

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *PARANORMASIGHT: The Seven Mysteries of Honjo*

Platform: Nintendo Switch, Android, Microsoft Windows, iOS

Genre: Horror/Mystery Adventure

Release Date: March 8, 2023

Developer: Square Enix

Publisher: Square Enix

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Takanari Ishiyama

Overview

Have you ever wanted to bring someone back from the dead?

How far would you go to make that dream a reality?

Set in the Honjo neighborhood of the Sumida Ward in Tokyo city, *PARANORMASIGHT* opens as a supernatural battle of wits. After Shogo Okiie, an average Japanese office worker, is granted a mysterious “Curse Stone”, he is prompted to hunt down and kill as many of the other curse-bearers in Honjo as he can before the Feast of Shadows ends. If he manages to eliminate enough curse-bearers, he will be able to enact the “Rite of Resurrection” and revive anyone he chooses to.

Okiie sets off on a mission to revive Yoko Fukunaga, a friend that he witnessed die under mysterious circumstances just moments before receiving a curse stone. The player will witness the events of this fateful night unfold across multiple different perspectives, solving puzzles and

mysteries along the way. Ultimately, they will come to see just how far one must be willing to go to bring back the dead.

Readers be advised: PARANORMASIGHT touches on topics of abuse, murder (both accidental and intentional), sexual assault, and suicide. Although this review won't go too in-depth on these topics, they are present nonetheless.

Characters

Shogo Okiie – An office worker, and all-around normal guy. He met Yoko Fukunaga a few months ago and grew fond of her obsession with the paranormal. After Fukunaga dies, he is granted the curse of the Whispering Canal, which allows him to kill anyone who tries to leave him behind. In hopes of bringing back Yoko Fukunaga, he uses the curse's power to kill others and steal their "soul dregs" to power the Rite of Resurrection. Although Okiie is initially presented as an every-man, he quickly gives in to bloodlust, not hesitating to take innocent lives with his curse stone if it means completing the ritual.

Yoko Fukunaga – A housekeeper who befriended Shogo a few months ago. She has an interest in the paranormal and has heard of the rumors of the Rite of Resurrection. She seeks the Rite of Resurrection in hopes of reviving her deceased dog Ogo-pogo. Her mysterious death is the catalyst for Shogo wanting to complete the Rite of Resurrection for himself.

Harue Shigima – A grieving mother with a stalwart will. Ever since her son was kidnapped and murdered, she has been searching for the person responsible. The police botched their investigation, so she turned to a Private Investigator in hopes of finding a new lead. She is the daughter of a high-ranking police official, and it is suspected that her son was targeted to get back at his grandfather. She received the curse stone of the Haunting Clappers, which can ignite anyone carrying a fire-starting device.

Richter Kai – A charming and mysterious man who introduces himself as a Private Investigator. Kai is a former police detective, who quit and decided to start his own private detective agency. He refuses to speak about what he is investigating, though it is revealed later that he has been hired by Harue to investigate her son's death. Despite his eccentricities, he proves himself to be quite a reliable detective, able to dredge up clues and leads that even the police's extensive investigation passed by. He places his clients above all else, even lying to the police to protect his client's privacy.

Tetsuo Tsutsumi – A gruff man with a no-nonsense attitude, Tsutsumi is the more experienced of the detective duo, with Jun Erio serving as his sidekick. Despite his rough exterior, Tsutsumi proves himself to be quite lighthearted at times, though he never loses focus on the investigation.

He finds himself mourning the death of a fellow cop and ultimately becomes the bearer of the curse stone of the Evergreen Beech, which can kill anyone who misleads the curse-bearer. His curse stone proves to be a valuable asset in obtaining information and discovering the truth behind the Feast of Shadows.

Jun Erio – Affectionately called “Rookie” by Tsutsumi, Erio acts as the second half of the buddy cop duo. What Erio lacks in experience he makes up for in enthusiasm, as he is always eager to help further the investigation. He looks up to Tsutsumi greatly and wants to become a reliable cop like him one day.

Yakko Sakazaki – A young high school girl who is mourning her recently deceased friend. She is reckless, rushing into situations with nothing but her gut feeling guiding her. She feels as if she has failed her friend and wishes to make amends in whatever way she can. She becomes the bearer of the curse stone of the Fool’s Procession, which kills anyone who listens to the music it produces for 30 seconds without spotting the curse-bearer.

