Dylan Fisk

Nefeli Forni Zervoudaki

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Persona 5 Royal: Challenging a "So Happy World"

Within seemingly every proposed utopia in fiction, there always linger doubts of its true perfection. The "happy world" presented in the final story arc of the video game *Persona 5 Royal* is no exception, raising many doubts and questions from both the characters inhabiting the world and the players contemplating it. In this paper, I'd like to analyze the ways in which questions of a utopia's legitimacy, morality, and leadership are challenged by the game itself while also personally reflecting on these questions as a player.

Persona 5 Royal is a Japanese Role-Playing Game (JRPG) in which the player takes on the life of a high school student given divine-like powers to fight social sin through enacting cognitive "changes of heart" on those participating in said sin. The game revolves around themes of challenging authority and rebelling against corrupt social systems. The final arc, however, flips this expectation of a 'sin and punishment' storyline completely. Instead of a criminal taking part in a corrupt system, the proposed 'villain' is a genuine and kind-hearted man who the protagonist has formed a bond with throughout the entire game: Dr. Takuto Maruki. And the crime he is charged with? Using the divine powers he was given to create a world in which suffering is no more, wishes are granted, and happiness is perpetual, personally tailored, and free for every individual. For all intents and purposes, this "happy world" functions exactly as it sets out to within the game without the strings that other proposed utopias attach. So why is the protagonist instantly skeptical? Why is a dead man who's been resurrected by Maruki's

wish-granting unwilling to settle for his salvation? Why does the player feel an unending uneasiness about the joyous world the characters have suddenly woken up in? What seems like a perfectly "happy world" thus becomes a subject of debate.

The game itself presents both sides of this argument directly to the player, with the two sides constantly in conflict as the story unravels. The argument for this "happy world" is represented by its in-game creator, the aforementioned Dr. Maruki. Maruki spends the majority of this arc attempting to convince the protagonist that his world is better for everyone, as it personally grants every individual's wishes without requiring them to make sacrifices or work to make those wishes happen. In his speech to the protagonist on February 2nd, the night before the protagonist is required to make his final decision regarding the matter, Maruki proposes his world as one in which "you'll never have to suffer the pain of loss, or the pain from having people and things stolen away from you!" and seals his argument with a promise that "every person alive will be happy in the world I create…" (Maruki). Besides through Maruki's words, this argument is expressed one last time through the song that plays in-game during the final physical fight against Maruki, titled "Throw Away Your Mask". The only way to get to the fight scene this song plays in is to reject Maruki's reality, so this song acts as Maruki's desperate final plea to the protagonist and his team, the Phantom Thieves, for conflict to end and his "happy world" to be accepted. Some of the lyrics are as follows:

> Don't sleep through / dreams that can come true / No more tears shall drop from your cheeks anymore / you won't need to / strive for greatness / Believe in me / That you don't need to suffer from / Anything

> You don't need to make a wrong turn / Just requires guidance from above / we don't need to have this conflict / cause I can take you / to the place of delight / give peace / of mind / to the whole world (1:00–58)

These lyrics make many emotional appeals for the legitimacy of Maruki's utopia. The song focuses on idealistic concepts of sorrow ceasing and putting an end to hard work's necessity in accomplishing "greatness." It uses language like "dreams", "delight", and "peace of mind" to communicate a "too good to be true" type of happiness which he actually is promising to deliver on. The song also presents the conditions on which these utopian qualities are to be gained through the language "believe in me" and "guidance from above". These phrases both communicate divine intervention: Maruki sees himself as the god of his new world, and offers endless happiness to those who will trust in him. Further, the use of the personal pronouns "I" and "me" show a sense of authority and power over the world he's created: it's Maruki himself who should be believed in and who is capable of taking the protagonist to a place of joy and peace. There is also a personal element to the lyrics of "Throw Away Your Mask" that uses language specific to the Phantom Thieves in order to further convince them of his utopia's legitimacy. The bridge is as follows:

> You can throw your mask away / No more pretending / you've been tied down for the longest of the time / be free / you deserve better / you should forever be free (2:34–3:02)

