

Game Narrative Review

Your name (one name, please): Sami Najed

Your school: DigiPen Institute of Technology

Your email: snajed5@gmail.com

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Game Title: The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel

Platform: PC

Genre: RPG

Release Date: August 2, 2017

Developer: Nihon Falcom

Publisher: Xseed Games

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hisayoshi Takeiri

Overview

The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel looks rather standard at first glance to any consumer who chances upon a gaming store page, with a cover featuring a school setting and many anime characters with weapons. This 2013 turn-based JRPG (ported to PC in English in 2017) gives off the essence of games such as Atlus's *Persona* series, highly popularized by its 5th entry's claim to fame, and on further inspection looks like a generic anime-styled calendar game. When players turned on the game, they are greeted by something unexpected: tanks exploding in the cacophony of gunfire, shells bursting and breaching stalwart defenses, soldiers pershing under a relentless onslaught. I watched on the edge of my seat as an unlikely group of kids and two adults ran to stop hijacked railway guns from firing upon an international trade

conference in the economic capital of the continent, Crossbell City. Too late to reach the railway guns, my eyes widened as the leader of the group, a nameless boy with black hair cried out as the guns fired, and the screen cut to black.

Shattering expectations and personal biases, the opening to *Trails of Cold Steel* shows you that this isn't going to be your average high school and calendar JRPG. It establishes a complex political scenario that newcomers to the series don't know anything about, and details a group of students who intimately know each other well and together prevail and push forward when faced with crisis and adversity. In spirit, this is *Trails of Cold Steel*: a series of dilemmas concerning an ever-changing international political landscape set in a living world filled with real people trying to live out their everyday lives.

Characters

- **Rean Schwarzer** – Our protagonist and a young man adopted into a noble family, Rean is chosen for the special class VII. At the beginning of the game Rean is stuck in the ambiguity of what to do with his life, and is told by Instructor Sara, “If you don’t plant yourself somewhere, you’ll blow away with the next big gust to come along.” Throughout the story, he blossoms as the heart and leader of the class, finding actualization in his deep friendships, feeding back into his feelings of self-worth. Rean, however, has poor self-worth and tends to attribute his victories to others, and takes the burden of failures onto himself. He also tends to overextend when helping others to a fault, even when he is at physical risk (such as when he takes an arm injury for Machias and Jusis in chapter two). In the worst situations such as in the final battle, he is unrealistically optimistic in pushing forward. His relentless drive and self-worth as the class leader are called into question when his friends defend his fallen newly-awakened Divine Knight(a mech) after his loss and he screams “ no they need me let me stay” as he is forced to run away from the battle to survive to fight another day.
- **Crow Armbrust** – A slacker upperclassman who was a part of the smaller prototype of Class VII, he later joins Class VII in chapter five due to nearly failing the year in skipping too many classes. He occasionally spends time with Rean, giving him bits of half-dubious advice. He also plays a big brother role to Class VII during the school festival in inspiring the class to do a concert and helping with the costume designs and planning. He also seems to be used to danger, and can get serious when his friends need him, as shown when he joins Rean in fighting a threat in the Old School House when Rean’s sister Elise is in danger there. However, his time at Thors was but a cover as he is the leader of the Imperial Liberation Front, a terrorist group poised against Chancellor Giliath Osborne, the main political power of Erebonia. Crow also sparks the Erebonian Civil War by assassinating Osborne in revenge for the annexation of his hometown Jurai,

and is the second final boss who fights Rean piloting the Divine Knight Valimar while piloting his own, the Divine Knight Ordine, who he's had for three years.

