

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Persona 4/Persona 4 Golden*  
**Platform:** Playstation 2 and Playstation Vita  
**Genre:** Japanese Role-playing Game, Visual Novel, Social Simulator  
**Release Date:** July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
**Developer:** Atlus  
**Publisher:** Atlus(JP/NA), Square Enix(EU-ps2), NIS America (EU-vita), AU(Ubisoft)  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Yuichiroh Tanaka, Akira Kawasaki

## Overview

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The protagonist - a high school student named at the player's whim - moves from the city to the fictional Japanese town of Inaba as a result of his parents' work taking them abroad. The protagonist moves in with his uncle Ryotaro and young cousin Nanako. Before our protagonist can settle down, two strange murders occur in Inaba. In both cases, bodies are found hanging upside down from high places.

Attempting to test the truth of an urban legend circulating the protagonist's new high school, our protagonist and his new friends Yosuke Hanamura and Chie Satonaka accidentally discover that they can enter a strange dimension through television screens. As they explore this strange "TV world", they quickly come upon evidence that this plane is connected to the string of murders. They also awaken mysterious powers within themselves called "Personas." Soon the protagonist and his friends start noticing signs that another murder is about to happen. At the same time, one of the protagonist's new friends, Yukiko Amagi, goes missing. The protagonist and his allies must use their newfound powers and knowledge of the TV world to stop the murders and find out who or what is behind them.

## Characters

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The large cast of side characters is one of *Persona 4's* major selling points. To avoid an overly long list of every character in the game, I'll restrict this list to characters with direct gameplay roles.

- **Protagonist** – A high school student that moves from the city to a fictional countryside due to his parent's work. The protagonist has a special connection with the enigmatic and clairvoyant "velvet room" that is run by the equally

mysterious Igor and his attendant Margaret. The protagonist exists as a sort of blank slate for the player to experience the story. The protagonist is characterized mostly by dialogue choices made by the player.

- **Yosuke Hanamura** – A goofy, fun-loving klutz. The player first meets Yosuke in a compromising position, stuck headfirst in a trashcan. On the surface, Yosuke is clearly included as a comic relief character, but his care-free demeanor hides a fear and resentment for his mundane life and isolation.
- **Chie Satonaka** – An energetic spitfire with a passion for martial arts and action films. She has an upbeat attitude and aggressive physical tendencies. She's close friends with Yukiko Amagi, but over the years has developed an inferiority complex due to Yukiko's intelligence and popularity. She derives pleasure from Yukiko's dependence on her confidence and is secretly ashamed of it.
- **Yukiko Amagi** – The daughter of a family that runs a famous local hot springs inn in Inaba. She is intelligent and reserved, sometimes crippling so. She is expected to inherit and run her parents Inn as she becomes older. Although too introverted to express it, she is scared to have her life laid out in front of her. Her parents' expectations suffocate her and make her feel like she has no freedom. She secretly desires to run away from Inaba and start anew.
- **Teddie** – Teddie appears at first to fulfill the anime trope of “mascot character”. A heavily merchandisable, usually supernatural being that serves as a strange face to draw people into the absurd fantasy of the universe. Teddie fulfills this role, himself being an animated mascot costume of a bear that is completely hollow inside. His character exists as a comic relief, making endless cheesy puns, and making failed attempts to flirt with the female cast members. He is also youthful and naïve, often putting his own foot in his mouth and failing to understand how he has. Ultimately his character subverts the mascot expectation to be a hollow and superficial face for the series by having his own unexpected crisis of identity. He has lost his memory and can't remember where he comes from. He becomes incredibly paranoid that he may have simply come to being and has no background or purpose to his actions. After this crisis, he resolves to become a real person and, with comically little explanation, takes on a blonde haired, boyish human form.
- **Kanji Tatsumi** – Kanji Tatsumi is initially seen by the central characters as a dangerous, tough-as-nails street punk. When the characters first began investigating him, it is due to his history of violence and apparent delinquency. Much of this turns out to be misunderstanding, with his most infamous case of violence being an attempt to protect his mother. His rough exterior is upheld due to his fear of expressing some of his shockingly feminine tendencies. Kanji is in a constant struggle with his sexuality. He is deeply self-conscious of others perceiving him as weak.

