

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Persona 5 Royal
Platform: PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5, Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series X
Genre: JRPG
Release Date: October 31, 2019
Developer: Atlus
Publisher: Sega
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Katsura Hashino

Overview

Persona 5 Royal [1] (Hereinafter referred to as *P5R*) is a Japanese role-playing game that tells the story of a group of high school students who are dissatisfied with the pedantic society fighting against corrupt officials to seek freedom and justice. The game's narrative uses a combination of flashbacks and interludes. The story begins with the protagonist being interrogated in prison. Along with the protagonist's memories, the whole story is revealed bit by bit and the player also understands the reason why the protagonist is trapped in prison. At this time, the story will show an unexpected but wonderful reversal, and move towards the final climax.

The protagonist played by the player is a transfer student who was falsely accused and imprisoned because of delivering justice. In order to pass the observation period smoothly, the protagonist needs to be a good boy and not attract attention. However, the pressure of reality makes the protagonist unable to bear this slave-like life. To break free from the shackles, the protagonist awakens the ability of the Persona and can sneak into the inner world of corrupt adults through a mysterious mobile application and reshape their hearts to make them repent. So, the protagonist appears to be an obedient student, but secretly is a phantom thief of hearts. During the adventure, the protagonist meets many like-minded companions, most of whom have similar experiences to the protagonist: suffering from the oppression of reality and eager to resist. They formed the group Phantom and continued to make powerful but pedantic adults repent, and finally discovered the truth about why society became corrupt.

Characters

- **Joker** – The protagonist of the game. Joker is the codename of the protagonist, and the protagonist's real name is customized by the player. Joker is a high school transfer student and the leader of the Phantom Thieves, leading his partners to fight against unfair reality. Joker does not have obvious personality traits. This is a common practice in many JRPGs, which can effectively help players bring their own personality and emotions into the protagonist. Despite this, the game hints in many places that Joker is a character with empathy, plasticity, and learning ability. Joker has black curly hair and wears black-rimmed glasses. In the palace, Joker wears a fashionable trench coat, red gloves, and a bird mask.
- **Ryuji Sakamoto** – A boy who attends the same high school and the same grade as the protagonist. His outstanding performance in the track and field team aroused the jealousy of the physical education teacher, who injured his legs. He joined the Phantom Thieves to make the physical education teacher realize his mistake. He has a bad temper but is brave and decisive. He has short yellow hair and often rolls up his trousers. In the palace, he wears a leather jacket and a skull mask.
- **Morgana** – A talking cat rescued by the protagonist in the palace. To find out his origins, he joins the Phantom Thieves and teaches the protagonist the skills of being a Phantom Thief. Morgana has a strong sense of pride but is also a bit arrogant. He is very sensitive and cares about what others think of him. Morgana's appearance in reality is not very different from that in the palace: a black and white cat with blue eyes and a yellow scarf.
- **Ann Takamaki** – The protagonist's classmate. Her best friend was bullied by the physical education teacher. To avenge her best friend, she joined the Phantom Thieves. She is a very understanding and compassionate girl who values friendship very much and is brave enough to face her inner demons to protect her friends. Ann has beautiful long golden curly hair, often tied in twin tails. In the palace, a red gelcoat is her most striking feature.
- **Yusuke Kitagawa** – He is an art student and got acquainted with the protagonist group because he was attracted by Ann's beauty. He joined the Phantom Thieves in order to make his teacher who had been oppressing his peers repent. Yusuke is eccentric but calm-minded and has a high passion for art. He has short blue hair. In the palace, he wears a fox mask and holds a Japanese katana.
- **Makoto Niijima** – She is the student council president of the school where the protagonist attends. Makoto has been aware of the existence of the protagonist group very early, but she never awakened the power of the persona until she was arrested by the mafia boss Kaneshiro. After making Kaneshiro repent with the protagonist group, she Join the Phantom Thieves. Makoto treats herself strictly,

makes decisions decisively and acts rationally. She has short brown hair and is wearing an iron mask and gloves in the palace.