- **Alisa Reinford** – Alisa is one of Rean's classmates in Class VII and heavily inferred to be the canon romantic interest, though the final bonding event is up to the player's choice. She gets off to a rough start with Rean as he tries to save her from a trap door during orientation, leading to them ending up in an unfortunate promiscuous position, after which she slaps him in retaliation. However, they later make up after they both had been trying to apologize for a while. As we grow closer to her, we find out she has many of the same insecurities as Rean in being in a position of privilege as the heir to the Reinford Group, the primary weapons and technology manufacturer of the empire. As a commoner with significant weight to her name, she is alienated from both social castes as a result. She attends Thors to find a path in her life and to escape her neglectful work-focused mother, who she has become estranged from due to her mother's support of the construction of the railway guns and backstabbing of her grandfather.
- **Sara Valestine** – Class VIII's laidback teacher whose coursework varies differently than any other teacher. Adopting a style taken from her previous position as being part of the Bracer Guild that focuses on peacekeeping and helping civilians. She poses the class's field studies as a means to encounter the empire's problems firsthand and makes sure to stay at an arm's reach if anything goes too wrong. Despite her unprofessionalism, she cares about her students and wants them to succeed even if they need a little push such as having Rean help the student council on his free days.
- **Elliot Craig** – A member of Class VII and a very close friend to Rean, he is the commoner son of Olaf Craig Lieutenant General of Erebonia's 4th Armored division. He was forced to come to Thors as a middle ground agreement with his father as he wanted to go to music school in the capital of Heimdallr and Thors was the only military academy with an orchestra. He is timid and kind, but energetic and confident when he needs to be.
- **Laura S. Arseid** – A member of Class VII, Laura is a noble from the Arseid family who practices a distinct and widely used style of swordsmanship. She holds her nobility in her demeanor, often being formal and blunt making a big deal about respect. She also holds personal and martial improvement at a high bar using her experiences to improve herself. Because of this, she gets into conflict with Fie who she views as "unvirtuous at first" due to being part of a mercenary group. However, they talk it out and duel mending their friendship.
- **Jusis Albarea** – A member of Class VII, Jusis is the bastard son of Duke Albarea, one of the four ruling noble houses that run the provinces of Erebonia. His mother was a commoner so his father is rather distant from him. He however has a good relationship with his brother Rufus, who taught him how to fight and noble etiquette. He is pretty serious and at times pompous about his role as a noble leading to him getting into

quarrels with Machias. He however can come to terms with Machias in chapter two, as they both understand each other past their generalizations.

- **Machias Regnitz** – A member of Class VII, Machias is the commoner son of Carl Regnitz the governor of the capital of Heimdallr. He has a deep-seated hatred of nobles after his sister's fiancé's social standing as a noble's attempt to marry her drove her to suicide. To end insult to injury the noble in grieving stated she could have been content being his mistress. Because of this and his father's position in the Reformist Faction of the government, he quarrels heavily with Juis. He however resolves his conflict with Juis turning it into a friendly rivalry. His personality is rather serious, hard-working, and irritable at times.
- **Fie Claussell** – A member of Class VII, A war orphan that got picked up by a Yeager(mercenary group) her group Zephyr had a conflict that ended with her father the leader dead, and the group disbanded. Sara the bracer who was investigating the situation took her into Thors. Fie is pretty cold and unproductive, she would rather laze and sleep than do work. She gets straight to the point, however as the story goes on she becomes closer to others becoming part of the gardening club, becoming snarkier and playful with her friends while still having a cool attitude.
- **Emma Milistein** – A member of Class VII, the kindhearted studios class president with mysterious powers shown throughout the game. She is the compatriot of the cat Celine you can feed throughout the game, and in the end, Celine guides Rean through piloting the Divine Knight Valimar, something Emma seems very knowledgeable about. If she is the character the player chose to dance in the festival she tells Rean that she's sorry and that she wants to tell him everything, and she's watched him this whole time.
- **Gaius Worzel** – A member of Class VII, a transfer student from the Nord Highlands, a sovereign territory adjacent to Erebonia. Gaius lived a nomadic life with his family and has a good relationship with Lieutenant General Zechs Vander who recommended him to Thors based on his spearmanship. Gaius is a very kind-hearted man who finds the Erebonian caste system strange having lived in Nord his whole life, he's calm and always friendly especially to Rean and Elliot his close friends. He is devoutly religious towards the septian church which worships the goddess Aidios but also has Nord animist spiritual beliefs in the guidance of the wind as an entity.
- **Millium Orion** – A member of Class VII who transferred in class VII in chapter five a member of the imperial intelligence division the players encountered and worked with to diffuse a possible war brewing in Nord during chapter three. She is cheerful and incredibly energetic, being a child. However, she has a mysterious floating combat shell (robot) that she can fly around with. She gets along with everyone, often annoying Juis with their relationship being like an older brother and little sister. It is revealed in the last chapter that her reason for being there was orders from Giliath Osborne to keep an eye on class VII's investigation of the old schoolhouse and see if Crow was C, which she failed at doing till it was too late.

