbeusch (2020) chapter 11.

ary literature, Anubis guides the deceased to a human-sized set of scales, upon which their heart is weighed against the feather of Ma'at (representative of truth and cosmic order).[48] His magical attacks include a curse that can instantly kill the enemy, drawing upon Anubis' association with the dead. Looking beyond the *Persona* series, Anubis presents an opportunity to examine how Egyptian gods are depicted in other Japanese media; he is more popular than each of the other gods discussed above. While it is beyond the scope of the current study to examine connections across modern Japanese pop-culture, his representation is diverse and offers considerable potential for more detailed future study. Note, for example, his appearance in manga (*Record of Ragnarok;*[49] the Stardust Crusaders story arc in *JoJo's Bizarre Adventures*[50]), anime (Anubismon in *Digimon; Yu-Gi-Oh: Pyramid of Light*[51]), and other videogames (*Mega Man Zero; Mega Man Zero 3*[52]).

Moving away from elements found in multiple *Persona* games to those specific to the Egyptian world of Futuba's creation, one other mythological creature appears that should be discussed. Throughout the level, the player learns more about Futaba's mother, Wakaba, and how blame for her death – presented as suicide – is placed on Futaba herself. The resulting guilt produces a monstrous form of Wakaba as the level's final boss: a giant winged sphinx. The Great Sphinx is yet another iconic image of Egypt's ancient past. Located close to the three pyramids of Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure on the Giza plateau, it has the body of a lion and the head of a king (the identity of which is debated) wearing the *nemes*

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48 Multiple examples of this scene are included in Taylor (2010), especially chapter 9, 'Judgement', which range in date from the papyrus of Nebseny in the 18th Dynasty (BM EA9900/4; ca. 1400 BCE) to the papyrus of Kerasher from the reign of Augustus (BM EA9995/4; ca. 30–1 BCE).

49 Written by Shinya Umemura and Takumi Fukui and illustrated by Ajichika, it appeared originally in the comic anthology *Monthly Comic Zenon* in 2017 and received an anime adaptation in 2021.

50 Written and illustrated by Hirohiko Araki, it was originally serialised for the anthology *Weekly Shōnen Jump* between 1989–1992, with an anime adaptation in 2014.

51 Both *Digimon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* are media franchises, established in 1997 and 1996 respectively (the latter originating with the manga series written by Kazuki Takahashi). *Yu-Gi-Oh! The Movie: Pyramid of Light* was released in 2004 (dir. Hatsuki Tsuji).

52 Published by Capcom in 2002 and 2004, both for the Game Boy Advance handheld console.

Figure 7 The Wakaba-sphinx (*Persona 5 Royal.* PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

headddress.[53] However, while there is an association with Egypt, the Wakaba-sphinx instead owes its design to Greek tradition.

> "... she had the face of a woman, the breast and feet and tail of a lion, and the wings of a bird." (Apollod. 3.5.8; trans. J. G. Frazer)

Not only is the appearance of the Wakaba-sphinx based on Greek mythology,[54] her words also place her within this tradition. Before her identity as Futaba's mother is revealed, the 'palace monster' warns the party "Do not approach the pharaoh's tomb!" This echoes the Greek sphinx's role guarding the gates of the city of Thebes, although the game forgoes the sphinx's riddle and proceeds

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53 A concise introduction to the sphinx is available in Ikram (2012).

54 While there are examples of sphinxes with female heads from Egypt, it is the wings that definitively mark this sphinx as based on the Greek model. For such female sphinxes from Egypt, see for example that of a queen of Tuthmosis III (ca. 1479–1425; Museo Barracco, Rome 13; Roehrig (2005) 32–33 [cat. no. 11]).

directly to her attacking the party. Wakaba's aggressive nature, together with the opportunity to have a flying boss (which provides diversity in the strategies required to defeat the game's bosses), accounts for the use of the Greek narrative, as no monstrous attributes are associated with the Egyptian sphinx. In contrast to the Greek myth though, wherein Oedipus defeats her through riddling, the party ultimately kills the Wakaba-sphinx in combat, freeing Futaba from her prison. Nevertheless, despite the introduction of Greek elements, to those unfamiliar with the details, the presence of a sphinx guarding a pyramid fits perfectly in an Egyptian world.

