

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Persona 4 Golden
Platform: PS Vita
Genre: Role-playing, social simulation
Release Date: June 14, 2012 (JP) November 20, 2012 (US)
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: Atlus
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tepei Kobayashi

Overview

In *Persona 4 Golden*, the player literally takes on the role of the “Hero.” Upon moving from the city to the town of Inaba for a one-year stay, the Hero and town at large experience an uncharacteristic string of murders. The player soon discovers that the murder victims appear on the television’s “Midnight Channel” before their demise. He gains the ability to enter the TV and acquires a manifestation of his persona—the part of him he puts forth to overcome life’s hardships—to fight for him. With this power, he has the opportunity to fight the monsters within the TV and save his friends as they are taken. By helping his friends face their shadows—the darkest parts of themselves that they reject and hide from the world, they also gain the power of their personas and join his side to fight and uncover the mystery of the murders.

Characters

- **Hero** – The player character, his voice is primarily established by the player via dialogue choices. However, he generally exhibits qualities of leadership and honesty. He bolsters his friends, and they gain strength from him to face the parts of themselves they would rather not see. He is tasked with saving those taken into the TV and solving the murder mystery before the school year ends. He is the only character who does not have to face, overcome and accept his shadow before gaining the power of his persona.
- **Yosuke Hanamura** – The Hero’s best friend, Yosuke is a light-hearted goofball. Since his father runs the biggest business in town, Yosuke is well off and carries little of his own responsibility. His shadow expresses that he sees life as tedious and boring but is truly afraid of being alone. He is excited by drama because it makes life more interesting and distracts from the pain of loneliness. His shadow wears an oversized grin and is made up of a silly, waving creature that mimics

Yosuke's carefree nature. Yosuke's shadow appears in a former victim's area of the TV world, rather than a dungeon of his own making.

- **Chie Satonaka** – Chie is spunky, fierce and unabashedly out-going. She is a bit of a tomboy but occasionally shows vulnerability. Chie's shadow expresses deep envy for her best friend, Yukiko. In particular, she envies Yukiko's femininity and her (though unintentional) ability to grab men's attention. She is empowered by Yukiko's dependency because of these insecurities. Her shadow manifests as a dominatrix held up by fellow classmates, complete with whip and Yukiko's long, black hair. Chie's shadow appears in Yukiko's castle, due to their co-dependent relationship.
- **Yukiko Amagi** – Yukiko is Chie's best friend and inheritor to her family's inn. She often misses school to take on her family's responsibilities and is outwardly modest, unaware of her apparent attractiveness. Yukiko's shadow expresses feeling worthless and powerless. She sees Chie as her prince, her protector and rescuer. She feels useless, unable to change her fate but too weak to flee. Her shadow manifests as a bird in a gilded cage, just as she feels imprisoned by the inheritance of her family's inn imposed upon her. To further the metaphor, her shadow appears in a castle where Yukiko embraces her femininity to the point of over-sexuality and victimization.
- **Kanji Tatsumi** – Kanji is a member of a local gang and becomes defensive whenever anyone might question this image. Kanji's shadow manifests as a body builder holding giant, male, sex symbols. This exterior surrounds a delicate version of Kanji, in a bed of roses. In real life, Kanji puts forth a tough-guy façade to defend his more feminine, vulnerable personality. He expresses insecurity from the pressures put on him to fit society's image of a manly man and fears girls for questioning his sexuality. Kanji's shadow appears in a sauna-like environment intended for males only, stating he prefers them since they would "never say those awful, degrading things."
- **Rise Kujikawa** – Rise is a famous, pop sensation known as "Risette." She is very sociable and often overly dramatic, despite wanting to be taken more seriously. She puts her singing career on hold to pursue a normal, teenage life. Rise's shadow degrades herself as an attention-seeking stripper. She expresses longing to be seen, threatening to completely expose herself to make others recognize her beyond her fake, celebrity identity. Rise's shadow manifests as a colorful, overly flexible stripper with a disc on her face resembling a satellite dish. The dish relates to the nature of her life being broadcasted to the public and/or her skill for analysis, the same skill she wishes others would utilize to see her for who she truly is. She appears in a dungeon modeled after a strip club.
- **Naoto Shirogane** – Naoto comes from a long line of detectives and acts mature beyond her years. She is cool, logical and demanding of respect. She is often mistaken for a man, as she downplays her femininity, along with her age, to gain respect. Conversely, Naoto's shadow acts childish and dependent, fearful of her inability to prove herself to adults and others around her. She feels her mind is her only asset and that her gender and age make her weak. Her shadow manifests as a robot-human hybrid with technologically advanced firepower, just as she

wishes her body could be altered to match an image society would respect. Her shadow appears in an experimental research facility befitting this alteration.

