

Estelle Bright

Trails in the Sky

Art By Crystal Li



KONSHUU

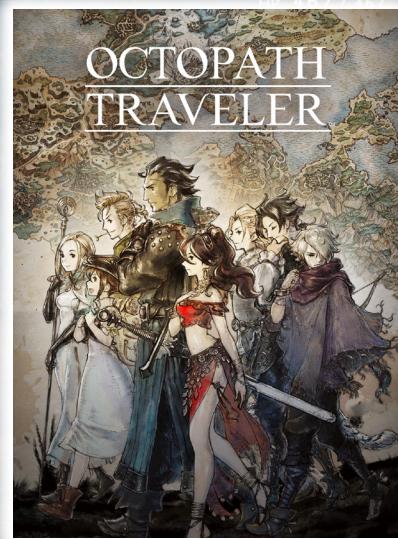
vol. 55 #3
JRPGs

THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED SERIES!

GAME RECOMMENDATION

OCTOPATH TRAVELER

Precursor to the upcoming *Triangle Strategy* game, *Octopath Traveler* fuses modern polygons with retro 16-bit graphics to create a visually striking diorama-like world that puts similar nostalgia chasing JRPGs to shame. As the somewhat goofy title suggests, *Octopath Traveler* allows the player to simultaneously explore eight different adventures that can be tackled in any nonspecific order. With an easy-to-learn battle system against a vast array of challenging foes, this game is sure to not disappoint fans of Square Enix games.



July 13, 2018
Directed by Keisuke Miyauchi
Developed by Square Enix, Acquire
Published by Square Enix

PS4



November 28, 2019
Directed by George Kamitani
Developed by Vanillaware
Published by Atlus

GAME RECOMMENDATION

13 SENTINELS AEGIS RIM

Packing satisfying real time strategy gameplay, a painterly 2D art style, killer music, and most impressively a captivating sci-fi narrative told from the interweaving perspectives of its titular 13 main characters, *13 Sentinels Aegis Rim* is perhaps the best JRPG that you have likely never played. Outside of the real time strategy segments, *13 Sentinels* mostly plays as a visual novel crossed with an adventure game, allowing its main selling point to shine: the story. Surprisingly, *13 Sentinels* also uses its “anime tropes” to great narrative effect, making for an experience that not just JRPG fans but even fans of Sci-Fi at large can enjoy.

HORRORS OF BERSERIA

Writer

NICHOLAS WONOSAPUTRA

3rd Year, MCB: Neurobiology and Psychology

Where is the line between love and fear?



I have not called upon the beast for months now, and I fear that those days I've spent in the vice grip of its claws were simply a product of a bad dream, particles of dust blown off the hands of time and into oblivion. Artorius's mantras ring hollow in my ears as I recollect his shining visage, obscured by the warped mirror of fate as I hesitate to admit that his ideals are hauntingly close to mine. Eyeing my Steam library carefully, I feel my brain melt under the pressure: 100 hours on *Tales of Berseria*. A shiver of dread travels down my spine as I remind myself that the average length of one campaign should have only lasted half that time. *Do I like the game?* I don't know.

The characters are fun and have interesting interactions, but I only really felt a connection towards Eleanor, whose character arc shifts her mindset away from the simplistic thoughts of a utilitarian towards a more nuanced understanding of the world. I usually find silly and mysterious characters to be fun, but for some reason I forgot Magilou's existence as soon as I completed the game. While the characters have more to offer than the cast of *Zestiria*, their character arcs feel incomplete.

That sense of incompleteness permeates throughout the experience. I spent 25% of the game playing through the story, 50% towards grinding, and 25% towards walking. Let's



set aside that 50% for now. Walking. Just walking. Why was there so much walking? The characters can't even run that fast, and the environments look terrible. There aren't really any hidden secrets to speak of except for the one item per region that is slightly better than one tiny piece of your equipment.

So... the grinding. By all accounts, if I had skipped the grinding, I would have had a normal, average-length gaming experience. At this, you may think *oh that's not your fault (unless you're just bad at the game) y'know a lot of jrpgs have grinding...* Right, but I also set the game's difficulty to the max despite never having played a game like this before. Because the early combat was really, really boring. Button mashing can be fun to an extent, but I felt like every encounter was arbitrary, and I struggled to understand why the characters were taking things so seriously. And to be honest, that change made sense at the time, as I was suddenly thinking about positioning and the most effective sequence of attacks to defeat my enemies.

