Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Steins;Gate

Platform: Windows / Xbox 360 / PSP / PS Vita / PS3 / PS4

Genre: Visual Novel

Release Date: October 15, 2009 (Japan) / March 31, 2014 (Internationally)

Developer: 5pb. / Nitroplus

Publisher: 5pb. (Japan) / Spike Chunsoft (Internationally)

Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer:** Chiyomaru Shikura (Planner and Base Story) / Naotaka Hayashi (Scenario Writer)

Overview

> " The universe has a beginning, but it has no end. --Infinite
> Stars too have a beginning, but are by their own power destroyed. --Finite
> History teaches that those who hold wisdom are often the most foolish.
> The fish in the sea know not the land. If they too hold wisdom, they too will be destroyed.
> It is more ridiculous for man to exceed light speed than for fish to live ashore.
> This may also be called God's final warning to those who rebel. "
> — Okabe Rintarou

  Steins;Gate tells the story of an eccentric man named Okabe Rintarou and his friends as they invent a useless machine that combines a phone and microwave — a device fittingly titled the 'PhoneWave (Name Subject to Change)'. By pure accident, however, this invention turns out to be capable of something remarkable: the ability to send emails to the past. These time-traveling emails (dubbed 'D-Mail') are capable of changing the current 'worldline' of the universe, effectively rewriting the past, present, and future to accommodate whatever impacts that message would have after suddenly being inserted into the past. While initially carefree with the discovery, Okabe soon learns that holding the key to time itself is far more of a curse than a blessing, as this invention leads him to become entangled in a huge conspiracy that threatens the people he cares about and even the fate of the world.

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Making use of its lengthy, slow-paced first half, *Steins;Gate* meticulously sets up a dense, grand narrative behind a façade of mundanity. It simultaneously constructs a unique cast of compelling characters while progressively introducing a myriad of inconspicuous plot threads, whose importance initially flies under the radar of the player. It is only once this setup is fully complete that *Steins;Gate* finally executes everything all at once, transforming from a causal, slice-of-life story into an emotionally stirring psychological thriller. *Steins;Gate* goes on to systematically reveal the true consequences behind every element it had introduced, composing a multitude of satisfying twists and poignant emotional climaxes. Through these moments, the narrative highlights the importance of both optimistic faith and pessimistic cynicism, crafting an intriguing core philosophy that argues that embracing both opposing ideals at once is more powerful than simply accepting one or the other.

Characters

Future Gadget Lab – A scientific lab in Akihabara, Tokyo, dedicated to inventing futuristic devices capable of destroying the world's ruling structure and plunging it into chaos — at least, that's how its founder, Okabe Rintarou, describes it. In truth, the 'lab' is nothing more than the rented-out second floor of a CRT repair shop where a small group of friends mess around and occasionally build useless gadgets. Most of the major characters in *Steins;Gate* join (or are already a member of) the lab.

- **Okabe Rintarou [Lab Mem 001]** – The protagonist and sole point-of-view character of *Steins;Gate*. Okabe claims that, in reality, he is a 'mad scientist' known as Hououin Kyouma, who fights a mighty battle against an oppressive group simply referred to as the 'Organization'. In actuality, though, he's just an ordinary university student. This absurd fantasy of his is merely a strong case of *chuunibyou* — a common trope in Japanese media wherein a character earnestly acts on fantastical delusions of their own design, often in an attempt to stand out or look cool. Given that Okabe is an adult, his behavior usually comes off as bizarre and embarrassing, although that fact doesn't stop him.

  Under his Hououin Kyouma persona, Okabe is eccentric, arrogant, and overdramatic. In more serious situations, however, this persona weakens and Okabe's true nature, which is largely the opposite of the façade he puts up, is exposed. Though socially awkward, he cares deeply for his friends and would lend them a helping hand without a second thought.

  Okabe possesses a special ability that he dubs 'Reading Steiner' (which, unsurprisingly given his personality, is a gibberish name he made up on the spot). Reading Steiner allows Okabe to retain his memories when the worldline changes rather than having them suppressed and overwritten by new ones.

- **Makise Kurisu [Lab Mem 004]** – A genius neuroscientist, more intelligent and accomplished than many of her peers despite only being 18 years old. Kurisu is rational and

curious, as one might expect of a scientist. Her sensible nature often clashes with Okabe's behavior, which brings out her sarcastic side (or, as Okabe and Daru would claim, her *tsundere* side). She joins the lab out of scientific curiosity, eager to experiment with and learn more about the PhoneWave (Name Subject to Change), but eventually goes on to form friendships with the other members. In the second act, Kurisu serves as Okabe's main line of support, both emotionally and in practical matters, and their relationship is a key focus of the overall narrative.

Kurisu is the creator of the Time Leap Machine, an extension of the PhoneWave (Name Subject to Change) capable of digitizing, compressing, and sending a person's memory to their past self. Along with D-Mails, time leaping plays a huge role in the story.