- **Teddie** – Teddie, the only resident of the TV world, begins the game in the form of a teddy bear and is the game’s primary source of comedic relief. He uses humor to hide his true feelings and fears. He frequently appears lost and shallow, his origin’s unknown and memories forgotten. Teddie’s shadow reveals his fear that he is actually empty inside. His shadow manifests as a broken, busted version of his bear form with a hollow interior. He is clawing onto the edge of a pit with no visible bound. He also appears in Rise’s strip club, having emerged after the team defeats her shadow. Following the group’s defeat of his shadow, Teddie leaves the TV and removes his suit, revealing a physical, human form. Rather than the emptiness he feared, he has come to find himself in the wake of overcoming his shadow.

Breakdown

The game’s narrative is founded upon Carl Jung’s work in psychology regarding personas, shadows and the unconscious part of the mind. These concepts heavily dictate the design of the game, from small snippets of conversation to the murderer’s motivations. Where this truly shines, though, is the way in which it is weaved into the game’s mechanics.

“I am a shadow, the true self.”

In Jungian psychology, a shadow is the part of ourselves which we deny. It is the most despicable part which we fear and from which we hide. It is made up of our worst thoughts and feelings, the part of us we do not want anyone to see. In the game, a shadow reveals their character’s greatest flaws. It speaks their unspeakable thoughts and exposes their weaknesses. When a character tries to deny their shadow as a part of themselves, the shadow gains strength, and a fight ensues. Within the combat itself, the shadow often has abilities which support its nature. For example, Chie’s shadow uses a skill aptly named “Bottomless Envy,” driving home her jealousy of Yukiko. These mechanics seamlessly incorporate the psychological principles into the primary combat challenges, the shadow’s themselves.

“The strength of heart required to face oneself has been made manifest...”

Only after the group defeats a shadow in combat will the relevant character approach and accept the shadow as part of themselves. Much of the group’s dynamics and narrative are built upon the ideas of friendship and unconditional acceptance. Once their friends have faced a character’s shadow, the character gains the strength to face themselves from their friends’ acceptance. Only then does the character gain a physical manifestation of their persona, described as “the façade used to overcome life’s hardships.” In Jungian psychology, our persona is the version of ourselves we present to other people, to the world. In the game, it literally aids the characters in overcoming future challenges, as they join the team and can fight through future dungeons with the power of their persona.

Furthering the idea of Jungian psychology as narrative basis, the game's characters could be said to exemplify some of Jung's archetypes. Though oversimplified, each can be viewed as a stereotype. Kanji exemplifies the man who over-exaggerates his masculinity to hide his more feminine interests. Rise is the apparently superficial girl that no one truly stops to see more substantially. While there are overlaps—Yukiko and Rise both cast off their popularity; Chie and Naoto both suppress their femininity to gain respect—all characters begin the game with one trait in common: they favor ignorance over the pain of facing and embracing who they truly are.

Though the game can be played as another JRPG or social simulation, this key fact is what really sets it apart from the others. The players exceed the murderer's expectations and ultimately thwart their plans by eschewing this ignorance and facing their shadows, learning to accept themselves instead of denying that which they fear. Though the game features periods of static, social interaction or dungeon grinding, for the most part, these concepts are mentioned with relative frequency. The biggest mechanical tie-in to these concepts lies in Inaba's strange occurrence of fog.

"You have lifted the fog in this world, as well as the fog in your own..."
—*Izanami-no-Okami (final boss)*

Persona's events and opportunities revolve around the game's weather system, an element which forecasts the weather for the player over the next week. The player's primary concern, as well as much of the minor characters' dialogue, involves the onset of fog. Over time, the game reveals that the fog is a metaphor for our inability to see the truth. During combat, the characters wear special glasses to see through the fog and navigate the TV world. However, this also represents their strength to face the shadows and overcome the pain of true acceptance.

Strongest Element

"What sense is there in yearning for truth? Close your eyes. Lie to yourself. Live in blissful ignorance..." —*Other Teddie*

The fog mentioned above, its metaphorical meaning and its relation to the Jungian principles which form the basis of the game's design are the strongest element of such. Having an engaging, interesting story is a worthy aspiration, but it is rare that a game—particularly of this genre—attempts to convey deeper meaning. Every major element of the game is crafted to support this meaning: the characters' backstories, their abilities in combat, the dungeons, the murderer's motivation, minor character dialogue, etc. Furthermore, this message has a meaning from which we can all benefit. In a technologically connected world where we have the power to carefully control the persona we present, how much of ourselves are we denying in the process? With as many distractions as we have readily available and as busy as our lives have become, how often do we stop to look within? How much are we numbing the pain or living in denial?