But then the difficulty spiked. And then it spiked again. And it was... odd. I think I didn't even understand how the combat system actually worked, I just tried to run around the battlefield while balancing team HP and revive statuses... Even though the game's all about high-octane combo strings... Sometimes I wonder if I would have actually had fun playing the game if I had selected the normal difficulty.

By the way, you can unlock an even higher difficulty mode in the middle of the campaign. I set my difficulty mode even higher as soon as I unlocked it.



NOT SO BRILLIANT AND SHINING



TONY T.

2nd Year, Economics and Data Science

Once again I pedantically rant about something aimed at an age demographic likely a decade removed from mine.

Managing Editor

To say that *Pokémon Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* are terrible video games would not be intellectually dishonest, but it would be misleading. On their own, the game(s) are technically fine, if not somewhat simple for the standards of Japanese role playing games. However, in comparison to the games they directly aim to remake as well as the core *Pokémon* franchise they are a part of, *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* are not only disappointing, but illuminate the sheer dearth of creative decisions which went into their conception. To explain this, I first need to explain the original games.

Pokémon Diamond and Pearl adapt the *Pokémon* franchise well for the hardware they operate off of. One needs not look no further than the game's overworld, which, like the prior three generations in the series' history, is organized in a grid format wherein players can move in four cardinal directions. Obviously, this is likely out of tradition, but it also fits the hardware—the Nintendo DS features only a four button direction pad, as opposed to the analog sticks that other consoles have since adopted. This decision would stick with the series all the way until the *Pokémon X and Y* games, which were released on a console featuring an analog stick. Said games still utilized a grid structure, but changed it to include eight directions of movement, with diagonals, as well as a more freeform movement with their analog stick, which, in the game, had the player avatar traverse the world on roller skates. While not terribly important to the discussion of the *Pokémon* games' utilization of a structured grid right now, it is relevant to the point of this article to mention the sort of visual 'snapping' the game would have when the player switched from analog to d-pad movement, moving from freeform movement back to the grid. The overworld grid in *Pokémon* games would only cease to exist with *Pokémon Sun and Moon*, wherein the world design specifically catered to the total lack of a grid.

Moving back to *Pokémon Diamond and Pearl*, the addition of a "Pokéwatch" gimmick fits perfectly on the Nintendo DS' bottom screen. It serves both as a useful piece of user interface, as well as an interesting device immersing players into the world the games take place in. The games' networking features also catered to the specificities of how the Nintendo DS handled wireless interfacing, with in-game locations dedicated for online interactions.

Diamond and Pearl also feature design which in of itself understands the way players will interact with the game. With the inclusion of HMs, necessary for proper pacing, the existence of a move deleter, to remove otherwise unremovable moves, makes sense. It is also a staple of the

franchise. Furthermore, decisions like the underground, secret areas like another entrance to Wayward Cave (which I may have gushed about in an earlier article), and more, reward creative thinking. These sort of design considerations, along with these games' narrative, are why these games are some of my favorites, as they evoke a unique feeling of exploring and excavating secrets. Unique across the entire medium of gaming? Certainly not. But, as someone with rather limited interest in gaming itself, I can at least say that *Diamond and Pearl* are fairly tight packages. They certainly have their issues, with the often maligned slow health bar being but one. Yet the copy-paste mentality of *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* pales utterly in comparison to the unique choices of *Diamond and Pearl*.

By directly adapting *Diamond and Pearl* and only changing a small amount of characteristics, the remakes manage to be completely inferior works. As previously mentioned, the original games, and the entire *Pokémon* franchise until its seventh generation, utilize a grid structure for its overworld. *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* take the route of *X and Y* by having both grid and freeform movement, and similarly feature an awkward 'snapping' as the player moves from one to another. Unlike the sixth generation of *Pokémon* games, however, the generation four remakes are not at all redesigned for this to make sense. The movement in these titles feels clunky and not fitting for the world, due to the world itself being identical to the originals and thus not fitting for freeform movements. The game's gym puzzles, for instance, often make far more logical sense in a grid format. The seventh gym, in particular, has the player destroy snowballs under ice physics, which only work in cardinal directions, making movement in this part needlessly tedious. Additionally, while the player at least has the option to freely move, as poorly as its implementation may be, all the other characters still move within the grid. Just like the 'snapping', this awkward incongruence is clearly the result of freeform player movement being added to an existing game without proper consideration as to how it works under the original design decisions.

