

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Fate/Stay Night

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Developer: Type-Moon

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kinoko Nasu

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Overview

*I am the bone of my sword
 Steel is my body and fire is my blood
 I have created over a thousand blades
 Unknown to Death,
 Nor known to Life.
 Have withstood pain to create many weapons
 Yet, those hands will never hold anything
 So as I pray, Unlimited Blade Works.
 -Archer*

Ideals: they make us who we are. They're the principles and standards that we set for ourselves, a concept used to represent the ever-distant utopia that is always beyond our grasp. However, at what point do the ideals that we set for ourselves start to harm us rather than help us? When do they become the very shackles that they were supposed to break?

The Unlimited Blade Works route of *Fate/Stay Night* focuses on Shirou Emiya, a high school student in the fictional Japanese city of Fuyuki. Upon accidentally witnessing a battle between magical entities known as "Servants", Shirou becomes deeply entrenched in the Fifth Holy Grail War, a battle of life or death between seven mages who each forge a contract with famous figures from history in the form of a "Heroic Spirit". The two groups are known as "Masters" and "Servants" respectively. The winning pair is granted the Holy Grail, a magical item that can realize one's desires. The game is a visual novel with three separate routes, and multiple bad endings, depending on the choices that the player makes throughout the story. Unlimited Blade Works focuses on the intersection between ideals and reality.

Characters

Shirou Emiya: The protagonist of the game, and a master in the fifth Holy Grail War. Shirou comes across as a kind and caring friend, one who is always willing to do whatever he can to help out his companions. He seems very reckless, always jumping to action to protect those around him, even in cases where it appears nonsensical.

However, these traits don't accurately represent Shirou, but are rather extensions of his true character.. Shirou was the sole survivor of a massive fire ten years ago. He was adopted by the man who managed to find him, Kiritsugu Emiya; a man who was devoted to helping as many people as he possibly could, operating under a system of "the needs of the many outweigh those of the few". A few years later, Shirou promised his father that he would carry on his ideals and wishes of embodying a "hero of justice", right before Kiritsugu passed away. Shirou deals with an all consuming survivor's guilt related to being the only survivor of the accident, contradicting his deep desire of wanting to live up to the hopes and dreams of his father. He simultaneously wishes to strive for a world where no one has to cry, yet also recognizes the need of prioritizing universal justice over the needs of the individual. His goal ultimately is to "*save everyone who's suffered*". The nature of these contradictory views leads to Shirou living an incredibly self-destructive life, one where he feels overwhelming guilt any time he even *thinks* about doing something solely for himself.

Rin Tohsaka: Rin is the current head of the Tohsaka family, an elite lineage of magi that has stretched back for hundreds of years. Due to mage families prioritizing marriage between other mage families with high quality magic circuits (which dictate one's aptitude for magecraft), Rin possesses incredibly high aptitude as a magus. She grew up in a deeply traditional Magi family, where she was made to prioritize her magecraft over everything else by her father, before he passed away during the previous Holy Grail War ten years prior. Since that point, Rin has continued to dedicate herself to her magecraft, and has decided to participate in the Fifth Holy Grail War for the sake of her father.

While Rin puts up a front as a serious, studious, and aloof individual, she is a very loving and supportive person who has a strong sense of honor. Her upbringing as a mage made her aware of the coldhearted nature that magi needed to embody to succeed, yet she still chooses

to be an empathetic individual in spite of that. Rin acts as a much needed foil to Shirou, living a life that is also focused on helping those that she can while also putting in a concerted effort to look after herself. Over the course of Unlimited Blade Works, Rin and Shirou develop romantic interest in each other and start a relationship.

Saber: Shirou's servant in the Holy Grail War. While her true identity is Artoria Pendragon, the *Fate* analog to Arthur Pendragon of Celtic Briton legend, she adopts the moniker of her servant class "Saber" in order to hide her identity from other Servants and Masters during the Holy Grail War. She is a dutiful king that wishes to right the fall of Britain by stopping herself from removing the sword of selection from the stone, preventing her from being recognized as the future king of Britain. Saber has an incredible sense of duty and honor, and will do anything she can to protect those in need. She is motivated by an immense sense of remorse over how the fate of the country that she held so dear turned out, which is why she so desperately seeks out the Holy Grail, the only item able to grant her wish and the prize for the winner of the war.