Mio Kurosuzu – A mysterious girl who showed up in Sakazaki’s class one day unannounced. She is revealed to be a spirit exorcist, able to detect and guide spirits to the afterlife. She initially joined Sakazaki’s class to exorcize a possessed classmate, though she also decided to help Sakazaki channel her dead friend’s spirit. She performs her spirit exorcist work in collaboration with a secret branch of the police and is acquainted with Tsutsumi, who is a key member of said branch. Kurosuzu is the counterbalance to the reckless Sakazaki, acting as the voice of reason and a source of knowledge on the spirit world.

The Storyteller - A mysterious man who introduces himself as the host of the game’s events. He is present only to the player, and seemingly omniscient. He presents each scene on the story map through the television that he stands next to and often quizzes the player on their understanding of the game’s events up to that point. The Storyteller draws heavy inspiration from the Japanese art form of Rakugo, and greatly resembles the attire and demeanor of a typical Rakugo artist.

Breakdown

Story Structure

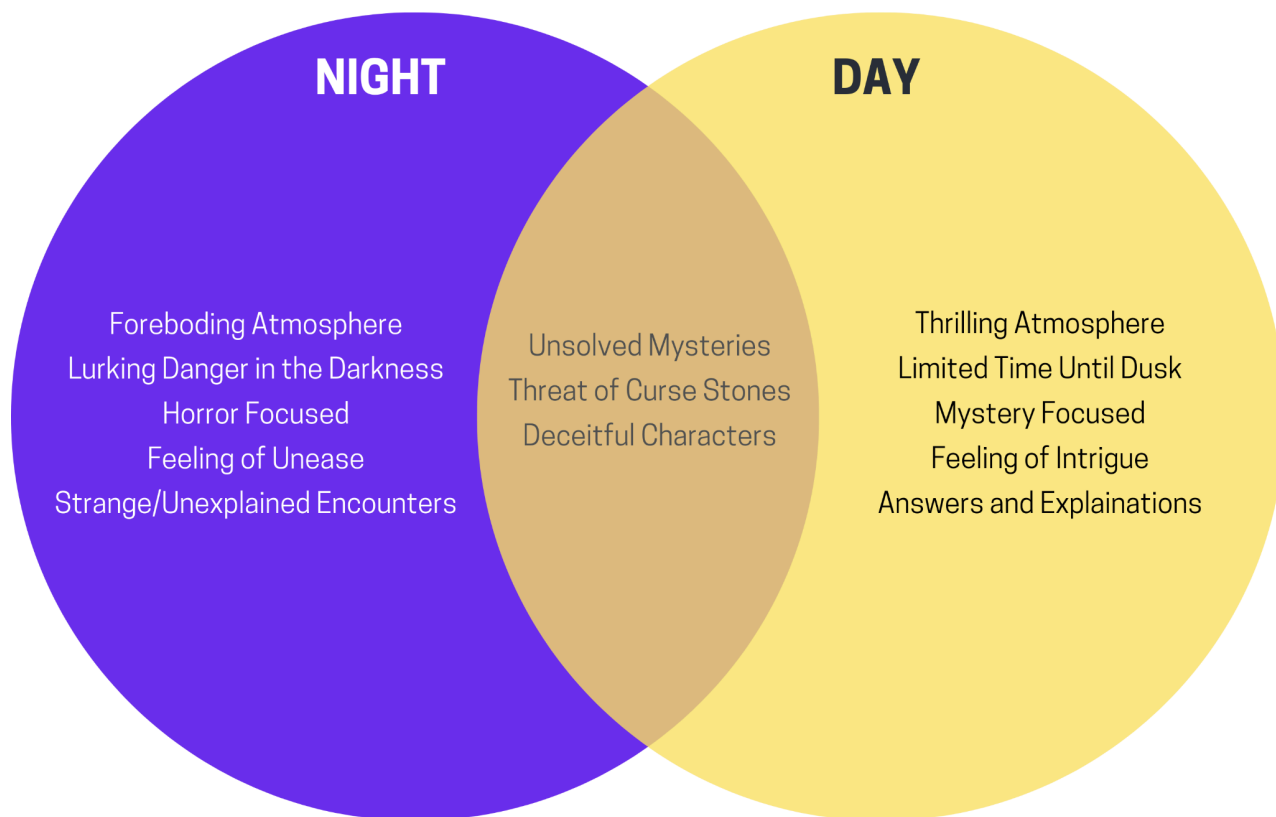
PARANORMASIGHT’s story starts small, but quickly grows in scope as the curtain gets pulled back further and further. Initially you are a witness to Okiie’s perspective of the Night of Shadows, encountering other curse-bearers and outsmarting them in order to complete the Rite of Resurrection. After a certain moment in the story the player is able to experience the perspectives of the other curse-bearers that Okiie had encountered. These rival curse-bearers evolve into fully

fleshed-out protagonists, each with their own reasons for pursuing (or investigating) the Rite of Resurrection.

