

Game Narrative Review

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Overview

Funky acid jazz music plays in the background. Nervous gamblers glance around the room with unease. “Someone’s in here”, whispers one of them.

A black cape whips across the screen. This cape belongs to a young teenager, dashing from ceiling beam to ceiling beam above the anxious onlookers. He is clad in black from head to toe, save for the white masquerade mask hiding his eyes and the bright red gloves on his hands. The leader of the Phantom Thieves, a trickster like no other - a true “Joker”. A smirk spreads across his face as he reveals himself above the crowd, holding the briefcase containing the stolen treasure.

“There he is!”

His distraction working, he continues to dance across the beams in the ceiling, making his daring escape with officers trailing him from below.

“Stop right there!”

“You won’t get away!”

A small blip in his escape route as he is cornered by monstrous shadows, but these beasts are no match for Joker’s skill. A teammate’s voice in his ear:

“Take them down, Joker!”

A cocky grin stretches across his face as he lunges toward the shadow, swinging his dagger, cartwheeling and backflipping out of reach while tapping rhythmically on his gun’s trigger, never missing a single shot.

The enemy is defeated, but backup arrives - even Joker knows when he is outmatched. There is no point in fighting the continuous waves of enemies.

He swings himself onto the upper balcony, disappearing into the back passages of the casino. He flies through underground passageways, sprinting down hallways, gliding through the shadows unseen. With the guards hot on his coattails, he follows his Navigator’s instructions to an exit. Bursting out onto another balcony, there is only a bright, stained glass window opposite of the banister rimming the the casino room. Is that really it?

“That’s just how it is,” says a member of his entourage. *“After that giant commotion, the bottom floor is completely closed off. Say, can you make it?”*

He smiles. Of course he can.

“Over there!”

“There’s nowhere to run!”

Joker’s smile doesn’t waver. He vaults onto the banister, sprinting toward his finish line. As he reaches the stained glass window, he stops and turns back to the guards:

“See ya.”

And with that, he launches himself through the window. The gamblers scream in shock from below, but Joker is unfazed. He glides through the air with the grace of a ballerina, twirling through the light rays shining through the shattered glass around him.

“You’re such a show off. You know that?”

He lands perfectly on both feet, somersaulting to a halt. He’s home free-

CLUNK! CLUNK! CLUNK! CLUNK! Blinding flood lights glare upon him, turning on one row at a time.

“Enemies here!?”

“These readings - it can’t be!”

“What’s wrong?”

“An ambush?”

“What happened?”

“CAPTURE HIM!”

Surrounded by tens - no, hundreds of police officers, Joker sprints full speed toward a fire exit ladder. He hoists himself onto it and begins to climb. A smile of relief crosses his face as he looks down over his shoulder behind him. Again, it’s too easy. He chuckles to himself and continues to climb, turning to look up -

Right into the barrel of a police rifle. The officer butts him in the head with the gun, sending Joker flying into the crowd of police below. Once he is arrested and cuffed, the officer leans down, unmercifully pulling Joker’s hair to lift his head.

“You have your teammate to thank for this. You were sold out.”

The above paragraphs detail the very first scene in the game. Persona 5 is a JRPG in the Shin Megami Tensei - Persona franchise. The story primarily follows Joker, the leader of the Phantom Thieves - a band of snarky teenage underdogs who must juggle their student and social lives with their secret other occupations - fighting criminals in cognitive “palaces”.

Palaces exist purely in the human psyche. They are a manifestation of the owner’s most twisted, distorted desires, and are fueled by a root object called a “treasure”, or the “heart”. This palace is inhabited by the owner’s “shadow self” - a representation of the owner’s subconscious state of mind. The goal of the Phantom Thieves is to “steal”, or remove, the root cause of the distorted desires, thereby causing the owner of the palace to be wracked with guilt and confess their crimes to the public. If the owner’s shadow self dies, the version of them in the real world eventually suffers a “mental shutdown”, dying of a heart attack.

Infiltrating these palaces is no easy task - the Phantom Thieves battle their way through palaces with their Personas, manifestations of their rebellious will that exist in palaces. However, in their attempts to promote justice, something darker is happening in society. Mental shutdowns are happening, and the Phantom Thieves aren’t causing them. These shutdowns and the Thieves’ infiltrations are more closely connected than any of them would like to admit, and it is up to them to prevail over the sinister forces of evil that lurk within the shadows.