- **Rise Kujikawa** – Rise is a famous idol with roots in Inaba, who meets the central characters while on a hiatus from tour. She has an outwardly cheerful and impish personality, often jokingly teasing, or flirting with other characters. She claims health reasons as the reason for her hiatus but in reality she is afraid of her own pop identity. She’s afraid that her career is causing her to lose her own individuality and sense of self.
- **Naoto Shirogane** – Naoto is a precocious detective prodigy. She lost both of her parents in a car accident at a young age. She is almost constantly serious and formal to a fault. Although expressing an impressively cool demeanor, Naoto hides massive insecurities caused by her gender and age. Afraid of not being respected professionally, she presents herself as more mature and sophisticated than her age would imply. Afraid of the sexism she would receive professionally and socially, she presents herself as male.

## Breakdown

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*Persona 4* is structured in a unique, day by day, fashion. The player is given a limited number of timeslots in any given day to fill with activities. For instance, a player could choose to spend mid-day going to basketball practice and choose to study later at night. The game takes place over slightly less than a calendar year, from mid-April to mid-March. In this way time is a finite resource for the player to use.

Days can be spent sending your team into the TV to experience a typical JRPG dungeon crawl, but can also be spent doing mundane things such as studying, part-time jobs, and socializing with the various inhabitants of Inaba. A significant chunk of the game’s narrative takes place within this socialization. The game implements a “social link”, system. When the player meets a significant character, a supernatural bond is formed with them. Every time a significant development in the protagonist’s relationship to the character develops, the social link “levels up”, allowing the player to create more powerful personas. This system reflects one of *Persona 4*’s central themes that the bonds you create with other humans give you strength.

The core plot of the game revolves around a weather based cycle. When a deep fog envelops the town, it is evidence that someone is about to be kidnapped and thrown into the TV world. The central characters attempt to figure out who the next victim is but inevitably fail each time. When someone is thrown into the TV world, that person unknowingly erects a dungeon that in some way visually represents their own repressed negative emotions (*e.g.* Yukiko Amagi erects a castle in which she is a trapped princess to represent her feelings of being trapped and without freedom). When the characters eventually work their way up to the peak of the dungeon, they find the abductee in conflict with their “shadow”.

The shadow is a visual doppelganger of the abductee, but represents the qualities of their personality and negative thoughts that they refuse to acknowledge. The shadow inevitably evolves into a monstrosity that serves as a not so subtle visual representation of the characters’ multi-faceted crisis of identity (*e.g.* Kanji’s shadow turns into a scandalously dressed body builder piloted by a pale, blushing teenager cradled by roses that bludgeons people with two giant gilded male symbols). Upon defeating this shadow, the abductee begins to come to terms with the harsh truths that the shadow represents,

turning the shadow into a persona. The abductee then joins the investigation team as a playable character. This cycle represents *Persona 4*'s theme of harsh truths and denial being inevitable on the path of self-acceptance, also that self-acceptance grants you strength.

What works so well is the symbiosis between the intense core narrative and the mundane day to day life in Inaba. The weather based cycle involves a huge amount of time between abductions, leaving time in which the TV world is full of side-quests and no serious threats. This creates an organic interest curve for the game. Peaks where the game is more heavily based around punishing JRPG dungeon crawling and emotional crises symbolized by over the top visuals. Valleys where the player is growing roots in Inaba by developing relationships with side characters and dealing with their inner turmoil in grounded realistic environments.

Those valleys are also filled with various scripted events involving the protagonist and central characters. Things like holidays, school trips, and vacations, that further flesh out the world and provide room for engaging character interaction. These sections play out like episodes of a slice of life anime series and involve the player in interesting ways through dialogue choices.