MEDJED: FROM OBSCURE GOD TO CONTEMPORARY HACKERS

A more subtle reference to ancient Egypt, which may have been overlooked by a non-Japanese audience, occurs in the name of a group of hackers in the game.

"We are Medjed. We are unseen. We will eliminate evil." *(Persona 5)*

Medjed enter the scene after the completion of the third palace, when the group threatens to expose the identities of the protagonists, the Phantom Thieves. In response, Futaba – under the alias 'Alibaba' – contacts the Thieves to offer her aid, in exchange for them changing her heart. The choice of name reflects a recent pop-cultural phenomenon in Japan and heralds the Egyptian theme of the next episode.

The Book of the Dead of Nestanebetisheru, commonly referred to as The Greenfield Papyrus (after its one-time owner Edith Mary Greenfield), is one of the longest surviving papyrus rolls from ancient Egypt, at 37m, and the longest known copy of the Book of the Dead.[55] Currently housed in the British Museum, the papyrus was part of the exhibition at the Mori Gallery in Tokyo in 2012 – the

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55 BM EA10554; cut in the modern period and mounted on 96 individual frames. The papyrus dates to the Third Intermediate Period, approximately to the late 21st or 22nd Dynasty (ca. 950–930 BCE) and was discovered at Deir el-Bahri (western Thebes, opposite modern Luxor). Nestanebetisheru was First Leader-in-Chief of Musicians of Amonrasonther, Priestess of Amun-Ra Lord of Iurud, and Priestess of Inheret-Shu Son of Ra. See Taylor (2010) 307 for further bibliography.

first (and only) time that it has been on display anywhere outside of the British Museum. Among the vignettes that accompany the text, a minor deity appears twice, once above spell 17 and again above spells 23–26.[56] In each instance, the figure is described on the British Museum's catalogue as "a mound with legs and eyes". To a casual observer, rather than a mound with legs, the figure resembles a person hidden under a sheet, like a budget Halloween costume. While the figure is not labelled in the vignette, he appears to be named within the text of Spell 17, one of the longest and most important in the Book of the Dead. This spell is accompanied by a vignette for only a limited period of time, the late 21st dynasty to beginning of the 22nd, that is, the date of the Greenfield Papyrus itself. Of these vignettes, the "mound with legs and eyes" appears in only nine manuscripts. The general consensus is that he is Medjed, who is identified and described in the spell as:

> "I know the name of that Medjed who is with them in the house of Osiris, who shoots with his eye without being seen, who rings the sky with the flame of his mouth, who announces the Nile flood without being seen."[57]

No image of Medjed appears in *Persona* 5, but the use of his name for the mysterious, invisible hackers reflects the hidden nature of the deity. Following Medjed's announcement, one of the Thieves, Yusuke Kitagawa, does his own research on the name, discovering its ancient Egyptian origins. In a series of text messages to the team, he relays this information:

> "As you know, Medjed is a god that appears in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. ... Its name apparently means 'the smiter'. It seems nobody is actually sure that Medjed is a real name. On top of that, almost everything else about him is unknown. Even his form is unattainable. An unseen god that flies through the sky and shoots from his eyes... He truly is an elusive being."

This use of Medjed does not imply that the game's developers scrutinised the papyrus when on display in Tokyo. Instead, this god – of whom the majority

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56 Spell 17 is on frame 76 (BM EA10554,76); spells 23–26 are on frame 12 (BM EA10554,12).

