

**Portfolio of Writing**

**Task 3 - Practice-Based Writing**

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**Ways of Thinking (ADAD4018)**

**Word Count:** 1,500 words

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My love for video games began when I was six years old. Being so young and amazed at how media could be so engaging, I attribute my early adoration of video games to the 11 years it took for me to finally begin to appreciate and love the stories they tell as much as I enjoy the gameplay on offer. It was *428: Shibuya Scramble* that finally broke that streak. Along with its varied soundtrack, the main cast are all likeable and feel real, two of whom I could closely relate to the issues of more than I ever expected to in a game, particularly one I only stumbled upon and had not heard of before.

I would like to one day create my own visual novel that draws upon the way my favourites made me feel through my analysis. Freelance writer Dani Cavallaro describes visual novels an *“interactive ludic experience that enlists the player’s creativity alongside the production studio’s own artistry and thus transcends the boundaries of other types of more controlling videogaming”* (Cavallaro, 2010, p8). In essence, they take advantage of what their digital platform has to offer over books, by adding interactivity with branching story arcs depending on the player’s choices, and depictions of the characters displaying an array of emotions. *428* takes this one step further; its text is written like a book rather than a first-person perspective told in text boxes, and the supplementing imagery is real-life photography (and occasional short film clips) of the actors shot in Shibuya.

What fascinates me most about my connection to *428* in my reflection is my lack of familiarity going into the game. Before playing, Shibuya was an area of Japan I had wanted to visit for five years, but even now after having decided I want to move to Japan for work in the future, I lack a deep understanding of the cultural differences as a western player. That said, I found myself deeply relating to two characters more than I ever expected I would in fiction. The first is Kyuzo Tateno, a detective whose bravery and selflessness is revealed to be a lack of care for his own life after inadvertently letting the love of his life die. While less dramatic, Tateno’s words, particularly *“I’m incapable of making other people happy. That’s the sort of person I am”* resonated so strongly with the way I felt during my depression, which I was just getting over. His acceptance late in the game that his life is still worth something after all cemented my desire to keep going because my life is also worth living, especially at a considerably younger age. The second is Kenji Osawa, who finds more joy in his work than the real world. He is an extreme example of introversion who lacks basic life skills and common knowledge (at one point it’s shown he doesn’t know how to operate a microwave), though it is not far off my own life.

From this, I can infer the importance of writing characters who have issues that players can similarly relate to. The next step then becomes choosing what themes to deal with. *428* also deals with other common character tropes, like lovestruck teenager Endo and amnesiac Tama (the latter is particularly common in visual novels). While researching what makes characters memorable, I found that Jessica Morrell believes *“character, not plot, is what chiefly interests the reader because he translates and feels the character’s actions, desires and passions from his own databank of experiences and emotions.”* (Morrell, 2008, p14). Reading this gave me the stark realisation that, while I enjoyed the progression of the story, it’s the characters I loved more, be it Achi reminding me of times I saw a pretty girl in passing, or Minorikawa’s pressure to finish his work under seemingly-impossible deadlines. To that end, I know now to channel the people around me when writing characters, and to rigorously ask myself “could people relate to the character’s situation and how they react to it?” If it weren’t for my own life experiences enabling me to empathise with Osawa, Tateno, Endo and Minorikawa, I may have still enjoyed my playthrough, but lacked the longing to experience it for the first time again that is still with me.

As mentioned earlier, visual novels take advantage of their digital platform and offer accompaniment to the text that printed books cannot offer. As a musician who aspires to compose for video games, I paid close attention to the soundtrack throughout my playthrough. There are 76

tracks in total, none of which ever felt out of place to me. The comic relief character Yanagishita's theme has a fitting bounciness matching his character, but by contrast, Kano's theme conveys his tentative nature before he even speaks for the first time. The game's theme song also plays at several points in public places foreshadowing its importance in the game's finale. In contrast, there are also several points where location ambience is playing instead, which set the tone of "a short break between the chaos" perfectly. Since the advances in technology allow video game music to draw from any song influences nowadays (Munday, 2007, p51), they are able to draw out emotions in the timbre better than the bleeps of chiptune music from the early days of video gaming.

The departure from the typical visual novel formatting in both *428* and *The Silver Case* led me to create plans for a blend of still photography and CGI/sprite characters and models for its backgrounds. I also fell in love with the synth-based tracks from the soundtrack; "Contemplation" and "Pressure" are dreamy despite the tension they bring to experience when played. The latter game has a unique presentation stemming from being developed in the company's infancy and thus reducing the amount of work needed to finish the game.

*428* covers many themes including comedy relief in how Yanagashita haphazardly throws himself at any possible get-rich-scheme, drama as the erratic actions of the ransom handoff ensue and both sides of romance; Endo fabricates his crush's intimacy with older men as he gets to know his crush more, and Osawa realising his love for his daughters, finally leads him to stand up to his wife, after which their status is unclear. To me, however, the most interesting theme is the way it handles withdrawal. Osawa unknowingly suffers from symptoms of "Hikikomori", the Japanese term for "withdrawal". With a "conservatively estimated" 700,000 cases just in Japanese people. (Lu, 2014, p1). He is an interesting case as he actually has a wife and two daughters, but finds more value in his work than his family, until realising what truly matters to him is his family once his daughters go missing. Previous research has shown that socially withdrawn individuals find belonging and meaning through various media (Lu, 2014, p7); for Osawa it is his work and Aya Kamiki's music, while during my depression it was music and anime art.

While visual novels have become more widely available in western markets in recent years, they have been a staple of Japanese video gaming for over 20 years. As a non-Japanese speaker, my options for other similar games are comparatively limited. Developers Spike Chunsoft have only localised *428* of their "sound novel" line, though the enclosed settings of their more well-known horror series *Danganronpa* and *Zero Escape* make for interesting comparisons.

Having now analysed *428: Shibuya Scramble* I see the game in a different light than before I started. Since I treasure the experience of my first playthrough so dearly, I'm glad that my analysis has allowed me to think about the game on a deeper level without ruining any future playthroughs, but rather, I'm looking forward to replaying the game with this in mind. I now have a considerably better idea of what steps I need to take to get my own visual novel plans going in the right direction. I also realised *just* how important it is to keep track of where the player's emotions should be. Emotion theory applies to video games too (Grodal, 2000, p200-201) and encounters in fiction can and will influence the way you think in real life situations, which is a large responsibility to bear as a writer. I specifically remember the tension and engagement I had during the game's finale, and I want to channel that for my own final chapter so the player enjoys it as much as I enjoyed *428*.

*428's* soundtrack is one I will keep as an influence for years to come regardless of what projects I end up working on. It's so versatile that there's something for everyone to enjoy. As a composer, I want my work to stand up by itself as well as making the game better. I cannot wait to get started

with writing my own visual novel either now I better understand the internal workings of why 428 is so enjoyable that I wish I could experience it for the first time all over again.

### **Bibliography**

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