- **Futaba Sakura** – She is the daughter of the protagonist's caretaker and is also an out-and-out homebody. The death of her mother was a huge blow to her, and she stopped opening her heart to outsiders. After the protagonist helped her to untie her heart knot, she joined the Phantom Thieves as a support character. Futaba is introverted and suffers from social phobia, but with the help of the protagonist group, she is working hard to make changes. She is very good at computers also. Futaba has long orange hair and wears round glasses. In the palace, she is a hacker wearing goggles.
- **Haru Okumura** – A student at the same school who is one year older than the protagonist and the daughter of the owner of a food company. In order to escape from her father's control and find her true self, she joined the Phantom Thieves. Haru is very gentle but has a conservative and very shy personality. This personality is mostly caused by her father's tough attitude. After she escaped from her father's control, she gradually became more cheerful and unrestrained. Haru often dresses very cute and restrained in reality, but in the palace, she wears a top hat, a black mask, and holds a giant axe.
- **Goro Akechi** – He is a young detective who is about the same age as the protagonist. Unlike others, Goro awakened and mastered Persona's abilities early. In order to prove that he is better than the protagonist, he constantly hinders the actions of the protagonist's group. He is also the direct perpetrator of many heart-stealing cases. But as his relationship with the protagonist deepened, he began to gradually repent, and eventually used death to atone for his sins. Goro appears gentle but is actually arrogant and ruthless. He has curly brown hair and red eyes. In the palace, he wears a gorgeous white dress and a red crow mask.

Breakdown

Although *P5R* has a deep development system and combat system as well as rich peripheral gameplay, it is still a story-driven game. With the worldview of the modern Japanese society of the 21st century, *P5R* explores propositions of freedom, resistance, rebellion, social discipline, whether humans have free will and the contradiction between individual will and collective unconscious. The special world "Metaverse" that appears in the game is the epitome of human collective unconscious. Also, *P5R* uses religious elements to satirize the depraved side prevalent in the collective unconscious, such as using the seven deadly sins in Christianity as the theme of the seven boss battles. In addition to the unique topic selection and peculiar world view, the reason why the game's narrative can attract countless players to get stuck in it and unable to extricate themselves is inseparable from the following two points: the classic three-act narrative structure and the application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory in narrative.

Three Acts Structure

The story of P5R does not strictly follow a linear narrative, but still follows the classic three-act design. The first act tells the story of the protagonist from being in trouble to awakening the power to rebel. Joker was detained indefinitely for helping a woman who was being harassed by a man. While under surveillance, Joker entered the Velvet Room in his sleep. Igor, the owner of the velvet room, told Joker that the velvet room was a reflection of his heart. Joker's room was a prison, and Joker himself was a prisoner wearing prison uniforms and shackled hands. Igor also told the player that if Joker does not complete his rehabilitation, he will face the fate of destruction. The game puts forward the concept of rehabilitation at the beginning, and rehabilitation is the mission throughout the game for Joker and the players. As Joker awakens his Persona abilities, meets new companions, successfully makes the enemies repent and forms the Phantom Thieves, the protagonist's road to rehabilitation also begins here and the story of the first act ends here.

The second act tells the story of the protagonist team constantly making more people repent and revealing the truth about the world. In order to implement the justice in their hearts, the Phantom Thieves have locked in larger targets, including gang bosses, corporate giant leader and even national officials. In this process, the protagonist gets to know many various partners in society. He helps these partners to solve their troubles, makes those who trouble them repent, and draws strength from these partners. As the conflict intensified, the protagonist group also found out that the masterminds behind many incidents were Congressman Shido and his subordinate Goro. Shido used Goro's Persona ability to do evil. Nearly all the people whose hearts were stolen by the protagonist group had Shido's secret instigation. However, just when everything seemed to be going in the right direction, Joker was arrested by the police due to wrong judgment, and that is the reason why the game started with an interrogation scene. With the player's mood hitting rock bottom, the second act of the story ends here.

The third act tells the story of the protagonist group breaking through their own shackles to achieve self-realization and save the world from chaos. The seemingly dead end ushered in an unexpected reversal. In fact, all the previous actions were just disguises made by the protagonist group to deceive Shido and Goro. They successfully deceived Shido and Goro into thinking that the protagonist was dead and relaxed their vigilance, which gave the protagonist group an opportunity to successfully defeat Shido and Goro. However, the world did not get better, but fell into a worse situation. The "Metaverse" interacted with the real world, which means that the protagonist group's existence will also be erased. In order to prevent this from happening, the protagonist has to face the fake god Yaldabaoth. Yaldabaoth tells the protagonist group that the reason why society has become such a mess is because in the collective unconsciousness of mankind, they have become accustomed to being Control and command, human beings are unwilling to make decisions by themselves and bear the consequences of their actions but prefer to leave the decision-making power to others. The protagonist team once fell into a state of self-doubt, but in the end, the protagonist team still decided to believe in humans.

possibility, believe that human beings have self-will, and break through their own shackles to defeat Yaldabaoth and complete rehabilitation.