Eventually the stakes of the investigation rise when Nanako, the protagonist's kid cousin, is abducted into the TV world. The protagonist and his team rush to save her and ultimately succeed. They also find Taro Namatame who is seemingly the culprit behind all the kidnappings. Returning to the real world, the player is given the following options: throw Namatame back into the TV world (effectively killing him with no discernable trace), insist that his life be spared, or insist that Namatame might not actually be the culprit based on some contradictory evidence and confusing statements.

Only the final option of those three allows the story to progress. The other two result in an unsatisfactory ending that all but tells the player to reload the save and try again. If the player continues the investigation, they will soon find that Tohru Adachi, a bumbling assistant on the police force, is the actual killer. Tohru erects one final dungeon for the players to overcome. When the player defeats Adachi, they learn that he is being controlled by Ameno-Sagiri, a god that has cursed the town of Inaba with the fog that represents falsehoods, illusion, and delusion. Defeating this boss allows for the game's true ending with the central characters seeing our protagonist off at the end of his year in Inaba with heartfelt goodbyes... but not actually.

If the player, on the last day of his journey, again decides to insist that something is not quite right with the investigation, they can come to realize that the curse of the fog has not truly been lifted. The player discovers that another god, Izanami, is to blame for the entirety of the game's events. Again, one final dungeon is raised and conquered by the protagonist and his allies, resulting in the game's "true", conclusion.

This myriad of "false", or unsatisfying endings reflect another important theme of the game, the importance of seeking truth in a world shrouded in illusion and falsehoods. However, I do see it as one of the weakest points of the game's plot line. The replacement of very human threats with gods comes suddenly and does much to unground the narrative in human drama. This is somewhat saved by the gods being thematic representations of the collective state of Inaba. More so, the same "false" ending trick being repeated twice feels gimmicky, especially since the final, absolute, "true" ending is actually very easy to miss on the first playthrough.

## **Strongest Element**

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Distilling what makes *Persona 4* such a great narrative is not a simple task. Its absolute strongest quality is the interest curve created by using mundane, day to day activities in the gameplay. Social interaction with characters completely oblivious to both your supernatural powers and the looming threat over the town does much to ground the narrative. More importantly, it fosters an attachment in the players to the world and its inhabitants, turning what might have been a standard fare JRPG dungeon crawl into a game with emotional stakes. *Persona 4* uses its blended social simulation gameplay to make you care about the world you're saving, elevating the narrative.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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Because of the “avatar” nature of the protagonist, the player’s role in the game can often break suspension of disbelief. Because of the way the narrative is packaged, almost all the characters who make up the town of Inaba often betray their own inner conflicts to the player after just meeting them. Not to mention the player taking the leadership role among the game’s heroes after being the first person to awaken his persona power; doing so without having to face any harsh truths or repressed emotions about his own character. The implications of these qualities seem to be that the main character is a preternaturally charming superhero with natural leadership capabilities.

It’s likely these decisions were made due mostly to convenience. Revealing each social link character’s inner conflicts quickly maximizes the amount of interesting story content you experience when you spend time with them. Making the player unquestionably powerful and suffering from no recognizable inner turmoil may have been the only solution to creating a protagonist that any player could step into the shoes of. Occasionally this makes the player step back and consider just how flawless and super powerful their own avatar is compared to the very human characters that surround them.

## **Highlight**

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On the last day of the protagonist’s year in Inaba, the player can insist that all is not yet right with the town and be faced with one final revelation. The player enters the TV world one last time and is faced with one final dungeon before facing the true antagonist of the game, a godlike figure who has created the worsening fog plaguing the town. Once the protagonist and his team drain the final boss’ health past a certain threshold, it uses a previously unseen technique to automatically wipe the player’s party.

In a strange limbo state, the protagonist is visited by visions of all the people with whom he has completed a social link. In an incredibly emotional scene, they express how their lives have changed since meeting the protagonist and inspire him to stand up and overcome. The protagonist’s persona evolves to its ultimate form. With this newfound strength, the protagonist manages to break out of the limbo plane and again come face to face with the final boss. Dramatically throwing off the glasses the protagonist and his team normally uses to see through the fog, the player destroys the final boss with one ultra-powerful move, “myriad truths”.