Unsuccessful Element

Despite its best efforts, there are still large swaths of game time passed in superficial dialogue interactions with other characters and tedious—often, infuriating—dungeon crawling. Even on the “normal” difficulty setting, average players die repeatedly, having to carefully construct personas and use items wisely to progress. When not dungeon-delving, days can pass where the most engaging encounter might revolve around blowing off steam at the local ramen bar. These mundane aspects of the game sometimes detract from or stall the narrative the game is trying to tell.

Highlight

While the turning point and, for many, most memorable moment of the game lies in the confrontation at the hospital with Adachi following Nanako’s rescue (two characters not covered herein), I reject this as the highlight of the game from the focus of this review. This moment serves the typical, major branching of narrative-based titles but does not support the deeper message the game is trying to convey. As such, I think a better highlight would be a more satisfying, revelatory one.

“Humans ache to expose their suppressed sides, while the prying eyes around them are curious to see them laid bare.” -Izanami

The final encounter between the main characters and the murderer is very revealing and emotional. The player should have been putting the pieces together, alongside the other characters, throughout the game, and this is the culmination of all that tension. The murderer reveals that the Midnight Channel was not solely of their own making but, instead, fueled by the viewers’ primal desire to see their fellow humans exposed. The encounter reaffirms the major themes of the game. The fight and defeat of this final boss is, by far, the most gratifying—not only because they player has overcome the most difficult fight of the game, but because they have overcome the challenge of exposing the truth.

Critical Reception

- **Destructoid (Dale North): 10/10** – North gave a glowing review of the game, claiming it to be “the most enjoyable release” of the series thus far. North praised the social simulation mechanics as “a very interesting way to progress RPG gameplay,” along with the dual nature of *Persona*’s engagement types. Players who might be deterred by social simulation games could revel in the dungeon-crawling segments, and vice-versa. He also noted the wealth of added content, in addition to that of the original game, adding to the replay value of a dialogue-heavy game.
- **Polygon (Philip Kollar) 10/10** – Kollar highlighted the game’s ability to evoke memories of hectic, high school life with the time management mechanics that force the player to carefully choose how to spend their social time, relating the social links with characters to the complexity of the leveling system. He concedes that some of the focus on friendship as power are reminiscent of “shallow

anime/Japanese RPG clichés” but praises the more difficult, sensitive themes handled by the game’s narrative.

Lessons

- **Psychology Describes the Human Experience** – Game designers often study psychology to create better experiences for their target audience: people! We can get caught up in designing the perfect system or mechanics but may forget that we are crafting these experiences for real, live, human beings. In *Persona*, the designers utilize some of humanity’s base desires and fears to draw players into the mystery, just as the murderer draws viewers to the Midnight Channel.
- **The Narrative is the Game** – Sometimes, narrative can feel incidental to a game, tacked on to the more core features of the experience. However, it does not have to be this way. *Persona* teaches us that narrative can be threaded into the game and designed into even the smallest mechanics, enhancing the overall experience, rather than just sitting next to or on top of it.
- **Meaningful Narrative is Not for Everyone** – While *Persona* has a shining narrative with a deep, powerful meaning at its heart, many players barely scratch its surface. With such exceptional reviews and a diehard fan base, other elements of the game are clearly praise-worthy and enticing enough to keep its audience coming back for more. The system for crafting personas for player use in combat is intricate and extensive and creates a strategy game within the greater game space. The characters’ elemental abilities work as one would expect and make for gratifying countering interactions. While the narrative has its own merits, the designers were careful to appeal to a much wider audience, ergo the game’s great success.

Summation

The writers and designers of *Persona* did not set out to create another JRPG or another social simulation. Instead, they faced a massive undertaking to create an experience which would convey a personal, meaningful message, deal with mature subject matter and still appeal to a wide audience as an engaging experience worth of 50 to 80 hours of playtime. Remarkably, they succeeded, possibly by emulating the courage distilled into the characters of their own making—to face such challenges and overcome them.

**All quotes are taken directly from Persona 4 Golden, save the “Critical Reception” section.*

Destructoid review: <https://www.destructoid.com/review-persona-4-golden-237697.phtml>

Polygon review: <http://www.polygon.com/game/persona-4-golden/2718>