A typical playthrough of the game features roughly 100 hours of play time, including the main story, 17 individual storylines for characters that Joker may befriend, and other minigames. An epic tale of friendship and a commentary on the state of today’s society, Persona 5 delivers a satisfying experience ripe with the stylish, suave shenanigans of the Phantom Thieves.

Characters

As there are many characters in Persona 5 with 100+ hours of gameplay, only the ones most important to *giving context to this narrative review* will be examined in depth here.

Characters not detailed in this section are *by no means unimportant* to the story.

Phantom Thieves - A collection of social misfits. Their goal in society is to stand up for the underdogs and “change the hearts” of the cruel and relentless.

- **Protagonist (codename Joker)** - A 16 year old boy with a delinquent past. He transfers to Shujin Academy in Tokyo on probation after a run-in with the police where he was wrongfully charged with assault following manipulation of the situation by Masayoshi Shido, the main antagonist. Despite being a silent protagonist and allowing for the player to craft his personality through dialogue choices, Joker still has the sassy, chaotic personality of a teenage misfit. These personality traits are depicted through his potential dialogue options, as well as through the animations that play to express his mood.
- **Ann Takamaki** - A kind, caring friend, Ann spent her childhood lonely and isolated; as a girl of mixed ethnicity, she was bullied for her unique appearance. As a result, she initially turns a blind eye to others’ obvious shortcomings and cruelty, being complacent in her and her friends’ pain because it is easier. She willingly pretended to date the volleyball coach, Suguru Kamoshida, in exchange to allow her friend, Shiho Suzui, to be on the volleyball team. This nearly results in her sexual abuse and Shiho’s suicide. In the Phantom Thieves, she is seen as the moral compass, constantly questioning the morality of their actions. Despite being incredibly considerate, Ann is also very strong headed; after Shiho’s near suicide, she refuses to be ever taken advantage of again, and dedicates herself to becoming “stronger”.
- **Yusuke Kitagawa** - An eccentric artist dedicated to finding his true meaning in life through the medium of art. His quest placed him into the “care” of Ichiryusai Madarame, a physically abusive, manipulative man who steals his pupils’ paintings and presents

them as creations of his own. Similar to Ann, Yusuke initially tolerates being abused before seeing through Madarame's lies and standing up for himself and his beliefs.

- **Makoto Niijima** - The younger sister of Sae Niijima, the prosecutor interrogating Joker throughout the events of the narrative. At the beginning of the narrative, she carries the high expectations of her older sister and her deceased father on her shoulders, aiming to be a top honour student without considering what she really wants to be for herself. Following her initiation into the Phantom Thieves, she casts aside the set path that she is expected to follow as a "good, studious girl" and seeks to develop her own interests and hobbies.
- **Futaba Sakura** - The youngest member of the Phantom Thieves, Futaba serves as the anchor to the deeper, more sinister plot as it unravels. Before joining the Phantom Thieves, Futaba is a shut-in master hacker with severe agoraphobia, depression, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts. Futaba believed that her mother, Wakaba Isshiki, "committed suicide" right in front of her eyes because "she hated Futaba". However, this was not what really happened; Futaba's mother was actually a researcher of cognitive science, and her research discoveries had the potential to cause ruin in society through "mental shutdowns". As a result, her research was stolen by Masayoshi Shido, and she was murdered. Then, Futaba was shown a forged suicide note to make her believe that she was the reason her mother had died, allowing for Shido to successfully get away with his crime. These events caused her to develop a palace of her own, where her heart yearned for death. When the Phantom Thieves came to her aid, she was forced to confront the reality from which she had averted her eyes, serving for the strongest character development in the game.
- **Haru Okumura** - The daughter of corrupt CEO Kunikazu Okumura. As a daughter to a financially prosperous corporation, she initially is obedient to her father, who arranges a marriage for her without considering her health and happiness. When she joins the Phantom Thieves, she refuses to bow down to him any longer, causing the rebellious spirit in her to form into a full-power Persona. At the end of her palace, her father is killed by Goro Akechi.