Breakdown

The story follows the life of Rean Schwarzer, a student of Thors Military Academy who is placed in an experimental class named Class VII. Class VII mixes the castes of commoners and nobles, with a special curriculum like no other, from which the game's core loop stems. You spend your time in class learning about the history and technology of the Erebonian Empire with occasional in-game quizzes. Every Sunday you are rewarded with a free day, in which you roam around the town of Trista and the school grounds of Thors. During these days, you hang out with your classmates in bonding events, run errands for other students and the locals on the behalf of the student government, and plunge into exploring the mysterious and seemingly unending depths of the old schoolhouse. In the evening you get a chance to talk with your classmates in the dorms before some much-deserved rest. Following the night, the calendar moves forward; it is now Wednesday and you have a practical exam, a special rules combat event. Afterward, Instructor Sara reveals the destination and groups for the major special curriculum activity: field studies. In a field study, the game hones in on a city or town in Erebonia as you grow closer to your classmates through exploring and resolving a mystery connected to each place. After questing around and learning about the people and culture of the empire, each chapter resolves in one big climactic event. In a cycle of rinse and repeat, this is the core narrative loop of Trails of Cold Steel.

The game contains about 60-90 hours worth of playtime depending on side quest completion and involvement with the world in talking to every NPC when new dialogue is available, both of which add a substantial amount of content and playtime. The game has seven chapters total and eleven characters to engage with bonding events and learn about over time. The game also features a prominent fishing minigame and a card game called Blade, and there are other one-off minigames such as swimming races. There is plenty of main path and side content to play through and by the end, the players are left wanting more from its direct continuation, Trails of Cold Steel II, or even from its predecessors in the Trails series, especially with the previous two titles in concurrent canon with the Erebonian story.

Mechanically there are a couple of mechanics that combine gameplay and narrative the first of those being the collectible book series Red Moon Rose. By exploring thoroughly and talking to NPC's you can find one usually each day during a field study minus the first and last books being in Trista. When all 14 are collected you can trade them for a resource used to make an ultimate weapon, however, they are books in not just names. You can read the books with each chapter forming a part of an in-world written novella. While those are the only books with gameplay rewards there additionally are a series of books called Carnelia that tell the adventure of a Bracer named Toby during the timer period of the hundred days war between Erebonia and the Liberl Kingdom. This book included appearances by Micht, the owner of the pawn store in Trista, with it heavily inferred to be based on a true in-world story.

These books give depth to world-building and add to the reality of the world as NPC will talk about it and it's not something imaginary but something you can read. The game also has volumes of the imperial post come out often detailing locations you may visit, acknowledging the player's actions, and even disclosing international politics and some of the events Ao and Zero No Kiseki the previous two games happening concurrently in the plot. The imperial post also frames international politics in a biased manner indicative of the society and imperialism tendencies of the country. This is further enhanced in knowing the history of the world and information from the other games which you also can find in a digestible form in the school library amongst other miscellaneous topics such as books on the Erebonian Railway, Sports, and Folklore. These all give the player the option to thoroughly and deeply understand the history of concepts that will later pop into the story. An example of this is such as the religious belief of animism being in volume one of Erebonian Folklore and later popping up in chapter three as practiced in the Nord Highlands and Chapter five as practiced in the Town of Legram.

