

***Persona 5 Royal: Topics in a Post Great Recession World***

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## **Abstract**

Video games are forms of narrative media that can discuss present day issues. After the great recession of 2008, the world shifted and different issues came to surface. The video game *Persona 5 Royal* is one of many games that address serious social issues that are frequently stigmatized such as exploitation and mental health. This research is an analysis of some of the issues addressed in *Persona 5 Royal* and how they connected to issues brought after the great recession. By using narrative rhetorical analysis, this research will also conclude with how videogames can serve as both a cultural timestamp and a way to acknowledge and start conversations.

## **Introduction**

Narrative media, such as films, are often viewed as an art form that reflects both the beautiful and harsh truths of our reality. Although often used as a means of escapism, they often get the audience to think about a particular subject that society or the individual that may otherwise go unnoticed. Video games, although similar to films, are vastly different from other forms of narrative media. Video games are interactive and playing through them is the driving force through narrative progression. It places the player in the center of the story and gives them a sense of urgency to resolve the conflict. Video games are fictional, but the real social issues they can depict are a new perspective and mirror to the world around us.

After the great recession of 2008, the video game industry took a massive hit that was unseen since the videogame crash of 1983 (Gailloro, 2020). There was a shift and more people were buying less games at once than the industry had seen previously. With numerous companies fighting for the average consumer's dollar, the industry had to evolve in order to stay

competitive with, “In order to maintain this healthy growth momentum, however, the gaming industry needs to continue providing appealing content and innovative experiences to compete for consumers’ entertainment time and share of wallet.”(Gaudiosi, 2009, para 5). Companies such as Nintendo focused on innovation, such as the creation of the Wii system and *Wii Fit Plus* that combined fitness with gaming; something that had never been seen before by an at home system. Sony and Microsoft prioritized aesthetics and the game narratives themselves; which in turn meant large budget games. “Traditional gamers simply will not settle on a mediocre game for \$60. Furthermore, gamers will only have a limited budget for titles that require a significant investment in peripherals.” (Williams, 2008, para 12). This has proven to be a success as video games sales are continuing to grow and myriads of people are on the watch for the latest games and systems; “Recent history demonstrates that the video games industry is largely recession-proof. During recessions, people tighten belts and go out less. Video games offer a good value source of entertainment.” (Barton, 2008, para 1).

One of these game developers is the Japanese company Atlus. They are a company that prides itself on complex narratives, distinct art style, and memorable soundtracks Atlus today is a company known for their hit games such as: *Trauma Center*, *Shin Megami Tensei*, and *Persona*.

The *Persona* series follows a silent protagonist who teams up with a group of fellow high school students to battle with their personas. In this context a persona is a physical manifestation of one's feelings and motives. In the game, they are used in turn-based battles. The game largely focuses on themes of finding one’s true identity, societal concerns, as well as exploration of the human cognition and psyche.

*Persona 5* started development in the great recession of 2008 and would later become their highest selling game in the series after being released in 2016 in Japan and 2017 worldwide. It won two awards at the Japanese 2016 Playstation Awards (Ashcraft, 2016), and Best Role-Playing Game at the 2017 Game Awards (Makuch, 2017). However, these are just a few of the numerous awards that *Persona 5* and *Persona 5 Royal* won or was nominated for. It is known as a game that challenges and reveals the true inhumanity and corruption in present-day human society.

This analysis will be of the expanded title *Persona 5 Royal* that was released in 2019 in Japan and 2020 in North America. Although the narratives are largely the same in comparison to the original game, *Persona 5 Royal* has a greater focus on mental health. While all of the narrative points are relevant today, the more prevalent elements of mental health mirrors society more than the base game already did.

This analysis will dissect how this game is a reflection of reality, and start conversations on real social issues. By looking at characterization, narrative points, and aesthetic elements, we will understand how videogames are more than just a form of entertainment, but commentary on present reality. The analysis section of this research paper will be divided into thirds and will correlate with the beginning, middle, and end of the game. Because this game has an average run time of 130 hours with all optional confidant arcs, it will be impossible to summarize every section of the game.. It is for this reason that I will be focusing on the following segments of the narrative: the palaces, the palace rulers, and the main characters. The focus of this paper is to connect real world issues to that of each chapter of the game. For each section I will summarize what is happening at various points in the game and end it with how it reflects real social issues. The questions I will be addressing include:

1. How does *Persona 5 Royal* reflect modern social issues?
  - a. How is mental health portrayed within the game?
  - b. How does *Persona 5 Royal* demonstrate that videogames are a form of cultural commentary for the present day viewer?
2. How does the videogame immerse the player into the real issues? Does it make the player experience the event more first hand or more as an outside viewer?
3. How can videogames be a cultural artifact and used to help understand this time period in the future to come?
4. What are real world examples that this game mimics from real events?

### **Methodology**

While conducting this research, I have replayed the game in full multiple times and took note of key moments and quotes from the game. During my replay I paid close attention to overarching elements and themes that intertwined throughout the various palaces. Along with that I looked into real events that influenced the narratives of the games; further connecting how this game reflects reality. I have also included a short list of key words and their meanings that are frequently used within the game.

For this analysis I will be using narrative rhetorical analysis. This form of analysis takes into account all elements of the analyzed piece; this includes: the audience, medium, context, and the intended as well as unintentional purpose. (Iversen, 2014). Because the narrative text is in an interactive format, it is imperative that there is a connection made about how the interactive element has a potential effect on the audience. My goal with this analysis is to see how this

format can be used to acknowledge and discuss topics that are often heavily stigmatized in the modern world.

## KEY WORDS

The text uses a lot of words that are unique to the game and not necessarily intuitive without context. Because these terms pop up regularly in both the game and the analysis, having an understanding of jargon is important. I have listed the terms below with a short definition of the words within the context of the text.

- Metaverse: A physical manifestation of the unconscious collective mind. The metaverse is what holds both mementos and the palaces.
- Palace - A manifestation of corrupt thoughts that are a reflection of the perception a person has on the world and people around them. These are the locations the characters fight and venture through someone's mental perception.
- Palace Ruler - The shadow (cognitive) version of their real life counterpart. They are often corrupt individuals whose distorted thoughts and motives cause the manifestation of a palace.
- The Phantom Thieves - The group that consists of the protagonist and the other playable characters in the party.
- Persona - They are the companions used to help fight enemies. They are developed through rebellion and a character finding oneself.
- Shadow - The term shadow is used in two different ways. The first are the names of enemies that wander around the metaverse. The second is in the context of the palace

ruler, the shadow form is a physical manifestation of the true side of their personality that is often suppressed in reality.

- Mementos - Similar to a palace but this is a collection of societal views instead of a single individual.
- Change of Heart - The sudden change of behavior that leads to a confession of wrong doings of the subsequent palace ruler.
- Treasure - The item found at the end of a palace that is usually something the palace ruler values the most (Ex: money). Once this is stolen, it gives the palace ruler a change of heart in the real world as well as destroys a palace.
- Calling Card - The item used to alert a palace ruler that their “treasure” is about to be stolen. This is the item that subsequently causes the treasure to manifest into physical form the following day. The calling card is given out in the real world, not the cognitive one.
- Confidant - A version of social link between the protagonist, supporting, and other playable characters. It is ranked on a level between 1-10, and displays how close the protagonist is with a certain character. The higher the level, the more the player learns about someone's back story as well as gaining boosts in game.