- **Other Phantom Thieves** - Ryuji Sakamoto, an impulsive troublemaker, and Morgana, the “mentor” of the game, a talking cat who thinks that he was once human.

Antagonists

- **Suguru Kamoshida** - The very first boss in the game, he is the introduction to the overall theme of the game. As a successful Olympic medallist, he physically abuses and sexually harasses the students on his volleyball team (and track team) at Shujin Academy. He manipulates Ann into dating him, promising Shiho a spot on the volleyball team while simultaneously subjecting Shiho to personal abuse sessions in his office. Members of the volleyball team deliver each other messages to go to his office to be physically abused, and no one stands up for themselves or their peers. His role in the narrative sets the beginning of the story perfectly; the parents of the abused students are aware of their childrens’ suffering, but turn a blind eye because indicting him is too troublesome given his status in society.
- **Ichiryusai Madarame** - The second antagonist, he is a vain artist who poses as a mentor to talented art students. In reality, he abuses all of his students and steals their work, displaying it and selling it as if it were his own.
- **Goro Akechi** - A self-proclaimed ace detective and somewhat of a celebrity. After discovering the identity of the Phantom Thieves, Akechi temporarily joins the Phantom Thieves during the infiltration of Sae Niijima’s palace, where the events of the first scene unfold. There, it is revealed that Akechi is actually the true cause of the mental shutdowns. Although he wears a charming mask in public, he is secretly a maniacal serial killer with the ability to turn people psychotic through use of the cognitive world. He is the bastard son of Masayoshi Shido, the object of his revenge. Akechi’s secret quest is to work with Shido, but to then ultimately kill him and destroy his reputation. He is willing to sacrifice anyone who stands in his way, including innocent people. Akechi is a character foil to several different Phantom Thieves. He is estranged as a child because he is different from the others, similar to Ann. He grew up without his parents, like Futaba. His reaction to these situations are both similar and different from the Thieves. After

being wronged, he seeks revenge - but the Phantom Thieves do so in the name of preventing it from happening to anyone else, whereas he does so purely in the name of malevolent vengeance.

- **Masayoshi Shido** - Masayoshi Shido is the main antagonist of the game - he is the catalyst for the majority of the Phantom Thieves' plight. After Joker interferes when Shido attempts to harass a woman, Shido blackmails the woman into giving a false testimony to the police where Joker assaulted Shido. Through the Phantom Thieves' journey, it is revealed that Shido is one of the most powerful politicians in society - he has total control over the police and detective force, giving him the power to hide all of his corrupt actions. When Akechi approaches him with the power to induce psychotic behaviour in others, Shido teaches him how to cause mental shutdowns, and together they wreak havoc. He is an egotistical and highly manipulative man, and his influence is strong enough that Akechi, despite his murderous intentions, still feels the need to gain his favour.
- **Other Antagonists** - Junya Kaneshiro, a greedy mafia boss who manipulates high school students into drug trafficking, Kunikazu Okumura, a corrupt CEO and Haru's father, and Yaldabaoth, the final boss of the game, a god manifested from humanity's desire to remain complacent in the face of injustice.

Other important characters to this review:

- **Shiho Suzui** - Ann's best friend, she is subjected to severe abuse from Kamoshida. These actions cause her to become suicidal, and she attempts to kill herself by jumping off the school rooftop. Though she is a minor character, she powerfully sets the tone of the narrative, as the conditions which cause her to become so despondent were easily preventable, yet society failed to protect her from exploitation. Shiho is already socially removed due to the trauma that she sustains in her relation to Kamoshida, but her failed suicide attempt solidifies her status as a social outcast due to the taboo act of attempting to kill herself. She captures the essence of who the Phantom Thieves want to help -

people who are backed into a corner by a society of bystanders who have the power to intervene, but choose not to.

- **Sojiro Sakura** - Joker and Futaba's guardian. An ex-researcher on cognitive science, he adopts Futaba after a series of events that transpire following Wakaba's death. While on the outside he appears to be a rough man, he is actually kind hearted, which is the reason that he takes Joker in following his criminal record.
- **Sae Niijima** - Makoto's older sister, she is a strong-willed and successful prosecutor. Sae is important to the delivery of the story - she outlines it, describing what has just transpired and what is about to transpire. She is jealous of the success of her male colleagues and superiors, which her director uses against her in order to coerce her into fabricating evidence to indict the Phantom Thieves for causing the mental shutdowns.