The bridge brings in this concept of a mask and this idea of being forced to pretend. This is a direct reference to the Phantom Thieves symbolic attire and the game's overarching message. In *Persona 5 Royal*, the Phantom Thieves all wear masks with their costumes when within a person's cognitive world (the world in which they change a person's heart) in order to conceal their identities yet also to further envelop the persona they must play if they are to fight back

against society. The mask is thus representative of the burden they have to shoulder by being Phantom Thieves and enacting vigilante justice. The lyrics of the bridge are therefore a direct plea to the Phantom Thieves to end their masquerading as vigilante heroes and let Maruki take care of the evil they sought to end. There's also this idea of what the Phantom Thieves "deserve" or how they "should be." This type of language makes an emotional appeal that is only justified through Maruki's authority. He arbitrarily creates this conception of the freedom which the Phantom Thieves "deserve" as a way of getting them to buy into his "happy" but false reality. From Maruki's own arguments to the lyrics of the song that plays over his boss battle, the game makes a fairly convincing case for the legitimacy of this "happy world" utopia, using a primarily emotional argument to convince both the protagonist and the player that Maruki's world is not just reasonable, but necessary for the eradication of evil and the happiness of all.

The in-game argument against this "happy world" is represented by a character who would not even be alive if not for Maruki's world: Goro Akechi. Akechi, like the protagonist, is one of the few people who actually sense that something is not normal as soon as Maruki's world becomes reality. And though he arguably has the most to gain from allowing this "happy world" to stand true, Akechi teams up with the protagonist, who he has expressed hatred for before the events of this final arc, to fight against it tirelessly. Akechi expresses his argument most explicitly on February 2nd, the same night that Maruki gives the protagonist his own speech. Akechi's argument focuses on power, choice, and autonomy. He tells the protagonist "...I will carve my own path for myself. I refuse to accept a reality concocted by someone else, stuck under their control for the rest of my days," and when pressed about his inevitable death if reality was returned to how it was, he simply replies "So what? That's the path I chose." (Akechi). For Akechi, true reality is one where choices have consequences that cannot simply be swept under

the rug and treated as if they never happened, for better or worse. He is so consistent in this ideology that he is willing to die for it because that is the natural result of the choices he had made. In other words, death is a form of autonomy and resistance for Akechi, and that is more important to him than living as a puppet on a string, subject to the will of someone else, even if that will is filled with happiness for all. Through his words and relentless commitment to action, Akechi presents the protagonist and the player with a compelling argument against Maruki's perfectly happy utopia by challenging the means of its accomplishment and its broader implications on human free will.

Despite the game displaying both sides of this argument, it ultimately holds its own bias, prompting the player to reject Maruki's reality by priming them with implicit stylistic choices. As soon as Maruki's "happy world" reality begins to take over the true reality (January 1st in-game), the player will begin to notice two differences in the game's aesthetics: the music played while exploring during the daytime and the visual effects that occur after a screen transition. The new song that takes the place of "Tokyo Daylight" is titled "So Happy World," a name that is instantly unsettling in its directness and strange wording. The song itself reinforces this feeling. The melody it begins with is a slowed down version of the main menu theme ("Royal Days"), with a bubbly, almost dreamlike atmosphere being created by its slowness and the sounds that dominate the background (one repeated sound quite literally sounding like bubbles being blown into liquid). In other words, it gives the sensation of a suspiciously dreamlike happiness, one in which the listener is aware that something is amiss because the happiness it communicates is exaggerated to an extreme. It also communicates this unsettling feeling by distorting a melody that the player is likely very familiar with, as the "Royal Days" melody would have played every time the player opened up the video game (and for a video

game that has an estimated time of completion of 100 hours, this would have happened a lot). This exact same sense of uneasiness comes across in a very subtle yet repeated change in the visual design of the game. Once the player becomes free to explore within Maruki's reality and is tasked with interviewing each of the other Phantom Thieves (January 3rd), every screen transition will be followed by a subtle, distorted rainbow effect that briefly occupies the borders of the screen. While this effect is potentially easy to miss, the comparison of Maruki's reality to some sort of hallucinogenic trip is loud and clear between this visual effect and the accompanying music.