- **Shiina Mayuri [Lab Mem 002]** – A childhood friend of Okabe, with whom she is extremely close. Mayuri is childish and absentminded, and although she struggles to understand complicated matters, she is perceptive when it comes to the feelings of her friends. Accordingly, she is almost always cheerful and caring.

  After being killed at the end of act one, a majority of the narrative follows Okabe in his desperate attempts to save Mayuri through time travel. On the cluster of worldlines known as attractor field alpha, where most of the story takes place, Mayuri's death is a 'convergent event', meaning all worldlines will converge to that result no matter what.

- **Hashida "Daru" Itaru [Lab Mem 003]** – A close friend of Okabe's, and his 'right-hand man'. He goes by the nickname 'Daru', a combination of the final syllables of both his family name (Hashi<u>da</u>) and given name (Ita<u>ru</u>). Daru is an extremely skilled hacker and programmer, with impressive engineering capabilities as well. Aside from his abilities, he is a massive anime and game *otaku*, being an unashamed, vocal fan of *eroge* as well as *moe* culture (accordingly, he's a frequent customer of the maid café that Mayuri and Faris work at). In the future of attractor field alpha worldlines, Daru is a member of Okabe's resistance group, Valkyrie, which fights against SERN and the Committee of 300. Additionally, Daru is the engineer behind Valkyrie's time machine, FG204.

- **Amane Suzuha [Lab Mem 008]** – A girl who pops up near the start of the story, having gotten a part-time job at the CRT workshop beneath the lab. Suzuha is an energetic and athletic girl, who can get quite competitive at times. In the second act, it is revealed that Suzuha is a time traveler from the year 2036 and a member of Valkyrie. She grew up in a dystopian future where the Committee of 300 had successfully subjugated the world using the power of time travel. Using Valkyrie's time machine, she arrived in 2010 on a mission to assist Okabe in preventing this bleak future. Suzuha's wish is to meet her father, whom she had never even learned the name of in her time, and who is later revealed to be Daru. This wish was inadvertently granted through a D-Mail Okabe sent to prevent her from leaving Akihabara earlier in the story.

- **Akiha "Faris" Rumiho [Lab Mem 007]** – A friend of Mayuri's who owns the cat-maid café 'MayQueen Nyan-Nyan', where they both work part-time. Although 'Faris' is her work name, she tells everyone to call her that, even outside of the job. Somewhat like Okabe with Hououin Kyouma, she typically acts out her 'Faris' persona around almost anyone. While this persona is playful and somewhat ditzy, Faris is actually extremely observant and able to accurately read people simply by looking into their eyes, a skill she calls 'Cheshire Break'. Faris' wish, granted with a D-Mail, was to prevent her father from dying in a plane crash.

- **Urushibara Luka [Lab Mem 006]** – A classmate of Mayuri's and a friend of both her and Okabe. Luka is soft-spoken and unassertive, usually struggling to stand up for themselves. They first met Okabe while being harassed by a group of photographers. Their sheepish nature proved ineffective at driving the men away, so Okabe stepped in to help out, which resulted in Luka developing feelings for him. Luka's wish, granted with a D-Mail, was to be born a girl.

- **Kiryuu Moeka [Lab Mem 005]** – A peculiar woman who never lets go of her phone, always using it to send messages or take pictures. She is standoffish and quiet, rarely speaking more than a few words at any given moment. Instead, she prefers sending emails to communicate, even if the recipient is standing directly next to her. Contrasting her actual behavior, her messages tend to be excited and full of life, only adding to the strangeness of her emotionless exterior. Moeka is later revealed to be an extremely lonely, broken woman who had been desperate for any source of acceptance or affection, which led to her being emotionally manipulated into joining the Rounders.

Committee of 300 – The overarching antagonistic force of the *Science Adventure* series, of which *Steins;Gate* is an entry. The Committee of 300 is a shadow organization that secretly controls many of the institutions and organizations underpinning society. It consists of a mere 300 members of the global elite. Their ultimate goal is to enact the ominously named 'Human Domestication Project', which involves culling the human population to a manageable one billion, whom the Committee will then brainwash, enslave, and subsequently rule over. They experiment with various potential means of realizing this goal throughout the series, but *Steins;Gate* deals specifically with their attempts at time travel.

- **SERN** – Based on the real-world scientific organization CERN, SERN is an international particle physics laboratory that was secretly formed by the Committee of 300 to experiment with time travel. SERN serves as the proxy-antagonist of *Steins;Gate*. In the future of attractor field alpha worldlines, they capture Kurisu and force her to complete her time travel theory, subsequently using the research to carry out the Human Domestication Project, resulting in the dystopia that Suzuha grows up in.