Another means in which the game linked gameplay with narrative elements is the use of link attacks and combat links in combat, put simply one character can link to another character for follow-up attacks and sometimes other effects. The more link level you have with your partner you gain access to more and better effects such as dealing killing blows under a certain hp range, auto-healing you for hp or sp, or even moving to block an attack halving your damage taken. All incredibly powerful and useful effects turn the tide of battle in your favor, by having characters linked their link-level goes up by a small amount. The main way of raising link levels is through bonding events where you hang out and spend some time getting to better know a character, choosing to do certain events (such as swimming, and story events like picking up costumes from the city), and side quest with that character, playing the card game Blade on the train with them, and last but not least talking to them occasionally grants link experience. These mechanics reward you in combat for engaging with the narrative elements of the game and pursuing one of the game's core goals in getting to know each of the members of Class VII better. Something that even further shows that is when the game links the biggest gameplay reward in a character's s-craft their most powerful move oftentimes unlocking during their big moments of development for example in chapter three Alisa after confiding her past and insecurities to Rean and beginning to move past them unlocking her S Craft of Rosetta Arrow.

In terms of engagement, the game starts strong introducing the class in media res starting during the events of later chapter five ending at the cliffhanger of the blank firing of the railway guns on Crossbell City. As noted in the overview this section of the game breaks the player's expectation and shows them excitement before returning to the start. However, players soon realize that for better or for worse the game has a very slow burn pacing and takes a long time to ramp up. *Trails of Cold Steel* is comfortable spending time in the mundane and exploring its world and the characters around it, and when the action starts it starts smaller progressively getting bigger each chapter. According to Steam's Global Achievement Statistics (as of December 1st, 2021) for the pc version of *Trails of Cold Steel* about 86.3% of the players make it

past the medias res section, and only 77.1 % complete the prologue an immediate reduction of 9.2 % as we shift into the mundane. From completing the prologue to completing chapter one another 14.3 % of the players drop out the largest amount out of any stretch of the game. The slow burn pacing and a large amount of detail vs immediate excitement is likely the cause of this drop as it's not for everyone. To complete chapter two we lose 7.3 %, chapter three we lose 5.8 % percent, however, when we get to chapter three's completion we rest around 49.7 % of the players having beaten it with only a loss of 9.2% of players between it and completing the final chapter. Chapter Three is when the stakes and investments in the characters reach a high enough level to continue to retain the number of players accustomed to the game's style of pacing in storytelling. Those who stay receive a rewarding experience and those who leave find the game's early pace unsuited to their narrative engagement type.

Strongest Element

Cold Steel's biggest boon is how the NPC and cast's characterization make the world feel like an immersive living breathing place. The place you spend the most time is around the campus of Thors and the Town of Trista and in talking to the inhabitants and fellow students. As you spend more time there talking to everyone you get to know the progressive stories and lives of everyone there. For example, something persistent is that every early morning when you get up for a field study you see Hana and Harrison a couple saying goodbye as Harrison goes to work. You hear the political and generational musing of an old man abbot while stopping by Kirche's Cafe, with him reacting to the news some of which you may have been involved in. In the school, you learn about the clumsy and mischievous Mint who's Uncle is professor Markov, a teacher as she tries to set him up with instructor Mary. It's a funny and light-hearted story in Markov knowing what Mint is trying to do and going along begrudgingly. These NPC's also get more development and a chance to take the spotlight which each of them having a quest as part of the free days.

One of which has Vivi who is usually trying to prank people and cause trouble for her twin sister Linde is involved in a quest where she tricks Rean into giving Linde a flower that signifies a confession. A quest that gives a clear image of her personality and a big step in her increasingly intense pranks. These add a lot to the setting of Trista and make it into an ever-evolving home and it lets players either check up on everything or even just their favorite NPC's to see the next step in their story or their reactions to the plot. The NPC's are reactive to their surroundings and world events and every time something approaches such as the school festival, or for example the imperial liberation front terrorist attacks the NPC's will react and change dialogue.

The thing is this is not only in Trista and Thors but every single field study location as well having their own cast of side characters, and NPCs all with their own albeit smaller stories. One of which is meeting Norton the imperial chronicles columnist visiting Nord or in or in

chapter two and chapter eight meeting Anton and Ricky, two recurring travelers from the Liberl Kingdom that appear in Bareahard and later come to the school festival.