57 Translation from Cariddi (2018) 197. Cariddi's article should be consulted as the most recent (and to-date the most comprehensive) study of Medjed in the Book of the Dead.

of the world are unaware (including scholars specialising on Egyptian funerary literature) – became a pop-cultural phenomenon. Since the exhibition, he has appeared in many places, in manga, paraphernalia, and several videogames, including his own mobile game (*Flying Mr Medjed,* 2015).[58] The developers have seemingly utilised the transmedial popularity of the figure, also undertaking their own research into its origins, to introduce a more subtle Egyptian element to their game. Medjed's predominance in Japan, and obscurity in the rest of the world, highlights a point that Leire Olabarria makes regarding the modern reception of ancient Egypt: "There does not exist, however, a single idea of Egypt, because different intellectual milieus may favor one aspect of its reception over others."[59] In this case, different modern cultures favour one aspect over others.

ALTERNATIVE EGYPT

While this use of Medjed reveals a particular feature of Japanese reception to ancient Egypt, as does the use of other Egyptian gods in anime and manga (as mentioned briefly above), in other respects it also resorts to more common elements of Egyptomania: curses, magic, and aliens. The first two of these points are encountered in solving the puzzles throughout the level. The Anubis statues hold out glowing orbs that need to be taken and relocated to disenable traps. However, taking orbs also triggers traps. An inscribed stela (labelled as a 'stone slab' in-game) next to one statue proclaims: "Any who attempts to steal this gem will be cursed", to which the characters react in different ways. Replacing an orb on a statue 'lifts' the curse. Since the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon in the Valley of the Kings in November 1922,[60] the

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58 Salvador (2017) 16–19 contains an overview of a range of such media appearances.

59 Olabarria (2020) 190.

60 For the definitive archaeological record of Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon's discovery of the tomb, see the online resources provided by the Griffith Institute, Oxford, "Tutankhamun: Anatomy of an Excavation" http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringTut/. The centenary of the discovery in 2022 will be accompanied by a new exhibition of the excavation material at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, which will be accompanied by the publication of Parkinson (2022). See also Reeves (1990) and Riggs (2019).

idea of a cursed tomb has been propagated in diverse media.[61] Already in 1923, following Carnarvon's death, Arthur Conan Doyle attributed the cause of death to "[p]owerful elements or spirits placed on guard by ancient Egyptian priests to protect the tomb."[62] 'King Tut's Curse' subsequently influenced the mummy-horror film genre, starting with Boris Karloff's famous *The Mummy* (1932; dir. Karl Freund).[63] Curses within ancient tombs, especially Egyptian ones, are such a standard trope that it would be more unusual for it not to be included in modern media, whether literature, film, or videogames.

Other puzzles are solved through the power of illusion. An inscribed stela, standing between two sarcophagi, instructs the party: "When red and blue align, an illusion will rise. Only proper guidance shall form a path." The use of illusion has connotations of magic, a topic for which ancient Egypt is especially well known.[64] Yet, while magic of a recognisable type (to a modern audience) is alluded to, the ability to identify the path only through "proper guidance" instead is connected to the realm of a particular practitioner, whose magic results from esoteric knowledge. The deceased's journey to the afterlife was fraught with danger and obstacles. Spells to protect the deceased from the former and secret information to grant them access through the latter were provided in mortuary literature, and certain spells were recited as part of funerary rites.

> "May you guide [the deceased], may you open the portals for him, may the earth open its caverns to him, may you make him triumphant over his enemies." (Excerpt from Spell 127 of the Book of the Dead[65])

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61 See Nielsen (2020) 99–107 for an overview of the history of the 'curse'. The death of several individuals connected to the tomb within a year of its discovery helped fuel the idea, including that of Lord Carnarvon himself on 5 April 1923.