The game further expands upon reaching the end of the night, with an entirely new portion of the game map becoming available. Players are able to experience the aftermath of the Night of Shadows and piece together various mysteries left in its wake, with the tone of the game becoming more of a detective thriller and less of a horror game. This shift in tone is incredibly well executed and the story adapts swiftly and effortlessly into its new direction.

Figure 1

Although the shift from day to night can be clearly felt, the core of the game remains the same.



Occasionally after important story beats, the omnipresent Storyteller will appear and pose questions for the player to answer. The Storyteller is functionally similar to characters like the host of the Golden Playhouse in the game *Catherine*, or the therapist, Dr. Hill, from *Until Dawn*. He serves as our host, our guide, and our anchor to which we return to once we have completed a scene. These scenes are the most narratively intriguing in terms of the questions they present, with the answers the player receives going against what the average interpretation of events may be. The Storyteller causes players to question what they know and begs them to more closely pay attention to the smallest of details.

Also of note are the data records that the player will receive throughout the course of the game. These records contain detailed and incredibly in-depth entries on locations, people,

objects, and events. More are unlocked as the story progresses, and they become available to read and review at any time. Players can easily refresh themselves on information they may have forgotten, and sleuth through the files to find hidden connections or interesting bits of historical context. Many of the records are extra-periphery to the story, serving as either a conveyance of real-world history or foreshadowing for the game's interpretation of the real story behind the mysteries of Honjo Ward.

PARANORMASIGHT almost begs for its many mysteries and secrets to be poked and prodded at, providing the questions and tools for the player to do so as the story progresses. Each location is thoroughly detailed in the records you gather, and each character profile begs you to look deeper and piece together the puzzle that lies beneath. Each scene provides something new to move the story along, with all three stories progressing toward the same conclusion beyond the horizon. In between each of those scenes the Storyteller awaits, beaming as he beckons you to question your understanding of the story so far or lack thereof. *PARANORMASIGHT* is structured meticulously to keep the player invested and on the edge of their seats, only letting up the thrill briefly for the few and far between moments of levity that the story contains.

Social Commentary

PARANORMASIGHT utilizes its story as a means of commentary on various aspects of Japanese society. One clear case of this commentary is in the game's portrayal of the Japanese High School. In Sakazaki's story, the player discovers that Sakazaki's deceased friend was a victim of sexual assault at the hands of one of their teachers. *PARANORMASIGHT* portrays this story as a parallel to the actual abuse that is unfortunately quite common in Japanese schools. A Japanese article in 2020 found that an astonishing 273 teachers had been disciplined for sexual assault the year prior, and almost half of them had not been fired from their positions afterward (Kyodo News 2020). A little over a third of the game's story revolves around finding justice for the victim, Michiyo, and uncovering the truth behind her death.

Within the story of *PARANORMASIGHT*, the justice system is often portrayed as incompetent or inadequate. The police, barring Tsutsumi and Kai, continually fail to solve mysterious deaths. The criminals who do get arrested for their actions are put behind bars, only to serve their sentence and return right back to their dastardly ways. Other criminals get away with blatant murder in broad daylight, with police failing to investigate any further than claiming the death an accident. This is a clear commentary on Japan's real-world justice system, particularly the recent expansion of police power and increasing frequency of police misconduct. Protests against police injustice - such as the 2020 protest in Tokyo following the beating of a Kurdish man by Japanese police (The National News 2020) - have only become more widespread as the policies of the late Shinzo Abe are becoming more critically examined (East Asia Review 2023). *PARANORMASIGHT* takes a clear stance against the ineffective and incompetent justice system through this portrayal. The game showcases through Tsutsumi and

Kai that those willing to put their lives on the line for others are the ones who get results, with their portrayals being markedly different from the portrayal of the average law enforcer in the game.

