Trails Through Daybreak

# Introduction

Trails through Daybreak, being the start of a new saga in a, at the time, nearly 20 year franchise with 11 entries and 3 completed arcs … needed a new foundation. Following the Trails of Cold Steel arc and the conclusion of the first saga of the franchise, the series was at a narrative moment where it could reboot itself to bring in a new audience by starting completely fresh and pioneering a new direction for the series, freeing itself of nearly 20 years of buildup and writing.

Daybreak takes practically every single criticism of the Trails franchise and JRPGs as a genre and literally builds a new Republic on it. And, in my opinion, it becomes one of the best games in the franchise through doing so.

Daybreak (which I'll be referring to Kuro no Kiseki from this point) is by far the most thematically focused and coherent game in the franchise and it absolutely nails everything the writers want to convey.

This game's themes are fully explored from the ground up through every single character, NPC dialogue, location and chapter and for good reason: The foundation of Kuro’s narrative is more grounded and rooted in reality than anything that's come before it which required the writer's to take it seriously. In other words: they locked the \_\_\_ in.

Just like the game itself, this video will reach some new audiences so here’s what I’m covering in this video:

The first part of this video will assume you have no idea what the Trails franchise is and will be a standalone, spoiler-free review. I hope it encourages you to play the game yourself and if you want a guide on the series I have a video that you can watch too. The rest of this video will be a narrative analysis that covers the plot and themes of the game and there will be marked spoilers that assume you’ve played through at least Trails of Cold Steel. I won’t be recapping the game’s story this time around as we’re focusing solely on analysis.

Thanks for being patient while I played through this game and wrote up the script for this one and I hope you enjoy the new direction I took with it!

# Review (Spoiler-Free)

## Gameplay

In order to bring in newer audiences to the Trails franchise, Kuro makes some major but incredible changes to the core gameplay. The option to play through most of the game with real time action combat (akin Falcom’s Ys series) have been added to the game, which makes navigating dungeons and the overworld much more fluid in order to get the player directly into the heart of the game. You have the option to swap between real time combat and traditional command based combat at will (outside of boss battles) which allows you to fully customize how you want to play. Since I mainly play these games for story, what I did was set the difficulty of the real-time combat to very easy and the command combat to normal which allowed me to completely negate grinding while still giving myself a challenge during boss fights which were actually still pretty difficult.

That being said, there is much more depth in the command based combat as the old orbment (or materia) system is back. If you enjoy creating builds and finding party synergy, this game has brought that back. There’s so many mechanics to experiment with when building up your character but you don’t have to engage with it if you don’t want to thanks to the difficulty options.

## Soft Reboot

Not only is the gameplay of Kuro completely different in order to cater to a new audience, the writing and party dynamics have also had a soft reboot for new audiences as well. The writers assume that this is the player’s first Trails game from this point on and they do a great job of letting the game serve as an entry point to the series while also retaining the momentum of its previous saga. The writers manage to effortlessly ensure that new players are introduced to characters that’ve been in the franchise for years while also adding new context to their pasts for veterans of the series all while managing to avoid major spoilers.

To use a specific example, veterans know that Renne plays an active role in pretty much every single game in the franchise but she’s still introduced as a character with her own standalone arc in this story that’s still appealing to new players without context. This keeps the writing engaging for all audiences, preventing the issue of alienating anyone who hasn't played the previous games (… yet). Characters vaguely reference past events in the franchise in order to give new players context as to who they are and what game they’re from which helps a bit with giving context to the worldbuilding.

In pursuit of finding a new audience, Kuro’s thematic focus and narrative shifts the story to appeal to an aging demographic and the ever changing world that early to mid 20-somethings are living in now, but more on that in a little bit. If the previous arc in the franchise, Trails of Cold Steel’s, development is a direct reflection and response to the cultural climate of anime throughout the 2010s, Kuro is a direct love letter to the vibe of the 2000s era of anime. I’m talking Great Teacher Onizuka and especially Gintama.

Kuro’s entire framework took Gintama’s homework and turned it in for a free 100. Vaan is literally a carbon copy of Gintoki from his personality, role in the universe, love of sweets and moral code. The party dynamic is reminiscent of the odd jobs crew with some minor tweaks and even the pacing of the story feels just as episodic as Gintama does. The writers effortlessly balance slice of life, humor and seriousness with its cast and narrative and it’s all the better for this shift.

