PERSONA 4 – A GAME NARRATIVE REVIEW

Larry Shen
New York University
lcs358@nyu.edu
December 2013

Game Title: Persona 4
Platform: PlayStation 2
Genre: JRPG/Dating Sim
Release Date: December 9, 2008 (North America)
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: Atlus
Creative Director: Katsura Hashino

(Note: This review covers Persona 4, not the remake/enhancement Persona 4: Golden for the PS Vita)

OVERVIEW

The player assumes the role of a high school exchange student, and arrives in the peaceful mountain town of Inaba by train. Upon arrival, the player is briefly introduced to the mysterious Velvet Room (which, it appears, only he can see) and the Persona mechanic that forms the core of both the game's narrative and actual gameplay. The plot unfolds slowly, settling the player down into life as a high school student and introducing the player to his future companions.

The peaceful life is suddenly shattered when a series of perplexing murders take place in Inaba. Around the same time, the player discovers that he possesses the power of entering an alternate dimension known as the "TV World" using television screens as portals. The player quickly realizes that the murders and the TV World are related (through a phenomenon known as the Midnight Channel), and that someone is throwing would-be victims into the dangerous TV World to be killed by the collective negative emotions of mankind, embodied as Shadows. Using the Persona abilities given to him by the mysterious inhabitants of the Velvet Room (and a mastermind hidden far behind the scenes), the player must save people thrown into the TV World and catch the serial murder culprit, all the while confronting the Shadows of his friends, who reveal to him their deepest, darkest, most sinister feelings.

CHARACTERS

- THE PROTAGONIST (MC) – The player avatar is characterized as a handsome male teenager with neatly trimmed gray hair and a calm disposition. This avatar is a silent protagonist who is treated as a "blank slate" by the developers to allow for further player customization, but nonetheless develops several concrete personality traits as the narrative progresses (namely a reputation as a leader and a ladies' man).

Party Members (The Investigation Team)
- YOSUKE HANAMURA – Yosuke is also a transfer student from the city (making him more relatable to the player character), having moved to Inaba when his dad was assigned to manage the recently-opened Junes supermarket (think Wal-Mart). He is outgoing and extroverted, but

his mouth frequently lands him in trouble with others. Nevertheless, he is an understanding and loyal companion, and the de facto Number 2 of the investigation team, often operating as the MC's biggest supporter (and bro). Yosuke tends to act out of passion, and takes his investigation team responsibilities very seriously. His Shadow, the first major one encountered in the TV World, reveals that he is secretly sick of living in Inaba and desires more excitement in his life, even at the expense of others' suffering. His weapon of choice is twin blades. His identifying color is YELLOW.

- CHIE SATONAKA – Chie is a classmate of both MC and Yosuke, and the best friend of Yukiko Amagi. She is an athletic tomboy, as characterized by her short blond hair and track jacket. She is one of the first students at Yasogami High who interacts with the MC, and is often curious about life in the big city. Chie appears content with her life and often overlooks the big picture in favor of the present moment, but possesses a strong will that keeps her going. Chie's verbal spats with Yosuke are legendary. Her Shadow, the second major one encountered in the game, reveals that she somewhat relishes Yukiko's dependence on her as a social intermediary, and that she secretly wishes she were as feminine and as refined as Yukiko. Her weapon of choice is greaves. Her identifying color is GREEN.

- YUKIKO AMAGI – Yukiko is Chie's best friend and a shy, reserved girl who initially acts tentatively towards the MC and other boys in general. She is the inheritor of the Amagi Inn, a traditional Japanese inn that serves as Inaba's pride, and often feels the pressure of inheriting such an important part of Inaba's cultural identity. Although Yukiko is a graceful/refined young woman, she does appear to have something of a wild side, as evident in her secret laughing fits and her extensive knowledge of rather questionable subjects. Yukiko's Shadow, the third major one encountered in the game, reveals her secret resentment of her fate as inheritor of the Amagi Inn, and her desire to be rescued from her fate by a fashionable Prince Charming (implied as Chie). Her weapon of choice is a fan. Her identifying color is RED.