Her character is another that is constantly contrasted against Shirou, as she is someone who also lived by similar principles until her death. She holds a deep interest in Shirou and Archer's conflict, as the conclusion to such would act as either denial or affirmation of her own desires.

Archer: Archer is a future version of Shirou Emiya, one who forged a contract with the spirit of the world to become a "Counter Guardian", an agent of the world that is summoned to ensure mankind's continued survival in moments of crisis. Archer believed that by doing so, he would be able to strive towards his ideals indefinitely. Over time however, he realizes that Counter Guardians do nothing but clean up the messes created by humanity, indiscriminately killing those who are a threat to the world's continued survival. It didn't matter what they did, or if what they were doing was right or wrong– the needs of the many outweigh those of the few.

This led to him becoming deeply cynical, betrayed by the very ideals that he devoted his entire life to. Though he wished to save everyone, all he ever did was cause more and more suffering as a Counter Guardian. Forced to face the reality of what it means to help the world, Archer grew to loathe himself and the ideals that he lived by. Despite knowing that the Throne of Heroes (where servants for the Holy Grail War are drawn from) exists outside of the axis of time,

his one wish is to be summoned into a past era where his previous self exists, before he can make a contract with the spirit of the world, and to kill him. He wishes to create a paradox under the slim hope that it would erase his own existence.

Kiritsugu Emiya: Shirou's adopted father, and the winner of the Fourth Holy Grail War. For most of his life, Kiritsugu was almost the ideological opposite of Shirou in terms of their approach to accomplishing their ideals. Originally hoping to become a "hero of justice" who could save everyone, Kiritsugu eventually came to the realization that such a thing wasn't possible, and that to save someone meant discarding the life of another. Kiritsugu is a very cold and emotionless person, traits that he forced himself to adopt to steel himself for the heinous actions that he would commit. He spent his entire life living as a machine, someone who was focused only on saving as many lives as possible regardless of the cost. Kiritsugu passed away upon passing his childhood dream of becoming a "hero of justice" to Shirou.

Breakdown

Strengthening themes through the Dialectical Method

*"So...
 This is...
 Scarier...
 Than the pain."
 -Shirou*

During the climax of Unlimited Blade Works, Shirou is made to face his future self. The embodiment of everything he believed in. Of everything that he continues to believe in.

...and yet...

This future version of himself has nothing in his heart but hatred for him. He hates everything that Shirou believes in, and wants only to crush his ideals and kill him. Why? What could possibly lead to such an outcome?

The boy and the knight in red ready themselves.

In a well-written persuasive essay, multiple viewpoints are presented in tandem with the core thesis. One of the manners in which this is done is known as the dialectical method. The method is composed of three elements: the thesis, the antithesis, and the synthesis. To create the most succinct and nuanced arguments, it is necessary to directly tackle antithetical points and make concessions when the opposing view shows merit. Upon doing so, a synthesis of the opposing ideas is reached wherein both parties ideally get closer to the fundamental truth of a topic. The relation between thesis, antithesis, and synthesis forms the basis of the three act story structure. During the first act, a status quo is established. Following this in the second act, said status quo is put into crisis through conflict of some manner. Finally, in the third act a reconciliation between the two states is reached, ultimately resolving the conflict. While this concept is structurally present in the vast majority of media, it is much less often applied to the development of the core themes of a piece. Themes present themselves during the culmination of a story, formed through the resolution of a conflict. The dialectical method instead suggests presenting themes clearly from the onset, and allow them to be challenged over the duration of the work. One of the areas where Unlimited Blade Works shines brightest is within its brazen clash of ideologically opposed positions, warring to prove their dominance over one another

As Shirou and Archer clash in physical battle, it becomes incredibly clear that the former is simply no match for the latter. On top of this, Archer uses this fight as an opportunity to crush Shirou's spirit. Using the life experience that Shirou will inevitably go through himself, Archer illustrates the exact way that he will be betrayed by his beliefs over and over and over again. The man who lived a life dedicated to the same ideals never once accomplished what he set out to do. Not only that, Archer explains in brutal detail how and why Shirou believes in the things that he does:

Archer

"Yes, it's natural for a child to admire his parent. But you went too far. It would have been fine if you just admired what Emiya Kiritsugu wanted to become. But he left you a curse at the very end. I do not even need to say it, right? That is everything for you."

Shirou(Flashback)

'———I'll make your dream(come true)...