Breakdown

With over 100 hours of gameplay, Persona 5 features several grand narratives. This analysis focuses on the way that the storytelling structure, characterization, visual storytelling, and audio create an impactful narrative experience for the player to communicate themes and lessons, but does not analyze all of the actual plot beats in the game.

Storytelling Structure

Persona 5 has a unique storytelling structure. After the first scene of the game, all of the events of the story are outlined by Sae Nijijima. She interrogates the protagonist following his capture in the casino, and every time she introduces a new antagonist, the story jumps to that portion of the plot. The structure involves two looping components - story development, then palace infiltration.

First, stories are told through cutscenes and/or dialogue scenes which provide context to the current plot development. During the development of the story, the player is unable to interact with the world around them other than advancing the story to learn context behind why the new target has a palace, what injustices they have committed in society, and why their actions should be corrected. Interaction with other elements of the game only commence after the development has completed, during the “palace infiltration” section of the game.

This component works decently well. The story development is usually very lengthy; advancement of the plot typically takes around 20 minutes to an hour, which in other games could be seen as drawn out, excessive, boring, and/or flow-breaking. However, Persona 5 succeeds because of the varied mediums for storytelling during this time. Discussion about current events happens both in-person (visual-novel style) and through text message (on the protagonist’s cell phone screen). Both in-person and text conversations are equally sassy and playful, but in today’s modern age, the presentation of an imperfect group dynamic through a group chat is refreshingly realistic without over exaggerating or alienating the teenage dynamic. The story is also paced nicely, allowing for the player to sit through these context-building

sessions without realizing the amount of time that has passed. Despite being lengthy in time, the player does not notice nor care because they are in a story-induced state of flow.

The story development establishes context for the palace infiltrations. After establishing the Thieves' next target, the player has a limited amount of time to steal their target's treasure for reasons outlined in the plot. Every in-game day, the player has blocks of free time where they may choose what to do. The player may then make a decision - to infiltrate the current antagonist's palace to make progress toward stealing the treasure, or to stay in the real world to advance their current friendships and personality trait levels. Advancing friendships involves completing ten cutscenes per person, and each of these cutscenes takes up one block of free time. Joker must also have a strong enough relationship to the characters in order to trigger the cutscene, so if his relationship to the character is not strong enough, he may choose to spend time with them to strengthen it. Certain characters also require a personality trait to be high enough before their story can be advanced. For example, if Joker's friend needs relationship advice, he must have a certain level of "charm". Finally, characters are also not always available for story advancement given their different schedules. It is up to the player to manage their time accordingly, juggling all of the available possibilities to craft an experience of their choice. Assuming the player successfully steals the treasure within the allotted time, story development commences again after the allotted time has passed.

Again, this mechanic solidifies the nature of the characters. Despite being shadowy heroes of justice, they are also high school students who struggle with maintaining friendships and balancing their school and Thief lives. The concept of time constraint is something that all people struggle with, whether as young students or working adults. The power of choice allows you to feel as though you *are* a high school student trying to balance Thief activities with day-to-day activities. Moreover, interaction with characters provides more insight into their backstories and motivations, strengthening the player's understanding of decisions that characters make during the main story.

Characterization

For the most part, the characters in the Phantom Thieves are strongly written and believable. Each character has a distinct voice and personality, so no characters are redundant. As previously mentioned, especially during the character arcs that the player may choose to follow, the characters are satisfyingly relatable as they work through the problems in their lives together. Typically each character's story features an event in their past that is holding them back from being their true selves.

Sojiro, for example, is being extorted by Futaba's blood uncle in the beginning of his confidant storyline. The reason for this becomes clear as Joker delves deeper into Sojiro's tale. After Futaba's mother passed away, Sojiro took custody of her because her blood relatives were abusing her. The only way for him to take custody was to promise a large sum of money to her relatives. However, Sojiro is still being extorted despite already paying back the money. When Futaba is made aware of this, conflict between her and Sojiro two occurs. At the end of Sojiro's tale, Joker helps the two reconcile - they visit Futaba's mother's grave together, and Futaba calls Sojiro her "dad". Sojiro thanks Joker for showing him the importance of family, and comments on how he has learned that fighting for good relationships is important, rather than taking the easy way out.