There is so much going on in this scene that perfectly blends the themes of the plot thus far. The final boss and the fog she commands symbolize the theme of spreading illusion and falsehood that the player has figuratively fought throughout the game. In

contrast to this, the cast of supporting characters all explain how the protagonist has helped them break through their own self-delusions and truly accept themselves. When the protagonist's persona evolves, elements of its design change. Notably, a stylishly interpreted Japanese school uniform changes into a business suit. This implies that the protagonist has matured greatly through his interactions with others. The symbolic act of throwing off the glasses normally required to see through the fog shows this as well, as it implies our protagonist no longer requires them to see past the miasma of lies and illusion that the TV world represents.

The game beautifully reinforces all of its core themes in this climactic resurrection: life is a struggle of self-acceptance, the bonds you make with others will give you strength, and the experiences you have will cause you to grow and mature.

## Critical Reception

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*Persona 4* has received high acclaim from critics since its release in 2008. The original PlayStation 2 title holds a 90 on Metacritic, while the Vita remake holds a 93.

Philip Kollar, in a 10/10 review for the Vita remake for Polygon, criticized elements he saw as shallow anime clichés, but praised the game for its handling of “serious topics in an intelligent, thoughtful manner”. He also praised the way the gameplay and story elements of the game formed a symbiotic loop where the main character becomes more powerful the more his friendships develop.

Greg Miller, in a 9.3 /10 review for the Vita remake for IGN, praised the game's story for being relatable enough to make the non-combat elements as rewarding as the game's action. He compares the way the story is told in the game to Telltale's critically acclaimed *The Walking Dead* series.

Gerald Villoria, in a 5/5 star review for the original PlayStation 2 title for GameSpy, praised the visual and environmental storytelling of the game's dungeons. Each of them being, “a specialized mini-universe that takes their [the potential victim's] deepest, darkest secrets and twists them into a delightfully tacky themed dungeon”.

## Lessons

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- **Lesson 1 – Time as a resource**
  - *Persona 4* takes place over a single year and uses that fact as a gameplay element. In a single day, only so much can be accomplished by our character before night falls and you must sleep. The game uses this to force the player to pick and choose which elements and character arcs of the narrative they would prefer to develop. It is difficult (although possible) to complete every social link in a single play through. The writers are still allowed direct control over the story with date barriers. No matter which social links the player decides to develop, or how many days the player decides to spend fighting in the TV world, if an abducted

character is not saved by, let's say, the 12<sup>th</sup> of the month, the investigation team will fail to save them and the player will receive a game over.

- **Lesson 2 – The implementation of simple game mechanics can impart meaning onto mundane activities:**
  - *Persona 4* communicates the protagonist's character growth through the growth of five core statistics. Choosing to spend your time studying one night will raise your "knowledge" score for instance. It portrays burgeoning relationships with other humans as developments that level from 1 to 10. By mapping simple rpg elements onto mundane activities, the player feels as if everyday life in this fictional town is meaningful.
- **Lesson 3 – An RPG becomes a transcendent experience by creating multi-dimensional and memorable characters and giving them space to interact**
  - The most important thing that can be taken from *Persona 4*'s success is its emphasis on character growth. I believe there is truth in the statement that the only thing a good story must do is make you care. *Persona 4* accomplishes this by making the player live in the world that its characters inhabit and become invested in their growth and success. You're not saving the world from some god-level supernatural evil simply because you must. You're saving it to see happy conclusion of each character's arc.

## Summation

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*Persona 4* is a transcendent experience. The blend of mundane social sim and exciting over the top dungeon crawler creates a rewarding gameplay cycle that never stopped giving in the entirety of my approximately 80 hour playthrough of the game. Behind its clichéd anime veneer lies a game with the grace and tact to touch on more complex social struggles than you can count on two hands while managing to unify the entire experience under central themes like the importance of self-acceptance, honesty, and personal growth through external interaction.