Persona 3 Portable

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This is a review of Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 Portable, one of the most unusual rpg's I had never tried. It's unique because it has a very strange, dark setting / vibe and because it combines several very different game mechanics pretty successfully. The hero (you) is either a male or female high school student (and that choice actually makes a difference in the game). I played the game at hard difficulty which was not too hard, except for the final fight. Apparently I was quite under leveled (I was level 70 at the end). My total play time was 74 hours (in game time, so probably 80 hours real-time due to reloading).

Persona 3 is an enhanced port of the original Persona 3 for the Playstation 2 (which is why I chose this one to play). It is the fourth entry of the Persona series by Atlus, all of which feature pretty similar game-play to this title. It has an expansion (The Answer) which I did not play (nor would I recommend doing so from what I've read). Also as a note, I didn't play it on a real PSP but emulated it on my Android Nexus 5 using an emulator (PPSSPP) so this will not be an exact review of how it plays on its original device. However, I can highly recommend using an emulator as I doubt I would have finished it without being able to save / load at will (mainly due to getting bored with the amount of battles necessary to progress).

What I liked

The overarching storyline

This really sets the mood.

The story is not a simple you are the hero and you will save the world story line. Instead it switches between light and dark regularly and the story can get pretty abstract / philosophical at times. What's also nice is that it's more of a tapestry of story lines all woven together. It's not just about you, but it's about the growth of all the people you meet and there are very few completely one-dimensional characters in the game. Some of the things happening are somewhat immersion breaking though. For instance the instant acceptance of pretty much everyone that they have to shoot themselves to summon a Persona. Also, no one in the world seems to be doing anything about the problems except for the main characters. Still it's very well done and I was genuinely curious to see how it would all play out. The amount of interaction you can have with characters (lots of text to read!) and the number of events that happen during your play through is very impressive. There are even a number of changes in the game world during the story and the story can diverge dependent on your choices earlier in the game.

The game mechanics

Navigating a location (female main character).

It’s a really interesting combination of a number of mechanics. The main story line feels like a visual novel in which you are a student attending high school during a few semesters. You can navigate this school and the world (by simply clicking on them on a map per location). Time advances by choosing an activity to do each time period of each day, but not every location and activity is always available and you don’t always get to choose. For example in the evening you can’t go to school, but you can do a part-time job, have fun, do homework or improve a relationship with a character available in the city. Spending time with people increases your relationship / social rank with them (which can give you access to new Persona’s) and can advance their personal story line. And then there are dungeons (Tartarus mostly) in which you can walk around in isometric-3D with a small party and fight turn based battles with very weird monsters. This part includes many standard RPG elements like leveling, skills, a quest system, item management and shopping. Both mechanics work pretty well together, especially for the boss fights outside of Tartarus which switch continually between story and battle.

The characters

There will be a lot of conversation to be had.

There is a very large cast of characters with which you can build up relationships. Some of these become part of your core group of people who you can take with you in fights. All of these are very well done; they each have their own personality, their own storyline, their own Persona, skill set and even a unique set of items. You can interact with them pretty much daily and stuff happens to them during the game and not all of what happens is good. One funny detail is that you can unlock special outfits for pretty much all main characters (including maid

outfits, tuxedo's and even santa suits). There are naturally also 'bad guys' who are in my opinion not as well done as the other characters, but not be one-dimensional either (although they are very crazy). Good stuff. Finally there are NPC's littered around the world who have minor stuff to comment about what's happening in the world. One minor annoyance for me was with the anime cut scenes. While these definitely added depth and were pretty well done, the characters didn't look similar enough to their portraits.

What I disliked

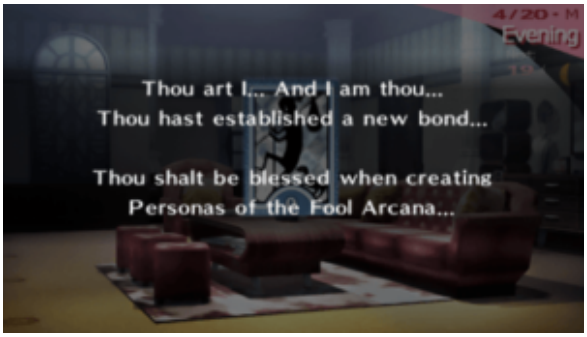
Tartarus

All of Tartarus looks pretty similar to this.