Regarding our main cast, it's very successful in how their interpersonal stories and catalyst for telling them are tied to the world. Jusis being directly tied to the politics of barehand being the ruling lord's son, Gaius being able to show his Erebonian his home and culture in Nord, Laura and her father and his school painting her upbringing in Legram, and Alisa's family dynamic and the weight of the Reinford company shown in Roer and Garrelia Fortress. There is no place where a core cast member's ties are not present whether it be direct like family or friends or indirect like the Reinford Company or Duke Albarea's provincial rule and army. Furthermore, you can see the family of characters we know from thors out in the world such as Becky's dad being involved in a side quest in the town of Celdic or Markov's Sister and Mint's mother Vanilla being in a house in Roer City. This level of expansive connectedness and detail creates an immersion so strong the player can get lost in and emotionally attached to the world of *Trails of Cold Steel*. And this feature of the game is a standout game selling feature for those willing to spend the time to take a deep dive into Erebonia.

Unsuccessful Element

While Cold Steel's Characters and world form the heart of the game, the bonding system is the game's biggest fault. The majority of the main cast is interesting and has depth however some like Emma barely get any development and only the occasional time in the spotlight such as in chapter two when unlocking the door and healing Rean. Of course, you can find out a lot more about her through her bonding events, you get to see her talking to Celine the town cat about observing Rean a gauging his potential. This adds some depth to Emma's mysterious nature by discerning her goal, something we would have never known otherwise.

Another problem that comes from the bonding system is that the game has a narrative crisis between what it wants the story to be and giving the player a choice especially in romance. The story constantly pairs Rean and Alisa from their initial encounter, talk in the night sky, and are often teased by their classmates. In Alisa's final message to real in the ending, she tells him more directly than anyone else stating "when we meet again I'll tell you everything that's in my heart". However, the canonicity of it is questionable because Romance is determined by the bonding system and spending time and doing a couple of events with them to get them as an option to dance with for the choice in who talks to Rean in the ending. This constrains the story in not being able to fully endorse the canon pairing it has and not being able to develop relationships in the core cast due to Rean needing to be an option for everyone. It's frustrating especially because this is a series where ramifications like this are important in the long run, and while your save file including your final bonding choice extends to cold steel 2, it stops eventually resulting in a reset of the investment gained from these two games.

Highlight

Rean loses the final fight and is forced to flee as his friends defend him. once again like the prologue the finale takes the players' expectation however this time of the whole game experience and subverts it in this downward spiral ending. Players are shocked, worried, and given a dose of realism in that the Class's power of friendship is not absolute force. They are delivered many questions, heartbreak, and want for answers. However, this is where Nihon Falcom gets the player, with the promise that those can all be yours right now in *Trails of Cold Steel II* its direct continuation and second half.

The ending of *Trails of Cold Steel* is the perfect capstone of the player's experience in showing a final reverberation of its core theme of human bonds by showing them in action. The player as Rean at his lowest point has given so much and you've both come to regard these people as friends, and then they give back to you in a heartbreaking act of sacrifice.

Cold Steel in its final and finest moment wishes to keep players at the tip of their toes. This scene is enhanced by elements such as the music. When fighting Crow "[The Decisive Collision](#)" pushes the player through with its somber yet progressive melody holding an air of finality and resolution. Afterward in the ending cutscene "[One And Only Hope](#)" plays heralding a bittersweet yet sorrowful sound while also looking out for a hopeful future for the fate of us and our friends. This is all combined with a stand-out performance from Sean Chiplock as Rean's English VA breaks out in full-on desperation in lines such as his final line exclaiming "they need me let me staaaay". The rest of Class VII's voice cast do well in using their tone to show their resolute will in this sacrifice, and for whoever the player chooses to dance with a heartfelt platonic or romantic thank you and goodbye.