62 Writing in the Australian newspaper *The Argus,* 7 April 1923; quoted in Nielsen (2020) 104.

63 See Lupton (2003) 31–36; for the history of the curse in Britain in particular, see Luckhurst (2012). The relevant filmography is too extensive to list here, but note for example *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* (1964; dir. Michael Carreras) and two separate films called *The Curse of King Tut's Tomb* in 1980 (dir. Philip Leacock) and 2006 (dir. Russell Mulcahy).

64 The literature on Egyptian magic is extensive and is aimed at multiple audiences; among recent publications, see, for example, Riggs (2020), which is targeted at a more general audience, and Meyrat (2019), which is principally aimed at specialists. Dozens of academic articles are published each year on various topics connected with Egyptian magic.

65 Translation from Taylor (2010) 132.

Such knowledge in Egypt was provided by priests.[66] In the game, no such figure appears and the player receives no extra guidance, apart from numerical clues that indicate the order in which the red and blue illusionary images should be activated. As these numbers comprise binary strings of 0 and 1, as also found on the pyramid's interior walls, one could interpret these clues as being from Futaba – this is her cognitive world, after all. Furthermore, the presentation of Futaba as the keeper of knowledge aligns with her role in the game following this episode. After acknowledging her persona, she gains multiple abilities in the cognitive world: revealing paths in the Metaverse, healing the party, and buffing them.[67] In the game, her Confidant designation may well be Hermit, in reference to her shut-in status, but in Egyptian terms she fulfils the role of Magician and Priestess (the designations of Morgana and Makoto respectively).[68] Instead, her codename, 'Oracle', reflects her abilities within the Metaverse.[69]

The identity of Futaba's persona further contributes to her depiction as a keeper of secret knowledge: Necronomicon. First appearing in H. P. Lovecraft's short story, *The Hound* (1922[70]), there have been several interpretations of the name. Lovecraft, who created the term, provided a derivation of 'An Image of the Law of the Dead', and other derivations have since been proposed.[71] Whatever its intended meaning and subsequent interpretations, being formed from the Greek words for death (νεκρός) and law (νόμος), it is a book that concerns the laws of the dead. Hence, it is connected by name with the Book of the Dead, the Egyptian mortuary text alluded to in multiple ways throughout Futaba's palace, as discussed above. Lovecraft's Necronomicon is, at most, an oblique reference to Egypt, but other works of his are firmly set in Egypt and align with

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66 On priests as magical practitioners, see, for example, Ritner (1993) especially chapter 5.

67 'Buffing' refers to the increase in abilities or attributes within a game. Regarding Futaba, she can increase the strength, defence, and evasion of the characters, and frequently accompanies this action with the announcement "Here come the buffs!"

68 'Confidant' is the designation given to several people in the game (both other members of the Phantom Thieves and other characters) with whom you can interact. This game mechanic, if the player chooses to engage with it, provides tangible benefits to various aspects of the combat system.

69 For oracles in ancient Egypt, see Kákosy (1982) and Tallet (2012); while the latter focusses primarily on oracles during the Roman occupation of Egypt, it also discusses earlier practices.

70 Coincidentally, the year of the discovery of Tutankhamun's Tomb, discussed above.

71 Joshi (2015).

alternative histories of Egypt, notably *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs,* written with Harry Houdini, which appeared in *Weird Tales* in May 1924.[72] The associations that surround Necronomicon therefore connect with Egypt in multiple ways.

The pyramids in particular are the focus of such alternative histories,[73] both because of our incomplete knowledge surrounding their construction and their remoteness in time from us.[74] Perhaps the best-known of these alternative histories is the involvement of extra-terrestrial beings in the formative periods of Egyptian history and the construction of its monumental architecture.[75] Since von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods* (1968), this idea has appeared across popular media, for example, forming the basis of two movies of the 1990s, *Stargate* (1994; dir. Roland Emmerich) and *The Fifth Element* (1997; dir. Luc Besson), and the long-running American television series, *Ancient Aliens* (2009–present).[76] *Persona* 5 also succumbs to this transmedial trope. When Futaba's persona, Necronomicon, is revealed to her, it appears not as a book but as a spaceship (in fact a clichéd image of a flying saucer), which draws Futaba into it.[77] On one hand, a spaceship

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72 Olabarria (2020) 188 discusses the role of Lovecraft in the reception of ancient Egypt in heavy metal music.