Tartarus is basically a big dungeon made up out of a lot of different floors where you can go at night to fight. Before I started I read that a lot of people consider Tartarus bland and boring. Initially I didn't agree. At the first few stages it was a quite limited number of floors and the battle system, side quests and equipment made it sufficiently interesting to keep me invested. However, past the half way point the number of floors you had to traverse for each stage became excessively large. I found myself dreading having to go in there again and wanting to be done with it as quickly as possible to get back to the story. And that is with the advantage of being able to reload instantly if an enemy gets the initiative which can be quite deadly. I can't imagine having to finish it without being able to reload instantly. Part of the reason I got bored is probably that I found the overall story line / individual story lines much more interesting, which made this even more of a chore as pretty much nothing happens story wise. One redeeming

quality were the quests which at least gave you something to do in there. Another was that the monster variety is very interesting (both in terms of art style as in how they work mechanically). To beat a lot of monsters / bosses consistently you do have to pick the right skills / Persona's to use. Which at least meant you couldn't just fast-click your way through every single battle. Note: I generally did a whole Tartarus stage in one night (to be as efficient as possible).

The social link system



Establishing a new social link.

This feels a bit weird to put as something I disliked. I really liked the concept of having a sense of progression with a lot of characters and even the aspect of unlocking new Persona by deepening your relationship with a certain character. However some of these side stories didn't feel genuine, but more of a mini game in which you have to say what they want to hear to manipulate them into trusting you. It may also be because I tried to do a 100% immediately, so I was trying hard to maximize out all social links. This for instance meant I was pretty much 'dating' multiple of the girls in the game at once without much of a negative result. Don't get me wrong, I found this one of the most interesting mechanics in the game, however the execution of a lot of these minor story lines felt unreal / immersion breaking (which may be in part a cultural thing). Note: If you are going for a 100% social link, read the first part of a guide on how to maximize your stats efficiently the first few weeks as some characters require a certain stat level before you can advance their story line. And during the game focus on the characters in the school when you can as those are available least. Personally I did this (with a sub optimal start) and only missed out on maxing out one and a half character.

Persona grinding

A Persona with it's stats & skills.

In its essence I like the Persona system. You, as the main character, are the only one with the ability to switch your Persona and you can even capture new Persona's and combine these to form even more and stronger Persona's. These Persona's also have skills which can be used in combat and passed on to the joint Persona by combining them in just the right way. Cool! And yeah, you need to unlock certain Social Link's to make certain Persona's and you need a certain level yourself to make specific Persona's. The way this was executed annoyed me though. You have a very limited number of Persona slots, you have to grind to find the right Persona's to combine with and to get exactly the right skill to a certain Persona you have to figure out the right chain of Persona's to merge. For the most unique Persona's (of which there are dozens) this becomes an extremely long grind in Tartarus. I can see how this would appeal to some people, but I am not one of those. Note: The Persona compendium (in which you can save discovered Persona) is fun to browse and you can restore Persona from there, but on hard difficulty that's pretty expensive.

Conclusion

This is definitely a game I enjoyed, especially since it has a pretty dark / deep story line, even though nearing the end I got very bored with the combat. I doubt I would have finished it if I weren't playing an on emulator as I couldn't be bothered to level up sufficiently to make the final fight much more easy. That fight alone took me a few hours with a lot of reloads. I would highly recommend not doing that at level 70 like I did (or play on normal difficulty as the story is the

most interesting part of the game). I do doubt I will end up playing any other Persona games as I do feel having played this one thoroughly means I've seen most of what the other games offer. All in all, I can recommend this game if you haven't played any of the Persona games or played another one and really enjoyed that one (or just like grindy RPG's in general).