This is an example of a confidant storyline that has the potential to be more emotionally powerful than the main storyline - rather than trying to create societal change, Joker is able to create smaller positive changes in individual people's lives. This proximity to the characters has a much larger impact on you than events in the main story do because you can see each step of the story's development, rather than only seeing the end result.

These emotionally charged scenes also manifest themselves during the main story, especially during the characters' lowest points. Some of the strongest scenes in the story are when the Phantom Thieves awaken to their Personas - when they finally cast aside their doubts and embrace their inner rebellion, and when they decide that they will never allow themselves to be taken advantage of again.

In particular, Futaba's awakening is extremely emotional. Futaba's plot arc involves the Thieves infiltrating her palace, which manifests itself due to Futaba's guilt and self-blame

following the death of her mother. During the boss fight, where typically the palace's boss is the shadow self of the target, her a flying beast version of her mother is the boss instead, screaming out Futaba's name and blaming her for her death. However, when Futaba enters her own palace during the boss fight, she encounters her shadow self and she is forced to face the delusions and inconsistencies in the story that she was given.

"I won't let those distorted lies deceive me anymore... And I won't be led astray by other's voices either... I'm going to trust my own eyes and my own heart to distinguish the truth from the lies. There's no way you're my mom! You're just a fake created by those horrid adults! I'll... I'll never... I'll never forgive them!"

- Futaba Sakura

Where other characters must face the people manipulating them, Futaba must face herself - and that is far more powerful because it is far more difficult. Many can empathize with a time when they doubted themselves - and to watch someone else (albeit a fictional character) overcome their difficulties by facing themselves is extremely inspirational and touching. Watching this 14-year-old girl fight off her inner demons and come to accept herself is one of the most emotionally impactful moments in the game.

The biggest strength of Persona 5's characters is their realism, communicated through interactions between characters. One strong example of this is when Makoto joins the Phantom Thieves. Prior to her introduction to the Thieves, Ann accuses her of knowing about Kamoshida's abuse because she is the student council president. Her emotional volatility leads her to accuse Makoto of indirectly causing Shiho's suicide attempt by being a bystander. Once Makoto joins the Phantom Thieves, Ann specifically requests to meet with her in private, apologizing for the outburst and stating that she was deflecting blame because she felt guilty for not being able to help her friend. This is a catalyst for a better relationship between the two for the rest of the game. It is these types of scenarios that touch the player's heart, and they too are able to understand and empathize with both characters. More of these situations between the Phantom Thieves would have helped to make the story even more memorable, because these types of situations that define both fictional characters and real people.

Visual Storytelling and Music Design

In other games, these are primarily meant to ease the player's interaction with gameplay mechanics. However, Persona 5 also uses these elements to enhance the player's narrative experience because some details can't be communicated through writing alone. This form of presenting information to the player is like the game's own form of exposition - subtly depicting the nature of the Phantom Thieves, the society they live in, and the experience of infiltrating palaces without ever having to directly describe it to you - showing rather than telling.

The UI is extremely stylized. Bold, randomly capitalized letters comprise the headings in the game, made to look like cutouts of magazine letters in ransom notes. Once Joker reawakens to his persona, the system menu screens include stylized graphics of Joker swiping with his hands, twirling through the air as if dodging a bullet, rappelling on a rope, or interacting with his cellphone, typically featuring cocky, condescending grins. In the palaces, loading screens feature Joker whipping his trenchcoat across the screen as he appears for a brief moment, then immediately dashing off into the darkness, leaving you wondering what you'd just seen.

Loading screens during day-to-day life include people walking across a busy street, or if Joker takes the train, people swaying back and forth, holding onto handles and clutching their belongings to avoid being pickpocketed. For the most part, menus are toned down when accessing "normal" shops, such as the local burger joint or diner. However, this changes when Joker enters a shop where he can buy weapons or healing supplements to help during palace infiltrations. The magazine letters are back, and the menus and UI are once again, stylish and communicative of the fact that the Phantom Thieves are in a shady business. All of this visual storytelling perfectly creates the setting of the story - typical students in Tokyo during the day who transform into secretive, stylishly dressed thieves after school. And it feels *cool*, it feels *awesome*. It feels like you, as the player, really do have two identities that you must uphold. All of these UI elements are already present in the very first scene of the game. With only the same amount of information detailed in "Overview" excerpt, you can already sense that the Phantom Thieves are some stealthy teenagers that lurk the shadows - and all of this is communicated through visual storytelling. If dialogue and game mechanics communicate the plot of the game, the UI and menus most definitely communicate the setting and atmosphere.