...That's the answer.

Hearing my casual remark, he left the words 'I'm relieved' behind him. And then that man, who was emptier even than me, died.

At that moment, Emiya Shirou had to become a superhero.

My will does not matter.

For his sake, I simply tried to become what he had admired since he was small.

The wish for everyone to be happy...

...Is an impossibility dreamed not by me, but by Emiya Kiritsugu————

Archer

"You should know, Shirou.

Your ideal is borrowed. You are only imitating what Emiya Kiritsugu wanted to become, what Emiya Kiritsugu thought was right."

Archer explains why Shirou is so desperate to accomplish his impossible ideals. He admired Kiritsugu, and during the last moments of the latter's life he promised he would accomplish what Kiritsugu never could. His wishes were never born from within himself, they were borrowed from the man who had saved him. It's a realization that is always on the back of Shirou's mind, but one that he forces himself to never think about. He knows. He knows that it would break his spirit, to make that connection. Shirou reflects on his thoughts during the fire ten years ago as he considers this:

Shirou

"Everything went away.

It is not because I gave up that I believed nothing would save me.

I just found out that it's natural.

It's just that dying people will die and survivors will survive.

I laid down on the rubble and stared at the burning field.

I understood everything then.

I thought I understood everything."

He simply admired the man that had seemed so happy to save just one life; a man whose eyes were filled with tears of happiness at being able to do this one small thing. At the moment he was saved... Shirou thought that if he also worked his hardest to save those around

him, perhaps he could know that happiness too. As he realizes this, Archer moves in for the killing blow, one that Shirou doesn't even attempt to block. Shirou has truly given up in the face of cold reality.

At this moment, the thesis and antithesis clash and it seems the antithesis comes out on top. The thesis is Shirou's staunch belief that he can save everyone, that if he simply perseveres, his dreams would one day come true. The antithesis, on the other hand, criticizes the very premise of the thesis: how can a person save one without sacrificing another? This is the reality that Archer experienced throughout the course of his life. In his life, he had to take sides in conflicts, causing harm and suffering to those that he was opposing. It didn't matter that he wanted to save everyone, true justice in harsh situations requires one to be impartial. In most cases, solutions where everyone comes out happy just do not exist, no matter how desperately you reach. Beyond that, a wish to save everyone would also require that he saves himself. It's hypocritical to put others before himself because he by necessity is as important as the ones that he wishes to help, yet all he does is cause himself misery. He realizes that his beliefs were foolish and contradictory. Naive beliefs wrapped in sophistry. Beliefs that are without merit.

...And yet...

Strength floods Shirou's body as he counters an attack that he should not have been able to. The battle continues. Shirou begins to acknowledge that his wishes are built upon a shaky foundation, mired in contradictions and lies he tells himself. However, within this realization, he remembers where the true core of this wish came from in the first place:

Shirou

"I get it. You're right

My wish really is fake.

But there's something beautiful about it.

Putting others before myself is hypocritical, I understand that.

Still...

I couldn't help but admire the idea.

I thought how great it would be if I could live like that.

*Even if my life was a sham, there was still beauty in that wish, In doing whatever I could
to make others happy.*

I won't let that go. Even if it is foolish I won't give it up.

'Cause...

I know my dream isn't a mistake!"

It is here where the synthesis reveals itself. Shirou admits that the things that he wishes to accomplish are simply impossible. He is more than aware of the various holes within his own logic, mistakes that led Archer down the path that he traveled.

However, that does nothing to change the reasons for why we as human beings believe in the things that we do, does it? Shirou realizes that even if he may never save everyone, even if he has to hurt some to save many, there is still merit in reaching for a world where no one has to get hurt again. There is beauty inherent to that wish. Acknowledging that he will never accomplish his ideals, and choosing to live in accordance with them in spite of that, is the conclusion that Shirou ultimately comes to. He will never be betrayed by his ideals in the way that Archer was, because he has adapted the reality of the situation into said beliefs.

Shirou continues his relentless attack, and Archer finds himself faltering. Shirou goes in for the killing blow, one that Archer can easily see and should have been able to counter without a thought. Yet he finds himself being struck by it regardless.

Though the wound is merely superficial to Archer, he stands still. Shirou pants, collapsed on the ground, at the very edge of his limits.

Even with a blade in his chest, a Servant should be able to easily counter-attack.

