

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Persona 3

Platform: Playstation 2

Genre: Japanese RPG

Release Date: August 14, 2007

Developer: Atlus

Publisher: Atlus

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Yuichiro Tanaka

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Overview

Persona 3 is a Japanese RPG, or JRPG, that takes place in a fictional Japanese city and revolves around the exploits of a group of high school students who are investigating a strange new phenomenon known as “The Dark Hour”. During The Dark Hour creatures called Shadows roam the city feeding on its inhabitants. This particular group of students takes it upon themselves to fight these Shadows by summoning personification of their inner selves, called Personas. Armed with their Personas they make it their mission to unravel the mystery around The Dark Hour and the Shadows that appear during it.

From all outward appearances *Persona 3* follows the standard JRPG outline, a group of young people whom, because of extreme circumstances, must band together in order to save humanity. While this concept is pretty cliché among JRPG, *Persona 3* manages to breathe new life into the concept by utilizing a vast array of narrative techniques to really immerse the player into the story and characters. The most notable of these techniques are an emphasis on psychology, both to give the characters psychological depth and to reach the player on a subconscious level, a truly unique form of characterization which draws from classical archetypes and Tarot, and an emphasis on character development through a Social Link system. By combining these narrative techniques *Persona 3* offers a truly exciting and entertaining experience.

Characters

Persona 3 has quite a large cast of characters. In total there are thirty-one major characters, nine playable characters, seventeen unique Social Link characters, and five plot characters, in the game, each with their own back-story and unique personality. While each of these characters adds something important to the game the ones that stand out the most are the first eight of the nine playable characters. These core characters are:

- **The Protagonist** – The protagonist is the character that the player is in direct control of for the duration of the game. The protagonist is a nameless male high school student whom the player names at the very beginning of the game. Every thing this character does, from in game actions to dialog options, must be decided upon by the player. What this means is that the protagonist's personality is a direct extension of who ever is playing the game. The only significant characterizations given to the protagonist are through his starting Persona Orpheus, another Persona, Thanatos, which has been sealed inside of him, and the Messiah Persona which is an evolved form of his original Orpheus Persona. For those unfamiliar with Greek mythology, Orpheus is a musician who travels to the Underworld on a quest to revive his deceased bride. Orpheus is one of only mythological character in Greek mythology who was able to soften Hades heart in order to gain a reprieve from death. This is a fitting Persona for the protagonist because it is later revealed that Thanatos, a Persona that is the ultimate, unstoppable personification of death, has been sealed inside of him. The Messiah Persona is revealed at the end of the game when it is up to the protagonist to sacrifice himself in order to stop the destruction of the world.
- **Yukari Takeba** – Yukari Takeba is a typical teenage girl and the first character that the protagonist meets after arriving in the unnamed Japanese city the rest of the game takes place in. Yukari is generally a cheerful and energetic person; however, like many of the characters in Persona 3, she has her fair share of skeletons in the proverbial closet. The more the player gets to know Yukari the more troubled they realize she is. Yukari is constantly poking fun at Junpei for various reasons but otherwise get along fine with everyone else in the group. Very early in the game Yukari is portrayed as mentally the weakest character. She starts the game unable to cope with the existence of the Shadows to the point where she will freeze up in battle with them. Because of this fear, Yukari is the most reluctant when it comes to facing the Shadows. Yukari's starting Persona is Io who later in the game evolves into Isis. Both of these Persona belong to the Lovers arcane in Tarot, which only makes sense since Yukari is also the Social Link character for the Lovers arcana Social Link.
- **Junpei Iori** – The phrase that would best describe Junpei is “the class clown”. Junpei is loud, rambunctious, and quick to joke. Junpei is the first male character that the protagonist meets and the two become best friends during the game. It becomes apparent as the game progresses that Junpei puts on the “class clown” act in order to hide his insecurities, namely his feeling of inferiority when stacked up against the protagonist. In the beginning of the game Junpei's only reason for fighting the Shadows is because it makes him feel more important. Junpei uses his Persona, and the fact that the group fights the Shadows, in order to make him feel better about himself as well as an excuse to slack off in school. It isn't until later in the game, after he has overcome his insecurities, that he becomes a more serious and driven individual and starts fighting the Shadows for a more noble reason. Junpei's starting Persona is Hermes, which suits him since in Greek mythology Hermes is widely known as a trickster. Later, when Junpei overcomes

his insecurities, his Persona evolves into Trismegistus. *Persona 3* relates both Hermes and Trismegistus to the Magician arcane in Tarot.