## Summary

*Persona 5 Royal* is a turn-based JRPG (Japanese role playing game) in combination with a life simulator. The game is about a teenage boy who is codenamed Joker; the player picks his real name. Joker is relocated to live in Tokyo for a school year due being falsely accused of assault by the culprit, who is a rich man after defending a woman who was being sexually harassed by a seemingly. Joker is arrested and is on probation; if he is caught committing another



crime he will face jail time. Joker is sent to live in the attic of a cafe named Leblanc. His new guardian is Sojiro Sakura, a cold and strict middle aged coffee shop owner who mentions he was acquainted with Joker's parents.

He keeps Joker on a tight leash and continuously reminds him that he is a delinquent and will face jail time. One night when Joker is in the attic a strange black and red app appears on his phone. No matter how many times he tries to delete it, it would always reappear. When Joker is first brought to Tokyo, he hears endless new stories and discussion regarding the influx of mental shutdowns happening through the city. The mental shutdowns in the game's context are random losses of autonomy, frequently leading to death of oneself or others. It is later revealed that these mental shutdowns were actually a political scheme for a character to guarantee winning the upcoming election.

When Joker first meets Ryuji, they end up in the palace of the school's volleyball coach, Kamoshida. With his persona revealed, he and Ryuji escape and run into a cat-like creature named Morgana also known as Mona within the palaces and metaverse. He trains Joker in combat, putting on a egotistical front that he is fearless to hide his crippling self-doubt and struggles with his identity-issues that will be later revealed in the halfway point of the game. Throughout the year Joker and other students form the group The Phantom Thieves and travel through the metaverse to liberate society from its oppressors. Towards the end they fight the God of Control who had been manipulating them and society from the beginning.

In the final arc they confront their therapist, Dr. Takuto Maruki who replaced the position of The God of Control. His motivation was that he wanted to create a world where trauma and pain no longer exist. The Phantom Thieves come to accept the trauma they experienced and

reject Maruki's new utopian reality. Their confrontation with him leads to the destruction of the metaverse as they continue life in the true reality.

## **Analysis**

Upon my research, I have found three topics that regularly are discussed within the game. Those topics being: person to person exploitation, institutional exploitation, mental health/coping with trauma. Although the game deals with more than just these three topics, these are the most prevalent in the game. In my analysis I split these topics into three different subsections. In my analysis, provide context to what is happening at a given point in the game and connect those to real-life examples. It is important to note that these events will be out of order in the game's chronology. However, this analysis is a focus on the topics and events as sole examples, and not how they lead to the next story arc.

## **Interpersonal Exploitation**

*Persona 5 Royal* is a game that doesn't shy away from serious issues such as suicide, sexual abuse, and exploitation. After Joker is relocated to Shibuya, Tokyo; it isn't long before the player is faced with topics dealing with attempted suicide, as well as both physical and sexual abuse. This is in the form of the exploitation of minors by a figure who is supposed to protect them. What is meant by person to person exploitation is exploitation that is not reinforced by a legal institution. Interpersonal exploitation in this sense is often the actions of a single person. Explain clearly here what you mean by person to person exploitation and distinguish it from institutional exploitation.

Exploitation is one of the first topics that is encountered in the game, as well one that comes up periodically from different points of the game. The topic of exploitation is both from an institutional as well as a personal perspective. The first moment is with the first palace leader, Suguru Kamoshida who is a former olympian and is now a high school volleyball coach. However, he is known to be physically and emotionally abusive to his students. He also sexually abuses his female students and athletes. Although he carries a facade of being righteous, and motivated, he is ultimately a selfish, vain, lustful and cruel person. His horrendous actions are known by the school, but the status he brings to Shujin High protects him from anyone speaking out on his actions.

Even before Joker's first day of school Kamoshida already has disdain for him. He threatens a boy named Mishima to tell the school Joker is a criminal, subsequently ruining his reputation with his fellow students. Failure to do so would lead to him being physically beaten by Kamoshida.

As the player progresses through the first arc, they learn that their newfound friend and school delinquent, Ryuji Sakamoto was beaten by Kamoshida in the past. He broke his leg after Ruiji threw a punch at Kamoshida because he had spread rumors about Ruiji's troubled home life. This resulted in the track team being disbanded and Ryuji's former teammates blaming him for it.

Kamoshida's actions then lead to a girl named Shiho to attempt to commit suicide after being regularly sexually and physically abused by Kamoshida. This abuse further extends to a teen model, and eventual Phantom Thief member, Ann Takamaki who is pressured by Kamoshida for sexual favors or else Shiho; her best friend would lose her starting position on the volleyball team.

A recent report stated that a majority of adolescents who have been sexually abused were the victims of an education professional. According to the organization Stop Educator Sexual Abuse Misconduct and Exploitation (SESAME), around seven percent (about 3.5 million out of total student surveyed) have had physical sexual contact from an adult. The majority of these offenders being teachers and coaches if not family members, (The Children's Center, 2019). This isn't an issue that is exclusive to The United States, rather it is on a global level and is growing exponentially.

Joker's first direct encounter with Kamoshida is when he drives Ann Takamaki to school in the rain; she will later be a vital character to the narrative. He offers Joker a ride as well but he declines. As they are driving away in the rain, a boy named Ryuji Sakamoto chases after them before getting out of breath. The two students walk together in the rain and the place their school once stood is now an ominous castle with a magenta and violet cloud spinning above it. As they navigate through the palace they see shadow versions of male volleyball students are tortured and the female students are exploited for Kamoshida's own sexual pleasure.

The two boys are imprisoned by the shadow version of Kamoshida. Unlike his usual athletic attire this time he is seen donning a golden crown, a red cape covered in pink hearts, and a magenta speedo. His new attire and color palette being a direct connotation of the deadly sin lust.

Even though the palace rulers' power, status, and money all stack against Joker's odds, he isn't one to remain silent. As he comes to this realization, he awakens to his persona Arsene. This is a key element to the protagonist's inner motives of thriving in order to bring justice to an unjust world. With Joker ripping off his literal mask he accepts Arsene as his persona (each of the future members of The Phantom Thieves will do the same with their own personas) he shows

he is ready to remove the label society glued onto him. After he has found his inner strength he is ready to question and confront the corrupt foundations within society. The following day, Ryuji awakens to his persona, Captain Kidd.

A topic that is brought up throughout the arc is how Kamoshida abuses his students whenever they don't perform well at practice or a game. Physical abuse from coaches towards their athletes has been a longstanding issue according to The Human Rights Watch.

*Persona 5 Royal* addresses this issue explicitly. Abusive coaching methods and sexual exploitation of athletes is seen within The United States as well. One recent high-profile case is that of the sexual abuse and grooming of young athletes by former team doctor of the United States women's national gymnastics team Larry Nassar. Nassar is alleged to have abused over 150 girls during his practice. Despite numerous complaints, his reputation and notoriety protected him from consequences up until his arrest in 2016 (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Although his crimes didn't become public knowledge until after the development of *Persona 5*, it further emphasizes that exploitation of athletes and minors is prevalent.

We see first hand what Kamoshida's abuse has led to. Shiho, Ann's best friend, jumps off of the roof of the school in an attempt to commit suicide. Ann is distraught seeing Shiho's limp body laying on the schoolyard. This is a rising issue that has been growing exponentially across the world in the past decade. According to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide amongst adolescents and young adults are continuing to rise as well as the rate of people who are exposed to suicide (*Health, United States, 2016: With chartbook on long-term trends in health*, 2017). The game brushes off Shiho's suicide attempt thus bringing light to another issue in our present-day school systems. When morbid events such a suicide happen (especially at a school aged level),

not much is done to help students cope with a traumatic event (Gould, Lake, Kleinman, Galfalvy, Chowdhury, and Madnick 2018).