- **The Rounders** – A mercenary group operating under SERN, tasked with carrying out their dirty work. This includes retrieving IBN5100s, an old, rare computer model that serves as *Steins;Gate*'s main MacGuffin, as it features a hidden function capable of decrypting SERN's most sensitive data. At the end of the first act, a group of Rounders led by Moeka murder Mayuri and attempt to capture the rest of the lab, kicking the plot into high gear.

Breakdown

Multilayered Storytelling

The first half of *Steins;Gate* is infamously slow-paced, focusing heavily on characterization and establishing emotional connections between the characters and the player. Critically, it also serves to painstakingly set up the second half. While this description may not appear to support the opening claim regarding pacing on the surface, context is key. *Steins;Gate* is a visual novel roughly 30–50 hours in length (as written on the game's Steam page), and the point at which it suddenly pivots from slice-of-life with a side of mystery to psychological thriller is placed almost exactly halfway through. If described using a traditional three-act structure, the entire first half of *Steins;Gate* would qualify as just the first act. Given that, in terms of relative size, the opening act is the longest section (being ~15–25 hours in length, depending on the player), the claim of slow pacing is justified.

The second half manages to quicken the pace dramatically and stay strong throughout, however, due to the extensive work done in the first half to put everything into place. This half is where *Steins;Gate* receives its reputation for being a tragedy-filled psychological thriller.

The existence of a deeper, overarching plot is clear from the very beginning of the story, and while it is still gradually expanded upon explicitly during the first few chapters of the game, a large portion of the first act consists of slice-of-life scenes that focus on character interaction over plot development. Their sheer volume is what gives the first half its distinctly sluggish pacing.

It would be a mistake, however, to view these abundant slice-of-life-style scenes as inconsequential. In fact, *Steins;Gate* most often layers multiple levels of purpose within each scene, incorporating aspects that are inherently more apparent to the player, like characterization or developing the relationships between characters, in order to obfuscate plot setup that is occurring simultaneously.

As an example, there is a scene in the first act where Kurisu opens up to Okabe about the unstable relationship she has with her father. On the surface, it offers a lot of characterization for Kurisu by offering insight into her deepest insecurities and how she came to be who she is now. Okabe, too, is characterized here; his sudden, unhesitant pledge to help her in trying to mend the relationship between her and her father indicates how much he cares about his friends, even new

ones like Kurisu. By extension, this scene deepens the relationship between the two, showing how they are beginning to rely on each other in deeply personal matters beyond what would be expected of their 'professional relationship'. Simultaneously, however, several crucial plot details are introduced here that will become extremely important much later, all the way in the final chapter. When presented in this scene, the details of Kurisu's backstory appear to exist for purely character reasons; however, the narrative is, unbeknownst to the player, simultaneously using them to build up the plot in the background.

Beneath the surface of this emotional and sweet scene are many meticulously arranged layers. Some layers, like characterization, feel meaningful at the time, which makes the scene strong in its own right when the player first experiences it, but all will become consequential at some point in the story — and once they do, the intentional setup work done earlier is not lost on the player. Most scenes filling the early chapters of *Steins;Gate* function just as this one does, carefully developing multiple aspects of the narrative at once, some explicitly for immediate payoff and others less obviously to be used to great effect later on.

Given the more outwardly compelling narrative of the second half, the first half is often dismissed for its lackluster impact in comparison. In doing so, however, one ignores the critical role it plays in allowing the second half to be as strong as it is. Though these halves are very different in tone and pacing, they are still undeniably two fractions of a single, cohesive whole. Despite ultimately being a psychological thriller, *Steins;Gate* manages to justify the existence of its slowly paced first half because each scene is composed thoughtfully and with intent. Elements that appear extraneous at first rarely are, returning later in surprising ways. This multilayered storytelling approach is used to build up both its plot and characters extensively in the first half, preparing them to be rapidly expounded upon in the second half without skipping a beat.

Characterization: Distinctive, yet Convincing

Given its length, game genre, and the heavy focus on character interactions during the first half, *Steins;Gate* dedicates significantly more time to characterization than most games. As a result, every character is given the proper time and care to be thoroughly introduced and fleshed out, made to feel like real, complex people with dreams, insecurities, motivations, mannerisms, and much more. By gradually exploring each character steadily over time rather than through dense info-dumps, these characterizations come off as providing authentic, rather than contrived, depth. The characterization, in turn, helps to establish an emotional connection between the characters and the player, which is crucial when, in the second and third acts, the game frequently relies on evoking player empathy to create meaningful experiences.

The characters of *Steins;Gate* are endlessly eccentric, yet despite their evidently larger-than-life personalities and exaggerated idiosyncrasies, they are still written to come off as plausible and human at their core. While any member of the cast could qualify as an example,

the strongest is Okabe. Okabe is the biggest oddball of them all, always playing pretend with his Hououin Kyouma persona amongst friends and strangers alike. He has no qualms with exhibiting his strange *chuunibyou* behaviors, such as when he loudly narrates a phone call while there is obviously no one on the other line, or when he recites one of the many nonsense phrases that he made up, like the iconic, "This is the choice of Steins Gate!" in response to seemingly any event. The player inevitably struggles to keep up with Okabe's seemingly random, chaotic peculiarities at the start of the game, but as they gradually come to understand him better as a character, they realize how consistent he actually is. Not normal, certainly, but not contradictory, either.