- **Mitsuru Kirijo** – Mitsuru Kirijo is the heiress to the Kirijo Company and fortune. Mitsuru an upper-classmen who is extremely mature and intelligent, she is valedictorian at the high school as well as class president. While Mitsuru is only a teenager she acts more like an adult due to the fact that her family trained her from a young age so she would be ready to take over the Kirijo Company one day. Mitsuru is the most driven character in the game when it comes to unraveling the mysteries surrounding The Dark Hour, because of this Mitsuru is the unofficial leader of the group. The reason Mitsuru is so invested in defeating the shadows is because she knows that the Kirijo Company, run at the time by her grandfather, caused The Dark Hour and shadows to appear. She feels it is her responsibility, as future head of the Kirijo Company, to clean up the mistakes of the past by putting an end to the Dark Hour. Mitsuru's Persona is Penthesilea which later evolves into Artemisia. These two Persona fit Mitsuru's personality well being as they were both ancient rulers and throughout the game Mitsuru surrounds herself with a queenly aura and a sense of authority, not to mention her social status. Both Penthesilea and Artemisia are tied to the Empress arcana in Tarot and Mitsuru is also the Social Link character for the Empress arcana Social Link.
- **Akihiko Sanada** – Akihiko is the captain of the school boxing team and a class mate of Mitsuru's. Akihiko was one of the first people to join with Mitsuru in the fight against the Shadow. For this reason much of the group looks up to him as a kind of mentor. The player is never told why Akihiko decided to join Mitsuru and fight the Shadows, however it is heavily implied that Akihiko is in love with Mitsuru, and therefore it's not much of a stretch for the player to assume he joined because he wants to remain close to her. Akihiko's main concern through most of the game is keeping everyone in the group together and safe. As an upper-classmen and captain of the boxing team he feels it is his responsibility to take on the toughest enemies and challenges in order to mitigate any danger the rest of the team must face. Akihiko's starting Persona is Polydeuces which later evolves into Caesar.
- **Ken Amada** – Ken Amada is the youngest member of the group, only being an elementary school student. Even though Ken is the youngest member of the group he is perhaps the most mature, and therefore the most unbelievable, character. Ken sometime acts more like a middle aged man than he does a little kid. This could be contributed to him having to grow up quickly since he orphaned at a young age or from fact that as the youngest member of the group, by many years, and he feels the need to overcompensate for his age. The group believes that Ken joins the group in order to help fight the Shadows and make use of his Persona. However, it is later revealed that Ken's parents were killed in an accident when a former member of the group lost control of his Persona, thus his real reason for joining the group is vengeance. Ken's starting Persona is Nemesis

which later evolves into Kala-Nemi, the only completely made up Persona. It seems unnecessary to point out how Ken's Persona, Nemesis, is a good fit for his character given his motive for joining the group. The Persona Nemesis is tied to the Tarot arcane Justice.

- **Koromaru** – Koromaru is one of the most interesting characters *Persona 3* mainly due to the fact that he's a dog. Koromaru is the only animal in the game that has a Persona. This raises many questions of the "Are animals the psychological, emotional, and spiritual equivalent to humans?" variety and the other characters in *Persona 3* briefly question this as well. Koromaru, like many dog characters in movies or games, is exceedingly loyal. Koromaru's previous owner was a monk who lived at a local shrine. Koromaru guarded both the shrine even after the monk passed away. When Akihiko finds Koromaru injured and nurses him back to health that loyalty is transferred to Akihiko and the rest of the group. Koromaru's Persona is Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates to the underworld. This is an extremely good fit for Koromaru's Persona being that they are literally both dogs, and because Koromaru is portrayed as a guard dog. At first he guards the shrine and the monk who lives there and later he guards the protagonist and his friends. Cerberus belongs to the Tarot arcane of Strength.
- **Fuuka Yamagishi** – Fuuka Yamagishi is the typical shy, quiet, awkward girl. Fuuka gains the ability to summon her Persona after she is rescued by the other members of the group. Fuuka does not have any fighting abilities and instead acts as a tactical advisor during the game. Because Fuuka isn't a front-line fighter like the other members in the group she tends to feel that she isn't an important member of the team. This insecurity leads Fuuka to try and be useful in other areas, such as taking care of the team. For much of the game Fuuka steadily practices cooking so that she can keep everyone healthy and full of energy, and so that she can convince herself, the only one who needs convincing, she is a needed member of the group. Fuuka seems to take on the role of "Den Mother" making sure everyone is healthy and notifying the protagonist when something is amiss. Fuuka's starting Persona is Lucia which later evolves into Juno. Given Fuuka's role as tactician and analyst Lucia, who is the patron saint of the blind, is a fitting Persona for her. Fuuka's tactical advice guides the protagonist and the group in just about every fight almost like leading the blind. The evolved form, Juno, is also fitting because Juno is somewhat known as a mother goddess, which reflects Fuuka's motherly instinct to guide the group and take care of them. Lucia and Juno both are associated with the Priestess arcane in Tarot, and Fuuka is the Social Link character for the Priestess Social Link.