But his hands are lowered and show no sign of moving.

I know without being told what that means.

Shirou

"I won, Archer."

I make the declaration while looking at him.

The knight in red closes his eyes once, and...

Archer

"———Yes. And I lost."

*He murmurs while looking off into the distance,
as if to convince himself.*

Even though the battle between Shirou and Archer ended in a scenario where Archer could very easily finish Shirou off as he lay in a heap on the floor, they both realize that the battle is over. Shirou has proven to his future self that the things that they both believed in were never truly wrong, it was a matter of not acknowledging reality that led to Archer becoming as bitter as he did. Through this clash between idealism and realism, a refined version of the thesis is born.

Typically in traditional storytelling, the dialectical method is used in a much more literal sense. Storytelling structures such as "the hero's journey" dictate that a hero's story ends with a return to normalcy, yet the hero is also irrevocably changed by the quest that they have endured. However, this often isn't consciously applied to the development of the themes of a piece. While the message of many modern films, games, and literature become clear at the inflection point, they do not present an initial thesis that has to be challenged to prove the merit of the themes that are being covered. Unlimited Blade Works' exquisite utilization of the dialectic in this manner significantly strengthens the core messages surrounding its discussion of idealism versus realism, in ways that would simply not be possible without consciously challenging the merit of its message.

Reference material for exegetical interpretation

References within media are very common, especially within the sphere of video games. Unfortunately, they are often under-utilized within interactional fiction in ways that classical literature has often avoided. Portraiture of characters from other popular games and media often appear, without much deeper connection to the work at large. Within games, referential material is often used to show a creative team's inspirations or favorite games.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is a strong example of the power of a well-utilized reference. This absolute behemoth of a novel starts with the simple sentence:

“Call me Ishmael.”

This is a direct biblical allusion to the story of Ishmael in the Old Testament, a child who was cast out at the age of 13 when his father bore a legitimate heir, Isaac, who established a covenant with God. This is used to indicate that the narrator views themselves as an outcast. It also references the miracle that both Ishmael's experience in their respective source material. Ishmael within the Bible is rescued from thirst, while Ishmael within *Moby Dick* is saved from drowning. The utilization of works present within the zeitgeist of classical literature can be used to build a narrative shorthand, allowing for writers to establish much more complex themes building upon the common knowledge gleaned from classic pieces.

Unlimited Blade Works uses reference to historical myths and figures of legend to an exceedingly strong degree. From very early on within the story, the entire concept of heroic spirits establishes the great power that history and renown grant to the various servants present during the Holy Grail War. Servants with legends that exist further into the past gain greater strength from the various feats that are attributed to them while they were alive. Cu Chulainn (the lancer class servant) possesses incredibly high agility and many blessings due to the length that his legend has propagated, for example.

Where Unlimited Blade Works makes its strongest utilization of its allusions and references is shown in the relationship between Saber's legend and Shirou's ideals. In Arthurian legend, the island of Avalon is a mythical location where King Arthur's sword Excalibur was forged. It is also where King Arthur is taken after the Battle of Camlann to heal. In certain Briton traditions, King Arthur is referred to as an “eternal king” who would someday return to save their people.

Within Unlimited Blade Works, Avalon is the name that is ascribed to both the scabbard of Saber's sword Excalibur, as well as an ever-distant utopia that exists outside of the boundaries of the physical world. Avalon (the scabbard) is a supreme defensive tool that allows for limited immortality and constant regeneration for its user. It is a “Conceptual artifact” that can be transplanted within a user to provide its benefits. While over time its abilities have been diminished to the point where only Saber or those near to her can take advantage of it, it is an immensely powerful artifact. During the fire at the end of the previous Holy Grail War ten years

ago, Kiritsugu stumbles upon a dying Shirou. Desperately wishing to save the one person that he could find, Kiritsugu implanted Avalon within Shirou to save his life.

Later in the story, during the climatic ideological struggle between Shirou and his future self, the thematic and symbolic purposes of this are put on full display. In the previous section, the climactic struggle between Archer and Shirou was discussed for its usage of the dialectical method. However there are additional elements in that scene which significantly reinforce the manner in which its conclusion resonates. During the critical moment where Shirou begins to reconcile his ideals against reality, something miraculous happens:

Shirou

"———That's right. I already knew that..."

...This is just a dream.

But I kept on believing in it because I thought it was right.