Interestingly enough, Kuro also takes a lot of notes from Yakuza’s growing fanbase, especially in the way that they appeal to women. This game completely removes harem romance and guns straight for the fujoshi’s which, in my opinion, is a hundred times better as someone who prefers a focus on platonic friendships in JRPG parties. If any of that sounds appealing to you, you’ll definitely love Kuro as much as I did.

Adhering to the thematic focus of the game, the cast of Kuro is diverse in age, background, personality and values which leads to consistently great exploration of its characters and Calvard as a region. The protagonist Van Arkride is a 24-year old for-hire mercenary who works between the surface and underworld of Calvard doing odd-jobs that the police and bracers won’t take. He ends up unintentionally recruiting a school girl, a child soldier, a hotshot theater performer, a maid, a movie star, and a young supergenius throughout the story. Each one of these characters hail from a drastically different background, upbringing and location as well. Their ages range from 13, 15, 17, 19, 20 and 69 years old. In a landscape of JRPGs where the protagonists are all high schoolers around the same age from the same town, it’s a breath of fresh air to play as an older post-college protagonist leading such a diverse cast. I’m the same age as Van and I haven’t had a game where I’ve resonated with the protagonist to this extent in a long time. Van’s daily life revolves around just trying to survive as an adult dealing with past and current relationships catching up with him, childhood trauma and is constantly being reminded that he’s ancient by 20 years olds despite only being a few years older than them. Navigating your mid 20s is a very interesting phase and it’s great to see this fully explored within the genre again, similar to what Yakuza 7 did for 40 year olds that grew up with video games.

Character banter is also consistently great throughout the entirety of the game. Slimming down the size of the cast enables the writers to let party members develop their own interpersonal relationships within the party as well as the NPCs in the overworld. This way, you don’t end up with the notorious JRPG problem of having party members that can only interact with the party when they're at the forefront of the chapter. There wasn’t a single time in this game where I felt that one of the main party members was put on the backburner in favor of another: everyone party member is written into the story pretty evenly. This cast feels like an cohesive group navigating a living, breathing world from beginning to end. With such a diverse and vocal party there’s room for characters to consistently express their individual concerns, perspectives and especially their humor. This game's dialogue is genuinely hilarious, especially if you keep Aaron in your party that dude has no filter whatsoever. They were definitely teetering into an M rating with 90% of what he says.

Characters also have their own personal lives that don’t revolve around Van and you can consistently find them navigating their daily lives between major story beats. Romantic bonding events have been shifted to favor more platonic connection events which allows for more character development than ever now that the protagonist's love interest isn’t ambiguous or even the focus. This shift also allows bonding events to serve as opportunities for the writers to develop the world of Zemuria as well which is an added bonus.

The in-game short stories that have been a staple collectable in every single Trails game have been replaced in Kuro with a handful of films to further adhere to Calvard’s technological advancement. I didn’t know how I felt about this at first as I’ve always loved reading these short stories in previous games, so much so that I’ve literally printed them out to go back and read from time to time. They served as pretty major avenues for the writers to develop the lore and worldbuilding for future titles of the series so for them to be replaced with what’s essentially a few paragraphs and images felt sacrilege. I got over that pretty quickly though once I actually realized that this allowed the writers to develop their characters and the world of Zemuria even further than they’ve already made room for with this game. The films range a multitude of genres from romance, thrillers, children’s films, historical pieces, to even straight up propaganda and an X-Rated version of a film. Throughout the story you can invite any party member and a few key NPCs to go to the movies with Van and afterward they’ll comment on how they related to the film, which allows for so much character and world building that would feel out of place to explore otherwise. For example, if you take your entire party to see the romance film, they’ll all talk about which perspective of the relationship they resonated with, which allows you to get a glimpse into their maturity level and even their past relationships (or lack thereof). If you take them to the historical film, you get to see how characters perceive Calvard’s history in relation to their background or identity. I spent so much time going through this dialogue and it was one of the more memorable parts of the game for me.

All this to say, Kuro’s writing is easily some of the best in the franchise on every level and I hope that anyone who considers picking this game up appreciates the lengths the writer’s went through to connect to their audiences both old and new.

# Worldbuilding & Themes

## Calvard

Kuro takes place in the highly anticipated Republic of Calvard which has been consistently built up since the original Trails in the Sky back in 2004 with characters such as Zin, Walter, Rixia and, most important of all, Kurt Nardin (If you’re a One Piece fan, the setup and payoff of this arc is adjacent to making it to the Wano and Elbaf arcs in that story).

