

Game Narrative Review

=====
Your name: Joe Lunghi
Your school: The University of Texas at Austin
Your email: jlunghi@utexas.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2018

=====
Game Title: Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 FES
Platform: PlayStation 2
Genre: Japanese Role Playing Game
Release Date: April 22, 2008
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: Atlus
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Yuichiro Tanaka

Overview

Persona 3 FES is the definitive version of Atlus's breakthrough Japanese role playing game, Persona 3. Popularizing the blend of dungeon crawling with life simulation mechanics, the niche publishing company reinvigorated a genre that was struggling to stay relevant. Mature but grounded themes of death and depression combined with immersive time management gameplay, layered over a familiar foundation of turn based combat and character driven stories. Persona 3 catapulted the franchise to stardom, and remains one of the most thoughtful, symbolically dense narrative experiences in the medium.

The player takes control of the Protagonist, a new high school student who balances socializing and studying with battling monsters. That's because when the clock strikes midnight, the world shifts into the dark hour. This extra hidden hour of the day is haunted by physical manifestations of the repressed psyche. Its origin is a mystery, and its danger is imminent. But it also gives the power to control the true self, the persona, to fight against the shadows of humanity. Most importantly, it's what ties together a cast of characters touched by death and despair, and it's only by facing these demons together that they are able to find their answer to life. But, at every turn they will be reminded; *Memento Mori* – Remember you will die.

Characters

Persona 3 is overflowing with characters. In the main cast, everyone has a persona which represents their internal qualities. They also all have a connection to death, which shapes their worldview and spurs on their growth. I wanted to highlight the ones I thought were most important to the plot, and those I specifically identify with.

- **Protagonist** – The protagonist is a projection of the player. He is a lens for you to experience the game through. His mysterious past and lack of voice acting make him easy to attach to, especially if you name him after yourself. An orphaned transfer student with the rare potential to summon a persona, he is recruited by SEES (Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad) to investigate and destroy the dark hour. The protagonist interacts through dialogue choices, but is generally a reserved, aloof, and composed person. His blue bangs cover one eye, and you can always spot his headphones on his skinny, slouched frame. His persona is Orpheus, based on the Greek hero who walked straight into the underworld to bring back his beloved. Because the avatar of death was sealed inside of him as a child, he also embodies the persona Thanatos, the Greek god of death. Despite coming off as distant, the protagonist becomes drawn to the people around him, and is motivated by cultivating these relationships, giving him a reason to fight while searching for the truth behind the many mysteries entangling him.
- **Aigis** – The last of her kind, Aigis is an anti-shadow android built to erase her creators' mistakes. In search of a "weapon", she was reactivated after 10 years to continue her only programmed purpose; eliminate the shadows. Despite being a machine, Aigis has a persona, Palladion (a Greek totem of protection), a clear sign that her artificial intelligence has a true psyche. Her clockwork doll body is abstract and uncanny. She has a rigid walk cycle and speaks in stiff monotones.

It was her who sealed death inside of the protagonist, a civilian in the wrong place at the wrong time 10 years ago. When she meets you again, she experiences guilt for the first time. It was her fault that you were dragged into all of this, and she doesn't know how to handle that. As she spends more time around you and the rest of SEES, she becomes more human. This inadvertently teaches her fear and sadness, which comes into conflict with her programmed nature.

Aigis's role is as a literal personification of the game's messaging; she is an artificial being with no concept of life, but in parallel to the protagonist, walks through each stage of it. The people she meets along the journey affect her, and each experience makes her more human, until she finds her own purpose for living, and accepts her life as genuine and precious.

- **Junpei Iori** – At the butt of every joke, Junpei comes off as a classic class clown. An immature loser who awakened his persona, Hermes, by chance, Junpei jumps

at the opportunity to be somebody and escape his dull, dead end life. To his disappointment, his life risking exploits must be kept secret, making him question his efforts in the first place. He's always dressed casually to match his laid back act, but underneath it all he's ruled by his inferiority complex.

Junpei wants to be accepted, and eventually falls in love with an enemy. He finally found someone who cares for who he is, and he starts to put that relationship above his responsibilities to the team. She manipulates him, before using her life force to bring Junpei back from a critical gun wound, killing her in the process. This mix of love, betrayal, and rage overwhelm his apathy for life, and he's left reeling with emotions he can't run from.