73 On this term, see, for example, Picknett/Prince (2003); see also Olabarria (2020) 173 on the tensions inherent in the study of Egyptian history, "between academic and so-called alternative visions of this culture, which are in effect competing views of ancient Egypt".

74 While this is not the place to enter the debate about the mystery or mundanity of pyramid construction, recent papyrus discoveries have revealed the logistics behind many of the operations involved; see Tallet (2017) and Tallet/Lehner (2022).

75 Another alternative theory concerning the Great Pyramid is the existence of a secret underground chamber beneath it (one of the key points within Lovecraft's *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs*). A point not mentioned above is that when entering Futaba's pyramid for the second time (i.e., after retrieving the map), the characters trigger a trap that sends them plummeting to a large chamber beneath the pyramid. While serving a practical purpose, creating extra chambers for the gameplay, the revelation of this secret chamber nevertheless echoes these alternative theories. This device also occurs in other games involving the pyramids, including recently *Assassin's Creed Origins.* On the history of these theories, see Picknett/Prince (2003) 178–90.

76 Nielsen (2020) 148–151 is a recent, concise dismissal of von Däniken's argument, as well as an important comment on the racist and colonial implications of his pseudo-archaeological claims. On ancient aliens and pseudoscience within Egyptology, see also Baumann (2018) and Herdt (2018).

77 The wall scene discussed above (figure 5) also includes a small image of the Necronomicon persona/spaceship above Futaba, prefiguring what will happen later in the episode.

Figure 8 Futaba and the Necronomicon-spaceship (*Persona 5 Royal.* PlayStation 4 screenshare. J. Cromwell).

is fitting for Futaba's technological genius, and her awakened self is dressed in a futuristic costume inspired by *Tron* (1982; dir. Steven Lisberger) – science-fiction stereotypes are set features of her overall presentation. In terms of gameplay, being above the rest of the players also facilitates Futuba's bird's-eye support role. Nevertheless, the inclusion of an alien spacecraft rather than any other fly-ing machine connects the game to such persistent alternative theories.[78]

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78 Another connection to von Däniken in the game, whether intentional or not, is the demon/persona Arahabaki, the model for which is taken from the dogū figures from the late Jōmon period of prehistoric Japan (1000–400 BCE). Von Däniken interpreted these figures as depicting alien visitors (he refers to them as statues of Tokomai), which he describes as having modern fastenings and eye apertures on their helmets. On these figurines, from In-cipient to Final Jōmon period, see, for example, Habu (2004) 142–151 and Kaner (2009), who also discusses the appearance of dogū figures in Japanese popular culture (pp. 79–82). The connection between these figures and Von Däniken may not, however, have been known to the game's developers; they are a specifically Japanese cultural feature in the game, most probably recognisable to a Japanese audience.

PERSONA 5'S EGYPTOLOGICAL WORLD AND JAPANESE RECEPTION

Persona 5 draws upon clear tropes of both the presentation of ancient Egypt (pyramids, animal-headed gods, mummies) and the ancient world more generally in videogames (ruins, smashing jars). The unreal setting of the cognitive worlds (the palaces) allows the developers to adapt elements of ancient Egyptian society to reflect Futaba's character, drawing upon broader contemporary understandings of, for example, hieroglyphs, art, and monumental architecture. Despite being a Japanese game, the main setting of which is Tokyo, these features are entirely recognisable to a Western audience, highlighting the game's intended global playership. Within this, though, there are aspects of the game that are particular to Japanese reception of ancient Egypt, notably the integration of Medjed (the name alone has resonance, even without any visual inclusion) and Anubis, both of whom appear across Japanese popular media.