Kiritsugu pursued it because he knew it was an unattainable dream, an impossible ideal.

Even if it may be unattainable...

He believed that he would reach his destination if he kept running.

Archer

"Her sheath...! Its protection is still there, even though the contract does not exist anymore...!"

I ready my sword.

I...

"———I won't lose to you. I don't mind losing against someone.

But I can't lose against myself———!"

I will keep on being Emiya Shirou———!"

In that very moment, Avalon begins to heal Shirou through its connection to Saber. Avalon is described as an absolute defense that immerses the user within the domain of Avalon, a place that is separated from the world itself. The user is protected by the land that King Arthur dreamed of, one that represented the ever-distant utopia that the king continually strove towards. In the same way, Shirou gains strength upon realizing that what he believed in was the

beauty of his ideals, not necessarily in its accomplishment. Avalon, the world of dreams which protects and shields its user, parallels the unending strength provided to Shirou by his beliefs.

While not immediately apparent, this connection very deliberately delineates the inflection point of this conflict. Avalon's activation acts as a subtle indicator of the birth of the dialectical synthesis that the narrative hinges upon. This utilization of reference material adds additional complexity, while avoiding making the story more convoluted.

Contrasting characterization through diegesis and mimesis

Diegesis and Mimesis are concepts that are talked about often in modern storytelling, even if not through those names specifically. Mimesis can best be described by the age-old storytelling staple of "Show, don't tell". Story is told through action, while secondary narrative elements are implied through various means. Diegesis then, is the explicit *telling* of a story through the use of a narrator or through exposition. Information about a character's motivations and emotions are conveyed through direct language that leaves less room for interpretation. Unlimited Blade Works uses its format as a long form visual novel to dive incredibly deep into the mind of Shirou, a character that can come across as brash and irrational in their handling of various situations during the Holy Grail War. The dramatic irony present from the player being made privy to his distorted world view makes Shirou a uniquely compelling character in execution.

Shirou can be initially seen as an "everyman hero", a character archetype born from early 16th century morality play; specifically, "*The Summoning of Everyman*" which is believed to have been completed in 1510. The play forms the initial idea of a character that is made to represent mankind. An everyman is a character that is relatable through their generally benign behavior, spurred onwards by dire circumstance. Due to these qualities, they are immensely more relatable to a reader as a protagonist. One can very easily imagine themselves reacting in a similar manner if they were put in analogous scenarios.

While this illusion is quickly shattered to the reader as Shirou pontificates within his mind, the other characters within the story are not privy to that. During a casual conversation

with Rin about why they both practice magecraft, Shirou ends up accidentally revealing a detail that allows Rin to key into the true nature of Shirou's personality:

Shirou

"———I see. I'm glad you're having fun."

Rin

"Thanks. So, I'm sure you were having fun too if you're saying that, right? You wouldn't be able to continue training unless that's the case."

Tohsaka says so as if it's natural.

But...

Shirou

"Hm———"

I can't nod back.

Rin is a much more healthy individual in how she lives her life. While she has a strong sense of justice and wishes to help as many people as she can, she also uses methods that she enjoys. The reason that she studies hard to become a mage is because she finds it genuinely enjoyable, not because she's forced to do it.

Rin

"...Wait. Answer me, Emiya-kun.

I might have severely misunderstood you."

Tohsaka glares at me seriously.

Shirou

"———Yeah. I never thought training in magic was fun. I never considered magic or training to be fun. But I was glad to have people around me be happy. Um, I thought I could be of help to someone if I studied magic."

Rin

"———"

Shirou

"I wanted to be a superhero like Kiritsugu. I learned magic for that reason. ...Well, that's my reason."

Rin

"———Then what? You didn't learn magic for your own good?"

Shirou

"Huh? ...Wait, isn't this for my sake? I'm glad to be of help to someone."

Rin

*"Hey now. You may be glad, but you're not having fun!
Look, I'm talking about what's fun for you. I'm asking you if there's anything you consider
fun!"*

Tohsaka roars out.