Breakdown

Being an RPG, arguably the most important parts of *Persona 3* are its story and characters. An RPG which doesn't tell a compelling story or have interesting characters

is not a good game. With that said, even though the concept behind *Persona 3* is a bit overused, the entire group of young people saving the world thing, the execution, characters, and plot twists are enough to keep just about any player interested.

Persona 3's entire story takes place in the span of a single Japanese school year, from April to March, and addresses the mysteries of time and the psychological shadow archetype. The game starts in April with the hero's arrival in the unnamed city and ends with him dying right before graduation in early March. During this time the games unnamed hero along with his trusty group of friends are working to solve the mysteries surrounding The Dark Hour and the Shadows which come out during it. The Dark Hour is an hour long period of time that takes place between 12:00am and 12:01am in which all of the city's inhabitants enter a comatose state and can be fed on by Shadows. Once The Dark Hour has ended the citizens wake up and are unaware of anything happening. Because of their ability to summon Personas the hero and his friends are immune to the effects of The Dark Hour and feel it is their duty to find out what is causing it.

The story progresses by months. Each month there is a full moon and during each full moon a different unusually powerful Shadow appears and roams around during The Dark Hour. Upon defeating this Shadow more information behind The Dark Hour becomes available. The games mystery is solved by dealing with the Shadows over a period of time. This narrative structure is quite common among RPG's. The player goes from boss monster to boss monster unraveling more of the story with boss' defeat. That isn't what is impressive about *Persona 3*. *Persona 3*'s story is quite good, and as unique as it can be for the group of kids saves the word cliché, but what really makes it stand out is its symbolism and character development.

The heroes in *Persona 3* are able to combat the Shadows by summoning a physical manifestation of their inner selves, known as Persona, to fight on their behalf. Each of the playable characters, other than the hero himself who contains multiple Personas, has a single Persona which represents their internal character and qualities. What make Personas particularly interesting is that they all take the form of mythological characters such as Odin, Thor, Satan, Shiva, etc. and they are each divided up into groups based on the twenty-two major arcana in tarot. For instance, Personas such a Loki and Orpheus belong to the Fool arcana, while Polydeuces and Caesar belong to the Emperor arcane. This correlation between the mythological characters representing Personas, the meaning behind the tarot cards, and the game characters all help define the character on a very symbolic level. So, if a gamer is curious enough to look up information on the twenty-two major arcana in tarot, then by just looking at a character's Persona or even which arcana it belongs to the player can tell a lot about that character's personality.

The game defines the archetypal Shadow as the manifestations of people's emotions and fractured psyches. When a Shadow feeds off of a person during The Dark Hour it doesn't feed off the physical person it feeds off of the person's mental energy, causing the victims to become a kind of barely conscious zombie. This coupled with the idea of Personas show that the game exists on a different level than just the obvious save the world plot. It says that this is a story about the importance of finding ones true self.

In order to discover the true self, characters use *Persona 3*'s Social Link system. The Social Link system is basically a rank, one to ten, on how each major character in the game feels about the main character. The player can influence these ranks by spending time with the different characters. Increasing the Social Link rank for a character does two things: one, it reveals back story or help to further characterize that character, and two, it allows the player to use different and more powerful Persona. Like each Persona, each character that has a Social Link is also associated with one of the twenty-two arcana. With each new rank the player gets in a Social Link the hero discovers more about himself, thus getting closer to finding his true self, and making him stronger. For example, in the Devil arcana one of the weakest Persona is the Imp, however if the player is able to get the Social Link associated with the Devil arcana up to rank 10 then the player will be able to summon Beelzebub, which in *Persona 3* is the ultimate embodiment of the Devil arcana.

By having to use Social Links in order to get the best Personas, and thus make the hero the most powerful, the player ends up caring more about characterization than the general overarching story of the game. This is what *Persona 3* is all about, its characterization. In fact every aspect of the game relates back to characterization be it the Persona, the mythology behind the Persona's physical form, or the meaning behind the twenty-two tarot arcana which every character and Persona is associated with.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in the game narrative is the game's Social Link system. Each of the major, and some minor, characters in the game have these social links. Social links are optional events that can be played through in order to learn more about the game's supporting characters. Each social link has its own narrative arc and a rank, starting at rank one and going to rank ten. Every time the player spends time with a character that has a Social Link the links rank increases and more is learned about that character.