Every tic of his, the player will gradually come to see, has meaning for his character. Often, he invokes particular behaviors as a means of concealing the insecurities and awkwardness of his true self, choosing to hide behind the haughty, bold Hououin Kyouma persona rather than facing the world as the real Okabe Rintarou. For example, he refuses to call Kurisu by her actual name, instead coming up with and using a slew of nicknames, the most common being 'Christina' and 'Assistant'. Though this first gives off the impression that he's simply condescending and arrogant, seemingly ignoring the fact that she is clearly more intelligent and capable than he is, the real reason behind this behavior is just the opposite. In truth, he has immense admiration and respect for her, but he possesses neither the confidence nor social acumen to properly accept and deal with that fact. For Okabe, it is easier to hide behind a persona of fabricated pride than confront how intimidated and embarrassed he is when facing her. Not only does this quirk serve to make him more distinct as a character, but it also hides a significant amount of depth inside of it, resulting in a far more well-rounded character than might be assumed based on the habit alone. In this way, his countless quirks serve to make him exceptionally unique while also humanizing him, making him more relatable and realistic to the player in spite of said uniqueness.

Just as well, the origin of his strangeness contextualizes and greatly humanizes his character, as the player later learns how he developed his Hououin Kyouma persona for sake of Mayuri when they were children. After Mayuri fell into an extreme depressive episode following the death of her grandmother, Okabe sought to do anything to console her and protect her from the harshness of reality. To do so, he created Hououin Kyouma, a persona that, in his mind, was stronger and more capable than his real self could ever be, one strong enough, perhaps, to save Mayuri even though 'Okabe Rintarou' could not. While the persona appears comical and childish when unironically played by the now adult Okabe, it was borne of the pure desperation and weakness he had felt at the time.

Understanding Okabe as a character is difficult at first, but therein lies an advantage of the characterization-heavy opening act: the player will steadily get to know him, connect with him, and see the deeply human aspects of him beneath the surface. Though far from trivial to pull off, the end result is creating a truly unique character, with such an unmistakably distinct voice that most of his dialogue lines, of which there are literally thousands, are immediately recognizable as 'him' to anyone even vaguely familiar with his character.

Realizations: The Execution of Compelling Twists

The second half of *Steins;Gate* features many twists, a fitting pattern given that it begins with one. A potential flaw that can result from executing frequent twists in a story is that they may begin to come off as cheap to the player, appearing as drama forced unnaturally into the story by a writer's misguided desire to inject excitement and intrigue into the scene or sequence. The most common approach to countering this issue is through the use of foreshadowing: giving the player a subtle hint of what is to come so as the make the sudden development feel less contrived. *Steins;Gate*, too, relies on foreshadowing to deliver its twists effectively. Rather than simply building upon one or two instances of foreshadowing, however, most of *Steins;Gate*'s twists are instead constructed upon a foundation of dozens.

The extensive amount of careful planning that went into the overarching narrative is evident when looking at these twists and seeing how frequently the details foreshadowing them can be found scattered around in the first act. In terms of setting up twists, the approach of multilayered storytelling was extremely effective.

As an example, nearly every single scene with Suzuha in the first act conceals an intricate layer of foreshadowing beneath the more salient characterization and relationship development layers. Without already knowing her backstory and role in the narrative, the player is likely to move on and overlook the many strange details and subtle hints surrounding her; however, once her story is fully revealed in chapter 6, there is a single, brief moment where the player suddenly begins to connect the dots between all of the small irregularities that they had held on to subconsciously but paid little heed to. Everything from her strange greetings, the hints towards a harsh upbringing, her peculiar disdain for Kurisu, the way she conveniently appeared after the 'satellite' had struck the Radio Kaikan — the player had learned countless odd details since nearly the start of the game that let on to her true identity. These details were purposefully woven into the narrative in such a way that they were simultaneously noticeable yet easy to shrug off and push to the back of the mind once they had no immediate implications — an effect enhanced, again, by the presence of other story layers that would draw the player's attention away.

The twist of Suzuha's true identity is one of many incredible moments set up carefully and deliberately behind the scenes. This twist is extremely effective because, from the player's perspective, it's not simply a shocking *revelation*. It's a *realization*: the sudden convergence of many once disparate details forming together into one whole. The player is, in an instant, led to not only excitedly anticipate what will come next, but also to retroactively appreciate everything that came before.