- TEDDIE – Teddie is a local resident of the TV World, and takes on the appearance of a bear mascot. Encountered by the MC, Yosuke and Chie in their very first (accidental) trip to the TV World, Teddie provides most of the initial exposition regarding the TV World and the Midnight Channel as well as a healthy dose of comic relief. Teddie is a sensitive bear with the character makeup of a child, but he quickly picks up the personality quirks of others and develops an endearing, genuine, if rather perverted, personality. His Shadow, the sixth major one encountered in the game, reveals surprisingly cold intellect and a pervading belief that everything is meaningless. Throughout the game, Teddie searches for the meaning of his existence, and views the investigation team as a family more than anything else. His weapon of choice is a claw. His identifying color is WHITE.

- KANJI TATSUMI – Kanji is a delinquent who developed a reputation beating up biker gangs in the streets of Inaba. Despite his tough exterior and rough mannerisms, he is a softie at heart who enjoys sewing at his mother's textile shop. However, he still possesses an immense distrust of the police and authority figures in general. Kanji's Shadow, the fourth major one of the game, reveals his personal insecurity, fear of women, and ambiguous sexuality. His weapon of choice is a blunt object. His identifying color is BLACK.

- RISE KUJIKAWA – The very first character to appear in the game (in a fictional TV commercial), Rise is a rising idol and pop singer who unexpectedly decides to go on hiatus,

retreating to Inaba to work in her grandmother's tofu shop. Due to her popularity, she frequently deals with stalkers and paparazzi, and has become immune to lack of privacy. Her personality is naturally bubbly, and she isn't afraid to flaunt her stuff and flirt with guys (especially the MC, who she seems to have a schoolgirl crush on). She views the investigation team as good friends who know her true self, which is even more significant considering how many of her fans think of her more as a pop symbol than as an actual person. Rise's Shadow, the fifth major one in the game, plays up her desire for attention (to erotic levels).

- NAOTO SHIROGANE – Initially introduced as a private boy detective. Naoto's parents were members of the police force, imbuing Naoto with an interest in all things detective. Enigmatic and serious to a fault, Naoto is secretly frustrated by the prejudices of society, which lead her to close herself off to others. In truth, Naoto is a girl who is confident and mature when dealing with others, but shy and reserved when dealing with herself. Her Shadow, the seventh one in the game, reveals Naoto's desperate desire to overcome social prejudices by changing genders. Naoto's weapon of choice is a pistol. Her identifying color is BLUE.

Other Significant Characters
- NANAKO DOJIMA – Nanako is the six year-old daughter of Detective Ryotaro Dojima (the workaholic lead detective of Inaba) and cousin of the player character. Throughout the game, she grows more and more attached to the player character, affectionately calling him "Big Bro". She is innocent, sweet and pure- a rare anomaly among all the major characters in the game. She plays the role of an emotional catalyst in the final act of the narrative.

- ADACHI – A bumbling detective who appears at various times in the story. He transferred into Inaba from the city not too long before the protagonist. He serves as the voice of the police, frequently letting slip information about the police's progress in the ongoing serial murder investigation. He plays a huge role in the final act of the narrative.

BREAKDOWN

Persona 4's narrative is incredibly long and complex, with players frequently taking more than 100 hours to complete the game. One of the reasons why Persona 4 is such a long game is because it takes its time to set up the scenario and the characters for the player. After the first cutscene, the player goes through a sort of initiation process through the eyes of the player character- the player experiences the protagonist's arrival in Inaba, the meet-and-greet with the relatives he'll be staying with for the next year, and scenes that establish the town of Inaba as the peaceful town that it is. It's like the player himself has just arrived in Inaba. The player simply presses the X button to proceed through these conversations, occasionally responding to the other characters' lines by choosing between three options from a dialogue tree. The dialogue tree serves no other purpose than to keep the player engaged- it doesn't really matter which dialogue option you choose, as the only thing that changes is the other character's line directly following it. So basically, for the first hour or so of the game, the player simply presses X and watches the protagonist's life as a high school exchange student play out on screen. In fact, the player doesn't even get a chance to MOVE the character until more than an hour into the actual story.