In the original game, this idea is reinforced as nothing is done to help Ann or any of the other students cope with the event. However in *Persona 5 Royal*, a therapist will be brought in for the rest of the game to help the students cope with not only this event, but other traumatic moments that will happen as the game progresses. After Ann witnesses Shiho's suicide attempt, she is determined to avenge her friend and shed Kamoshida's crimes to the public. After stealing his heart, he confessed his crimes during a school assembly and turned himself into the police.

Kamoshida's character is not just an entry level villain, but is rather speculated to have been based on a real person who committed similar crimes in Japan. Masato Uchishiba was a two-time olympic gold medalist in 2004 and 2008 in judo. After his Olympic career he started coaching Kyushu University of Nursing and Social Welfare. In 2011, around the same time of *Persona 5's* start of early development, he was arrested for raping an underage and unconscious girl who was a part of the judo club. ESPN reported on January 31, 2013 he was sentenced, "Two-time Olympic judo champion Masato Uchishiba was sentenced Friday to five years in prison for raping a female member of a university judo club in 2011" (*Associated Press*, 2013, para 1).

What later happens to Masato Uchishiba further confirms how those with power are able to escape their actions. Despite being a convicted rapist he went on to coach the men's judo team in Kyrgyzstan in 2018; according to The Japan Times (Kyodo, 2018).

Within The United States, there is a victim blaming mentality where a lot of society questions whether victims of abuse are telling the truth or ask why they didn't say something

sooner. This is because society has a record of putting more blame on the victim rather than on the perpetrator. Making the victim responsible for another person committing crime against them, “Some women try to avoid facing their own vulnerability to rape through victim blaming: they believe that because they are 'good' and do not do the 'bad' things that supposedly 'cause' men to rape, they will not be raped” (Walsh & Foshee, 1998. pg 141).

Although one could pass this off as a rare circumstance, in reality rape and attempted rape is more common than it initially appears to be. Sexual assault and rape are serious problems in today's society; for example, statistics demonstrate that one in five women will become the victim of rape or attempted rape in their lives (*Ending Violence Against Women*, 2022). This form of manipulation goes beyond the victim themselves, as people around them are affected as well to an extent. However, the outside person is often cast aside or scapegoated as a person who is somehow responsible for what has happened (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). In this specific case, Ann is manipulated by Kamoshida into believing she is responsible for his actions towards Shiho. Although Kamoshida was brought to justice, many abusers continue to go free because of the power they hold.

Another moment of person to person exploitation comes from another student and teacher dynamic. This case features exploitation in a way to boost one's reputation and not exploitation through physical and sexual abuse. It also features topics dealing with foster parents and foster children in the form of exploiting them for monetary gain.

The second palace ruler in the game is Ichiryusai Madarame is a famed Japanese artist who is known for being the artist for a piece called *Sayuri*. He is also the foster parent and art mentor of a teenage boy named Yusuke Kitagawa. Yusuke is in denial of his mentor's history of stealing his pupils' artwork, including his own. Madarame in his mind believes that because of

his age and status that it is justified to steal his pupils' work, leave them unpaid, and then throw them out when their work doesn't match the quality he wants.

His palace has the appearance of a golden art museum with large moving paintings of his past and ruined pupils, including Yusuke. This symbolizes how Madarame views his students. They are his creations that are nothing but a form of profit. When Yusuke is dragged into the palace he learns to accept that he is being mistreated and used by the person he considers to be a father. This specifics of mental health will be discussed in a further section.

In comparison to The United States, mentorship is far more common in Japan. It has a major influence on future careers and developing relationships with those in a given industry.(Ono and Kato, 2003). However, with the example of Madarame and Yusuke; it is possible for mentors to exploit their protege's drive.

In the United States during the 2008-2009 recession millions of people lost their jobs “Nearly 9 million American workers lost their jobs during the Great Recession. Unemployment in the U.S. peaked at 10 percent in late 2009,” (Andres, 2018. para 2 ). For students, “Graduating into a recession makes finding an entry-level job tougher, which can delay career advancement. It can also force people to take jobs with smaller companies that don't pay as well or force them to switch fields altogether, taking any job available to pay the bills” (Andres, 2018. para 6). At that point lenders as well as some employers were able to exploit the value of a paying job. Treatment of employees dropped as well as working conditions in some aspects.

Another effect the recession had was on family stress due to economic shock which led to increased rates of child neglect. Studies have shown a connection between neglect and poverty (Drake & Pandey, 1996). When more people fell into poverty due to the recession, family tensions rose and children were subjugated to poor quality environments “There is good reason



to think that the Great Recession—a time of great uncertainty—would be associated with increases in parenting practices associated with the risk for child abuse”(Baily, Litan, and Johnson, 2008. pg 17).

As the game progresses the player later learns that not only is Madrame selling numerous counterfeit *Sayuri* copies and claiming them as the original; but he actually didn't paint them at all. Yusuke's mother had painted it, but Madrame covered her signature with a cloud. Like Kamoshida, Madrame's internally thoughts could be heard from within the game. In his mind, if he lie enough times it would ultimately become the truth.

The third palace in the game deals with exploitation in a different matter; specifically blackmail and coercion. Unlike the previous two examples, the third palace doesn't establish relationships between the exploiter and the one being exploited. The two parties are complete strangers up until the moment of exploitation. Junya Kaneshiro is the third palace leader who is a crime boss who involves minors in drug trafficking. Should they turn him in or refuse to work for him, he threatens to traffick and/or murder their family members.

At this point the whole country is starting to become more aware of The Phantom Thieves. They are even more determined to make social reform happen, but they can't decide who they should target next. As they are meeting up at their hideout they are caught by student council president Makoto Niiijima. She had been coerced into spying on the students by principal Kobaykawa in exchange for a good college admissions letter. Wanting to achieve academic excellence and become a notorious lawyer like her sister, she takes the offer even though it will ruin her relationships with other students throughout the school. She threatens The Phantom Thieves to have their identities revealed unless they change someone's heart. However if they fail she will expose them. This would likely lead to expulsion and jail time.

Without a second option, they listen to her about how she wants to have Kaneshiro's heart changed. She explains that she believes that he's been roping students into his crime circle. Students begin by thinking they can earn a bit of extra money and learn they are actually trafficking drugs and are subsequently blackmailed and extorted for money by Kaneshiro.

Makoto is subdued and kidnapped by Kaneshiro's henchmen; The Phantom Thieves follow the car and end up at Kaneshiro's hideout where he takes a photo of them with drugs, cigarettes, money, and alcohol in the background. He tells them that he will send the photo to Shunjin Academy in three weeks if they don't pay him three million yen (approx \$25,400 USD). If they run their mouths to the police he is going to break them, starting with their families.

The Phantom Thieves navigate through Kaneshiro's palace where people are literally walking ATMs and he is hiding in a UFO bank. The Phantom Thieves and Makoto run into shadow Kaneshiro who mentions that he was going to make Sae his slave and sell her off when he gets bored. Like the other characters, Makoto awakens to her persona, Johanna, in a fit of rage when he threatens to sex traffic her sister. Like the other characters, her persona has intertextuality. Makoto is now a member of the group of outcasts. Once they steal his heart, Kaneshiro turns himself into the police. The students at Shujin were no longer being blackmailed into committing crime and their families became safe from murder and human trafficking.

Within the past century, Japan has seen major economic, political, and social change. With new business ventures and money making opportunities rising; the Yakuza came to rise. The Yakuza are a notorious Japanese crime syndicate that deals primarily with extortion, fraud, and drug/weapon trafficking. However, they have been known have been dealing in human trafficking since the time of World War II, "The Yakuza worked with the Japanese government during World War II to provide Imperial soldiers with "comfort women""(Jones, 2010. para 3).

