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### Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics Analysis of *Persona 3 FES*

Released in North America in 2008, ***Persona 3 FES*** presented gamers with an odd JRPG/simulation hybrid thickly coated in an anime aesthetic. While not the first JRPG to attempt such a feat, *P3*'s gameplay, narrative, and aesthetic quickly hooked gamers and the gaming media. While *P3* follows the tenets of the RPG genre, the implementation of time into its rules, gameplay, and narrative creates a dynamic effect that ripples through every facet of the game. Unlike most RPGs and games in general, time is not merely a limit or a necessity of story; it is both ally and enemy, restriction and freedom, and it creates an unrivaled paradox between player and game.

A brief overview of the game and its rules are necessary to understand this paradoxical treatment of time. *P3* takes elements from multiple gaming genres: the rogue-like genre's randomly-generated floors and dungeon-crawling, the JRPG genre's turn-based battle system with an anime-styled visual and audio aesthetic, and the simulation genre's character interactions as a prominent part of the narrative and gameplay. These seemingly disparate components are melded together into a cohesive whole. The interaction between *P3*'s mechanics and dynamics helps to develop the game's narrative and gives the player a compelling reason to play beyond that interaction itself.

As part of our discussion, we'll first examine the actual structure of the game itself with definitions from *Understanding Video Games* (pg. 126). *P3* is played from a third-person perspective, which means the player can see the character as they control him. The gamespace is a 3D world with a free space type. This is because the game is set in a city, and the player is free to roam as they please but with a few restrictions, as we'll see below. The off-screen space is dynamic. Even though the player cannot see every part of the city at once, actions do take

place off screen. For instance, characters with schedules are still in the game and active, even if the player cannot see them. This is also true of the enemies. *P3* scrolls freely—along the x, y, and z axes—and exploration is also free. No artificial barrier such as the edge of the screen forces the player along.

The authors of *UVG* also propose a distinction between two rules based on the work of game designer and scholar Gonzalo Frasca. Interplay rules “determine the relationships and the properties of elements in a game. These correspond to the physical laws of the gamespace. They determine what can be done and, combined with player input, what happens.” Evaluation rules, on the other hand, “decide which occurrences are rewarded and which are punished” (UGV 121). We’ll see how these two operate within the game, especially in regards to time.

Time is utilized in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings in *P3*. We’ll closely examine the use of time in three examples—Social Link creation, battle, and narrative. A deeper analysis of the game’s graphical and audio presentation would provide further insights, but this is beyond the scope of this analysis for the time being.

*P3*’s story and setting is immediately relatable and realistic; the player character is a transfer student to Gekkoukan High School, in 2009, in the fictional Japanese city of Iwatodai. The player controls him as he attends class, makes friends, and generally behaves like any high school student. He and his new friends struggle to find their place in the school, in society, and in life. Unlike real life, Iwatodai is beset by the Dark Hour every night at midnight. It exists in a place outside of time, and influences the reality of the real world. During this hour, the high school is replaced with the towering, labyrinthine dungeon known as Tartarus, which, incidentally, is taken from Greek mythology. Aside from a select few, notably the protagonist, his friends, and a few others, the majority of people are unaware of the Dark Hour. Those who are “awake” during the Dark Hour fear the wrath of the shadows, beasts that feed upon the

consciousness of whomever they catch. The victims of such an attack are left in near-catatonic states in real life.



Tartarus, as seen from outside. It replaces the school every night during the Dark Hour. It's floors are randomly-generated due to the very nature of the structure itself; it constantly forms and reforms.

The protagonist and others use Personas to fight the shadows. As defined by the game's instruction booklet, "a [Persona] is a second soul that dwells deep within a person's heart. It is an entirely different personality that emerges when a person is confronted with something from outside his world." These Personas can only be summoned during life-threatening events, but it's possible to force such an event through the use of an "evoker." The evoker mimics a real gun in shape, sound, and use, but it isn't loaded. A Persona user summons their Persona by holding the evoker to their head and pulling the trigger. It's an especially gruesome sight, and the player witnesses this act with every action. The fact that the protagonist and his friends are all teenagers makes it that much worse.