Studies on the reception of ancient Egypt in modern Japan are rare. Anja Wieber's study of non-Western approaches to the ancient world included examples from Egypt, focussing especially on the 1970 anime film *Cleopatra* (dir. Osamu Tezuka), which involves time-travelling from a futuristic age to ancient Egypt to investigate the erotic qualities of Cleopatra. Western orientalist clichés of the exoticism and eroticism of Egypt are therefore present in Japanese media, but the Roman timeframe enables critical references to be made regarding the materialism of modern America.[79] Discussing non-Western, especially Japanese, videogames involving Greece and Rome, Dunstan Lowe notes how approaches of the designers and artists to Western classical culture are "oblique and creative", including *Time Soldiers* (1987; SNK) and *Time Slip* (1993; Nintendo).[80]

The lack of studies on the Japanese reception of ancient Egypt – in videogames and other modern media – is not a result of a lack of material. The multi-media *Yu-Gi-Oh!* franchise, which includes manga, anime, trading card games, and multiple videogames (1996 to present), uses Egypt as part of its own backstory,

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[79] Wieber (2017) 339–340.

[80] Lowe (2012) 55. Lowe (2021) looks at allusions to ancient Greece in Rome in versus fighting games, including several games developed by Japanese companies, including the *Street Fighter* (Capcom; 1987–), *The King of Fighters* (SNK; 1994–), *Tekken* (Namco; 1994–), and *Soulcalibur* (Namco; 1996–) series. Away from videogames, see several of the studies in Renger and Fan (2019) for the reception of ancient Greece and Rome in contemporary Japan.

and heavily draws upon recognisable Egyptian symbols throughout. In contrast to these overt references to ancient Egypt, other games integrate imagery in both character and background design. For example, in the versus fighting game *Street Fighter V* (2016; Capcom), the character Menat is a young Egyptian fortune-teller whose costumes draw upon ancient Egyptian motifs (ranging from a stylised broad collar in her default costume to mummy-bandages, a uraeus, and a Cleopatra-style hairstyle in her Battle Outfit 1 costume). Another character, Nash, is buried within a sarcophagus in an Egyptian-style tomb, which inexplicably forms part of the New Zealand-inspired "Waterfall" level.[81] Futaba's palace in *Persona 5* is thus part of a much broader use of Egyptian imagery in late 20th and 21st century Japanese popular culture.

Why, then, has Japanese reception of Egypt received such little attention? While the study of the reception of Egypt in general is a less well-developed area of study than that of ancient Greece and Rome, additional factors are also involved. In terms of reception studies and Egypt, scholarship still largely focusses on individual case studies (such as my own offered here on *Persona 5*),[82] and some areas of popular culture have particularly been overlooked, and not only videogames, as highlighted by Leire Olabarria in her study of ancient Egypt in heavy metal music.[83] However, regarding the reception in Japanese popular culture, ad-

81 While Lowe (2021) primarily focuses on allusions to ancient Greece and Rome, he also mentions the "indeterminate Egyptian location" of the Desert stage in *The King of Fighters '98* (SNK, 1998). Another Japanese versus fighting game series to add to the discussion is *Vampire* (Capcom, 1994–2013), known outside of Japan as *Darkstalkers.* The games' characters are based on mythological or literary monsters. Of these, Anakaris is the 5,000-year old mummy of an Egyptian pharaoh, who can utilise his wrappings as weapons and whose special moves include the use of a sarcophagus. Anakaris' appearance, which goes beyond linen bandages to include a *nemes* headdress, kilt, and other royal imagery, suggests that his inspiration goes beyond the mummy horror genre, drawing upon other aspects of Egyptian reception.