Junpei's role is as a loser; a misfit who struggles in school and feels like they were born in the wrong place or time. He stands for the kids who feel like they don't belong, and that society has no place for them. I've also tried to brush off my failures as if I don't care about them, but the sting always hits me. I hated feeling dejected, and acting like I didn't care was the only way I knew how to cope. I'm glad Junpei is in the game because finding myself was a big part of growing up, and Junpei felt like a real high schooler going through exactly that.

- **Fuuka Yamagishi** – Fuuka is an introverted girl who struggles to speak her mind. She doesn't show much skin, and would rather spend a Saturday indoors on her computer. Incredibly kind and forgiving, she is caught in a cycle of abuse as her "friends" take advantage of her. She goes missing after they lock her in a classroom, trapping her in Tartarus. This near death experience awakens her persona, Lucia, the patron saint of the blind. Despite almost getting her killed, Fuuka still wants to be friends with the girls who pick on her.

Fuuka wants to help people, but her awkwardness and anxiety often get in the way. She used to feel useless, but her persona empowers her, helping her face her fears and stand up for others. It's really touching to see such a quiet, timid girl bring out her inner confidence, like when she willingly puts herself in danger to save you and her bullying friend.

Bullying is a very real catalyst for depression, and it can be a hard topic to organically cover in video games. I identify with her struggles, and appreciate how she continues to struggle with it throughout the story. In my experience, rebuilding a relationship takes time, and left scars that still haven't healed completely.

- **Mitsuru Kirijo** – Mitsuru is the sole heir to the Kirijo name, an overwhelmingly wealthy and influential family that practically runs the city. She's composed, professional, and an unhealthy perfectionist. Raised as a leader since she was a child, Mitsuru is the class president of the school and the founder of SEES. Her privileged upbringing is clear from her fashionable outfits and sophisticated speech. Her persona is The Empress Penthesilea, daughter of Ares and queen of the Amazons.

It was her grandfather's foolish pursuit of a time machine that spawned the shadows and dark hour 10 years ago, right on the site of Tartarus. Their family is deeply ashamed, and has been using their resources to undo that mistake ever since. Mitsuru is constantly trying to live up to impossible expectations, most of which she places on herself. She craves acceptance from her distant father, but despite her perfect grades and work ethic, it's never enough. When her father is murdered and she inherits the family company at age 18, the pressure finally crushes her.

Initially Mitsuru is a strong leader that the rest of the group can rally behind. She loves order, and is at times comically sheltered. Her role is somebody who takes on more than they can handle alone, and suffers from unrealistic expectations. This is something I still struggle with. Whether from parents, society, or myself, I know what it's like to never feel good enough. Everyone looks to Mitsuru as "Ms. Perfect"; someone who has their life together. But it couldn't be further from the truth. On the inside, she's a ticking time bomb of insecurities and unhealthy habits that you would only find out by getting to know her. She's a great example of why you shouldn't judge people on the surface, and I continue to relate to her character in college.

Breakdown

Themes and Symbols

The structure of the game is built around "time" as a concept, both narratively and mechanically. The entire game takes place over a single year in the Japanese school calendar, from April to March. This is used as a condensed timeline for a human life, specifically your player life, with spring coinciding with birth and winter as death. Time is heavily tied with death throughout; again life is finite and death is inescapable, the one true inevitability for everyone. As time goes by it only gets closer, and there is no way for anyone to rewind the clock. This is implemented literally with the avatar of death as the final boss of the game, awaiting at the end of the calendar year, and after months of in game time spent dreading the confrontation and being told it is impossible to overcome. Time is deeply embedded in the gameplay; every day the player is managing their time like a life simulator. They balance personal relationships with responsibilities like studying or working, but every action moves the clock forward. This mechanic intensifies immersion, keeps the player engaged with tangible progression, and most importantly gives every decision narrative weight while reinforcing the ideas being introduced to the player along the way in the main plot. After all, the day by day simulation mechanics of Persona 3 are the key other half of the story that ties it all together.

In literature, the Latin phrase "memento mori" is a classic theme about how life doesn't last forever. It was used to encourage people to be moral, and framed the afterlife as all-important. Persona 3 flips the idea, using the phrase to say that, yes, life is short, so

make the best of it *now*. Forget about the afterlife, you only live once. The game proceeds to shape a sprawling narrative around this one, central phrase. Throughout the journey it is up to the player to realize this message through their actions, and by the final act, find themselves fighting for it themselves right when death is calling to them.