At this point, the player has completely understood the true meaning of rehabilitation. It is the growth of the protagonist's Persona ability, the integrity of the protagonist's character, the deepening of social bonds, and the transformation of the soul. Along the journey, everyone in the protagonist group has experienced the process of not being willing to face the ugliness in their hearts, to facing up to the ugliness in their hearts, and finally reconciling with themselves to complete redemption. This kind of all-round and multi-faceted growth is exactly the concept that the game hopes to convey to players.

The Application of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

If the three-act story structure allows players to understand what rehabilitation is, then the application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory in the game's narrative pacing allows players to truly feel involved in Joker's rehabilitation process and does well in integrating the mechanics of the game are integrated into the narrative of the game.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory believes that people's needs from low to high can be divided into physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization. The protagonists of many games have strong backgrounds and abilities at the beginning which will cause players to lose the joy of experiencing growth. On the contrary, the protagonist of P5R has experienced the lowest need for survival to the highest need for self-actualization, which allows players to fully experience the joy of growth.

At the beginning of the story, Joker, who has just arrived in a new city and has been charged with a crime, is likely to be unable to meet his current physical needs in an unfamiliar new environment. Fortunately, his relative living in the local area provides room and board for the protagonist, which satisfies the physiological needs of him. This attic provided by his relative will become the base of the Phantom Thieves in the future.

However, next, the protagonist is faced with the problem of safety needs. The protagonist who mistakenly enters the special world "palace" faces many fatal threats. Fortunately, he awakens the Persona ability, allowing him to beat the enemies in the palace. At the same time, Persona system, the core development and combat system of the game, is also introduced here. It is a great example that the introduction of a new mechanic highly fits the narrative pacing of the game.

After the protagonist becomes friends with his first partner Ryuji, the game will introduce the cooperation system. As the number of the protagonist's group increases, the protagonist can establish bonds with more and more people, spend time with them, and develop into close friends or lover relationships with them. The cooperation system not only satisfies the protagonist's needs for love and belonging, but also gives players many useful abilities for exploring the palace.

Soon after the protagonist establishes the Phantom Thieves in the story, the game will introduce the Phantom Channel system. Players can use the Phantom Channel to receive requests from people from all walks of life. Players can help them complete these tasks to gain higher support rate. With the help of the Phantom Channel system, protagonists can intuitively feel society's admiration and respect for themselves, which satisfies the protagonist's self-esteem needs.

At the end of the story, the protagonists who have experienced various things have a higher need for self-actualization. They face their own hearts, break free of the shackles that restrain themselves, and summon the strongest Persona Sataneal to give the final BOSS Yaldabaoth the final blow. The reason why the game took Sataneal as the final Persona may be because the story wanted to convey that only by looking directly at your dark side can you break through the shackles.

Strongest Element

The narrative of the game can smoothly create higher and higher levels of needs for players and introduce the appropriate game mechanics at the right time to satisfy these needs. For example, when the player's life is in danger because he is trapped in the palace, the Persona mechanic introduced by the game meets the player's safety needs. When the player feels lonely and lacks companionship, the Cooperation system helps the player experience a sense of love and belonging. And no matter which mechanic the player spends time on, it will help the protagonist's improvement, which makes the player feel that every operation they make is meaningful. This satisfaction of growth and constant positive feedback give players the motivation to play this game without getting tired.

Unsuccessful Element

Although the game uses some narrative tricks, the first half of the game is still relatively repetitive. This narrative process can be summarized as the following loop: encounter difficulties - companions awaken - solve difficulties. In such a loop, players can easily predict how the game's story will progress next, which results in a lack of wow moments in the first half of the game, and to a certain extent, causes the subsequent plot reversal to be a bit abrupt. In order to improve this, the game can add some narrative drama to the first half, such as allowing a character to awaken Persona abilities in advance but disguise himself as an ordinary person to mislead the enemy into revealing his true form. This kind of plot design not only breaks the previous routine narrative cycle, but also paves the way for a substantial reversal of the subsequent plot.