82 Taterka (2016) 207 notes that, for Egypt, reception studies is still largely constrained by a phenomenological approach, lacking a body of work required for more dedicated treatments. This is not necessarily accurate, as there are several monographs and edited volumes dedicated to the topic (see n. 2). However, what these studies do have in common is a focus on western Europe in particular, with studies in other parts of the world being limited, as Taterka does note (p. 206). Note that his discussion of Egypt in videogames is limited (pp. 211–2), naming a small number of games that explicitly concern Egypt (mainly strategy and *Civilization*-type games).

83 Olabarria (2020). Her comment concerning why the study of heavy metal has largely been neglected could also apply to videogames: "ancient Egypt and heavy metal share some

ditional obstacles exist. There are practical concerns, including the availability of the relevant media outside Japan, in particular in translation, which impacts non-Japanese scholarship on the topic. Within Japan, another hurdle is the nature of the discipline of Egyptology itself, which is younger than in Europe and the US and is struggling to establish a permanent presence in Japanese universities, as several recent studies have stressed.[84] As Kawai concludes, when looking to the future of Egyptology in Japan, it is important for Japanese scholarship to contribute to the discipline, to present "ideas … developed from a specifically Japanese point of view, based on their own philosophy and religion, thus producing something different from the western approaches ultimately based on the Judeo-Christian world-view."[85] The same holds true – more so – for the reception of Egypt in contemporary Japanese society.[86] It is also worthwhile to note how Egyptology is structurally organised in Japanese university curricula, with Near Eastern studies, including ancient Egypt, being categorised as part of 'Western History', until the Islamic period when it becomes part of 'Oriental History'.[87] Although it is beyond the scope of the current study, a future route of enquiry is how the Japanese representation of Egypt contributes to or complicates Edward Said's paradigm of 'Orientalism'.[88] Defined, in part, as a Western style of dominating and having authority over the 'Orient', and an essential

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common ground, as they are both governed by popular (mis)conceptions that have deeply affected their reception" (p. 173). While the past decade has seen the publication of important studies on videogames in the ancient world (see n. 2), Egypt remains poorly represented overall, and videogames are still to be taken as seriously as other media, e.g., films and literature, as a source of scholarly enquiry in ancient world studies.

84 See Kawai (2017), Kondo/Kawai (2021), and Nishimura/Miyagawa (2017).

85 Kawai (2017) 59.

86 I am very conscious of my own positionality as a white British academic researching the responses of a culture not my own (Japan) to another culture not my own (Egypt). While I hope that my own observations are not negatively biased by my own cultural background, this study certainly represents a specific response to both Egypt and Japan. As Olabarria (2020) 190 remarks, "the rise in Reception Studies reflects the sentiment that every type of knowledge is mediated by the surviving sources and the way these are understood."

87 Kawai (2017) 54.

88 Said (1978 [2003]). Olabarria (2020) 190–193 uses this framework to explore the reception of ancient Egypt within heavy metal music, stressing how his ideas are essential to the study of Egypt despite criticisms of his work.

framework for understanding Western reception of Egypt, the East-West dichotomy is inverted in this instance. Japan is the east, and ancient Egypt is conceived as Western history from its perspective, both geographically and academically.

SUMMARY

In *Persona* 5, the narrative device allows multiple fictitious worlds to be included within an otherwise contemporary Tokyo, ranging from historical to science fiction settings. These historical worlds include sufficient real-world markers to create an authentic feeling. In the case of the Egyptian setting, core elements of Egyptian imagery (pyramids, hieroglyphs) are utilised together with common tropes from other media and alternative histories (curses, traps, aliens). The result is a game-world with which multiple audiences among *Persona 5*'s global player base can identify. However, distinctly Japanese elements are also incorporated, notably the inclusion of the obscure god Medjed, which demonstrate a specific local reception to Egyptian sources. Understanding such aspects is only possible when the game is examined within its own cultural context. As such, while numerous conventions are employed that will be familiar to many players, *Persona 5* ultimately reflects a particular cultural response, highlighting the sometimes-subtle ways in which such receptions are produced and mediated.

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