Persona 3 FES is a Shin Megami Tensei game, which is a series that is famous for pulling monsters and themes from various religions and mythologies around the world. Persona 3 pulls specifically from Greek, Roman, and Latin lore. Every character's persona fits into this region's pantheon, and the game's intense drama mirrors a Greek tragedy. These mythologies are excellent for adding flavor to the game and rewarding players who are familiar with them. It enables each persona to tell us more about the characters, and allows for clever foreshadowing and symbolism. My favorite example is how Akihiko and Shinjiro have the twin personas Pollux and Castor respectively. This immediately tells knowing players that these two are close, even before it is revealed that they grew up in an orphanage together and are brothers in all but blood; and just like the myth, Castor (Shinjiro) dies, leaving Akihiko devastated just as Pollux was.

Additionally, Persona 3 draws heavily from tarot cards. Tarot refers to a deck of cards used to gain insight on a person's life, predict their future, and are often associated with fortune telling. The most important cards are the "Major Arcana", a 22 card deck composed of the "face" cards. As stated in game, "...they tell a story in numerical order that is a metaphor of an individual's journey through life. Each Major Arcana represents a stage on that journey...an experience that the individual must incorporate to realize his oneness" (Persona 3). Essentially, each of the face cards are filled with meaning and implications, and because of this they are central in the actual act of fortune telling. Read numerically, they literally illustrate a person's life. "The first card in the set is numbered 0, The Fool, which is suggestive of the beginning and of infinite possibilities....The final is card The World, which represents the individual's full awareness of his place in the world" (Persona 3). These meanings are central for the characters. Orpheus, for example, is "The Fool", implying that your protagonist is as well, since he is you. Every persona, arcana, and character is matched together beautifully. Orpheus is reflective of the journey you undertake; he was famous for his own struggle against death when he went to the underworld to bring back his wife, and is especially fitting when considering that your goal is to fight to the top of Tartarus, literally hell in Greek mythos. Akihiko's Pollux is designated as an "Emperor" arcana, and so is Akihiko. For example, Pollux was known as "the boxer", and Akihiko is captain of the boxing team. The Emperor denotes leadership and power. Akihiko is the headstrong, upperclassman of the group with an obsession to be stronger than he is, leading to his insecurities and flaws. Every main character has these deep connections to their arcana, and it's a strong characterization tool. Before the player even learns about Akihiko's backstory, his qualities are already implied and foreshadowed from the beginning of the game. The concept of shaping a cast around the personalities of the cards is clever, and further ties in with the overall motif of time and death masterfully. For those who don't know about tarot or the religious and

regional lore, all of this information is available in game through creative optional dialogue and a demon encyclopedia.

Persona 3 is also deeply inspired by the work of famous psychologist Carl Jung. So far we've outlined an emphasis on the supernatural, but the game is just as interested in the evolving mental state of humans. To start, the dark hour is inhabited by monsters known as shadows, which are explained to be the dark, repressed thoughts of the people of the city (which are also classified into tarot arcana based on their vices, attributes, and physical design). The word "shadow" is used in Jungian psychology to refer to a person's unconscious ego. It is implied to be the negative parts of a person, since that is what we tend to repress, but it doesn't have to be. Going even further, Jung proposed the idea of a "collective unconscious"; that all humans are influenced by an abstract, shared mind made up of instincts and symbols. He described that as humans develop, they naturally seek out individuation, the state of differentiating from the collective unconscious into a unique person. However, people hide their true natures from the rest of the world, and the tool Jung proposes we use is a *persona*, a social mask we all wear to fit into society and play our role, and even the lens through which we and society see each other through. Jungian personas are how we chose to represent our inner selves to the outer world, and one's greatest internal struggles often revolve around the honesty and repression of one's true characteristics in their public persona, which you now know would be identified as someone's shadow. Now it all fits together. In the video game Persona 3, characters awaken to their personas, the embodiment of the true self, to fight against the repressed personalities of the greater collective unconscious, who are literally unconscious during the dark hour when and where all of this takes place. Personas and shadows are essentially the same, the difference is that a shadow becomes a persona when a character has acceptance and control over who they are, as if your personality is something one must tame, again literally and metaphorically. We can also apply the idea of a "sociological role" in life back to the tarot, with each arcana fitting a role in the journey of life, and the corresponding attributes fitting the outward personality a person would display to fit into their perceived societal function.