"—————"

*Even if she says so, I can't answer what I don't know.
I can't think of anything that's fun for me, and most of all——
——I'm not qualified to have such a wish.*

While Rin has suspicions about the unhealthy nature of Shirou's way of life, it's at this moment where she truly begins to understand how hollow his existence is. Shirou doesn't find *anything* fun. Everything that he does is simply in service of what he believes in, he derives no enjoyment or satisfaction from anything he does. The player grows accustomed to Shirou's internal thought process over the course of the story, but this moment aims to drag them out of that familiarity by framing just how disturbing and self-destructive his way of life really is. This reversal of what is traditionally shown and told breeds empathy for someone who would otherwise be very difficult to relate to, while also using the other characters' responses to his true beliefs as a grounding tool for how unnatural and troubling Shirou is as a person. The rule of "Show, don't tell" is not an absolute one. There are many cases where careful utilization of both can be used to build up much more layered and nuanced characters than what would otherwise be possible. Diegesis has its place within storytelling, and can build empathy for characters that would otherwise be very difficult to relate to.

Strongest Element

With no exception, the strongest element within Unlimited Blade Works is Shirou himself. He is a broken individual, someone who is so wracked by survivor's guilt that his very sense of self has been eroded away to dust. His ideals are the one thing that holds him together and yet, they are also what's tearing him apart.

“A dream to reach a world where no one has to suffer.” Marred by the reality that to save someone by necessity means to forsake another, to have such a contradiction act as the foundation for one’s self is profoundly self destructive.

But what choice was left to him? As the sole survivor of a massive blaze that took hundreds of lives, he believed that others had to die so that he could survive. It is that very reason why he looked up to his adoptive father so much. Kiritsugu showed him an idealism that completely rejected that belief. Even when he couldn’t save everyone, he was overjoyed at being able to save just one child. Upon seeing how happy he was, Shirou thought that he could have that happiness as well; that perhaps doing everything he could to help others would help fill the hollowness within his heart.

The self-destructiveness of his personality is shown multiple times throughout the story, but one of the most heart-wrenching examples of it takes place when Rin takes him out on a fun day out with Saber. In the middle of a day where he finds himself genuinely enjoying himself, he has a realization:

Shirou

“...It was really fun.

The town I only used to walk by...

I didn't know all the things I didn't involve myself in were so meaningful.

"_____"

As soon as I think so, something like a cage falls on me, and I understand.

I don't deserve this.

I'm unworthy of all this.

It tells me so from deep down within me.”

Shirou cannot stand the idea that he can simply have fun. He hates himself for having forgotten the guilt that drives everything he does. It’s not just the beliefs that he formed during the fire that caused this, it was the pressure of being the singular survivor of a massive accident. Constantly he asks himself “Why did I survive when no one else did?”. How could he possibly enjoy life when he feels a need to make his survival worth the death of everyone else?

Shirou's future self, Archer, shows the exact cost of living a life so feverishly devoted to the impossible. He embodies everything that Shirou wishes to be, the purest distillation of the ideals that Shirou holds closest to his heart. Yet... Archer is a man who is filled with regrets. At every turn, he was betrayed by the very beliefs that he had. Even in death, he finds no reprieve. Due to offering his soul up to the world itself, he is doomed to spend an eternity acting as a Counter Guardian, committed to the ideals that he has grown to hate, with no opportunity to escape.

Within Shirou lies an undeniable sincerity, yet it is one born through endless guilt and countless hardship. The tragedy of the child who so desperately wishes he could save those around him no matter the cost to his already broken mind evokes a uniquely strong sympathy.

Unsuccessful Element

The least successful element of Unlimited Blade Works lies within its handling of the various bad endings that the player can reach. While the idea of a bad ending isn't bad in and of itself, the way these endings are executed makes little to no intuitive sense. During a scene where Shirou is facing a servant all by himself without Saber to aid him, the player is given the choice to use a command spell (each master receives three at the beginning of the Holy Grail War, and they can be used to issue magically bound commands) to summon Saber. Given the circumstance, the player would see no reason to not use it. However, this results in an unexpected bad ending where Shirou abruptly gets his arm cut off.

Many of the bad endings present within the game are of a similar nature, where seemingly arbitrary choices lead to bad endings due to information that the player hasn't been privy to yet. They hamper the flow and pacing of the story for little to no narrative pay off. This element could be made significantly stronger by having more of the bad endings line up with information that is present to the player. Beyond that, the bad endings could also be used as another method to strengthen the core themes of Unlimited Blade Works by tying into the dialectical structure spoken of previously. If there were bad endings that showcased the pitfalls of Shirou's malformed ideals and the consequences of them earlier on, that would be a much stronger usage of the concept.