Suzuha's identity is merely one example. Moments of realization like these are the norm rather than the exception in the latter half of *Steins;Gate*. The first half secretly plants seeds like these everywhere; the details being just obvious enough for the player to recall them when their true purpose is revealed, but layered well enough to conceal their importance, thereby delivering

an effective twist when the time comes. The identity of Moeka's superior, the contents of Faris' D-Mail, the importance of the slew of strange occurrences in the prologue, and many more revelations are carefully set up and effectively executed in much the same way.

Thematic Ambivalence

Following Mayuri's first death halfway through the story, *Steins;Gate* weaves together many moments of tragedy to communicate to the player a set of nuanced themes which are reflective of the complexity of the characters through which they are conveyed.

The darker and overall depressing tone of the second half might lead some to believe that *Steins;Gate* delivers a predominantly pessimistic message, but that is far from the truth. And although it ultimately concludes with a 'happy ending', its overall message is not one of pure optimism, either. Rather, the core themes of *Steins;Gate* rest within the dichotomy of positive and negative extremes, blending together the opposing sides of the spectrum to produce shades of gray more vivid and meaningful than either side would be capable of individually. Much like the concept of yin and yang, *Steins;Gate* holds that these opposites are instead most powerful as an interconnected balance. In particular, it addresses three pairs of opposing ideals:

- Hope and Despair: the struggle between grasping onto naive faith versus succumbing to pragmatic despondency.
- Bonds and Isolation: the value of connections to and reliance on others versus shielding oneself from the pain that those connections are capable of causing.
- Resolve and Resignation: the meaning in always pressing onward in futility versus surrendering to salvage what remains.

Rather than accept one over the other, *Steins;Gate* portrays both the positive and negative extremes of each duality as folly; the 'correct' path forward, it posits, requires the courage to embrace both. This 'truth' is not one it declares outright, but rather one it leads Okabe, and by extension the player, to discover naturally while experiencing the narrative.

The overall relaxed tone of the first half encapsulates the ideals on the 'positive' end of the spectrum: Okabe and his friends live relatively carefree, developing and using time travel on a whim, driven by innocent curiosity. Outside of trivial purposes and experiments, the only time the PhoneWave (Name Subject to Change) is used to meaningful effect is out of pure goodwill: on several occasions, Okabe uses it to grant the otherwise impossible wishes of the people he cares about. Even when these 'wishes' result in unforeseen consequences to the worldline, Okabe does not get too concerned with it and moves on, deciding the benefit to his fellow lab members is worth it. Hope, bonds, and resolve; faced with infrequent opposition, these ideals are taken for granted to the point of being invisible.

Their value becomes all too clear, however, once they're suddenly ripped away.

'Desperation' is the perfect word to encapsulate the start of the second act of *Steins;Gate*. It's desperation that drives Okabe to time leap again and again in an attempt to save Mayuri; desperation that only grows with every failure. His hope, bonds, and resolve become useless, even harmful, ideals to hold on to. His bond with Mayuri gives him tunnel vision; he is so desperate to save her that he's unable to calm down enough to think of a new approach aside from brute force. Hope that he'll eventually succeed, combined with the resolve to do anything for her, pushes him endlessly through a repeating path that leads nowhere, gradually eroding his will and sanity, slowly destroying him. It is then that despair, isolation, and resignation begin to take hold. Feeling as though he has no one to turn to and seeing no way forward, he approaches his absolute breaking point. At this point, these negative ideals have fully supplanted their once dominant opposites, taking complete hold of the narrative.

After taking the time to explore both ends of its positive-negative dualities in their pure forms, *Steins;Gate* finally begins heavily exploring its core philosophy in earnest. Despite the fact that Okabe was the only one who was time leaping, and thus the only one with knowledge of what was happening, Kurisu, through their bond formed in the first half, could tell that something was going on and sought to help him. Though he thought he was alone, she was able to give him new hope and resolve; it did not destroy the negative ideals consuming him, but this light was enough to push him forward. Thus, the first clear instance of ambivalence — the blend of both the positive and negative — is revealed, establishing *Steins;Gate*'s philosophy that this fusion is more powerful than the sum of its parts.

This philosophy proceeds to be explored and exposed through many facets of the story: plot, characters, and even in how the game uses branching endings.

A majority of the second act of *Steins;Gate* consists of Okabe undoing the D-Mails sent in the first act, attempting to return to the original worldline that the story began on, as Mayuri's death will not be an unavoidable convergent event there. To do so, however, means undoing each of the 'wishes' he granted to his friends. He, with good intent, delivered them each a world where their dreams were a reality. To save Mayuri, however, he needed to take away the things that mattered most from the people he cared about. Thus, he spends time learning more about each of them and their wishes before convincing them to erase from history the thing they treasure more than anything else.

The bonds that once gave Okabe strength were now the cause of great suffering. He had the resolve, though wavering, to save Mayuri at all costs, but it would still destroy him every time he was forced to hurt his friends. The path forward that should be paved with pure hope was sullied with despair; thus, to move ahead and embrace hope would require him to accept that despair as well.