While this seems like a surefire way to turn people away from the game, I believe that it does the exact opposite: the setup of the game completely immerses the player in the world of Inaba and, later on, the TV World through its use of storytelling and characters. For example, the player moves

into the Dojima household like he or she would move into an actual relatives' household. The player experiences the first day of school without knowing what to expect, and is introduced to the characters who will later become comrades in battle. The player gets to see these characters living their normal everyday lives as high school students, something not many games do nowadays. By immersing the player in the daily life of Inaba, the game effectively captures the player's emotional investment, which come in handy later on when the actual battles start. Teaming up with party members to fight a boss in a dungeon becomes more meaningful when the player remembers that each party member has a life back in Inaba, and something to fight for. The same characters having fun at the school's Cultural Festival just hours ago can suddenly find themselves fighting for their lives in an epic 15-minute boss fight, and it is up to the player to guide them through the fight. Such juxtaposition between desperation and normalcy creates a roller coaster of emotions that really picks up in the third act, when the protagonist's 6 year-old cousin Nanako gets kidnapped. More on that in a moment.

The game works hard to get the player invested in its characters, and does so by injecting an absurd amount of depth into each character. The seven party members are quite colorful- figuratively and literally. Each character possesses a personality that is vaguely stock, but ultimately unique in a way that makes the character comes alive through their interactions with one other. Let's use Yosuke as an example: Yosuke likes to organize group hang outs. He once asked Yukiko out on a date, only to be rejected by a completely clueless Yukiko. He argues with Chie a lot. He is a huge fan of Rise Kujikawa's public persona. He begrudgingly volunteers to let Teddie stay over at his house after the latter stumbles out of the TV World. Etc. The character of Yosuke has a working relationship with each of the other characters- he sees them a certain way, and changes his perspective based on his interactions with them. The same is true for the rest of the characters. They all act a certain way around one another, and the more time they spend with each other, the more they develop and grow as people, and the deeper their bond becomes. The player, as the protagonist and leader of the team, becomes a part of this process, and it is through this process that the player begins to view the party members as more than just allies in battle.

The growing bond between the characters is strongly reflected in the gameplay as well. The TV World serves as the main dungeon of the game and the stage of combat. The game gives a reason to put the player in the TV world, stating something along the lines of: "People are being thrown into the TV World, and will die if they aren't rescued in time. So go rescue them." The developers take this idea to the next level by making the victims familiar characters, dangling them out in the peaceful world of Inaba before throwing them into the treacherous TV World, leaving it up to the player to get them out. The bosses of each level are also relevant to the narrative: each boss represents a suppressed emotion of the character thrown into the TV World, and since most of these characters happen to be future party members, the player is basically witnessing the darkest, innermost secrets of a party member before battling it. One of the recurring themes of the game is "accepting one's true self", and each chapter of the game features a party member coming to terms with his or her Shadow, turning that Shadow into a Persona that will aide him/her in future battles. Therefore, the Personas are a constant reminder of the trials of accepting one's true self, and the members of the party share a growing bond that comes from battling the self, a storytelling mechanic that is rarely seen in video games, let alone JRPGs.