Highlight

To preface, it is important to understand an element present within the world of *Fate/Stay Night*. Shirou as a mage is very weak. Due to both his lack of training, and his natural aptitude being low, Shirou can do very little. However, he knows how to use reinforcement magecraft, allowing him to make items temporarily stronger by strengthening their structure. For example, he is able to make a rolled up poster as strong as an iron rod. Upon observing Archer fight, Shirou figures out how to use projection magecraft, a much more advanced version of reinforcement that allows Shirou to replicate weapons once he has seen them once. These are both an extension of Shirou's true ability, even if he doesn't realize it at the time.

Later, Shirou watches Archer recite a poem:

Archer

*"I am the bone of my sword
Steel is my body and fire is my blood
I have created over a thousand blades
Unknown to Death,
Nor known to Life.
Have withstood pain to create many weapons
Yet, those hands will never hold anything
So as I pray, Unlimited Blade Works."*

Upon completing it, a fire that doesn't burn spreads out in every direction. Everything goes white. When he regains his sight, Shirou finds himself upon an endless hill, gears filling the sky. Littered across the landscape lies countless swords.

This is what is known as a "reality marble", and this particular one shares its title with the name of this paper. A reality marble is one's internal world, projected upon reality. In Archer's case, he recites an aria of regret, one that represents the life of someone who was betrayed by everything he held dear. It is the catalyst to cast his reality marble upon the world.

Near the end of the story, Shirou faces the heroic spirit Gilgamesh, who repeatedly calls him a fake, deriding his ideals as those of one who cannot accept reality. This triggers the epiphany that Shirou needs to truly realize what the origin of his magecraft is:

Shirou

"I make up my mind on this hill of swords.

...That if I can save the world in front of me, I will fight for it.

I didn't even need to think about it.

My world is small.

This small "world" is all I have ever been able to create."

"———So that's it!"

Shirou's ability to use reinforcement and projection magecraft is simply an extension of his internal world. Upon realizing the true nature of himself in totality, Shirou finally gains the ability to conceptualize and use his reality marble.

Shirou

"Everything is here, and nothing is here.

That is why this is called Unlimited Blade Works.

This is the only definite answer obtained by the one who lived as a sword all his life."

As someone who spent their entire life living as a metaphorical weapon against injustice, this is the one ability that Shirou truly possesses: the ability to manifest his internal world into physical objects. Every weapon he has ever seen is stored within the endless hill that his reality marble's landscape is composed of, and it is from here that Shirou draws upon them when he projects them. While Shirou and Archer both possess this internal world, their respective paradigms change the appearance of the world and the invocation drastically. This is best represented by Shirou's version of the summoning aria:

Shirou

"I am the bone of my sword.

Steel is my body and fire is my blood.

I have created over a thousand blades.

*Unaware of loss,
Nor aware of gain.
Withstood pain to create weapons, waiting for one's arrival.
I have no regrets. This is the only path.
My whole life was Unlimited Blade Works!"*

Shirou's aria differs greatly from Archer's, and demonstrates the difference in the conclusion they both reached. Archer says that he is "Unknown to death, Nor known to life", representing his existence as a Counter Guardian that will never know the respite of death. Shirou on the other hand states that he is "Unaware of loss, Nor aware of gain", a showcase of his newfound world view. He acknowledges that he will never achieve his ideals, yet he also refuses to let that fact stop him. Shirou changes the line of "Have withstood pain to create many weapons" to "Withstood pain to create weapons, waiting for one's arrival" to make clear that he holds onto the hope granted to him by his dreams, no matter how in vain that belief may be. Finally, Archer ends his aria with "Yet, those hands will never hold anything. So as I pray, Unlimited Blade Works", showing his regret at never achieving the things that he wanted all his life. His hands will never hold the fruits of his labor, everything has slipped between his fingers like grains of sand. Shirou's last section, by contrast, becomes "I have no regrets. This is the only path. My whole life was Unlimited Blade Works!". His words are meant to galvanize himself. His words are affirmation of his resolve, that there are no regrets within him, nor any alternative paths for him to take. His whole life was that of a weapon to cut the darkness. Just as Unlimited Blade Works is a reflection of himself; his whole life is a reflection of the conclusion that he came to.