*P3*'s simulation aspects primarily occur outside of Tartarus. After the player attends class, which is enforced by the game, they are free to spend their time as they please. They can go to the mall, participate in extracurricular activities, and spend time with a friend. Time progresses in set increments, but it's dictated by action. The morning is spent in class, the afternoon is left in the player's hands, and they then can choose whether or not to explore Tartarus during the night. The act of spending time with another character pushes time forward to night time. Speaking of time, the narrative is structured around the school schedule. The player has a limited amount of time to solve the mystery of Tartarus, and events later in the game, particularly the threat of the apocalypse, add more immediacy to gameplay. The player must wisely choose how to spend their time within the parameters of such rules.

Time spent with another character improves the Social Link between the two. Each character is assigned one of the major arcana; this is also true of all Personas. The improvement of the link results in stronger Persona fusions for that arcana. Characters can also learn additional moves in battle such as helping a fallen character up, which prevents severe damage to that character. Maxing a Social Link gives the player the ability to fuse the highest level Persona of that arcana. It's in the player's best interest to spend time with their friends, but it's also through this interaction that the player learns more about his friends. The school schedule also makes it highly unlikely that any player can max all Social Links during their first playthrough. Characters have schedules and are frequently unavailable, which means the player has to prioritize with whom they spend their time.



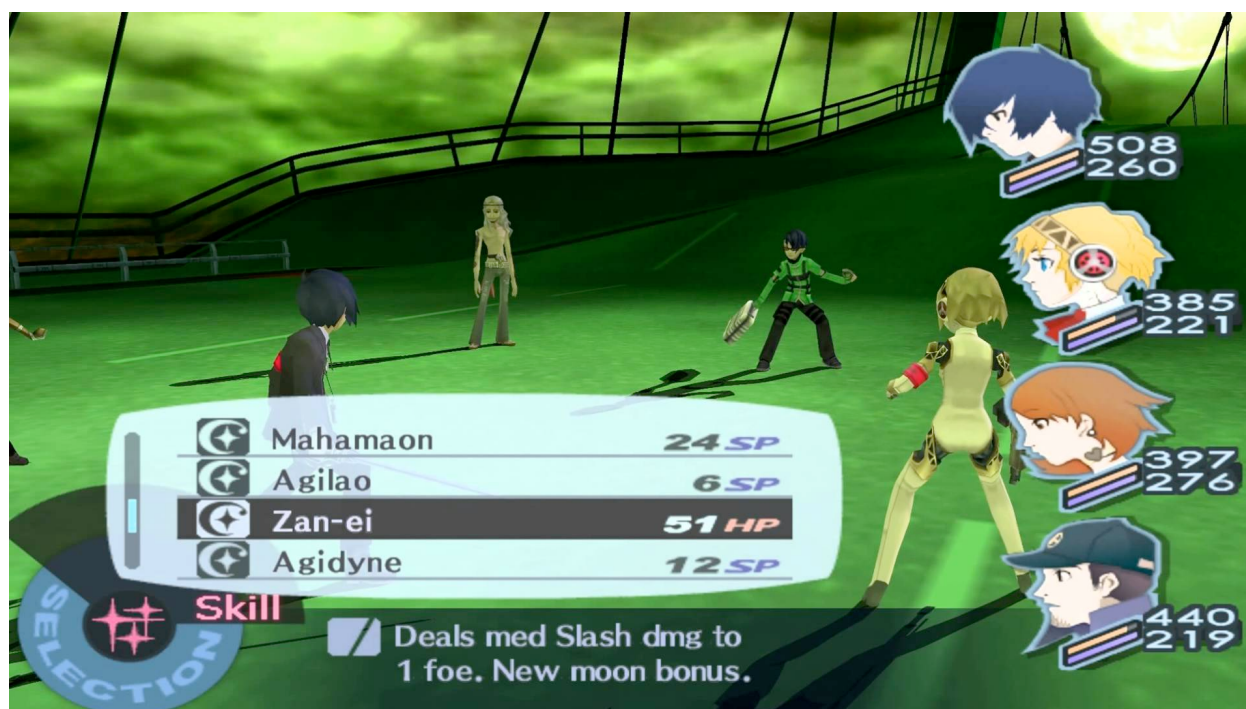
The player has chosen to spend time with Junpei after school. Events and conversations during these moments can be lighthearted and silly, or dark and serious. Just as in life, each character has their own hopes, fears, and dreams.