While half of the gameplay consists of fighting shadows in dungeons, the other half of the gameplay consists of a visual novel-style daily life simulator/dating sim, where the player is expected to live the life of, well, a normal high school student. The game introduces a clever mechanic that ties

this simulator-style part of the game with the dungeon-crawling part of the game: The Social Link mechanic. Social Links are character-specific levels that allow the player to acquire more powerful Personas based on how close they are to the characters tied to the Social Links. For example, if the player spends a lot of time hanging out with the uncle, Ryotaro Dojima, he or she will level up Dojima's Social Link, and will be able to create more powerful Personas of the Hierophant arcana. The Social Link mechanic provides a unique opportunity to fit in even more narrative in the form of side stories. In the case of Ryotaro Dojima, hanging out with him will gradually reveal his concern that he is not spending enough time with his daughter Nanako due to his job as a detective, and the anguish he feels about his wife's death. Only by leveling the Social Link up to the max level will the player be able to finish Dojima's story, and although progressing through the Social Link is entirely optional, it is strongly recommended if the player wants to obtain more powerful Personas. In this way, the game balances narrative and gameplay.

STRONGEST ELEMENT

Outside of the team dynamic shown by the main party members, I'd say the strongest element in the storyline is the despair and hopelessness felt in the moments immediately following Nanako's death. Ever since the beginning of the game, Nanako has been in the background, supporting the protagonist, and just taking that away from the player leaves a huge hole in the heart when he/she realizes the importance of Nanako's presence. The setup builds an ideal world for the player to inhabit, and by taking away the ideal world in the latter stages of the narrative, the player is forced to experience loss and all the intangible emotions that come with loss.

UNSUCCESSFUL ELEMENT

Persona 4 likes to cover all the bases, and while this works in many aspects of the storytelling, it can also lead to frustrating moments. For example, because part of the game involves solving a murder mystery, there will be scenes where the characters get together to reason through the facts and come up with theories. More often than not, the player will reach the conclusion a lot quicker than the characters in the game. The game has a tendency to spell out every little detail and plot point again and again to the point where it just hammers everything into the player's skull. Nothing is subtle in the game- everything is spelled out through the dialogue, and sometimes the characters will suddenly spew out impressive life advice that seems to come more from the developers themselves rather than from the actual characters. I guess the developers really wanted to make the message and themes known, but they could have probably gone about it in a more subtle way.

HIGHLIGHT

As mentioned above, I believe that Nanako Dojima is one of the- if not THE- most important character in the narrative of Persona 4, and I also believe that the developers knew this, and planned the narrative with her character as the focal point of the third act. Since the very beginning of the story, when the protagonist arrives in Inaba, Nanako is there to greet him. Nanako is there to greet the protagonist every night as well when he arrives home, always saying something along the lines of "Welcome back!" and "Welcome home, big bro!". Through a series of well-placed scenes, it is revealed that Nanako feels lonely because her dad is always out working cases for the police, and relies on the protagonist to break that loneliness barrier. Nanako appears in most of the other party members' Social Links, often dropping by to make innocent observations and see how the protagonist is doing. All of the party members are incredibly fond of Nanako, and treat her well. Throughout the story, she is there for

the protagonist, representing a beacon of purity in a game of serial murders, Shadows, and school exams. And then, about two-thirds into the game, she is kidnapped by the serial culprit and thrown into the TV World. The player is tasked with rescuing her, but not before experiencing the full effects of her disappearance- starting with the first time he/she returns home and finds no one there to greet him/her. The battle to rescue Nanako is a long and arduous one, but after she is rescued, she dies a sad, gentle death in a hospital bed with the protagonist by her side. Nanako's death represents the lowest point in the story arc, and the entire investigation team breaks down into sorrow and irrational anger directed at the individual who put her into the TV World- a man named Namatame. The player is then forced to make a decision that represents the one true fork in the road for Persona 4: Should he/she take revenge for Nanako's death? Or should he/she calm down and look for more answers? One choice leads to the good ending. The other choice leads to a sad, depressing ending. Here, the game forces the player to make an emotion-filled choice. It is rare for games to play with the player's emotions in a way that might influence the decision-making process, but Persona 4 succeeds. Taking a quick look at various playthroughs online will reveal how much Nanako's death has impacted players upon playing the game for the first time, and it is quite fascinating to see people responding to Nanako's in-game death as if their own little sister just died. Nanako's death can lead players to reflect on their own choices, which actually fits with the overarching theme of "accepting one's true self".