Cultural Connection

PARANORMASIGHT features the usage of curse stones as a main mechanic in its gameplay. Each curse stone bears a unique curse, and most can be utilized by the player to solve puzzles or progress the story. These curse stones, although appearing at first glance to be one-note paranormal MacGuffins to progress the plot, are actually based on real urban legends in the Honjo region of Japan. Each stone is based off of one of the 7 Wonders of Honjo, which in real life are featured as urban legends inscribed on wooden carvings throughout the district. The Japanese art form of Rakugo, a minimalistic form of performing arts, often recounts the mysteries of Honjo as stories within their theaters.

Figure 2

Each Curse Stone/Real World Honjo Wonder Equivalent

Curse	In-Game Power	Real-Life Equivalent
The Beckoning Light	Kills other curse-bearers using the curse they possess.	The Sending-Off Lantern: A mysterious lantern which guided a warrior, only to blink out and leave the warrior in utter darkness.
The Everburning Lantern	Kills by disembowelment anyone who becomes trapped in the darkness of the curse.	The Unlit Soba Shop: A soba shop's lantern which continued to burn without a candle or oil, on which the numbers 28 were written. Dousing it was impossible, and attempting to do so brought misfortune.
The Fool's Procession	Kills by fatal fall anyone who hears the music it emits for 30 seconds without seeing the curse-bearer.	The Procession of the Tanuki: A musical procession of magical beasts that can be heard just out of reach. No matter how hard one searches for the source of the sound, they cannot find it.
The Foot-Washing Mansion	Kills by crushing anyone who hears the command "Wash!" spoken aloud.	The Foot-Washing Mansion: A giant foot that descended into the house of a young woman, that would rampage through the

		house until it was washed. Upon being washed, it would disappear back into the ceiling.
The One Sided Reed	Kills by dismembering anyone that the curse-bearer knows the name, age, occupation and current location of.	The One Sided Reed: After a man killed a young widow when she refused his advances, he hacked off her left arm and leg and threw them into a ditch. From then on, that ditch would grow nothing but a rare reed with leaves that only sprouted from the right side.
The Haunting Clappers	Kills by burning alive anyone in possession of a fire-starting device (such as a match or lighter).	The Following Wooden Clappers: On the 20th day of each month, the temple bells resound with the afterlife's tones and the streets will go dark. On this day, one might hear the sound of wooden clappers (used to warn the people of a fire) banging from behind. They will synchronize with your footsteps, getting closer and closer until you reach home.
The Whispering Canal	Kills by drowning anyone who attempts to leave the curse-bearer behind (such as walking away from a conversation).	The Leave it Behind Straggler: Fishermen heard from a nearby moat a voice commanding them to "leave it behind..." If they tried to leave, their feet would become heavy and drag. Their fish sacks would suddenly become empty, whether or not they tried to do as the voice commanded. One way or another, all their fish would disappear.
The Taiko of Tsugaru	Kills by bludgeoning anyone who is hiding something from the curse-bearer (physical or otherwise).	The Taiko of Tsugaru: The Tsugaru tower, was a watchtower that was used to summon the fire brigade. Unlike other towers which used a large wooden bangi, the Tsugaru tower would use a deep booming taiko drum.

The Evergreen Beech	Kills by hanging anyone who attempts to lie to the curse-bearer.	The Chinkapin Tree of Unfallen Leaves: In the garden of the shogun's vassal, there grew a large chinkapin tree. This tree, unlike the other chinkapins, never shed a single leaf.
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Note. All real world equivalent translations provided by Hyakumonogatari.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *PARANORMASIGHT* is the way it methodically presents the narrative to the player. The game cleverly disguises its true breadth by only showing the player what is necessary to move forward within the story map. Once the story map first opens to the player, there is only one available path and only one character route. After a certain point, the game presents more playable routes, each providing further context to the events of the first route. Eventually the game even allows the player to continue their investigation into the day, exploring the aftermath of the events that took place the prior night. Compounded with the game periodically introducing new characters and more complex puzzles that require information gathered throughout different routes, this carefully crafted design is tailor-made to keep the player curious and eager to explore the possibilities.