Animations make the communication of Joker's character very strong as well - though he never speaks in-game, the player can tell exactly how he is feeling through his character's body language. The game ensures that you never forget the fact that Joker, even as leader of the Phantom Thieves, is a rebellious teenager with copious amounts of attitude. Whenever he receives a good exam score or dodges a whiteboard eraser thrown at him in class, he smooths back his hair and cracks his neck. In palaces, when he dashes from place to place, he flips his coat or allows it to billow out behind him. Despite being a silent protagonist, Joker's sassy personality is evident through little details such as these.

To top it off, the lyrics to the music that plays just before a boss fight really sells the confident, arrogant nature of the Thieves:

"Ain't it a shame

I'm not a figment of your ailing old mind?

I'm just as real as

I'm just as dangerous

As you, so know you'll find

A taste of your own meds

Fire in every breath

Fire inside your head, your heart

And as your crippled brain

Tries to fight in vain

Your empire will fall apart"

- Life Will Change, Benjamin Franklin

All of these non-written communications of the plot contribute to a greater understanding of the narrative, and the prevailing attitude of the Phantom Thieves. It is here that we see the Phantom Thieves for who they are, their chaotic ideal of justice, and how they seek to enforce it with their questionably moral methods.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of Persona 5's narrative is its ability to put players into a flow state through player-dictated progression of gameplay. The player chooses their own pace while they follow the narrative, and they can decide exactly how they want to immerse themselves in the story world. If the player wants to infiltrate a palace, they can. If they want to complete normal day-to-day activities such as working a part-time job, hanging out with friends, or even going out to the local batting cage, they can. This is why players can lose themselves in the game for several hours at a time - making these decisions about time management and talking to other characters puts the player in a state of flow, where they experience the life of a Phantom Thief. Allowing the player to choose how they advance the story is one of the strongest successes of the game, as it is experienced exactly how it should be - a life simulation with a little bit of extra tomfoolery involved.

Unsuccessful Element

The biggest shortcoming of the narrative is that sometimes characters move on from their experiences too fast, causing their dialogue to become impersonal. Beyond the character's story arc, they become shallow tropes. After the Thieves' individual plot arcs, each character has the same opinion about everything, and they all speak from the collective "Phantom Thief's" perspective, leading to a loss in individuality. At certain points in the narrative, which line belongs to which character doesn't matter. The result is an oversimplification of each character's motivations, leading to this unfortunate inconsistency in the narrative's quality.

Ann, for example, was sexually harassed and was nearly a victim of sexual assault. Yet right after the events of her palace, she is pressured by the other Phantom Thieves to pose nude for Yusuke's new art piece in order to advance an investigation. This is all done in a comedic light, which is rather insensitive of what she had just been through; she is reduced to the trope of a sexy girl who contributes to the group with her good looks.

Another example of this is Yusuke, who spent his childhood and adolescence being physically abused. He was emotionally manipulated into believing that Madarame was going through an “artist’s block” and willingly gave up his works of art, allowing Madarame to take credit for painting them. Yet Yusuke barely ever comments on how this has affected him, and rarely does he offer any empathy to other Phantom Thieves when they go through similar situations. Once his plot line is complete and the players defeat Madarame, his experiences are reduced to statements like “I understand how you feel” without further justification. His character’s quirky eccentricities only manifest themselves as social awkwardness, as opposed to being a product of his past.