The power and influence of the Yakuza has grown since then and deals in a variety of white-collar crimes as well,

*Persona 5 Royal* criticizes the lack of effort from both the government and law enforcement to stop the Yakuza. Although they hit their peak in the 80's and 90's, they are still negatively influencing Japanese society. Despite their opportunities diminishing, "The continued existence of illegal markets, and the lack of political will to seriously tackle these groups, makes the survival of these groups a certainty. However, the space within which they can operate has diminished and is diminishing" (Hill, 2004. pg 3). Just because an issue is diminishing, doesn't mean one can just become complacent; thus it is being enabled to grow once again. (Jones, 2010).

Sex-trafficking to repay debts has been a long, on-going issue in Japan. Part of the reason it has been ignored is due to it being labeled as part of the "entertainment industry",

Japan has a vast so-called 'entertainment industry' that includes the largest sex market for women in Asia. It is estimated that the entertainment industry generates gross annual earnings of between four and ten trillion yen. This represents around 2–3% of Japan's GNP. Moreover, it is an 'industry' that is embedded in mainstream Japanese business culture. (Dean, 2008, ).

Sex trafficking isn't always defined by someone being kidnapped and sold off. It also includes people being put into a so-called "consensual" situation to repay a debt in order to avoid gaining more interest from loan sharks or potentially being beaten,

Often these women will be working as forced labor and in conditions of debt bondage. In this context, distinguishing between migration for employment and trafficking for sexual exploitation is a complex task and one that is made particularly difficult because of Japan's liberal visa regime for 'entertainers (Dean, 2008. pg 168).

Because of these nuances of employment and exploitation; it in due course enables this industry to progress and exploit more people. *Persona 5 Royal* discusses the issues of sex trafficking in a more literal sense with Kaneshiro explicitly saying he will sell Makoto's sister off. Once Kaneshiro has a change of heart, he lifts the hold on all of his victims and turns himself in to the authorities.

In relation to to the Great Recession there is evidence showing how financial crises leads to more people being sex trafficked or put in a position to commit crime in order to survive. In 2009 a report stated that there was a spike in modern slavery and sex trafficking, "In its annual "Trafficking in Persons" report, which tracks "modern slavery" like forced labor and the sex trade, the State Department said growing poverty around the world has sparked an increase in both supply and demand for human trafficking" (Charles, 2009. para 2). Within The United States alone, people who become victims of forced labor and trafficking are often put in that position because they promised housing and support for their families. (Bocinski, 2020).

Trafficking and exploitation comes in a myriad of forms. What is often forgotten is that anyone can become a victim at any moment. *Persona 5 Royal* shows this by having the victims be fellow classmates who have previously gone unnoticed by the player.

### **Institutional Corruption**

This section of the analysis will talk about exploitation in an institutional setting. Although it is largely one person committing the exploitation, what is different here is that the settings are used as a tool for exploitation rather than just a setting where it happens. The way the institutions are set up are systematically corrupt and allows one to easily bypass morals and ethics. The examples here largely affect larger groups of people than those of the previous section.

At the midpoint of the game, exploitation falls under a legal umbrella. These being workplace exploitation, and political exploitation. During the fifth arc of the game The Phantom Thieves investigate Kunikazu Okumura, the CEO of Okumura foods who has been accused of overworking his minimum wage workers. The Phantom Thieves initially don't see him as really "evil" in comparison to people like Kaneshiro and Kamoshida. He just seemed like any other money-focused business owner; greedy but not truly wicked. Although the treatment of workers may be defined legal, that legality does not nullify the potential to become exploitative.

When the Phantom Thieves end up investigating his palace, they run into a 3rd year student named Haru, the heiress and daughter of Okumura. She reveals that not only is he mistreating his workers, but is trying to force her into an arranged marriage to help boost his power in the food industry and in the upcoming prime minister election.

Okumura's palace is shown as an outerworld spaceport, which alludes to the height of his ambitions in the business and political world. Within his palace there are countless robots who work themselves until they literally break down that are meant to symbolize his mistreated employees. His boss fight is different from every other palace ruler in the game. Instead of transforming into a monster, he hides behind his robots and forces them to fight on his behalf. This is also the only boss fight to have a time limit of thirty minutes. One of the elements that differs in *Persona 5 Royal* versus the original is that the Phantom Thieves fight a robot version of Haru. She obeys to every whim her father commands, explicitly showing how Okumura sees his daughter as another pawn for his success.

The Phantom Thieves celebrate their victory at an amusement park and watch the confession on their phones. Okumura confessed to the poor working conditions and the lack of sanitation at his businesses. He brings up the scandal with the mental shutdowns, and as he is

questioned on who did it he dies from a mental shutdown himself. Haru was watching with the other Phantom Thieves when this all happened. She was now orphaned and left to clean up her father's mistakes after inheriting the company. The Phantom Thieve's ratings plummet; almost all of Japan sees them as a group of murderers.

Poor working conditions and overworked employees have been a growing problem in the twenty-first century. Within The United States inflation is rising but minimum wage has remained at \$7.25 since it was federally mandated in 2009, (*2022 minimum wage rates by state 2022*). The country is seeing people in the working class having to work more than one job and over forty hours to even make it by with the bare necessities. This is resulting in exhaustion and declining mental health, both at work and outside of work. This also has shown evidence that continuously being overworked can lead to physical health problems, which in turn lead to a higher risk of dying earlier. "In North America and Western Europe a number of studies have demonstrated a significant relationship between high job strain (high production demands and low levels of control and social support) and cardiovascular disease." (Nishiyama & Johnson, 1997). This is seen within the Okumura palace when the robots work themselves to death.

This isn't an issue that is exclusive to the Western world; rather it is a global one that seems to keep growing as countries are fighting for the title of "best economy". In the Japanese language there are two words that mean death by overwork.

*Karoshi*- Death by overwork.

*Karojisatsu*- Suicide from overwork.

For a long time in Japan, the government has done little to intervene until recently when it comes to death from overwork; specifically *karojisatsu*. This is in large part on the volitale definition of suicide. Dr. Steven T. Targum conducted an interview with Dr. Junko Kitanaka in

2012, she is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Sciences at Keio University (Tokyo). When Dr. Targum asked about how suicide was conceptualized in Japan, Dr. Kitakana mentions that suicide was romanticised and normalized because it was seen as an act of personal freedom. The definition has evolved until recently when the rates of suicide skyrocketed in the country within the past decade. Now it suggests, that suicide results from tremendous social pressure and depression (Targum & Kitakana, 2012). One of the major reasons why suicide has become more common was in part due to the recession which left many under more work and economic related stress.

*Persona 5* and *Persona 5 Royal* addresses this need to not overwork yourself in a less explicit way as well. The second most prominent feature of the game is the life balance mechanic within the game. The player can choose if Joker hangs out with a confidant, work, study, infiltrate a palace, or even sleep in. These are only a few examples of the many life activities the player can choose from, but they all offer some sort of stat boost or the benefit of getting to know one of the other characters. It suggests that there needs to be a balance between work and leisurely activities. Within the loading screens, there is a small reminder for the player to take their time. Due to this being such a massive game that takes over 100 hours on a first playthrough, one can easily grow overwhelmed. Ironically, the game reminds the player to go at a pace most comfortable for them, blatantly contradicting the ideologies of Okumura.

