

**Game Title: Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4**  
**Platform: Sony Playstation 2**  
**Genre: Japanese Style Role Playing Game**  
**Release Date: December 9, 2008**  
**Developer: Atlus**  
**Publisher: Atlus**  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Katsura Hashino (Director)**  
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## **Overview**

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4 continues long-standing tradition within the Persona series of making high school students overcome their psychological shortcomings through the students' involvement in extraordinary events. The story is presented as a murder mystery where the murderer throws his victims into a bizarre world that exists inside of televisions. While a victim is within the TV world, their "Shadow" manifests physically and torments them until a certain point in time when the "Shadow" turns on the person and kills him, depositing him back in the real world.

The protagonist gets caught up in this mystery by coincidence during a one-year stay at his uncle's house in the rural town of Inaba. The player controls this protagonist and must balance his attempts to save the victims from the TV world while maintaining a social life and attending classes at school. Early in the game, the protagonist awakens to his Persona, a powerful deity that represents his inner strength. The principle characters that the protagonist befriends are explored through their encounters with their "Shadows" which, when overcome, awakens them to their own Personas. Other characters the protagonist meets, as well as these principle friends, are explored through "Social Links", events where the protagonist meets with friends during his free time. The protagonist is characterized by the decisions the player makes during "Social Links".

## Characters

- Protagonist – The protagonist is the character that the player controls. He is staying with his uncle in Inaba for a year while his parents are working overseas. He is given a name by the player at the start of the game and much of his personality is left up to the player. The protagonist only speaks when the game prompts the user to select from a list of dialog options; as such he is a “silent protagonist” whose personality is dictated by the player. The protagonist is the leader of the “Investigation Team”, a group of students who use their mysterious powers to try to find out the identity of the serial murderer that is throwing people into the TV world.
- Yosuke Hanamura – Like the protagonist, Yosuke moved to Inaba from a larger city. The two are in the same class and Yosuke had a crush on one of the girls in the senior class, Saki Konishi, but she ends up being the second victim of the murderer. With the protagonist and another classmate, Yosuke discovers and explores the TV world. Yosuke is the character that comes up with the idea to create the “Investigation Team”, but since the first character to develop powers is the protagonist he is elected to be the leader of the team after Yukiko is saved from her “Shadow”.  
  
Yosuke’s shadow represents his hopes for something interesting to happen as well as his negative feelings for living in the rural, generally quiet town of Inaba. He learns to come to grips with his sadness over the death of Saki Konishi if the protagonist spends time working on his “Social Link”.
- Chie Satonaka – Chie is another classmate of the protagonist and the protagonist sits next to her in class. She is good friends with Yukiko and she originally joins in the investigation to try to save Yukiko from the TV world. Chie is a tomboy who loves Kung Fu movies and sees herself as a defender of Yukiko. Her “Shadow” represents her desire to maintain dominance over Yukiko

in their relationship as well as her jealousy of Yukiko's feminine qualities and skills. If the protagonist spends free time advancing Chie's "Social Link", she will learn that her desire to control Yukiko was actually a desire to protect people and that their relationship is one of mutual caring.

- Yukiko Amagi – She is another classmate of the protagonist, a close friend of Chie, and the first person that the protagonist, Chie, and Yosuke successfully save from the TV world. Yukiko's family runs the historic Amagi Inn and she is next in line as manager of the inn. Yukiko is very popular among the students and is frequently asked out, though she never accepts any of the propositions. Once Yukiko is saved from the TV world, she decides to join the "Investigation Team" so she can use her powers to save more victims like herself. Her "Shadow" represents her feelings that as the heir to the Amagi Inn, her destiny had been secured as soon as she was born. Yukiko's "Social Link" involves her decision to either stay in Inaba and take over the Amagi or head elsewhere and pursue her own dreams. Ultimately, Yukiko decides to stay in Inaba because everyone she cares about is there and she is happy to make her own decision to take over the Inn.
- Kanji Tatsumi – Kanji is a year younger than the protagonist and is the second person saved by the "Investigation Team". Kanji is known throughout the school as a delinquent and this reputation causes some problems for Kanji's mother, who owns a small textile shop. Because Kanji is raised by the owner of a textile shop, he is very good at sewing and dealing with handicrafts in general. His talent with handicrafts leads Harima to have a confused image of what masculinity and manhood are and this leads him to have a confused sexuality; he is not sure what his sexual orientation is, he's just himself and he wants people to accept that. Kanji's "Shadow" represents his confusion over manhood and sexuality. Working through Kanji's

“Social Link” helps him learn to be himself and introduces him to more people who accept him for who he is without worrying about hiding it.