The game is aware of its strong suit, and even uses player choice to further enhance the simulation element and strike closer to your heart. This cliffhanger is incredibly effective in very intelligently highlighting the core of the experience to the player and rewarding them despite providing an intense amount of suspense. This is your doing, these people want to do this, you've come to know them and come to test your mettle again and again. This causes the player to reflect on every single interaction and how it all led to this single moment of compassion. While the situation may be terrible for all involved there is an overwhelming sense of hope which will stay in the player's heart for a time to come. They feel that hope in despair through Rean and want in the end the power of the bonds made to come through.

Critical Reception

- **Twinfinite – Hayes Madsen – 4.5/5 – Great:**

Madsen calls the game a “hidden gem” citing that “The main cast of characters truly are the heart of Trails of Cold Steel”. He cites how the game is a slow burn and that the pacing can be rough however he also describes the narrative as painstakingly built through the pacing being both an asset and minor detraction.

- **Kotaku – Jason Schrier – “worth experiencing”:**

Schrier draws an analogy regarding the game’s pacing and content to a sandwich with delectable insides surrounded by a large amount of bread in filler. These thoughts coincide with Madsen’s take on the game, with Schrier stating that despite the filler the game is “at its most sluggish, it’s never boring”. Schrier additionally takes the need to say that he would consider Cold Steel 1 “the rare game where talking to every NPC is actually worth your time”, and stating that the games cast who initially show as anime tropes reach unexpected depths later on.

- **PushSquare – Robert Ramsey – Great 8/10:**

Ramsey touches on many of the points that Schrier and Madsen cover, stating that the game “plods” while also discussing its depth of character. Ramsey states that NPC interactions and worldbuilding are the best part of the game and that the world holds “a great sense of place and time”. Ramsey compliments that in sidequests the game contextualized even mundane tasks and was interesting and felt meaningful. He also touches on the fact that bonding events provide both narrative and system engagement by improving the link attack mechanic as well as developing the characters.

Lessons

- **Choosing Who Gets Characterization Detracts From The Main Story** The bonding system creates a core fault in attachment and understanding of the deeper stories of some characters and strangles the main narrative in developing any romantic relationships in canon. While it gives the player choice it locks important information away from them that may completely change how they view a character's depths of actions later. This creates an awful choice on the player’s front, having to struggle with a fear of missing out on characters currently important to the story vs hanging out with their favorites. Additionally, for the characters cast aside, it further distances them as some of their possibly likable depth is never shown and never has the chance to interest the player. Give the player options to see all the events, maybe some without the mechanical reward.
- **Strong Immersion Adds Another Layer of Emotion**
When you can feel like you’re really in a setting the level of immersion and identification

skyrockets, you're no longer looking at a story from the outside in. *Trails of Cold Steel* expansively nails that and those who put the time to further immerse themselves in it will gain more emotionality and meaning from the story and characters. Games that can do this blur the line between fiction and reality using the unique power of interactivity to further immerse players.

- **Long-Form Storytelling can be Uniquely Powerful:** *Trails of Cold Steel* takes time to build everything up being a slow-burning game, taking in mundanity and exposition comes back to enhance action and tension. Getting to understand what makes a character tick and what their everyday life looks like in their environment, makes the emotional stakes and the player's identification that much higher when it's time for the rapid beats of action and tension. Taking your time in having a whole game of world-building and set up for another allows the sequel to start-up running and reach heights it could not reach if it were all one compressed game worth of story.

Summation

Trails of Cold Steel is not a masterclass in storytelling that the industry will put on a pedestal to look back at for years. However, it cannot be denied that the game has incredible heart, and narrative depth, and attention to detail above most of its JRPG kin. While true that it owes part of that to its predecessors or even the fact that it is detailed set up for the adventure of its direct sequel, the game builds upon the pre-established history of the series and fleshes out the complexities of the world with a deep and interesting political focus. It may have its imperfections in its constraining bonding system and character casualties of depth in its bloated cast. But in the end, it tells us a story of human compassion, connection, and the warmth of bonds in an unforgiving world, much like our own. These narrative themes are of course commonplace, but when given the chance to shine as in *Trails of Cold Steel*, they prove to be powerful. This game hopes to inspire others to find that warmth for themselves and provide the same for others, and through investment into its narrative presents that warmth as a gift to the player.

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