This is most evident during Akechi’s storyline. Akechi was the cause of countless mental shutdowns, murdering many people (including Futaba’s mother and Haru’s father). His motive for doing so is to take revenge on Shido for abandoning him at youth and causing him to be bullied for being an orphan. This goal is mirrored by the Phantom Thieves, who wish to steal Shido’s heart. Yet despite Futaba’s mother and Haru’s father being directly murdered by Akechi, the Thieves offer to let him join them. This is the biggest indicator that after joining the Phantom Thieves, the causes of these characters’ developments are forgotten; the effect that the deaths of these parents had on their children was severe. Futaba’s palace was formed due to her extreme emotional stress following Akechi murdering her mother. Haru isolates herself after Akechi murders her father, believing that her actions as a Phantom Thief may have been what caused her father’s death. Neither of these characters, upon learning the truth, should have forgiven Akechi for his actions, and they certainly should not have been active participants in encouraging him to join them. This offer is extremely out of character for all of the Phantom Thieves, breaking the player’s immersion with the plot and creating a rift between the player and Akechi. How the player feels is exactly opposite to what the Phantom Thieves say, meaning that all of the careful crafting of visual storytelling elements and character building is nullified during this scene. Considering that it is near the end of the game and is one of the climaxes, this is the exact opposite effect of what is desirable.

Highlight

The most cleverly delivered scene is the first scene of the game, as highlighted in the “Overview”. This serves as a solid introduction to a narrative for all of the reasons outlined in the “Breakdown” - it features playful banter between characters while simultaneously showing off Joker’s suave skillset. Visual storytelling components such as loading scenes are a clever delivery of exposition that set the tone of the story without overloading the player with information. Moreover, this scene actually foreshadows its reappearance during one of the climaxes of the narrative. In contrast to the player’s first experience of this scene, having context satisfyingly ties together all of the prior events that transpire, allowing for the player to reach a true understanding of what led up to that point. As the player’s sentiments align with the characters’, this moment of realization creates one of the most empowering experiences in the game.

Critical Reception

Andrew Goldfarb from IGN rates the game with a 9.7/10. He commends the ability of the series to “[explore] serious subject matter, ... [shining] light on abuse by teachers, drug sales, suicide, and a host of other issues that are handled well and are at times extraordinarily moving”. At the same time, he also states that some of the confidant story lines grab his attention because their stories are almost as interesting as the main plot.

Philip Kollar from Polygon gives the game a 9.0/10. He states that this installment “pushes the [Persona series] to new height of polish, allure, and charm”, and that “[the plot] takes some surprising twists and turns and includes a few extremely memorable villains”.

Lucy James from Gamespot gives the game a 9.0/10 as well. She talks about the strength of characters’ storylines: “They go from being mechanical tools that you engage with to strengthen their Personas, to real people you can identify and sympathize with. By the time the credits rolled, I felt like I was leaving behind friends I had known for years.”

Lessons

One lesson that can be learned from Persona 5's narrative is that **visual storytelling is incredibly important to selling the idea of who your characters are and what the story is about**. So much of Persona 5's little narrative details are expressed through aesthetic UI/menu choices, animation, and soundtracks - without these elements, Persona 5 would not have the same impact on its players. For example, when Joker is charming, without the GUI suggesting his mood, the player would either receive no feedback and be left to their own devices to decipher how Joker feels at that moment, or need a line of dialogue from Joker that is a simple statement of how he feels. Both of these are ineffective for storytelling.

Another lesson is that it is important to **stay aware of each character's individual personality when writing dialogue**. In a very lengthy narrative like Persona 5's, which features over 100 hours of gameplay, it can be easy to lose an individual character's voice to the group that they represent. To write a more convincing and personal reaction to a given event, perhaps the characters' past experiences should be considered.

Finally, **the delivery of a theme is far more effective when kept personal**. The impact of Shiho's near suicide as an example of someone suffering is far more impactful than dialogue stating that Kamoshida is abusing his volleyball team. Instead of simply stating how a social issue impacts large communities of people, morals should be communicated through specific character interactions that target player empathy.

Summation

Persona 5 is an incredible narrative that perfectly captures the life and motivations of a teenage underdog in society. The way it communicates is extremely effective, showing its audience many details about its characters, plot, tone, and themes, all without ever explicitly mentioning it to the player - a feat only accomplishable through the medium of a game. The gameplay structure is conducive to telling the story, aiding the actual gameplay in making it feel less repetitive. The story is gripping and the characters feel real. Though some parts of the narrative suffer from a lack of depth that creates a less emotionally powerful experience for the player, in general, Persona 5 delivers a satisfying social commentary and lesson, teaching the us, the players, to stand up for ourselves - and stand up for what is right.

Citations

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