Every party member is touched by death in some way, and this serves as a catalyst for their growth. One of the game's most powerful symbols is the evoker, a handgun that is used to summon a character's persona by shooting themselves in the head. The game does a great job creating a mechanical feature that works so well on a narrative level. The imagery is incredibly powerful, teenagers constantly shooting themselves in a game about struggling against death and the human psychology. It's a clear allegory for the real internal battles people have with death, and the temptation some have to pull the trigger. It's a heavy symbol, especially considering how each character experiences deep depression, anxiety, and thoughts of giving up. Keep in mind that this was made in Japan, a country with some of the highest suicide rates in the world, with suicide being the leading cause of death in children and teenagers. However by the end, Persona 3 has reversed the image, using it to highlight how in order to face your "true self", and by extension live life to the fullest, you have to show that you are unafraid of even death, a feat accomplished by pulling your own trigger. The symbol is transformed, representing

the confidence they have to look death square in the face, and even shoot the fear right out of their head.

All of these elements blend together to make the game work as a whole. Each piece is connected in thought-provoking and powerful ways that make scenes more meaningful and impactful. A final thought before diving into the narrative is to consider the greater context of the game with all of these thematic elements in mind. A group of mismatched high schoolers are brought together to fight through the pain, depression, and insecurity of society and death. The battleground is the school, where during the day you balance the stress of classes, socializing, and time management, while at night the campus morphs into a labyrinthine tower named after Hell itself. This was surprisingly indicative of my high school experience. It really felt like a prison I dreaded going back to every day. It was some of the most relevant, thought-out framing I had ever seen in a video game, and the exceptional symbolism naturally works as a game.

The Narrative

The game's first act establishes the world and your role in it. You sign a contract, enabling you to enter the Velvet Room, a metaphysical realm between mind and matter only you know about. It's a deep blue, upholstered elevator car that's always going up, with a giant, golden clock ticks above the doors. Mechanically it's where you fuse personas to make stronger new ones, but narratively serves as a place for direction. The owner of the room, Igor, is your guide to lead you to your full potential, giving humanity the slim chance to overcome the impending end. His only stipulation is that you abide by the contract, stating that you must take responsibility for your own actions. This one room sets up Persona 3's premise. Time is always moving, and the elevator is always rising, correlating with the game's objective to climb to the top of the tower, Tartarus, before it's too late. Every action you take until then is your responsibility, so use your time wisely and blame only yourself for the outcome. Every time you enter this room, and it's a lot, you are reminded of these facts. From the very beginning Igor is giving the protagonist and you the player this advice, a clear lesson about life. You also get the power of the "wild card", tying in with the tarot card motif. It gives you the unique power to summon multiple personas in game, but symbolically represents the power to change humanity's fate.

For 10 years the protagonist has had the avatar of death unknowingly sealed inside of him, and this represents his awakening. When you first summon your persona, Orpheus, he is violently ripped apart from the inside by Thanatos, who rampages against a shadow before phasing back into Orpheus. That avatar is Pharos, whose prison stripes show that he's trapped in the protagonist's psyche. On a micro level, the player character already has the beginning and the end inside of him, with Orpheus being tarot number 0, The Fool, and Thanatos being number 13, Death. Meanwhile on a macro level, the player is starting their journey through each tarot stage, represented by each numerical boss fight occurring every full moon, ending with Death, the ultimate end. This really highlights how thought out Persona 3's narrative is. In the first 30 minutes the game has outlined its

entire structure, which operates on multiple levels at the same time. Every symbol ties together with the mechanics, themes, and lessons of the game in elegant and intricate ways. The level of care is astounding, especially considering this is the set up for a 100 hour journey.

The player officially joins SEES (Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad) and starts high school. During the day go to class and spend time with people, and at night balance studying with dungeon crawling. This is the routine of the game. I love how the action of the daily grind reinforces the game's message about responsibility. It's genius to use time management gameplay to tell a story about how finite life is. You have complete control over how you spend time, and it's both empowering and overwhelming, much like real life. Spend every night fighting monsters and your grade will suffer. Spend too much time studying and your friendships won't develop. The gameplay itself is making a statement, and that's something only this medium can do. It's brilliant.