Calvard as a region has been set up throughout a franchise as a place of diversity in terms of their demographics and culture, which is a foundational thematic focus throughout this entire game that I’ll be constantly referring to throughout the video. The setting of Calvard fuses the political history, diaspora and demographics of post world-war France and a bit of the United States. This decision leads to an interesting progression where the series is simultaneously experiencing sweeping changes in the political states, [developing technologies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_France#:~:text=Auguste%20and%20Louis%20Lumi%C3%A8re%20invented,in%20caf%C3%A9s%20and%20traveling%20fairs.), and demographics of their nation. [Just like France, Calvard historically had strained tensions with their neighbors and shifts from a monarchy to a Republic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France%E2%80%93Germany_relations). In-game this arc is directly following the end of the Erebonian war seen in the Cold Steel arc which is essentially an allegory for the rise and fall of Prussia’s Bismarck Empire. With that context, at the start of this game, Calvard (or France) is experiencing a new wave of eastern immigration and relative peace due to reparations from the Erebonian war. But, as with all major societal changes, this era of peace creates internal and external tensions between immigrants, natives (and also colonizers) within Calvard.

## Grey Area

One of the foundational thematic focuses of Kuro is the gray area of society, somewhere between the light and dark of the world of Zemuria. In the previous games in the franchise, we play as the law of the world through the Bracer guild, the Crossbell police force and a military academy. This (aside from Trails the 3rd) is the first time the series has had a protagonist who operates outside of the good alignment. This decision allows you to shape your alignment throughout the game's main and side quests which allows you to align with characters and organizations of your choice. You can side with the bracers if you want to be lawful, the villains of the franchise, ouroboros, if you want to be chaotic and a new organization if you want to operate between the two. These choices actually have consequences within the world as characters and NPCs will change their dialogue depending on your alignment.

This is also explored thematically through how gray areas in society are created, shaped and maintained and the multitude of ways this impacts all parties involved. Every single character, location and plot point is a different perspective in the exploration of the margin between the majority and minority. I’ll explore this further in the spoiler section of the video.

This focus on the gray areas of society in combination with Calvard’s ushering in an era of peace makes room for the interesting and bold exploration of a number of hard hitting themes that most writer’s shy away from in bigger video games.

**The main one I want to highlight that’s seen all throughout Kuro no Kiseki is how diaspora and, by extension, diversity, prejudice and racism shapes the landscape of our modern societies.** As a person of color, it’s rare to see media that covers these issues with tact let alone with more than a surface level understanding of the concept of racism which is why I was so glad that the writers and localizers went all in on building the Calvard arc on this foundation. Many fantasy stories tend to tackle racism by making it synonymous with a take on slavery when it’s so much more prevalent than that. For example, Final Fantasy XVI doesn’t go much further in its allegory of racism than saying ‘these people were oppressed because they have powers’ which is so harmful within this conversation. Because so many people (especially in America) have been educated to consider these concepts synonymous, it makes the systems that uphold racism almost invisible and taboo to even talk about because so many people think that we can and should all move on from talking about racism just because slavery was abolished. When in reality, racism as a concept is ever present in the way that our society was shaped and is currently maintained. It rules over every single facet of the lives of people of color and I want to take the time to use Kuro as a way to educate people on it. I won’t take too long on this topic because I know that it’ll make me sound preachy but I don’t really care because I think that it’s a good learning opportunity for us and I spent a good chunk of my degree learning about this, so bear with me.

Kuro approaches racism with a more modern lens and you can tell that the writers understand the difference between systemic racism and prejudice which is already a huge step forward when talking about this concept. Using the book *So you want to talk about race* as a reference, it defines racism as ‘a prejudice against someone based on race, when those prejudices are reinforced by systems of power.’

In the case of Kuro, the game explores how, despite Calvard legally banning discrimination based on status or race, immigrants from Tharbad and the East are still constantly impacted by systemic racism and prejudice. Many of the immigrant NPCs throughout the game explore the different ways that the corrupt systems and prejudice in Calvard’s community are failing them. Some of the hostesses and actresses from Tharbad can’t find jobs because they’re being discriminated against for their ethnicity. Older Calvardian’s don’t like the widespread immigration and want to go back to the Calvard’s monarchy days, which sounds very familiar.