The final topic Okumura's chapter deals with is political manipulation; in this case it is the mental shutdowns to subdue or kill off potential competitors. This is something that has been seen in recent years with the Alexei Navalny, Alexander Litvinenko, and Sergei Skripal poisonings. All three of them are and were prominent Russian figures who were critical of the current Russian President, Vladimir Putin. Like the Okumura case it isn't objectively certain who

ordered or conducted the poisoning (mental shutdowns in *Persona 5*'s case). However, it is heavily suggested that whoever did it saw these individuals as a threat to their power; likely President Putin in this case. This topic will be explored further in Shido's Palace.

The sixth palace is an example of exploitation in an unjust justice system. Similar to Okumura, the intention wasn't to be harmful but was a consequence of being blinded by one's own ambitions.

The Phantom Thieves are now officially seen as wanted criminals after the traumatic death of Okumura. A majority of society wants them locked away and the investigators are getting closer to revealing the identities of The Phantom Thieves. An investigation takes place at Shujin Academy, questioning all of the students who have had a negative interaction with Kamoshida. With the risk of getting caught and negative feedback they have received online, The Phantom Thieves agree to stop being Phantom Thieves and go back to a normal life.

This is short-lived however. Goro Akechi is a high school age detective who has been on the hunt to find the identities of The Phantom Thieves since the beginning of the game, and he has photographic proof they are The Phantom Thieves. With his title as Detective Prince and his celebrity status, he says he will reveal their identities unless they make an agreement with him. In exchange for destroying the evidence The Phantom Thieves are going to prove they didn't murder Okumura. This means another infiltration with the assistance of Akechi himself. However, after the infiltration they must agree to permanently disband as The Phantom Thieves.

Akechi states that their next target will be Sae Nijijima, the prosecutor he's been working with and Makoto's older sister. He mentions that after her father was killed justice became a meaningless concept to her. She became obsessed with success and would rig criminal trials to



be in her favor. Her warped desires lead to the formation of her palace; a luxurious casino where the house always wins.

The Phantom Thieves enter her palace and are forced to gamble, where the odds are always against them. Unlike the other new recruits Akechi already has a persona: Robin Hood. This means that he had already awakened to his persona before he joined The Phantom Thieves.

They run into shadow Nijima for the final time and battle her with a gambling mechanic that only appears at this part of the game. Unsurprisingly, they have to prove she is cheating before they have a fair fight and inevitably defeat her. Unlike all of the previous palaces, this one doesn't collapse. Futaba hacks into a police call and overhears that the police are in position to arrest all of The Phantom Thieves. This is due to a traitor in the group that sold out their information and allowed the police to infiltrate the palace.

Joker's friends all escape back to the real world. Where *Persona 5 Royal* differentiates from the original game is Joker's run in with Kasumi Yoshizawa. The gymnastic honors student is introduced at the beginning of the game. She helps Joker out before making her escape, but as he jumps out the window he is surrounded by armed police and riot guards. Joker is arrested within Sae's palace and is taken into interrogation where he is being violently beaten and drugged by police guards. Sae's interrogation time comes to an end, Joker tells her to show his phone to whomever enters the room after her. She leaves and runs into Akechi who is about to enter the interrogation room, she shows him the phone which ends up causing a distortion to the facility. Joker and The Phantom Thieves' phones being the tools that allowed them to enter palaces in the first place. With the distortion in place, the real Joker escapes and leaves an identical copy of himself. Akechi explains his motives before shooting the fake joker in the head and framing it as a suicide. Akechi is a traitor.

Within a lot of justice systems, they are sworn to abide by the law. At least that is what they claim. Some people would argue that the role of a lawyer is to lie in the benefit of their client. In the book *Our Corrupt Legal System* which dissects injustices within the justice system, “In fact, the bad name [of lawyers] comes mainly from trial lawyers, 40% of the total. The other 60% may be really nice people who would never tell a lie. Common law judges are former trial lawyers untrained as judges”(Whitton, 2009. pg 154).

However, the question is why is there so much dishonesty in a system that is supposed to be based on honesty? Part of the reason potentially has to do with the way lawyers are paid (Elsesser, 2018). This is not fixed, as every country, state, and law office has their own rules when it comes to pay. Some lawyers are paid regardless of the client winning or losing and charged based on the hour they spend building a case. Others are paid only if the client wins and usually they will take a percentage of the settlement.

In Sae’s case, it is less about money and motive and more correlated with pressure she puts on herself. It is evident that she is obsessed with winning and places almost all of her self value on success. Part of her exemplified drive for success could be due in part to the gender bias that is seen in a lot of male dominated careers. In an article written by Forbes, it was discovered that many female lawyers have faced bias when it comes to pay, respect in the courtroom, or being mistaken for a janitor or a receptionist,

With this gender bias, it forces women to have to fight and work even harder to attain the same value and respect men in the field get. Although Sae’s loss of meaning in the justice system is due to her father’s death, this chapter alludes to biases people have against her. This can be seen with some of the interaction between her and other minor characters who discredit her work throughout various points of the game.

Another issue Sae's palace addresses is police brutality when it comes to the interrogation with Joker. At this point The Phantom Thieves are considered to be domestic terrorists and some may argue that enhanced and violent interrogations techniques are justified. However, one has to take into account that Joker is a minor being beaten and drugged by an adult. This is an evident form of the exploitative nature within court and police settings.

Looking from a video game standpoint one might think that this interrogation scene is an exaggeration for dramatic effect in the narrative. Although, there may be some truth to this scene. An article written by The BBC discussed why innocent people in Japan confess to crimes they didn't do. It is suggested that it may be in part due to the integration,

Without any sort of security for the interrogator this potentially leads to abuse tactics being enacted to get a confession. Shortly after the events in the sixth palace, Joker is now laying low to not risk being caught alive by Akechi or one of the police officers. With the election coming up a charismatic and prominent figure gains popularity amongst the people, Masayoshi Shido. Joker recognizes him as the man who framed him for assault.

Shido is a prime example of a corrupt and exploitative politician. What makes him so dangerous is that his corruption is not known in the public. Actually, he is rather loved and is predicted to be the winner of the election. Like many politicians he is very critical about his country's weaknesses and promises to change the country for the better.

The Phantom Thieves are suspicious of his real motives and suspect that he might be the individual behind the shutdowns. One of their reasons for thinking this is Okumura's death, the palace leader who was planning on running for political office.

After some investigation they discover he has a palace in the form of a colossal and ornate cruise ship. His ship is sailing on the waters that are literally drawing Japan. His palace is

filled with rich elites loitering on his ship, listening to his speeches on loop, and looking at the propagandic campaign posters. Additionally, there is a political board where the vote is always unanimous for Masayoshi Shido.

While in Shido's palace the player learns that he is the one who ordered all of the mental shutdowns to happen. He has his critics and opponents assassinated. He is also some who assaulted a prostitute who ended up giving birth to his son before she committed suicide. When Shido reunited with his illegitimate son, he forced him to obey his every command if he wanted to be accepted as his son. His son is the one who physically carried out the murders and the mental shutdowns: former Phantom Thief, Goro Akechi.

After discovering all of this The Phantom Thieves agree that he deserves to pay for his crimes. In order for them to fight shadow Shido they need to get four letters of recommendation from the five VIPs to be allowed access to the legislative chamber.

With all five letters obtained they run into Akechi once again who is only in the palace because of his suspicions Joker may have survived. He reveals he is Shido's son, the black mask assassin, and the traitor of both Shido and The Phantom Thieves. In a fit of rage of never being accepted by anyone who doesn't want to use him he summons a new persona: Loki. In the second phase of the battle he transforms into his black mask assassin costume and reveals Loki's true form: psychotic and deranged. After losing, a cognitive version of himself shows up. This version is completely submissive to Shido and is here to end things. As a way to amend for his crimes, Akechi saves The Phantom Thieves and sacrifices himself to shadow Akechi (father's cognition of Akechi), subsequently killing him in real life as well.