Everyday you're motivated to spend time building social links narratively and mechanically. Each of the 22 tarot cards wonderfully correlate to a character you can have a relationship with; for example The Hanged Man represents qualities like self-sacrifice, pause, and indecision, and is represented by a little girl who blames herself for her parent's failing marriage, and contemplates running away to mend it. Every time you spend time with someone, it's like a new chapter in their vignette. Each relationship has a rank out of 10, and their major story events trigger a level up. The higher level your social links, the more powerful your Personas will be of that tarot arcana, meaning the stronger you will be in battles. This gamification of relationships is smart because the player wants to get the tangible progression benefits, while also being pulled along by what happens next for each character. Eventually, I became so invested in my favorites that just hanging out with them was reward enough to spend my precious time. They're well written and alive. They have their own schedules, will ask you for advice, and even getting into fights with you. A great touch is that social links can become "reversed" if you neglect or upset them. This flips their tarot card, implying the negative traits of the arcana just like in fortune telling. When this happened to me, I was upset that something was going wrong in the relationship, and genuinely wanted to mend it. The implementation of tarot cards is seamless, transcending the gameplay/story barrier while retaining its actual functions from real life. You start off with nobody, but as you make more friends and open up to each other, you gain emotional and mental strength that directly correlates with an increase in your physical strength in combat. Notably, combat against death, depression, and all the negative, repressed emotions trying to take you down. It's poetic.

At night, your goal is to put an end to the dark hour, and to do that they decide to investigate Tartarus, the enormous, transmogrified tower that forms from the school. It's a mesh of jagged architecture littered with even more clocks. No one knows why it appears or how many floors it has (264), but the only lead you have is to get to the top and find out. Tartarus had to be a mirror of the school, because it represents the mental side of student life. It's named after the Greek hell, and for many high school students

that's exactly what it can feel like. It's a direct parallel to the anxiety and sadness class brings, whether from bullying, overworking, or failure. Each of which can be seen in Fuuka, Mitsuru, and Junpei respectively. The symbolism becomes a lot more poignant when you remember that suicide in Japan is the leading cause of death among children, with studies showing that "1 in 12 primary school students and 1 in 4 secondary school students suffer from depression, which causes many of them to commit suicide" (humanium.org). The floors of Tartarus seem to drone on forever, a never ending maze of the same dull hallways. Many have criticized how repetitive this dungeon is, and I think it's a double edged sword. It's split into several zones, but each one is a homogenous mess of randomly generated rooms with the same drab designs. It can make the dungeon crawling feel repetitive and stale, especially when the art design doesn't change for 50 floors at a time. I'm torn; I acknowledge that this is a gameplay shortcoming, but I really think this conveys what it feels like to be a student suffering from the mental trauma of school life. Yes it will wear on you from a gameplay perspective, but to me that's the point. I respect the imagery, but at the end of the day the gameplay can suffer from it.

This is the loop of the game. Recruit more members, defeat a boss every month, and immerse yourself in the day to day activities. There are 2 major moments where this cycle is disrupted. The first is summer vacation, which juxtaposes the tone of the game with a few days of vacation at the beach. It's the only true happy time of the game. Scenes are lighthearted and goofy, as if all the troubles from school were nothing but a bad dream. It highlights the world that could be without the baggage of reality, and I identified with the escape summer vacation brought from my responsibilities. It's a clear sign of what I was fighting for, and it stings knowing that this is the only time they get.

The other major shakeup is during the final chapter of the game in winter, when you get the news that by the end of the month, there will be an apocalypse. Called by the overwhelmingly negative and apathetic wishes of humanity, a prophecy known as "The Fall" will summon Nyx, the personification of death, to end all life on earth. Pharos, now in the form of a friend named Ryoji, laments that there is nothing you can do to stop it. He will unwillingly turn into Nyx's avatar, and when that happens he'll be invincible. He asks you to kill him here and now, delaying The Fall by a few weeks and erasing everyone's memories of the dark hour. He can't save the world, but he can let it die in ignorant bliss.

Persona 3 gives you this choice before the last act. You can accept his offer, get amnesia, and roll credits. But it's the wrong choice. This is the moment of truth for the game's message. By now I was so invested in the world and its people that I couldn't let it all end. I wanted to fight for not just my own life, but for life itself. Accepting an end to everything was out of the question. Even if I couldn't stop death, this was not the way out. I told Ryoji I wouldn't kill him, but he just begged me more. Emotions surged seeing my friend want to die so badly, just to spare me the pain of waiting for my own. Over and over again he told me my efforts would be useless, but I wouldn't flinch.