I also appreciate the localizers for retaining the bluntness within this game's verbiage by directly using such as racism and white supremacy so it's impossible for people to misinterpret the messaging. This is something that's almost never seen in mainstream video games (let alone media) and if it is it almost always gets censored out of fear of upsetting the ‘no politics in games’ crowd which makes no sense to me. Video games are art and art is a reflection of reality. If games want to be taken seriously as an artform it’s important that they’re capable of having deeper conversations such as this one. Overall, it’s explorations like this that make me appreciate how dedicated the writer’s were in making Calvard feel alive.

# Characters:

This is the point of the video where I’m getting into the analysis of the story and its themes. If you haven’t played Kuro I highly recommend picking it up and playing through it yourself and maybe even going through the rest of the franchise. Feel free to come back and let me know if you do so in a comment! I’d love to hear your thoughts on the franchise. That being said from this point onward there’ll be spoilers for Kuro and marked spoilers for anything that came before this game.

In order for a gray area to exist there must be friction between what’s considered lawful and unlawful and it’s important to understand that what’s lawful and unlawful is decided by those in power. Just because something is the law doesn’t mean that it’s correct or even moral. Many laws in place today (especially in the United States) are created in order to bring groups of people to power and keep other groups down.

Sometimes these gray areas come to fruition due to people not fully acknowledging these parts of society as well such as homelessness, abuse and even racism, as I mentioned earlier. Calvard as a region is experiencing the full embodiment of this gray area. They’re a relatively progressive region that’s currently experiencing a lot of friction in moving from its darker history into a brighter future. While they’re the most technologically advanced region in Zemuria, they’re overwriting a lot of their historical infrastructure by rapidly developing it. While immigration is at an all time high, it’s causing internal conflict and turmoil between its own population. There’s so many examples of how this transition from the past into a new future creates gray areas in society and it’s fully explored through its main cast.

## Kill the Past

Each party member in Kuro embodies another theme explored throughout the story which is running from and not acknowledging one's past or identity and existing within a gray area because of it.

**Van** is constantly haunted by his history, relationships and mistakes and keeps himself close but distant from everyone around him because of it. He has to live up to the mistakes he’s made in the past as well as the expectations from the master that trained him.

This is even shown in the way he fights. His weapon is similar to Estelle and Lloyd’s in that it's made primarily for defense but he can also sharpen it enough to kill someone. His fighting style is also a mix of eastern and western combat.

**Agnes** has to live under the shadow of her father and navigate being a part of Arkride Solutions and a normal school girl. She’s haunted by the past of her family life and the shift it took when her father became president.

**Feri** is a child soldier who is thrown into navigating life as a relatively normal city citizen. She has to live up to the legacy of everyone in Kruga and choose to live life as a normal girl or a jaeger.

**Aaron** is the reincarnation of the Tyrant which forces him out of a normal life into being a pawn in the battle between multiple organizations throughout Calvard.

**Risette:** Rissette literally doesn't own her own body, as it's on loan on behalf of Marduk corporation, who saved her life by giving her an artificial body. While she's grateful for this, she does struggle with her lived experience as a cyborg who's human bust is mostly machine.

**Judith**: Even though Judith is one of the most popular actresses in Calvard she lives in the shadow of her mother and grandmother who were also successful actresses.

**Quatre**: Throughout the game, Quatre slowly realizes his feelings about his identity and sexuality. He's coded as a bi and trans character which is explored through the way he interacts with characters in the bathhouse scenes.

I thought his character was handled with tact throughout the game and his development was one of my personal favorites.

**Bergard**: Lives under a new identity in opposition to his role as a Dominion. Unlike the rest of the party, Bergard has lived long enough to be comfortable with his own identity. Rather than being tied to a religious organization, he lives life hedonistically while staying true to his personal code, acting as a guide to Van and the rest of the party.

Once again, you can see just how committed the writers were to the thematic focus of this game through these characters alone. This underpinning allows the characters to feel much more intimately connected to each other and their mutual goals.

## Norse Mythology

Kuro, just like every other Trails game, has deep roots in mythology, specifically Norse and Babalonian mythology this time around. Researching some of these references has been interesting so I’ll share a bit here. Let me know if you have anymore examples:

[Grendel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grendel?wprov=sfla1):

“The namesake of Van’s alternate form, Grendel, is a reference to a character in the Old English epic Beowulf. Grendel is a monster who is repeatedly described to be in the constant shroud of darkness. They refer to it as a Sceadugenga which means a "shadow walker" or a "night goer" – which is exactly what Van does in this form. When Van transforms into Grendel he is almost navigating the ‘gray area’ between life of death within a fight.