- Rise Kujikawa – Rise is another underclassman at the school the protagonist attends and she is the third person that the team saves. Rise is a popular teen idol who decides to take a break from the spotlight by living with her grandmother in Inaba. Her “Shadow” represents her perceived lack of a personal identity which was born from being an idol told what to do, eat, and say all the time. When the protagonist spends time advancing Rise’s “Social Link”, Rise learns that her identity was an idol and that she could do good acting as a role model for people.
- Teddie – Teddie is a mystery entity that the protagonist meets the first time he enters the TV world. It is revealed, ultimately, that Teddie is a “Shadow” that had such a powerful desire to be loved by people that he took the form of a bear mascot and learned human language. Eventually, Teddie overcomes his own “Shadow” that represents his fears that his existence is hollow because his bear body is hollow. Once he overcomes these fears, he manages to gain his own power and he develops a human body that allows him to enter the human world and continue spending time with the “Investigation Team”. During his “Social Link”, Teddie learns that he is accepted as true friend by the team, even though he’s a “Shadow”.
- Naoto Shirogane – Naoto is a young private investigator that is introduced to the party as a boy, but is actually a girl who disguises as a boy to be accepted more easily by other police that she has to work with. She is one year younger than the protagonist, but she comes off as being one of the more mature characters in the party. Naoto came to Inaba because of the unsolved murders that the regular Inaba police force has been unable to make any headway in solving. She is immediately suspicious that the “Investigation Team”, that works completely independently, is holding information back on her. After she is saved from the TV world, she

understands why the team had to work independently and she joins up.

Naoto's "Shadow" represents her desire to be taken seriously as a detective in spite of her gender and age. Naoto's "Social Link" teaches her that she really does love being a detective and that she is not simply becoming a detective to carry on her family's tradition.

### **Breakdown**

Even though the story in Persona 4 is unchanging from play-through to play-through, it is very easy to get engaged in the events in the game world and feel like you, as a player, are making a difference. This engagement comes from the ability of the player to characterize the protagonist through choices made during the game, the robust characterization, customization, and importance that is placed on "Social Links", and the whole nature of the game as a mystery that the player is tasked with solving.

While the main character never talks and must be given a name by the player, his character shines through by what decisions a player chooses to make throughout the game. Right from the start of the game, the player is given superficial choices that allow a player to feel as though the protagonist is who the player wants him to be. These choices usually do not have any effect on how events in the game will play out. On the other hand, each of these choices allows the player to connect with the protagonist and personalize the play experience. Whether they change the scene they are in or not, dialog choices add to the already great characterization that is exuded within Persona 4. Each of these choices only feels more meaningful and connects the player with the protagonist more when they happen during the small social link events which further define each character.

When the protagonist establishes a bond with a character or group that he meets during his one-year stay in Inaba, a "Social Link" is formed with that character. "Social Links" advance in rank as the protagonist spends time with the group associated with the link and these rank advancements help the protagonist power up "Personas", deities that are summoned by the player to help out in combat with the monsters encountered in the shadow world in the TV. Some "Social Links" are established and advanced simply by progressing through the story of the game, but most of them must be found, established, and advanced by spending free time outside of school hanging out with certain characters. These optional "Social Links" provide some of the most fun and end up being some of the most memorable characters that create the greatest connections with the player. These characters and the strengths they give the player in combat are both memorable and important as the player solves the murder mystery presented by the main plot.

While characterization and establishing connections between characters and the player is the greatest strength the game has, the suspense created by the murder mystery presented to the player keeps the player involved as the school year advances. The game does a great job of giving the player a few hints and red herrings to keep him thinking about how events are going to unfold and always has the lingering question of "who is the murderer?" held above the player's head. That said, when characters in the story are figuring out certain hints and elements that are vital to the solution of the mystery, odds are the player has already noticed these same things long ago, the hint that every victim of kidnapping has become popular through appearance on TV being a prominent example. Even the fact that each of the playable characters was either closely tied to a victim or was the victim of kidnapping adds connection to the character as well as making the circumstances more important to the characters. These short comings are easy to overlook though as the game is more than happy with throwing a curve ball where it seems like the story is going to go in a certain direction but instead heads somewhere else, such as the

reveal that the man who has been kidnapping everybody is not related to the actual murders that are taking place. This story helps to wrap up the amazing characterization, adding context to the interactions with each character in the game.

Thanks to the presentation of many choices for the player to make, the powerful “Social Link” system, and an intriguing mystery to tie everything together, the narrative in Persona 4 is deeply engaging.