Unlike with Okabe's initial desperate struggle, there is now a light at the end of the tunnel; and yet, unlike that time, moving forward and making progress was, itself, a source of suffering. In this way, *Steins;Gate* fundamentally strips the positive and negative connotations

from the concepts of 'success' and 'failure' respectively, much as it does with its contrasting pairs of ideals. The player, then, is not made to assume that Okabe's chosen path is the 'correct' one but is instead encouraged to come to their own conclusions.

In fact, this is directly reflected in how and where the game uses major branching and alternate endings. Of the six endings in *Steins;Gate*, three are placed earlier in the story, at the end of chapters 6, 7, and 8. Each branch occurs at a point where Okabe is deciding whether or not to send a D-Mail which will erase the wish of that chapter's focus character (Suzuha, Faris, and Luka, respectively), as he weighs his desire to save Mayuri against the pain of carrying the knowledge of what his friends sacrificed for their sake.

Whether the story continues on the main path or branches off to an alternate ending depends on whether the player chooses to have Okabe send the D-Mail or not. Sending the D-Mail may continue the main story and move Okabe closer to success, but that does not inherently make it the 'right' choice. Giving the player an opportunity to see other paths of equal validity and confront the ambiguity of 'success' reinforces the philosophy of ambivalence, in turn strengthening the main route's thematic power.

The relationship between Okabe and Kurisu in the second act, too, is reflective of these themes. Even when Kurisu was unaware of Okabe's struggle, she came to his aid; once she did know, she always supported and helped him. Okabe was able to keep moving forward because the negativity consuming him was balanced out by the positive influence that Kurisu gave him; together, they created ambivalence, the 'true' path forward. This portrayal is perhaps the easiest for the player to see due to how important their relationship is in the narrative.

For a final example, the duality of 'Okabe Rintarou' and 'Hououin Kyouma' is a reflection of *Steins;Gate*'s philosophy in much the same way, with the former representing the 'negative' end of the spectrum and the latter representing the 'positive' end. As characterized, 'Okabe Rintarou', the version of Okabe that he believes is his real self, is weak, pessimistic, and afraid, whereas Hououin Kyouma is strong, confident, and fearless. During the first act, he rarely drops his Hououin Kyouma persona, but as his sanity declines in the second half, he begins to lose that side of himself completely. Each side has its benefits and shortcomings: Hououin Kyouma may have the courage to move forward, but, ultimately, it's a fabrication that Okabe cannot wholly rely on to carry him; 'Okabe Rintarou', on the other hand, may better reflect his genuine self, but its weakness and cynicism drag Okabe down and hold him back. Neither is portrayed to be the 'best' version of Okabe; instead, he is continually forced to use elements of both personas as he confronts many hardships. The version of Okabe, then, that leaves the strongest impression on the player is this one: a blend of two opposites that, when working together, can achieve harmony which outshines either constituent component.

The significance of this duality is shown most clearly in the true ending (which serves as the third and final act of the story). Following a complete mental breakdown after worldline convergence results in him accidentally killing Kurisu with his own hands, Okabe refuses to

make a final attempt at reaching 'Steins Gate', a worldline where, theoretically, neither Mayuri nor Kurisu have to die. This moment depicts the complete, fully exposed 'Okabe Rintarou', the Okabe who believes he cannot do anything and doesn't even have the courage to try. In a climactic scene following this breakdown, Okabe receives a wake-up call from both Mayuri and his future self (via a D-Mail), which results in the 'resurrection' of the Hououin Kyouma persona. Embracing this side once more and achieving ambivalence, Okabe regains the ability to push ahead one last time in order to realize the future he desires. The path forward is neither to yield nor charge forward heedlessly; to reach Steins Gate, Okabe needs to harness a degree of both faith and cynicism, for one without the other is mere folly. After going through so much to reach this point, Okabe — and the player who had been on this entire journey as well — knows this to be true.

Strongest Element

The greatest strength of *Steins;Gate* is how tightly constructed its plot is. For how long, expansive, and complex the plot becomes, *Steins;Gate* remains remarkably consistent at ensuring every element, however minor, plays a meaningful role in the story. Especially in the first act, plot threads and character arcs are frequently introduced and quickly overshadowed; however, they are never forgotten. Eventually, whether it's one hour later or over a dozen, they always resurface in a satisfying manner to contribute to a plot twist or emotional climax. This meticulously crafted setup-and-execution relationship, where every detail in the narrative is made to contribute to the setup of a powerfully executed moment later on, is a testament to how thoroughly planned the overall narrative must have been, despite the inevitable complications that would arise when planning a story centering around time travel.