This final, cold month a slow burn of raw emotions. Every action is valuable because you know exactly how much time is left. If there are any social links I wanted to

finish, any people I felt the need to see for the last time, I did it without thinking. The gameplay loop doesn't change, but your perception has. I felt like I was diagnosed with a disease and the doctors told me I had 4 weeks to live. There was a crushing reality in knowing your date of death and being powerless to stop it. At first, all the party could do was live these last days to their fullest. But despite how hard we all tried, our sadness never left us. In fact the whole city felt sick. The music turned somber, trash and graffiti claimed the streets, and the people themselves spiraled further into depression. And this is how the game illustrates its main point. I wasn't running away from death, but was still accepting that I would die. The game pushed me here, in the depths of despair, to say *that isn't good enough*. Seeing the broken people broke me. I picked up my weapon, and continued to climb Tartarus. The whole world may have been shouting that it was pointless, but I couldn't give up hope. I was going to fight death.

We finally made it to the top of the tower on the final day. An in-game year later, and I felt like a different person than the one who began back in March. The first tarot arcana you level up is The Fool, someone who is starting a journey and ignorant of the world. The last is The World, symbolizing someone who has experienced life and knows their place, and it's only leveled up as you reach the highest floors in Tartarus. Seeing each of my steps level up the card was electrifying. It reaffirmed my stance and gave me the confidence to keep going together with the rest of my team. The satisfaction of reaching the top after this "life-time" of labor was such a triumph by itself, but was supported by everything I had learned along the way from my experiences, battles, and the people I had grown close to.

But now I had reached the end of that life. The avatar of Nyx descended from the full moon, a towering angel of death with a pale, empty face. It asked me why I was going through all of this trouble; why were we resisting death. 100 hours ago, I would have said it was because it was the final boss. Now, it was because I didn't want to die. I didn't want anyone to die. My team members chimed in. Even though they were scared, they decided that living means staring death in the face. Everyone there was ready to risk their life to keep it, including me.

The battle concludes when Nyx fuses with the moon, and begins warping reality as a great eye opens on its surface. The party is crushed under its force, except for the protagonist. Miraculously, you float peacefully towards it, against the screams of your friends. You land in an empty void, facing an abstract, glowing core of Nyx itself. A new battle begins, and it hits me with a critical explosion. With 1 health point remaining, I'm left to engage this creature by myself. My attacks do nothing. The explosion hits me again, but somehow registers as a "miss". I can hear the voices of my friends, telling me to stand up. I'm not alone. Each of Nyx's attacks start to bounce off of me, as the rallying cries of my friends gets stronger. Every character I've bonded with over my game life flashes before my eyes, and the power of "The Universe" becomes mine. At the cost of all of my health points, I lift my hand up, and seal Nyx away.

The game fast forwards to you to March, the final day of the game. I was shocked that I was still alive, but overjoyed to see my friends again. It's graduation day, and I

spent it saying my goodbyes to all the people I've met. The protagonist can't shake how tired he is, and heads to the roof. There, he lays down to rest against Aigis. As the cherry blossoms of spring flutter by, the game gives presents a final choice. As Aigis tells you how she finally understands what matters most in life, you can either select "Close your eyes" or ".....". My stomach dropped. I froze. This is the moment where I started to cry. I waited a moment, and as my character drifted off surrounded by the people I cared about, I deeply identified with the game's answer to life. As the bittersweet credits music washed over me, I thought about all the people in my own life. I thought about how much they mean to me, and how often I take them for granted.

Strongest Element

Persona 3's strongest element is its use of life simulation mechanics. It's the key ingredient that elevates the game, giving it a strong identity in the genre and a new gameplay vehicle to convey its themes and messaging. There's so many different choices you have in your day, and you will never be able to do all of them without a guide. On my first play through, I was only able to max out a few of the game's 22 social links, and I never even met 1 of them. But that was my in game life, and it was genuinely unique from everyone else's because of my choices. By the end, I was looking back on all the people I missed out on getting to know better, and it made me feel something. I wished I had the time to. I'm only 21, but in that moment I felt like a man on his deathbed treasuring the relationships he had, and regretting the ones he failed to make. It was one of the most powerful things a video game has ever made me experience, and it was all conveyed through my daily gameplay. Even such a massive game has tremendous replay value thanks to this system.