Unsuccessful Element

PARANORMASIGHT is not a game without its flaws, unfortunately. Where the strong narrative structure and well-developed characters make for a jaw-dropping journey, the “true ending” feels as if it falls flat. The true ending is not the culmination of the narrative that the player has been experiencing up until that point, but rather, reaching it creates an alternate “true” timeline in which the events of the game were subverted, and the Feast of Shadows never occurred. This is all presented through a quick montage sequence, which feels incredibly unrewarding. The game acts as if the best ending is a timeline in which the player's actions are entirely subverted. In this way, the narrative conveys that it is the destination that matters most, completely invalidating the journey the player took to reach the end.

The true ending is not meant to be an invalidation of the player's effort, however. The intent is fairly clear, the writers wanted to convey that a world without the rite of resurrection- a world where the dead stay dead- is the best world to be in. When the opportunity to bring back the dead is even remotely considered, only negative things can happen from there. Yearning for

what lies beyond the veil, attempting to undo the hand of death, these things are foolish ideals. The energy of the living is better spent on moving forward rather than looking back.

Although what the game was going for with this ending was understandable, the execution left much to be desired. What we ended up getting is what essentially amounts to an animated powerpoint in which the characters experience the same arc as they did in your playthrough, except without the paranormal aspect. This true ending feels as if it cheapens the experience, and detracts from the overall strength of each character and their otherwise incredible arcs, and minimizes the events of the story the player experienced in favor of hopping ship to this “better timeline”.

Highlight

The best moment in the game is a puzzle involving a character that is introduced towards the ending of Act 2. In this puzzle, the character needs to find a way to escape the room they are being held in, but there isn't much in the room to experiment with. The puzzle requires the player to explore other characters' routes, finding information or completing actions that will impact the room that the trapped character is in. In almost every other puzzle, the information needed to progress can be found within the same scene you are playing. In this puzzle however, you must pause the scene and experiment within other routes to find the information you require. With some clever puppeteering of events and gathering of information, the player is able to help the trapped character escape and progress the story. The utilization of the story map for this puzzle is extremely clever, and the puzzle itself serves an important narrative purpose, foreshadowing a major twist later in the story.

Critical Reception

PARANORMASIGHT was fairly well received on release, receiving scores ranging from above average to quite high. Pocket Tactics praised the game's “dizzying web of interwoven narratives”, giving the game a perfect score. Rock Paper Shotgun called the game “one of the biggest surprises of the year” and states that “over 10+ hours it didn't feel like there was a dip in the game's tempo, even when switching between story routes.” Destructoid gave the game an 85 and noted, “It was constantly surprising, kept me thinking, and has some pretty great characters to boot.”

Lessons

- **Careful pacing makes all the difference.** *PARANORMASIGHT* utilizes careful withholding of narrative elements to ensure that each reveal is impactful. Whether it be new characters, new routes, or new points on the timeline, the game is meticulous in what it shows to the player and when it does so. By slowly trickling each element in as the story calls for it, the player is kept engaged and excited, with each twist and turn unveiling something new for them to experiment with.
- **Guidance is important, but don't overdo it.** Nothing felt better than correctly answering the questions posed by The Storyteller at the end of each "arc" of the story. Deducing the order of certain events and the truth behind certain lines of dialogue kept me engaged and excited to see how I would be proved right or wrong in my theories. *PARANORMASIGHT* mostly excels at providing hints and guidance in moderation, however, the balance between clear guidance and trusting the player to solve things on their own is a difficult one to get right, as shown in the frustrating path to the true ending.
- **Utilize real culture in novel ways.** *PARANORMASIGHT* takes real rumors from Honjo and twists a fascinating and thrilling tale with it. Highlighting the culture of real-life places and utilizing it within your narrative can create a sense of uncanny parallelism and authenticity to the real world. Having the player feel uncertain on what is true and what is part of the fiction of the game enhances the feeling of mystery and unease, and can spark genuine curiosity. Blending the real and the fictitious is a difficult but rewarding thing to do, and can make your game's world feel truly alive.

Summation

PARANORMASIGHT is a woefully underrated game, with a cleverly crafted and delightfully detailed story. Not only are the characters fantastically written and well-developed throughout, but the world itself is undeniably alluring. Filled with head-scratching puzzles and spine-chilling scares alike, *PARANORMASIGHT* provides a horror experience that no other game can. The love poured into this game shines through in every aspect, from the delightfully obtuse Storyteller quizzes to the incredible adaptations of real-life Japanese myth and culture. It is a game that tries many bold ideas, and manages to succeed with a majority of those ideas. For these reasons, I believe *PARANORMASIGHT* is deserving of analysis and review.

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