Unsuccessful Element

One of *Steins;Gate*'s weakest elements is how it uses its branching endings in chapter 10, near the end of the game. Unlike the Suzuha, Faris, and Luka endings, which branch off from the main story route long before it ends, the final three endings of *Steins;Gate* split off from each other near the conclusion of the main story, with the route that the player takes being based on choices they made all throughout the game. For simplicity, the former three endings will be referred to as 'alternate endings' and the latter three, consisting of Mayuri's ending, Kurisu's ending, and the true ending, will be referred to as 'conclusion endings'.

Unlike the alternate endings, which offer unique and interesting perspectives via 'what-if' scenarios, the branching that occurs for the conclusion endings is not effective in the same way. The main reason why is the fact that the conclusion endings are forced to compete directly with each other, as the player can only get one of them on a single playthrough. For the alternate endings, the player can choose to take the branch, see the ending, and then easily load a save

from before the branch to continue the main story. The conclusion endings are not afforded this, however, because they split off based on choices that the player made spanning all the way back to chapter 4. To see a different conclusion ending, then, the player is forced to go through over half of the game again (which is thousands of lines of dialogue) to change their choices. While the 'skip' function makes this more tolerable, it is still extremely tedious. Additionally, the ending split is extremely convoluted, as there is no indication as to which choices matter or what effect any of them have on the split without looking up a guide.

What truly makes this competition between the conclusion endings a glaring weakness of the game, however, is that it is difficult to justify the existence of Mayuri and Kurisu's endings when compared to the true ending. All three endings resolve chapter 10 in roughly the same way (sacrificing Kurisu to save Mayuri), but only the true ending continues with chapter 11 and the final act of the story, whereas the other two simply end with chapter 10. Put plainly, Mayuri and Kurisu's endings are effectively incomplete versions of the true ending. In the case of Kurisu's ending, this statement is literally true; chapter 10 is identical for both routes, with the singular difference being that only the true ending continues into chapter 11. Conversely, while Mayuri's ending does introduce some changes that differentiate it from the other two endings, those changes serve to directly undermine the emotional impact of chapter 10 by de-emphasizing Kurisu's sacrifice, despite taking the story in the exact same direction. For a narrative that is otherwise very tight, the Mayuri and Kurisu endings are one of the few elements that seem to exist merely for the sake of existing.

If the writers wanted to feature an alternate ending for Mayuri, it would have fit better as one of the alternate endings, branching off prematurely from the main route to tell an interesting 'what-if' scenario, instead of splitting off from the true ending to tell an incomplete version of largely the same story. Kurisu's ending, on the other hand, could have been dropped altogether, as it is identical to the true ending but truncated to exclude the final act.

Highlight

While many scenes could be a contender for the highlight of *Steins;Gate*, one particularly standout part is the epilogue of the story, which comes immediately after the credits roll in the true ending. The epilogue follows Okabe one month after reaching the Steins Gate worldline as he meets with each main character to deliver them a lab pin that he commissioned.

Okabe created the pins to symbolically represent the powerful link uniting the lab, a link that transcended worldlines and led them all to Steins Gate. Even if only Okabe remembers what transpired that August, the pins serve to immortalize what everyone gave to reach this point: the sacrifices they made, the pain they felt, the moments they shared, and what they attained in return for their efforts.

The epilogue begins with a sequence of short scenes where Okabe interacts with each lab member, reflecting on what occurred, what they sacrificed, and what the future may hold for them. By the end of this long, emotionally draining story, the player has a significant degree of emotional investment in each of the characters; these closing moments, then, deliver a degree of catharsis as each character's story, individually, is closed.

After these scenes, only two characters have their stories left unresolved: Okabe and Kurisu. Despite what they went through together on other worldlines, on Steins Gate, they had barely met, and Okabe assumed that they probably never would again. In the final scene of the game, after Okabe accepts this reality, the impossible happens — walking down the street, the two just so happen to pass one another in a moment of pure coincidence. In the most profoundly cathartic moment of them all, the pair are united once more, finally wrapping up the story of the two characters whom the player bonded with the most.

Steins;Gate's story is not one for the faint of heart. In its second and third acts, the player's emotions are repeatedly taken advantage of and crushed. They are made to see the characters that they grew to become attached to be torn down again and again. Yet, as *Steins;Gate*'s core philosophy conveys, pessimism and despair can only take one so far. Thus, the epilogue, the capstone to this sprawling narrative, fully delivers the optimism and hope that balances out the equation. Striking that balance while sealing up every character's story creates a potent, unforgettable sense of catharsis; this feeling that the epilogue creates, then, serves as the highlight of *Steins;Gate*.