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Persona 4 is critically acclaimed with a 90/100 score on Metacritic.

Jeff Haynes of IGN writes: "Persona 4 provides a deeper dungeon crawling/social link experience that makes it engaging to play. Everything from the battle system and the dungeons that you fight through to the social links you develop and friend interaction that you do on your 'off hours' has been radically improved in this game. While the pacing can be somewhat off, and some things feel repurposed or unaffected from previous games, Persona 4 really is an evolution of the RPG series, and an instant classic."

The "social link experience" that Haynes refers to makes up a good portion of the narrative fabric of Persona 4, and he comments on both the conventional battle RPG aspects as well as the school life aspect of the game. The "off hours" refers to all those moments of pushing X and wandering through the town of Inaba, soaking in the environment.

Will Herring of GamePro.com writes: "An engaging and incredibly well-translated script weaves the game's intricate plot together, creating a cast of truly memorable characters that really compliments the intriguing world that Persona 4 has created."

Here, Herring refers directly to the character dynamic shared by the members of the player's party, and the bond that enhances the gameplay experience.

Andrew Fitch of 1Up.com writes: "What really sets Persona 4 apart, though, is its endearing, relatable cast... From the moment my spunky tomboy classmate invited me to sit next to her in Persona 4... I felt an immediate connection -- and the sense that these could've easily been guys and gals I went to high school with. They're all normal kids with mundane problems: a big-city dude who's adjusting to life in the country, a girl whose friendship with a classmate might not be without ulterior motives, a girl who's trying to reconcile her public image with her private desires. Nothing earth-shattering -- just the

personal, internal battles we all fight."

Fitch immediately compares the characters of Persona 4 to people from his own life experience. Without the initial setup, he would probably not have felt as attached to the characters as he ended up feeling.

LESSONS

- *A narrative that take its time to set up the world and the characters increases emotional investment when the real plot begins.* The player spends the first couple hours of the game settling down in Inaba and making friends. Later, when outside forces threaten to disrupt this peaceful existence, the player is compelled to fight back and preserve the peace.

- *Multi-faceted character relationships strengthen the team dynamic of party members.* The vibrant characters of Persona 4 make team-building and dungeon-crawling more fun, and the player feels as if he or she is a part of the group as the story progresses.

- *A central emotional catalyst gives the player more incentive to complete the objectives given by the game.* Nanako's rescue and subsequent death makes the player more determined to bring the culprit to justice, sending the player on a journey that is more personal in nature (and, thus, more memorable).

- *A plot point at the very beginning of the narrative is addressed at the very end of the narrative, bringing all the events in the game full cycle.* The player encounters a gas station attendant at the very moment he arrives in Inaba, and it is not until after the main culprit has been captured and the last case solved that the player has the opportunity to discover that the gas station attendant is the mastermind pulling the strings behind the curtain.

SUMMATION

Persona 4 pushes the boundaries of video game storytelling by presenting a narrative that is long yet internally complex. The themes surrounding the game deal with accepting one's true self and other psychological factors, essentially making the game one long look at what makes us human. The game achieves this through fleshing out the town of Inaba and thoroughly developing the characters who the player will be spending time with for the next 100+ hours. The player ultimately becomes attached to the characters and world of Persona 4, making the age-old objective of "Saving the World" that much more satisfying to accomplish. As evident by the emotional events of the third and final act, Persona 4's narrative aims to hit home on a personal level, and succeeds at creating a world where emotions and life itself are examined. The narrative works in harmony with the gameplay and in fact enhances the gameplay mechanics (Social Links, Personas, facing Shadows, etc), which makes Persona 4 a deep, memorable and ultimately satisfying gaming experience.