After witnessing his death, The Phantom Thieves are sympathetic toward Akechi and are even more determined to make Shido pay. They enter the legislative chamber and secure a route to the treasure.

Shido has a change of heart and confesses all of his crimes on national TV. The Phantom Thieves' approval rating suddenly rockets to 93%, the highest it has ever been at any point of the game. Just as they are all ready to celebrate their victory, they notice society has suddenly grown apathetic and passive.

Shido is arguably considered to be the most corrupt villain in the game. Several of his traits that mimic a lot of those that are seen in recent politicians. He is charismatic, scandalous, rich, and has selfish intentions. Shido's sexual assault cases that have gone unnoticed and unpunished mirrors what we are seeing in a lot of prominent figures running for office. The current and most recent presidents of The United States, President Joe Biden and Donald Trump, were both criticized for allegations of sexual assault. These criticisms had little effect on their run for President. Another situation within The United States is back in 2017 when former senator of Minnesota, Al Franken, was accused of numerous charges of sexual harassment from years prior. Although he willingly resigned, he refused to take responsibility for his actions claiming that he remembers some accounts differently from his accusers and other counts were fictitious stories (Larsen, 2018). As he stepped down he criticized the irony and hypocrisy of politicians in The United States. He said he resigned, "While a man [Donald Trump] who has bragged on tape of his history of sexual assault sits in the Oval Office and a man [Roy Moore] who repeatedly preyed on young girls campaigns for the Senate with the full support of his party."

Similar to Shido, Roy Moore's allegations were deflected and the blame was shifted onto someone else, "In his first campaign event after allegations broke, Moore denied having met the

women accusing him and suggested, nonsensically, that the whole episode was a conspiracy provoked by his aggressive prosecution of drug dealers some decades earlier” (Larsen, 2018. pg 4). This, like all issues reflected throughout the game, is not exclusive to one specific place; rather it is a criticism on global issues. In Japan, women constitute only 10% of Lower House seats, placing it 164th out of 193 countries in Inter-Parliamentary Union's ranking of women's representation in national assemblies (2019). This ends up revealing a form of gender inequality that is in Japan when it comes to holding political office.

Similarly to The United States, Japan has reported recent allegations of sexual assault from those holding political office,

The numerous sexual harassment cases that have emerged in recent years in Japan in the world of politics, and its closely-related industry, the media, provide glimpses into the routine misogyny that women in those fields are confronted with. It is this world of the media, the bureaucracy and politics where the #MeToo movement in Japan found its legs (Dalton, 2019. pg 5)

The movement gained speed in Japan almost immediately after a journalist accused the highest ranked individual in the Ministry of Finance of sexual harassment.

Like with Shido and his VIPs, politicians don't typically act alone. A lot of these agreements and partnerships come from trading favors and information. With the two or more parties having a mutually beneficial partnership it enables one another to get away with corrupt tactics and even offer some form of protection for the individual conducting said corrupt action. Although this is not the law for all countries in The United States it is illegal to trade power for benefits,

With these nuances within the law it allows for corrupt bribery among people of power. With Shido and his VIPs they all provided something to his benefit in exchange for silencing their competitor.

Another aspect of Shido that arguably is the most reflection of most politicians is his selfish motivation for running for Prime Minister. Shido is a character who doesn't care about resolving issues within his country; his primary motive is to not only be in power but to become the strongest person in the entire country.

### **Mental Health and Coping with Trauma**

Mental health is a topic that is at the core of the video game. All of The Phantom Thieves and the various confidants encountered through the game discuss mental health and trauma. The player gets to watch these characters cope with trauma. However, because of the number of optional confidants and individual examples this section will only focus on mental health in regard to the palaces that have not yet been discussed. These three palaces all being unavoidable except for the new optional final dungeon that is exclusive to the *Persona 5 Royal* edition.

During the fourth palace, after successfully taking down three corrupt individuals, their approval rating is steadily growing. That is until a terrorist organization called Mejdred contacts them to investigate an issue or have their audio recording leaked to the entire country.

Soon, they receive a text from an anonymous source with the codename "Alibaba", saying that their target is a girl in her early teens named Futaba Sakura. It is quickly revealed that Alibaba is actually Futaba herself. To their surprise, they learn that this is actually Sojiro's adopted daughter. In order to get more information, they sneak into Sojiro's house. Due to her antisocial behavior she panics and refuses to give them the information needed. As they begin to question her on what her home is like she replies that it is like being dead inside and that she is unable to get out. She will die in that home, her tomb.

Futaba is a young girl who witnessed her mother's suicide when she jumped into ongoing traffic. Her mother, Wakaba, was a renowned researcher on the metaverse and when she died the

people around her blamed young Futaba as the reason Wakaba killed herself. After being scrutinized and blamed she started to believe that she did kill her mother. It led to her becoming antisocial with extreme anxiety and suicidal thoughts. She stayed locked in her messy room almost 24/7, practicing her hacking and computer skills. The only other person she ever communicates with is the one adult she trusts, Wakaba's friend and her now adoptive father, Sojiro.

When the Phantom Thieves infiltrated her palace it was literally a tomb, specifically an Egyptian pyramid. Unlike the other rulers Futaba's palace was not created out of corruption but rather an intense grief and will to die. The palace has several puzzles that depict how Futaba remembers the events leading to her mother's death. However, the Phantom Thieves learn that this was not a suicide, but rather a staged murder.

Wakaba had made some discoveries about the metaverse that some individuals considered to be a threat. In order to silence her they caused her to have a mental shutdown and made it appear to be a public suicide, thus destroying Futaba's mental health as a young child.

The real Futaba infiltrated her own palace after receiving a calling card and came face to face with Shadow Futaba, who is the personification of her internal thoughts as well as shadowy figures of adults. The shadow adults blame her once again for killing her mom. It sends Futaba in a panic before running into The Phantom Thieves who are battling a giant sphinx with Wakaba's head. Sphinx Wakaba insults Futaba and claims she is the reason for her suicide as well as saying she wished she was never born.

While the Phantom Thieves continue to struggle against Wakaba, Shadow Futaba reappears to Futaba and helps her piece together that this was not a suicide and that she is not



responsible. When Futaba accepts that she has been lying to herself, she awakens to her persona, Necronomicon, and helps the Phantom Thieves to beat Shadow Wakaba.

Childhood Trauma is a major factor for a lot of teens and adults who experience depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, “Epidemiological studies have provided strong evidence that adverse experience during childhood, such as abuse, neglect or loss, is associated with dramatic increases in the risk of developing depression.” (Edwards, Holden, Felitti, and Anda, 2003). One of the potential outcomes of this is suicide.

As of the time *Persona 5* was in development, Japan was the leading country in the OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) in teen suicides for both males and females. Although a lot of this is due to stress at school and being overworked in school and/or work; trauma is something that cannot be discounted. Parental suicide or murder can be a significant source of trauma.

When looking at the tragic death of a parent the issue is far more of a complex issue rather than a singular one. One of the groups most vulnerable and affected by this tragic death is the deceased’s children. The effect on the children can extend further than a period of grief and behavioral outlash. Children dealing with longer periods of grief may also experience stronger feelings of stigmatization and social isolation, as well as increased feelings of guilt and blame. Which can result in disruptions to family communication (Beautrais 2004). This is reflected in Futaba’s situation as she does put the blame on herself. As frequently seen in the game, she self-isolates and suffers from panic attacks, anxiety, and depression. Even after she comes to terms with the truth, she still continues to struggle in social situations and grows extremely anxious around new people. Her optional character arc and confidant has her working on her mental health and encouraging her to put herself in social situations.