Shirou's utilization of Unlimited Blade Works at the end of the story represents the completion of his journey. He has come to a conclusion that is vastly different than Archer, and within doing so truly finds himself. He acknowledges the impossibility of his dreams, and yet defiantly chooses to pursue them anyways. The projection of his internal world upon reality itself acts as a parallel to his new beliefs. This moment acts as a culmination of everything the story was building towards, and is executed with an incredible level of finesse.

Critical Reception

Fate/Stay Night is a visual novel that is particularly hard to find reputable critical reception for, as the game relies on a widely disseminated translation by “Mirror Moon”, a fan translation group. There has never been an official English release. Within this section there is an informal review found after much digging.

‘Whatever’ of HonestGamers stated in their review of Fate/Stay Night (Where they give a score of 9/10):

“ This is one of the major themes of F/SN: Shirou's struggles with his ideals and their consequences. Throughout the visual novel, his devotion to his ideal and lack of concern for himself worries his friends and allies. In the three different routes that make up F/sn, we can have Shirou reaffirm his ideal or renounce it for something else. His development is one of the major driving forces of F/SN.”

Lessons

Utilization of the dialectical method to build up the themes of a piece allows for much more resonant delivery of its message. - Build your themes like you would build an argument. Unlimited Blade Works very clearly states the thesis of Shirou’s beliefs early on in the story, and then uses the conflict with Archer to pick at all the points and flaws within said ideology. This is followed by Shirou finding a middle ground between the flaws and merits of his ideals, creating a synthesis. Challenging the core tenets of the themes that one presents within a piece of fiction allows for them to shine brighter than if they simply ignored their implications.

Well-utilized and implemented reference material acts as a form of ‘narrative shorthand’, allowing for much more complex narratives to be delivered without becoming convoluted. - Unlimited Blade Works utilizes its reference material, specifically Avalon, with a high degree of effectiveness. The additional elegant complexity added to a story isn’t limited only to reference material, however. Ontology, Hermeneutics, Poetics, Architecture, historiography, etc. all add different elements and flavors to a piece of media, and provide multiple levels of richness and analysis that can greatly bolster how resonant the core message of a work may be.

The contrast between thoughts and actions are key to creating compelling and believable characters. - “Show don’t tell” is not an absolute rule. There are many manners in which it can be played with to allow for greater depth and dramatic irony in terms of building character relations and player empathy. Shirou is a character that can be very difficult to relate to given how extreme the nature of his trauma is, as well as the ways in which it has shaped his world view. However, the unique swapping of diegesis and mimesis that the story employs allows for players to relate to a character that may have been very difficult to traditionally relate to.

Summation

Unlimited Blade Works is a technical masterclass in utilizing traditional literary techniques to greatly bolster the resonance of the core themes present within. Not only that, the beauty of its message evokes emotions that are exceedingly difficult to nail down. Common logic dictates that if something is impossible or contradictory, it is important to learn to let go. Some dreams are simply never meant to be, and learning to accept that is an important part of growing up.

However...

Does something being impossible make it not worth striving for? Of course not. If everyone followed that logic, mankind would not have accomplished the myriad of feats that we have. Insurmountable odds and unending hardship have been repeatedly ignored in the course of our history and through the defiance of the human spirit, we achieve the unachievable.

It is within the struggle between our ideals and reality that Unlimited Blade Works makes its greatest triumph. Faced against the cold truths of reality, it is a tale that warmly embraces the player, emphatically telling them that “no, your dreams aren’t a mistake”. There is *a/ways* worth to be found in fighting for what you believe in, regardless of how childish or naive said beliefs may be.

Shirou is a broken individual with the belief that he had to make his dreams come true. His ideals exist outside of reality, and it’s his refusal to accept the various contradictions and

flaws within his world view that leads to Archer becoming the bitter and cynical Heroic Spirit that he is. By adjusting his goals to living in accordance with his beliefs as opposed to focusing solely on achieving them, Shirou both corrects the mistakes that lead his future self down the path he went down *and* gives himself the opportunity to truly heal. He makes his ideals work within his reality.

We live in a time rife with hardship, a world filled with an endless amount of injustices that are seemingly impossible to fix. It can be exhausting to feel like no matter how hard you fight, that things will never change. Even so, there is meaning within our collective struggle. Even if we can't fix the world by ourselves, we pave the path for future generations to move closer to that ever-distant utopia. Always remember:

Your dreams were never a mistake.

Citations

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