Unsuccessful Element

While I think the game does a great job justifying its length, the reality is that Persona 3 is too long for many people to even consider playing it. Ironically the game is about how precious our time is, and 100 hours is a steep price. Even for players who have started the game, it can be hard to finish it because of how the narrative can leave them behind. If someone took a break and came back weeks later, they would be completely lost. Persona 3 would benefit from having a way for players to recap previous story events, making the experience less demanding. I love that this medium can tell a slow burn of a story in 100 hours, but that will always be an inherent disadvantage in appealing to the less invested.

Highlight

The highlight of Persona 3 is the last day. Persona 3 makes good on the symbolism of the protagonist's ultimate persona, Messiah. I had seen the world, experienced life, and given my own to protect it all. I had literally faced death, and come back. The last day is all about seeing the people most important to you one last time, before you leave forever. It's the narrative culmination of the social link system. I was so invested in these people that getting the chance to actually say goodbye to them was sentimental. They don't know they'll never see you again, but there is that ominous sensation of moving on after school has finished. Everyone knows that your time together is up. Farewells are always powerful, but they're given so much more weight after getting to know these people so closely. The final sequence with Aegis is especially heartbreaking, because just when everything the two of you have fighting for is achieved, you have to leave it all. Looking back from the end of the journey is deeply nostalgic, and made me want to find all of my real loved ones to tell them how important they are to me.

Critical Reception

Eurogamer's Rob Fahey gave Persona 3 a 9/10, gushing over the game's representation of teenage taboos like suicide, drugs, and sex. He focuses on the juxtaposition between light, surface level bubbly characters and settings with the dark, twisted reality that's always lurking. I also love how this game wants to make you uncomfortable, it's an edge that reinforces the tone of the narrative and makes it stand out. IGN's Jeff Hayes gave the game an 8.3/10, noting how the social simulation aspects were a big departure for the series. His take was that they were interesting, but potentially distracting for fans of previous games. I appreciate this perspective, because it highlights how unfamiliar this combination of genres was at the time. In hindsight we know they're a great mix that pushes immersive narratives, but at the time were still being tested. It was this element that has gone on to be the driving force of the Persona series, is why they're known as story heavy games.

Lessons

- Experiment with genre mechanics – Persona 3 wasn't the first game to mesh turn based combat with life simulation, but it found a great balance. Introducing unorthodox mechanics can keep a game fresh, and give it a unique identity to help hook an audience. Without these ideas, Persona 3 would be a lot more homogenous.
- Be careful with game length – It doesn't matter how great a game is. If people are overwhelmed by the time investment, they won't get to finish it, let alone start it. Make sure it's easy for the player to jump back in after taking a break. Persona 3 doesn't have a great way to get caught up, but later JRPGs have started using synopsis journals.

- Be creative with characterization – A lot of JRPGs struggle with defying character tropes, but Persona 3’s cast stands out from the crowd. The use of tarot cards is a creative motif that does a great job making everyone unique and memorable.

Summation

Persona 3 FES wasn’t afraid to take risks. It experimented with mixing gameplay genres, tackled personal, mature topics with provocative imagery, and built a dense narrative around a 100 hour niche experience. Persona 3 was ambitiously designed to shake up a genre by testing the limits of immersive gameplay and storytelling. The result is a game oozing with style and purpose that is unafraid to be genuine with its emotions, metaphors, and ideas. I played the game my senior year of high school. It was a time of change, stress, and uncertainty for me. I found a game that was actually able to capture my insecurities, and remind me that life is truly worth celebrating in spite of them.

Works Cited

- Fahey, Rob. “Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3.” *Eurogamer.net*, Eurogamer.net, 25 Feb. 2008, www.eurogamer.net/articles/shin-megami-tensei-persona-3-review.
- Haynes, Jeff. “Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 Review.” *IGN Boards*, IGN, 25 July 2007, www.ign.com/articles/2007/07/25/shin-megami-tensei-persona-3-review.
- Olivier. “Child Suicide in Japan: the Leading Cause of Death in Children.” *Humanium • We Make Children's Rights Happen*, 4 Oct. 2017, www.humanium.org/en/child-suicide-in-japan-the-leading-cause-of-death-in-children/.