Another potential effect a parent's suicide has on a child is an increased risk of committing suicide later in life (Ratnarajah & Schofield, 2007). Although Futaba doesn't explicitly say she is going to commit suicide she shows warning signs. Those signs are increased sleep, lack of eating, and continuously talking about how she is going to die. It is possibly suggested that this chapter of the game is to shed light on teen suicide and what are the warning signs everyone should be aware of.

Mental illness in teens has grown exponentially in comparison to before the Great Recession. A 2005 study on teens with mental illness suggested the rate of occurrence to be one in five teens (Draucker, 2005). With more recent studies there is evidence that nearly half of all teens have or are currently experiencing some form of mental illness, "Many adolescents experience positive mental health, but an estimated 49.5 percent of adolescents has had a mental health disorder at some point in their lives." (*Mental health for adolescents: HHS Office of Population Affairs* 2021, para 1).

Futaba's palace is an example of mental illnesses stemming from a traumatic event. When the palace is finished, she accepts that she has been lying to herself and that she is not responsible for her mother's death. She comes to accept this and has a change of heart and her anxiety and depression continue to be something she deals with for the rest of the game. This stands as an example that mental illness is something that takes time to recover from. Her palace also shows that mental illness is deeper than just being sad.

The topic of mental health is also apparent in the original final palace. The difference here is that instead of showing how mental illness can affect people it takes a personified approach to depression and anxiety. This arc shows how depression and anxiety can be

controlling and feel like it robs the individual of their autonomy. In this palace it takes place a literal false God of Control named Yaldabaoth.

Mementos is the original, final, and largest, palace. The location is unlocked early in the game and after each palace the player can go deeper into Mementos. It holds the desires of individuals of society whose minds are not warped enough to form a palace of their own. It is the incarnation of the collective unconscious. After defeating Shido, The Phantom Thieves return to search the depths of Mementos after Joker hears, “man's world is corrupt and is impossible to fix”.

As they search the depths of Mementos they discover the Prison of Regression. Every person, including those who have had their hearts changed (Kamoshida, Kaneshiro, Shido, etc.) are all bound and imprisoned against their free will. The Phantom Thieves are gravely disturbed and travel even deeper until they find a giant golden chalice named The Holy Grail.

Like Kamoshida’s medal, this is a treasure. More specifically, it is the treasure of society. The Holy Grail is worshiped as a god who is meant to grant societies’ wishes, but in truth he just wants to be in total control of everyone. The Phantom Thieves engage in a fight and inevitably lose. The Holy Grail merges reality with the metaverse, and creates a new reality. Creating a world where the shadows roam and wreak havoc and The Phantom Thieves cease to have ever existed.

After being defeated the Phantom Thieves are back in Shibuya Tokyo and see the convergence is already beginning. Their bodies turn to ash and they metaphorically die one by one while society ignores them as they cease to have ever existed in this world.

Joker is taken back to a place called The Velvet Room, where Joker visits periodically throughout the game. The being in charge of this space is known as Igor and is the one who gave

Joker the ability to travel in and out of the metaverse. Igor orders Joker's execution for failing to reform society. Joker is then saved by Igor's assistant, Lavenza. She says that this man is not the real Igor and that he is actually a false god and the embodiment of The Holy Grail. She reveals that he made a bet with Igor. This bet is between Akechi destroying and recreating the world or Joker standing against ruin with a reformed society. The Holy Grail however falsely decided that people are apathetic and hopeless; and locked away the real Igor.

They fight The Holy Grail again who eventually transforms into Yaldabaoth; his final, true form. All of the palaces are based on the deadly sins and Yaldabaoth unleashed power based off of those sins as proof that man's free will is destructive. The Phantom Thieves are being brutalized as onlookers below spectate the fight. All of the players' maxed out confidants have individual cutscenes that encourage The Phantom Thieves to keep going and to not give up. As society watches their support shifts from Yaldabaoth to The Phantom Thieves and their approval rating hits 100%. Joker then awakens his true persona, the fallen angel Satanael. Satanael shoots Yaldabaoth who then admits that society is not made of fools and that they deserve free will.

Autonomy in this case is not being looked at with its literal definition. Rather, it is being looked at as how depression and anxiety can feel debilitating. This debilitating aspect of depression is one that often goes disregarded (Kanter, Busch, Weeks, Landes, 2008). Because the feeling of depression often goes disregarded it serves as a potential reason why we are seeing more mental illnesses in teens and young adults, "The prevalence of depression in adolescents and young adults has increased in recent years. In the context of little change in mental health treatments, trends in prevalence translate into a growing number of young people with untreated depression," (Mojtabai, Olfson, and Han, 2016. para 4).

Yaldabaoth can be seen as a personification of depression and anxiety. He appears to be the undefeatable being with overwhelming amounts of power. When The Phantom Thieves cease to exist, it can be seen as the feeling of being alone and that no one cares. In that scene no one acknowledges that this group of teens are dying in front of them. This also suggests how greater society often disregards and ignores mental illnesses in teens. Often leaving young individuals feeling rejected by society which then potentially leads to never finding an outlet to help recover from mental health illness.

Yaldabaoth wants to seize control. When The Phantom Thieves first fight him as The Holy Grail the people imprisoned behind him wail and beg The Phantom Thieves to stop harming the Grail. This is a literal version of depression feeling like a jail cell. As mentioned earlier, each of the confidants have their own storyline and form of mental illness. Almost all of them require The Phantom Thieves to go into Mementos during that respective story arcs. This further emphasizes connection with Mementos and mental illness. Another aspect that is implied through mementos is how a large percent of people have suffered or are continuing to suffer from mental illness. However, it goes unnoticed in reality because depression and anxiety can't typically be seen. This is the metaphoric mask that The Phantom Thieves both literally and figuratively rip off throughout the game.

In *Persona 5 Royal*, the game takes another look at mental health in the new final palace that can not be seen in the original game. This more specifically focuses on coping with trauma rather than pretending it never existed. This is introduced in Maruki's palace, known as The Center of Melancholy.

The topic of mental health is addressed from the very beginning of the game, specifically during Shiho's suicide attempt. Where *Persona 5 Royal* differs from the original game is the

implementation of the school counselor and therapist, Dr. Takuto Maruki. After the events of Kamoshida's palace he meets with each of The Phantom Thieves (unknowing of their secret identities outside of school). Throughout the year he discusses and helps the teenagers through the traumatic events they have experienced. However, he is later revealed to be the final villain who happens to have flawed but positive intentions. Unlike every previous palace ruler, he is not shown as shadow Maruki, but the real Maruki.

After New Year's Joker notices that the world seems off but no one else seems to take notice. One of the first things he notices is that Futaba's mother, Wakaba, is alive and Futaba no longer suffers from social anxiety. Joker isn't quite sure why everything seems wrong until Akechi walks into Leblanc on January 2nd; despite watching him die. Akechi says they need to talk privately and they end up speaking at the laundromat about how he was suddenly released from jail and acquitted from all his charges. Joker is confused by this because last he remembered, Akechi was dead. Joker receives a phone call from Kasumi saying to meet her in Odaiba, where the three of them infiltrate what looks like a palace in the form of an opalescent research center (briefly visited a bit earlier in the game). As they investigate the palace they learn that this is actually Maruki's palace.