The player can also reverse and break social links. This occurs by choosing incorrect dialogue choices and performing other negative actions. The player is unable to summon Personas from the arcana of a reversed Social Link. Even worse, a broken Social Link closes that arcana to the player, effectively removing Personas from the game. Social Links can be repaired, but require a great amount of time and effort by the player—time which they might not be able to spare depending on the circumstances. The choice of character and Social Link is also important. The characters in the player's party, like Junpei, technically benefit the most from Social Link development, but a Social Link with an NPC (specific non-playable characters also have Social Links) might yield more desirable rewards depending on how the player plays the game. This forces the player to carefully balance rewards against time and against the sense of obligation formed by these links.

*P3's* Personas are based on mythological figures and creatures from different mythologies such as Greek, Norse, and Hindu. Some example Personas are Thor, Parvati, and Atropos. The player character can utilize multiple Personas, while his friends are only able to

use one. This makes the player character the strongest and most versatile unit in the game. However, while the player character could opt to explore Tartarus on their own, no right-minded gamer would make such a choice. It's impossible to have the correct Personas with the right abilities at all times, and it's equally impossible to know specifically which enemies will appear in any given battle. There's no hard rule that prevents the player from making this choice, but the odds are severely stacked against them.

In battle, the player character can be accompanied by up to three other characters. Just like in the simulation portion of the game, the player character and his friends depend on each other for support. The player can't actively choose the moves of his comrades. He can issue passive orders (focus on healing, focus on defense, etc.), but lacks active control. This is a deliberate choice by the designers and fits with the narrative of the game. You depend on your friends, and your friends depend on you, in every and all circumstances, and battle is no exception. As the player decides on an action and takes it, their friends will choose an appropriate corresponding action. If the player is injured, they'll heal him. If they have the ability to knock down an enemy, they'll do so.



The player and his team in battle. The player is currently picking a skill to use for their turn. Life points and ability points are indicated under each character's portrait. Status ailments (sleep, poison, etc.), and fatigue and illness also appear here. Unfortunately, shadows aren't the only enemies in *P3*.

As a turn-based RPG, much like many JRPGs, success depends upon the player's ability to understand their enemy, to exploit a weakness if available, and to defend against the exploitation of their own weaknesses. For *P3*, this means changing Personas as necessary, as well as potentially changing your own role. For example, while it might be tempting to have the player character lead the assault, he might lack the ability to do so. It might be in his best interest to allow his team to take lead while he instead focuses on support abilities. It's also necessary to know how your friends will react; they don't act randomly, they act based on the information known during that particular battle. These circumstances dictate that the player must be fully immersed in the game to not only play the game, but to also succeed at it as well.

Tartarus is broken down into six sections. The completion of a section unlocks a checkpoint, which allows the player to continue their journey from that point. While the player will push himself to explore as much of the dungeon as possible, there are multiple time-based variables that impose restrictions on exploration. The player and his comrades can become sick or tired the longer they stay in Tartarus, which fundamentally weakens their overall battle abilities. Such an occurrence transfers into the real world; a sick or tired character is unavailable to explore Tartarus again the next day. The player can determine if a character is about to become sick or tired by listening to them while exploring Tartarus. No rule dictates that the player can't continue under these less than ideal circumstances.