Being optional, Social Links don't do anything to advance the game's actual story. What they do is flush out NPCs and makes them feel more real. Each Social Link event usually involves the player helping a friend with an issue specific to that character. What this means is that each of the NPCs who have a Social Link are completely different. Every character has its own likes and dislikes and depending on the player's actions during an event that characters opinion about the player can change. *Persona*'s system for this isn't like most other games, where the player gets an obviously good or bad option, instead they must respond to the characters personality or the given situation. For instance, there is one character, Kenji, who is a happy go lucky kind of guy, and most of his Social Link events are fun and light hearted with him and the player just joking around with each other. However, around rank eight of the Social Link Kenji gets dumped by his girlfriend and is heart broken. In this event the player is supposed to console Kenji, and if they don't they run the risk of the friendship ending.

This level of character development is really what drives the game. The rest of the game is excellent, but even it pales in comparison to the character development. Giving each NPC a different and complex psyche that changes and evolves as the game goes on makes them seem so much more real and believable. This level of characterization is rarely seen and words really just can't describe how it enhances the overall experience of the game.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful element in *Persona 3* is at the very end when the main character dies. The problem isn't that the main character dies, it's how he dies. In the last mission of the game the main character sacrifices himself in order to summon the ultimate power "Universe" which allows him to seal Nyx, the ultimate evil, away from humanity. However, instead of the main character dying here he is able to continue on with his life for three months before randomly dropping dead for no apparent reason.

The game's ending suffers irreparable damage from this single plot element. The entire endgame experience has been built up to the point where the player feels that something monumental is going to happen, that it must happen, and then nothing. After the final boss fight the player knows what must happen, the hero must sacrifice himself for the greater good, and he does. However, the sacrifice means nothing because he's fine afterwards, well until the time skip to three months later. It takes away from the enormity of the obstacle that was just overcome and causes the player to feel cheated. On top of feeling cheated, while watching the ending cut scene 5 minutes later, which takes place after the three month time skip, the hero dies. Instead of the emotional ending the hero could have had, he just simple dies for no reason. The mix of frustration from the anticlimactic final fight and the confusion from what just happened completely overshadow any kind of emotion that might have once been attached to the death of the main character, leaving the ending empty and unsatisfying.

Highlight

The best moment in the game was the final boss fight with Nyx. This was the climatic end to the game; everything done in the game lead to this single battle. This is the battle in which the protagonist has to selflessly sacrifice himself in order to preserve the lives of his friends and save the world. There is so much emotion in this scene that it literally becomes hard to blink for fear of missing something. The part of the game is only made better by the fact that immediately after the player is left with a sense of extreme accomplishment and at the same time a kind of empty feeling knowing that that the game is over.

Critical Reception

Critically *Persona 3* was a big success. Scores awarded to the game ranged from 70's to 100, with the majority being in the 80+ range. IGN gave the game an 83, saying "Amazingly deep, with tons of replayability in both the dungeon crawling and social link directions, *Persona 3* is an incredibly engaging title." Gamespot.com gave *Persona 3* an even higher score of 85, stating "At times shocking and always intense, *Persona 3* is not a game you are likely to forget." The website www.gamerankings.com, which averages the scores from numerous game ranking sites, has placed the average score for *Persona 3* at 87.

On top of the excellent reviews *Persona 3* has been re-released twice since its initial release in August of 2007. *Persona 3: FES*, which offered an additional dungeon was released on April 12, 2008 and received similar rankings to the original. Just recently, November 1, 2009, another version of the game *Persona 3 Portable*, was released in Japan.

Lessons

- Developing NPC characters can add immeasurably to a game's immersion. In fact, character development can be the driving force behind the game if done correctly and in an interactive way.
- While the old saying "It's the journey not the destination" might be true the destination still matters. Even if a game is perfect up until the very end, that ending still has potential to ruin a player's experience. Don't string along the player sometimes it's better to just let them.

Summation

The story in *Persona 3* is honestly pretty cliché. A group of high schoolers banding together and saving the world is one of the most overused JRPG plot lines there are. What makes *Persona 3* a great game are its characters. Each character in the game is completely unique with an unprecedented psychological depth. Between the Social Link and the correlation between the classical archetypes, Tarot, and mythological figures it's easy to see how much time and effort went into making the characters as believable as possible. *Persona 3* is proof that great story telling involves more than just a good plot. In fact it can be used to argue that characters and characterization are potentially more important than a game's plot. By making more realistic characters and utilizing psychological concepts as well as symbols and archetypes that have been around since the birth of story telling game writers could vastly improve the quality and believability of NPC's and thus improve the entire game. Having better characters in

games directly leads to a more immersive experience and the player being more emotionally invested in a game.