The game also attempts to convince the player to reject Maruki's utopia by rewarding the player for their rejection and punishing the player for their acceptance. The most explicit reward that the game uses to bribe the player and shape their mind is the promise of more gameplay. The only way the player can unlock the most amount of content and achieve what is regarded as the "true ending" by fans is to reject Maruki's utopia every time. This rejection allows the player to explore the final dungeon and challenge the final boss. If at any point the player decides to agree with Maruki, the game is cut short and the player is given one of a few different "bad endings" as again referred to by the game's fans. In the most common of these "bad endings," the player accepts Maruki's deal, only to be instantly placed many weeks in the future. They are then shown a few scenes of all of the characters enjoying their time together (Akechi included) in a manner completely uncharacteristic to how they have been shown to act in the past. This is accompanied by a creepy acknowledgement of the protagonist's knowledge of the world he chose and then followed by an abrupt cut to the game's credits, which rest on an ending photo depicting all of the characters again enjoying an evening together. However, in this screenshot, both Akechi and the protagonist can be found staring directly into the camera, an eerie meta acknowledgment of

the player's decision. Neither the nature of the ending itself nor the eeriness conveyed by the ending photograph leave the player feeling satisfied with the decision they chose, and thus, the game itself disincentivizes the player from choosing the utopia, explicitly revealing its own bias.

Since the game itself urges the player to reject the utopia it presents, it is no surprise that many players (including myself) would treat this rejection of Maruki's utopia as the 'correct answer' to the question. It is very easy to simply accept the moral lesson presented by the game's implicit and explicit biases toward rebellion. However, removing the bias presented by the game, I'd like to reopen this question for discussion, starting with a simple question: why? Why do we instantly feel this pull to reject a theoretically perfectly happy world where most of the ideals we struggle for on a daily basis are accomplished without effort? I identify three potential reasons for this rejection: a desire for free will, our experiences with striving, and the 'who' of utopias. Firstly, I believe a part of the player resonates with Akechi's argument for autonomy and choice outside of the game's biased atmosphere. We as human beings have been fighting for independence and agency for centuries and are very sensitive to ideas and authorities that challenge these core aspects of our humanity. While Maruki's reality promises a world that prioritizes human happiness and eradicates human suffering, it does so by forcing everyone to give up the notion that they have choices that reap consequences, which challenges the very ideas of free will and autonomy that I have learned to hold dear. Secondly, there is a part of us that identifies with our struggles and resonates with the struggles of others. In a world where we no longer have to suffer for anything, there is a fear that we will lose part of what shapes us and makes us who we are. And while it is true that our struggles help to define us, the actual ways in which we derive our identities are unknown in a world that is theoretically perfect (for in theory, we would not feel as though we lacked in any aspect of our identity). Thus, this fear of what is

unknown to us drives our unwillingness to fully denounce suffering and embrace effortless, unconditional joy. Thirdly, I believe that the 'who' of utopia is very important to how we view utopias as a whole. In every example of a utopia I can think of, someone or something either holds a position of authority or has the power to set the utopia in place. Who or what this is becomes crucial in our conception of how perfect a utopia is. As a Christian, this idea of 'who' is absolutely crucial for me in differentiating what perfect world I would accept and reject. As I initially pondered Maruki's world, I struggled to understand why I had issues with it. On the surface, it appeared like a watered-down view of the Christian doctrine of Heaven (with the game even pointing this out by naming an area in Maruki's cognitive world "Psientific Model Eden"). But as I further considered the idea, I realized that it is not the "what" of Maruki's world I necessarily take issue with, but the 'who'. In the example of Maruki's reality, the 'who' is a human being who desires to use the divine-like powers they have been miraculously given to put their world in motion. Therefore, the utopia Maruki envisions is subject to the limitations and corruptions of the human mind. As a Christian, this becomes very problematic, as I believe that the human mind is ultimately broken and sinful, susceptible to corruption and incapable of achieving perfection on its own. The reason that I accept Heaven as a separate and superior utopia to Maruki's is because its creator is the God whom I believe to be perfectly good, knowledgeable, and capable. The utopia created by this God is one that I believe I can trust wholeheartedly. Thus, this idea of 'who' has authority over the utopia is crucial in analyzing what makes a utopia legitimate and acceptable.

Persona 5 Royal's final story arc presents the player with a theoretical "happy world" which challenges the notions of a utopia's legitimacy, morality, and leadership. Though the game ultimately takes a decisive stance on the issue it presents, the question of a perfectly happy world

is filled with nuance that calls into question the player's priorities, beliefs, and morals. After reflecting on how the game itself presents the arguments surrounding this utopia and prompts the player to challenge it, and after personally reflecting on the question of Maruki's perfectly "happy world" without the game's bias, I have come to a deeper understanding of my criteria for a true utopia and the reasons why I continue to reject the "happy world" that *Persona 5 Royal* presents: I care about free will, identify with my struggles, and reject Maruki, a mere human being, as a valid authority over the entire world order.

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