### **Strongest Element**

The strongest narrative element is the exploration of the characters the protagonist meets throughout the game. The “Social Links” and the events with the “Shadows” create an attachment between the player and the characters that the protagonist meets along the way. Though the dialog sequences are lengthy and gameplay takes a complete break while characterization is happening, the characters are so believable and the scenarios so authentic that they are easily the strongest portion of the game. The events where the protagonist’s friends must confront and overcome their “Shadows” are memorable as these characters must confess to some deep, embarrassing flaws in front of so many people in order to overcome their weaknesses and awake to their Personas. “Social Links”, on the other hand, are fun because the player can choose which characters to explore and which to avoid. The game says that a strong bond is formed between the protagonist and the people he is hanging out with when a social link is concluded, and the player feels like he really has established a strong connection with the characters that he explores in these events. All of these events add up to characterization that creates a powerful bond between the player and the characters that he meets during the game.

### **Weakest Element**

Story resolution is easily the weakest part of the game's narrative. It is ultimately discovered that the murderer was Adachi, the bumbling detective that works with the protagonist's uncle at the police station. Adachi's character never seemed to suggest that he might be the murderer, though maybe that should have made him the most suspicious. It turns out that the developers decided to make Adachi the murderer late in development and it shows in the way that he abruptly changes from nice, bumbling goofball to evil, oppressed monster as soon as he is revealed as the villain. Beyond that, the true villain is revealed to be Izanami, a Japanese deity who is both the lover and rival of the protagonist's Persona, Izanagi. It turns out that Izanami wants to turn humans into mindless monsters that acted on pure impulse by fusing the shadow world with the real world. She gave the protagonist, Adachi, and the kidnapper, Namatame, the power to enter the shadow world and awakened them to their Personas as test to see whether humanity should be allowed to continue as they are. She also set up the Midnight Channel, which allows people to see into the shadow world, just to stir up the people of Inaba. This final villain is alluded to once, loosely, and must be tracked down by the player after Adachi is caught and the monster controlling him, Ameno Sagiri, is defeated. Adding a villain in to the mix after the story had been concluded just felt jarring and when this is compounded with how arbitrary the selection of murderer was, it weakens the feeling of success that should come with completing a story such as this.

### **Highlight**

The best moment in the game comes after the "Investigation Team" saves the protagonist's young cousin, Nanako, and captures the man who has been kidnapping people and throwing them in to the TV



world. The entire "Investigation Team" is present at the hospital as Nanako dies in her hospital bed and the entire team becomes divided between those who wish to kill the man responsible and those who think that killing the man would make the team as bad as him. It ends up being the protagonist's choice as to whether the team kills the kidnapper or lets him go and pursues the truth of the matter even further. This scene carries an incredible amount of weight as every bond the protagonist has forged with his team is represented in his team's deep caring for his cousin. In addition to that, the option of vengeful justice versus merciful justice tests just how far the player is willing to go.

### **Critical Reception**

The reception to the game was almost universally positive with the game earning a 90 on Metacritic. Most reviewers enjoyed the bizarre story and praised the varied, relatable, and unique characters. Some reviews do note that the story may not be for everyone, especially with so much Japanese culture present in the game.

GameTrailers gave the game a 93 and summarized the reactions nicely, saying "It's a little bit out there, but it works thanks to its paranormal hook, rich setting, and memorable characters providing depth and interest." NTSC-uk on the other hand gave the game an 80 and compared it to its predecessor with this to say about the story: "These social links are much less memorable as a result and it's a real shame because as a mechanic it has endless potential."

### **Lessons**

- The presentation of choices, be they superficial or not, can help attach a player to a character he is controlling, even if that character never says a word otherwise. These choices could be made even better by adding consequence to them in the form of new dialog or scenes that unfold differently.
- Allowing a player to choose which characters to spend virtual time with and learn about is a great way to create connections between the player and the character. Making these significant for gameplay makes these connections even more important to the player.
- Wrapping well developed characters up with a story of murder and mystery that is actually connected to each character very closely makes the story feel more dire for the player. This could be improved upon further by placing subtle, but reasonable, hints throughout the game that allow the player to really feel like he solved the mystery.

### **Summation**

Persona 4 is a game that builds a ton of characters and deals with a large, involving storyline that players get attached to thanks to its use of personal decisions as a storytelling device. While the ending of the game trips over its own attempts at being surprising, the storyline as a whole manages to be engaging and satisfying thanks to the bonds that the player forges with the characters he meets. As a role playing game, story and character are very important to the experience and Persona 4 manages to keep the player engaged at all times, even when the player is doing no interaction other than watching a cut scene take place.