Mare:

Mare, Van’s Pixie AI, is based on a demon of the same name that rides people’s chests while they sleep, giving them nightmares, which is why Mare constantly asks Van to Bear the Nightmare. It’s described in Polish folklore as a soul of a living person who leaves their body at night and is seen by others in the guise of wisps of hair or moths. Russian legends paint the mara as invisible but with the ability to also take the form of a woman with long hair. In Norse mythology, they are often contrasted with gods.

Jotnar:

The Mare is classified as a jötnar. The jötnar typically dwell across boundaries from the gods and humans, which is appropriate for this game considering Van’s role in the story.

While jötnar in Old Norse accounts are highly diverse, lacking a single physical appearance, and best thought of as a social grouping, some broadly shared traits have been identified such as living on the periphery of the world, outside society which is, again, appropriate for characters of this story.

A common motif is the journeying to obtain secret knowledge from the jötnar.

**Babylonian Mythology:**

Marduk Company:

In the Old Babylonian Period, while Marduk is acknowledged to be the ruler of the people (King of Gods), there is no evidence that Hammurabi or his successors promoted Marduk at the expense of other gods. Enlil was still recognized as the highest authority, and Marduk was far from being the pantheon head, instead appearing to be a mediator between the great gods and Hammurabi.

* wields great power but ultimately uses it for good. Interesting angle for a tech company.
* Essentially Zues in Greek Mythology

Melchior:

# Story Commentary:

**Chapter 5:**

* Almata Backstories: I appreciated that they incorporated the backstories of the Almata members into multiple loose ends of the games lore and within the games core party, but it would have been much more impactful if the writer’s built this up a bit beforehand. With the new approach to this game's cast, there’s so much room for the writers to give the Almata members the opportunity to be approached and developed while off duty in bars and in the towns throughout the game which would be a great time to develop them as characters.  
    
  It feels like Almata fell into the same narrative trappings that many organizations throughout the series fall into: This evil group is evil and then the writers decide to try to get the player’s sympathy by giving you their backstory right after you defeat them or before they die. It’d be much more interesting if they actually developed their backstories and characters early on so we actually understand why they’re doing what they’re doing.

**Epilogue:**

* The execution of Kuro’s epilogue was an interesting way to fully convey the theme of the story. The way that I interpreted this section was that since Almata wanted to control the world through fear, it was a sort of allegory to the way that oppressors attempt to control minorities. The lingering impact of oppression through events such as colonization or slavery continues to invade and dictate the lives of minorities. This is shown through the pacing of the story where, despite the organization effectively losing its entire structure, the group still manages to slowly inflict their goal into society through fear. Even though the people that actually committed the acts are effectively dead, their will and methods are still impacting those that are still here.

# **Interviews**:

[Reddit Essay on Kuro's Themes](https://www.reddit.com/r/Falcom/comments/vch3mv/the_themes_of_progress_and_truth_in_kuro_no_kiseki/)

“[Kondo](https://noisypixel.net/new-falcom-president-interview-trails-npc-world/): Correct. Our approach is that Trails can be played by one or two kids in the class who “have a slightly different hobby.” I don’t think it’s that niche now, but that’s the basic idea.

Rather than “RPGs that will be popular with everyone,” we always aim for “the next step.” That is, a game that is a little difficult to understand at first yet brings an amazing experience all the same.”

Readings:

<https://www.reddit.com/r/Falcom/comments/vch3mv/the_themes_of_progress_and_truth_in_kuro_no_kiseki/>

<https://www.reddit.com/r/Falcom/comments/1foel1g/the_epiphany_of_oracion_the_revolution_and/>

## To Do

* Gray Area in society
* Diaspora and by extension, diversity and racism creates the landscape of our modern societies
* Killing the Past (Ignoring history in favor of progression/preservation), being tied down to events that’ve happened in the past or past legacies. Hiding personal and historical truths (masking). The cost of Technological Advancement
* Conclusion: In order to have change there MUST be friction. You can't passively make your way into a good outcome for society.

## Gray area sub notes:

Dingo and Marielle: two sides of news reporting. The underworld and tabloids. They meet in the gray area

Renne: student council and past as ouroboros

Van: fighting style is a mix of east and west.

Quatre: while it's not right to call it ‘gray’ Quatre operates between the binaries of society as someone who might be Bi.