Maruki mentions that he turned everyone's (every 'innocent' person) desire into reality. Hence the reason Wakaba is alive and Morgana is human. He also reveals that the real Kasumi is dead and the Kasumi that Joker has grown to know is actually her twin sister Sumire Yoshizawa. Maruki says that he made Sumire subconsciously believe that she was actually Kasumi as a way to help cope after witnessing her sister get hit by a car, an incident that she feels responsible for.

Throughout the week, Joker spends time with his friends and sees they are all living a life free from pain, angst, and cruelty. This was able to happen because when The Phantom Thieves

reclaimed the people's free will, they subconsciously gave that power to Maruki. This was able to happen because he was helping them through their traumatic events over the past year and in the process they confessed their deepest desires.

Throughout the palace The Phantom Thieves learn about Maruki's backstory. He was about to marry his fiance until her parents were murdered in a home robbery. After the brutal murder of her parents she suffered from severe PTSD that left her catatonic. Maruki was devastated to witness the pain his fiance was going through and wished he could save her. Maruki mysteriously got power from an unknown entity that rewrote his fiance's reality. This was at the cost that she forgot about their relationship, and that she even knew Maruki prior to that day. Instead of burdening her with explanation and trying to rekindle their relationship, he left her to live her most ideal life. An ideal reality without him that still continued to bring Maruki tremendous pain. Shortly after losing his fiance, all of his research was inhibited by Shido; causing him to no longer have a research lab built in Odaiba.

After reaching the treasure, Maruki shows up at Leblanc to meet up with Joker and Morgana. Akechi has disappeared, but Maruki can grant them a fresh start. However, if Joker doesn't accept Maruki's reality as the true one, he is unsure where his fate lies. They go to confront Maruki in a final fight. Throughout various points of the battle, depending who is currently in the player's party he tries to pressure different characters into keeping this reality or losing a parent, friend etc. The Phantom Thieves have already come to accept the horrible thing that has happened, and living this way isn't living with free will. During the final phase As the metaverse slowly starts to disappear Maruki vents and screams how he gave up everything (his fiancee, and research) to help people.

Maruki's reality disappears and time continues as if his reality never existed in the first place. Akechi is missing and Joker is sent to a juvenile detention center for the events prior and breaking probation. While detained all of the maxed out confidants will protest to release Joker. He meets up with his friends and they all decide to go their separate ways and pursue their own life goals. Morgana the cat ultimately decided to stay with Joker as he moves back home.

The new final palace shows that bad life events are often unavoidable and that life events do not take into account the morality in each individual. The reality that Maruki created is nothing more than an unattainable, ideal fantasy. His world lacks individual autonomy, similar to that of Yaldboth's except Maruki's is built on a foundation of ideal fantasy. This segment of the game has The Phantom Thieves learn to accept that this reality can never be true and that they need to learn how to cope with their traumatic life events rather than ignoring them all together.

Trauma often goes unspoken about, partially because it can be difficult to acknowledge that trauma has happened as well as find a way to talk about it. (Herman, 2022). With traumatic events one can understand the potential of someone wanting to act as if that even had never happened. This is one of the myriads of trauma reactions, however some studies suggest that in the long term it is counterintuitive to coping (Thompson, 2011). This is one of the main components of Maruki's palace. This can also be seen in Maruki after losing his fiance and his research, he never took the chance to cope with his own trauma. Although his intentions were good in that he didn't want people to suffer, it ultimately led him to not take the time to process his trauma. This is likely the reason why he felt so threatened when Joker rejected his new reality.

The player gets to experience these traumatic events with the characters themselves and see how it affects them, potentially developing sympathy and wishing these events had never



happened. The new final palace shows that trauma can not go ignored and needs to be worked through. However the game doesn't show this in a manner that makes coping look quick and instant, rather that it can take a long time and it's okay if it does. What Maruki failed to notice is that he didn't have to create this false reality to help the students, he actually had been helping them from the beginning through the counseling session. In that meantime, he never helped himself.

*Persona 5 Royal* takes a dynamic and complex look at the topic of mental health. It acknowledges that it is still stigmatized in present society and that trauma and mental health illness is individual to each person. By going through the different confidant stories and palaces it shows how it can affect people from all walks of life. *Persona 5 Royal* breaks the narrative of a singularity defined understanding of mental health and trauma.

## **Discussion**

Upon replaying the game, I found that the narrative of the game had an overarching theme of personal freedom. The game deals a lot with one finding themselves and breaking the chains that their oppressors hold. The literal mask worn by The Phantom Thieves is both a literal and figurative allegory of suppressing one's true feelings and falling complacent within society.

Although each of the palace rulers share one of the three common themes; institutional corruption, interpersonal exploitation, and mental health, they all did it in different ways. This shows that these topics don't have a single example on how they can resurface.

In comparison to the original game, I found a greater appreciation that Maruki's palace and character added to the game. Unlike all of the other palace rulers, he was the only one to have good intentions for society. However good his intentions may have been, they still have a negative effect on society. In fact it robs people of their freedom just as Yaldabaoth wanted to do

in the previous palace. His palace had a major focus on the importance of working on one's mental health and finding a way to cope with trauma. His palace also addresses that there are unhealthy ways to cope and it is very apparent throughout his character arc.

My biggest criticisms of the game is the portrayal of suicide. This criticism isn't about how Ann worked through Shiho's suicide attempt, but rather how the narrative framed Shiho as the girl who was known for having been sexually assaulted and attempted suicide. Although Shiho is a very minor character, she is mentioned several times throughout the story, especially as Ann's confidant. Because she is mentioned throughout the game, I can see how her character only being known for her trauma can be a form of problematic representation.

There is more to a person than their trauma and showing this single element in a character can be an issue. Although the game does a terrific job of representing the other characters working through their trauma, Shiho is the only one who actively attempts suicide (apart from Shido who did it to not get caught). Because she is the only character who attempts suicide and is only known by that incident, it can potentially paint a narrative that people who have attempted or successfully committed suicide are little more than their trauma, which is a narrative I find to be both harmful and dangerous.

Despite my criticism of Shiho, overall I find the game to be revolutionary in the way it handles sensitive topics. Although some could have been handled a little better the game helps to start conversations and acknowledges that what a person is going through is valid and doesn't make them less of a person.

Although someone could play this game just for enjoyment's sake, the discussions on modern social issues are virtually impossible to ignore. Because of this, it can help the player to

see and understand some of the injustices within the real world that they might have not considered yet.

## **Conclusion**

*Persona 5 Royal* is an interactive narrative that discusses some of the most stigmatized topics in society. The importance of this is that it can serve as an outlet to start conversation about some of the most prevalent issues that affect the world post the Great Recession. Although the player may not or ever directly experience the same events as the character in the game, it serves as a lens through which they can see it from another perspective.

Not only does this game start conversations, it also acknowledges that these topics are real and that a person's experiences are valid. With videogames being a popular form of escapism, this game merges fiction with reality. Thus, potential being a way for someone to have acceptance and an acknowledgement of their experiences.

Video games are growing into more than just a form of entertainment. They are cultural artifacts developed in a given time. In the future it can serve as a way to to get an understanding of what life was like. Because of social issues that can arise within the narrative, they are another example of how narrative can be an effective form of communication.

Researching and analyzing *Persona 5 Royal* is an example of a videogame being a cultural timestamp. By looking at the overarching issues of interpersonal exploitation, institutional corruption, and mental health; one can have an understanding how this form of storytelling can start conversations on topics that are frequently labeled as taboo. Videogames are a piece of media that can help one get a better understanding of the world we live in.

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