Highlight

One of the highlights of the P5R story occurred at the end of the second act. When all players thought the story was heading to an uncontrollable end, the progress of the narrative changed dramatically. At the end of the second act, the protagonist is arrested and examined by Sae. However, what the protagonist does not know is that Goro has already planned to murder him while he is under control. As the interrogation ends,

Goro's footsteps get closer and closer, the story seems to be heading towards an irreversible ending. However, all these are just what the game wants players to see. As the third act opens, the game reveals to us the protagonist group's plan: In order to escape Goro's tracking, the protagonist group designed Joker's fake death plan. The difficulty of the plan is to gain Sea's trust. If you make a wrong move, Joker will die. Fortunately, the protagonist's bond with his companions convinced Sea to agree to participate in Joker's plan, helping him to show his mobile phone to Goro to trap him in the Metaverse. At this time, the game uses a narrative trick to continuously switch the scene between two shots: Joker's background and Goro's footsteps. The player sees that Goro is about to step into the room where Joker is. However, what is unexpected is that the door in front of Joker does not open, and Goro's act of killing Joker is just Goro's fantasy in the Metaverse. The real protagonist has no clue in reality. Then, the camera cuts back to Joker's front face, and the player sees Joker showing a proud smile. At this point, this unexpected reversal ends wonderfully, and the scene corresponding to the beginning of the story also forms a closed loop.

Critical Reception

IGN 10/10 - The author praised the dialogue options in the game as being more valuable than other games. He thought different choices may lead to different play styles and agreed that this approach can increase the replay value of the game. – “Choosing to work part-time might give you extra cash to buy better weapons, but it comes at the cost of ranking up a Confidant or increasing your stats.” [2]

GameSpot 10/10 - The author believes that the character stories in the game are very deeply rooted and close to life, which can help players better understand their partners, although some stories are a bit embarrassing. The author also praised the game for its good integration of the Cooperation system and the game narrative. – “Because the social sim elements and RPG dungeon crawling are woven together seamlessly, you grow attached to the very world you're fighting to change.” [3]

Lessons

- **Create need for players step by step.** In order to improve the player's sense of involvement and allow players to truly feel the joy of growth, the game should smoothly increase the level of the player's needs, rather than satisfying the player's advanced needs in an early stage. Just imagine if the protagonist's initial encounter was not so bad, the player's sense of accomplishment in the end would not be so great.
- **Introduce the right mechanic at the right time.** The introduction of new mechanic should be able to meet the current needs of players. For example, if the Cooperation system is unlocked before the Persona system when the player first gets into palace, players will not be interested in running the community because their safety in the palace is not guaranteed.
- **Paving the way for a reversal.** When the game's narrative has a reversal section, the game should hint at the possibility of a plot reversal through some narrative

techniques such as shots or dialogue before this part, otherwise the plot reversal will be very abrupt. There are only a few hints in the first half of the plot of P5R, which leads to an abrupt twist at the end of the second act and dampens the player's emotions.

- **Reward players for interacting with characters.** Players do not want to spend time on long-term character interactions without rewards. In order to better tell the story between the protagonist and other characters, the game must not only give players positive feedback emotionally, but also from game resources (such as new skills or new props) reward players and encourage players to actively interact with other characters. If the game wants the player to have a long-term interaction with a character, the game's narrative should show different possibilities for the relationship between the two. Many players actively interact with their beloved characters in order to develop a romantic relationship with them in P5R.

Summation

P5R has given the industry a lot of inspiration on how to use rich gameplay mechanics to serve a story-driven game to make it have a better narrative experience. Like many Japanese role-playing games, the character of the protagonist in P5R is like a "blank sheet". Players are tired of playing a character with a sense of separation. When many people think that such a story will eventually be launched on the stage of history, P5R shows us Another possibility for Japanese comic stories. P5R cleverly integrates some methodological and literary concepts (such as Jungian and Maslow's psychological research theories) into the game narrative, designing a macro growth trajectory for this blank-slate boy, so that players can both Bring your own personality and emotions into the protagonist, and the protagonist's growth trajectory will not deviate too much from the designer's established route. Such a design can be applied to many story-driven games to enhance the player's sense of immersion and optimize the connection between game mechanics and narrative.

References

- [1] *Persona 5 Royal*, Sega, 2019.
- [2] Goldfarb, Andrew. “Persona 5 Review”, IGN, Mar 29, 2017.
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- [3] Higham, Michael. “Persona 5 Royal Review – Hearts Of Gold”, GameSpot, April 6, 2020. <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/persona-5-royal-review-hearts-of-gold/1900-6417444/>