Critical Reception

USgamer – Pete Davison [Score: 5/5]

Davison praises *Steins;Gate*'s world and character-building, particularly noting how the cast is able to "continually subvert expectations despite, in many cases, initially appearing to play to conventional anime tropes." Additionally, he commends the game's use of real-world phenomena and urban legends to give an authentic feel to the narrative while still keeping it "accessible and understandable to those who aren't familiar with *otaku* culture as a whole," as well as praising its fully diegetic 'Phone Trigger' system that the player uses to interact with the story. Although not an explicit critique, the review notes that *Steins;Gate* requires a lot of patience and time to get through, which may not be appealing to some given that the "vast majority of your time will be spent reading narration and dialogue."

Destructoid – Brittany Vincent [Score: 8/10]

Vincent similarly praises how well fleshed out the cast of *Steins;Gate* is, highlighting that "later on, it becomes startlingly obvious just how much *Steins;Gate* has forced you to care about

[its characters]." She notes, however, that the story's early pacing and convoluted dives into science fiction concepts may be overwhelming to those inexperienced with visual novels, an issue particularly noteworthy given that the subtle details in these sections are crucial to tying the story together. Despite the caveat, she goes on to conclude that *Steins;Gate* has "a thrilling premise, memorable characters, and a fantastic 'true' ending that may very well move you to tears."

RPG Fan – Leona McCallum [Score: 91/100]

McCallum lightly criticizes *Steins;Gate*'s attention to detail during its slow start, noting that "although you are enjoying the characters and their interactions and the science is certainly interesting, you just want to continue unraveling that juicy mystery the game keeps teasing you with." However, she praises the overall structure of the narrative, emphasizing that although the slow pacing and extensive detail may be frustrating at first, "when you reach the end and you view the bigger picture, you realize you wouldn't change a single thing about it."

Lessons

Setup is just as key as execution

While the execution may be what the player will remember most about a game's story, the setup is what ensures *how* memorable that execution is. While *Steins;Gate* serves as an extreme example, leaning heavily on the 'setup' end of the spectrum at the price of slowing down the pacing significantly, the results speak for themselves. Every plot twist and emotionally evocative scene in *Steins;Gate* is reinforced by hours upon hours of carefully constructed foundation that allows for these moments to be realized to their fullest potential. Not every game would benefit from focusing on the setup as much as *Steins;Gate* does, but dedicating time and care to developing the story's most powerful moments before the fact makes them all the more meaningful when they do come to fruition.

Unique does not inherently equal unrealistic

While characters should, in most cases, be written to feel realistic and well-rounded, that is no reason to stifle creativity. Larger-than-life characters, when given proper depth and development, can come off just as real to players, while at the same time being more unique and memorable. For more lighthearted games, this statement may appear obvious; however, even those with a serious tone and darker themes can manage this to great effect, as *Steins;Gate* proves.

Steins;Gate does not let the fact that it's a serious psychological thriller prevent it from writing exceptionally outlandish characters. Neither, however, does it allow their eccentricity to hinder their complexity. By taking the time and effort to meaningfully characterize its cast, Steins;Gate does both. Each character is given a distinctive personality and voice, making them uniquely memorable, while also being explored to such a depth that they still come across as realistic despite their oddities. This fusion of both, refusing to sacrifice one for the sake of the other, is one of Steins;Gate's greatest strengths.

Empathy is a writer's greatest weapon

Every successful element of Steins;Gate is rooted in the manipulation of player empathy. Through its extensive setup and characterization, it ensures the player establishes a significant degree of emotional investment in the story, as well as a deep understanding of the characters and their relationships. Making use of this link of empathy, Steins;Gate manages to repeatedly deliver evocative emotional climaxes, each standout and meaningful in its own way. Even when the player knows ahead of time what is bound to come, such as in the case of Okabe having to undo the wishes of his friends one by one, the impact is not made any less potent because their investment and empathy have not lessened.

While still useful in analysis to attribute the effectiveness of Steins;Gate's strongest moments to techniques like meticulous setup or in-depth characterization, ultimately, the most important factor contributing to their power is empathy. Steins;Gate tells an incredible story because, at its core, it understands this, and always works towards maintaining the empathic link between narrative and player.

This concept should be far from foreign to any writer, but it can be all too easy to overlook it while focusing on perfecting the technical elements of the writing. In the end, regardless of how interesting the plot is or how witty the dialogue may be, if the player does not have a strong emotional connection to the narrative, it is all for naught.

Summation

The visual novel market is relatively niche compared to other types of games, and although Steins;Gate is one of the better-known and better-selling games of the genre, this fact still holds true. While many are put off, rather justifiably, by their heavy focus on dense narration and dialogue, as well as their tendency towards lengthy, slow-paced narratives, the value of visual novels, and, by extension, any game that puts narrative first, should not be discounted. Steins;Gate is not merely a standout visual novel; it is proof that game narratives can not only rival those of traditional fictional media but perhaps even surpass them. With its excellent cast of

characters, meticulously planned and executed plot, and beautifully written emotional arcs, *Steins;Gate* is a testament to the heights game storytelling can reach.

And to all the mad scientists out there: El Psy Kongroo.

Citations

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