In accordance with the game's narrative, the player must defeat a boss shadow at the end of each month—at the full moon. If the player fails to accomplish this task, they are sent back to the start of that month. If the player successfully defeats the shadow, the next section of Tartarus is eventually unlocked in accordance with the narrative. The player can continue to train in Tartarus to increase their battle prowess, but cannot progress until a specific amount of

time has passed. A player's success in Tartarus is dictated by their ability to utilize the correct Personas, navigate labyrinthine floors, and maximize the potential of Social Links—all while time oppressively bears down upon them. The clock disincentives the player from wanting to make those bonds, but those bonds are ultimately what they need. This is the paradox of time presented to the player and the crux of the game's structure.

Please click the following [link](#). Bear in mind spoilers as this occurs near the game's end. You're welcome to watch the entire clip, but at 11:40, the player character recognizes their inner strength—as the result of Social Links and time—and gains the ability to fight Nyx. The ability, Great Seal, is powered by his connections with his friends. Also note that Nyx's Death ability should have killed him from the very beginning of the fight.

As we can see, the interaction between *P3*'s mechanics (rules), especially time, and its dynamics (gameplay) creates a gaming experience that is more than the sum of its parts. This is especially true near the game's end, which is forced upon the player based on time. The player has a set amount of in-game days to accomplish their tasks before they're thrust into the endgame, regardless of whether or not they're prepared. The primary antagonist is Nyx, a being who is capable of bringing about The Fall, or the apocalypse. Antagonist is a misnomer for Nyx, though. She appears because of humanity's despair; The Fall isn't so much an apocalypse as it is a mercy killing. The player's Social Links—their friendships—contribute to the protagonist's ability to stop Nyx. The game's social interactions, dictated by the rules of the game and acted upon by the player, adds an emotional layer to the battle mechanics and the narrative. After all, at this stage in the game, after everything you've been through, you aren't watching characters or people die—you're watching your friends die.

I chose to analyze *P3* because it elicited a strong emotional reaction from me. I can freely admit that the above link brought tears to my eyes, and after the above analysis, I believe I can explain why. *P3*'s setting and characters are relatable. We've all been teenagers, we've all



searched for our purpose. The act of balancing responsibilities and friendships against the constraints of time is painfully familiar to humanity, and so is the sense of dread and despair that can accompany day to day life. This is especially true considering that the game's primary antagonist isn't some diabolic character bent on world destruction, but a neutral being summoned by despair. Despite the time crunch, I came to value the friendships I had formed with the game's characters, and at the end, after all their accomplishments and successes, the mere suggestion that they might perish despite their best efforts was heartbreaking. The reward for the amount of effort I put into the game and its Social Links increased immersion and blurred the line between game and real life.

This idea is exemplified by scholar Dennis D. Waskul, who, when analyzing RPGs, determined that "boundaries inevitably implode as person, player, and persona blend and blur in an experience that necessarily involves all three" (UGV 169). Our personality and being is not separate from the character we control. We are not outside observers, but active participants in the gamespace. Scholar Torill Mortensen expounds upon this concept with her own analysis. Mortensen determined that "a great deal of pleasure is derived from a gaming environment that permits personal influence, social interaction and development in relation to other players, not just in relation to the game" (169). While this analysis is typically applied to games with real life social interactions such as MMORPGs, the same is true here as we've already discussed. The design of *P3*, as guided by time, permits personal influence through player choice, and encourages social interaction and development through Social Links.

Persona 3 FES is therefore primarily dictated by time. Time is used as a mechanic, a dynamic, and an aesthetic. It permeates every aspect of *P3* and its use transcends any singular purpose. Much like real life, time is both foe and friend, and what we make of our lives—both in and out of the game—is ultimately a function of that time.