This frustration I feel extends to new inclusions, such as partner *Pokémon*, as well. New in *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* is the ability to have a *Pokémon* follow the player. A feature in *HeartGold and SoulSilver*, games running on the same engine as *Diamond and Pearl*, this is not particularly novel, but in of itself is interesting. In execution, though, the idea is miserable. The partner models constantly get stuck onto objects in the world, a direct result of the freeform movement rendering previous world design decisions irrelevant. These models also are not properly scaled to the world, resulting in awkwardly small *Pokémon* in comparison to their implied canon sizes.

Past this, the different camera angles that these remakes have means that the player considers the world from a far more realistic perspec-

tive. The original games, and their predecessors, are somewhat excusable because it is fairly clear that what the player sees is not itself a real locale, but an abstraction representing an actual place. With polygonal models and lacking pixelation, though, the remakes make it increasingly hard to take a town with only four buildings seriously as an actual functioning mini-society. Along the same lines of decisions that cannot be retrofitted onto new games is the reintroduction of the Pokéetch gimmick. Said gimmick only really worked with the originals due to the Nintendo DS' double screen, and as such, its inclusion in *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* is incredibly awkward. Lingering on the top right corner of the Nintendo Switch's singular screen and only interactable by tapping on it, thus expanding it to encompass the entire screen, the Pokéetch is an absolutely horrid inclusion for the remakes. With the Pokéetch only truly usable when it fills the entire screen, it completely misses the point of the gimmick to begin with given how the Pokéetch is only interesting as a fun user interface tool with aspects which make it immersive in the world.

Finally, the single complaint I think perfectly highlights the problem these remakes have in directly adapting—and attempting to remaster—content from the original is its inclusion of the move deleter. As the original *Diamond and Pearl* have (rightfully) been criticized for the overabundance of HMs, *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* follow the trend of more recent games by completely removing that gameplay element. With that in mind, then, there is almost no scenario where *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* would have a move deleter if developed from the ground up. The only possible reason to even consider this is an utterly niche situation where the player deliberately wants to delete the majority of their Pokémon's moves for an advantage. This would be plausible if not for the general lack of care these games have for considering possible ways the player would want to play, as shown with things as simple as the overworld.



Essentially, the central problem with *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* is twofold. First, they directly copy almost every element from their source material with little alteration. Pokémon has done remakes before, with *Firered and LeafGreen*, *HeartGold and Soulsilver*, *Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire*, and *Let's Go, Pikachu! and Let's Go, Eevee!* remaking the series' first, second, third, and first generations, respectively. Yet, none of them so blatantly copy every aspect of the original games to the extent that the generation four remakes do. Those remakes also do not suffer from the second half of *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl*'s major issue, which is that, on top of copying and pasting everything, there is next to no consideration for actually adapting the original ideas to fit the new game. Rather than refining what already exists, these games simply repeat what was originally there, while including elements from later Pokémon entries which absolutely do not work together.

Various criticisms of these games exist which target elements such as

their lackluster graphics. I don't believe that they actually explain the biggest issues that *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* face, though. Yes, the designs which made sense in the original game's sprites look odd as polygonal models. However, at the end of the day, those are actual artistic design choices. Bad choices, but choices nonetheless. *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl*, as a whole, though, feature almost no original game design. The sole improvement these games may have had on the originals was the revamp of Diamond and Pearl's Underground mechanic, which was a legitimate improvement. Yet, even this one piece of praise I give to the remakes is conditional, as the new Grand Underground is hardly that distinct from the original game's idea, merely including extra zones with roaming Pokémon within them. If anything, the existence of roaming Pokémon in these areas and not the rest of the game's overworld, would feel like a strange inconsistency if a player does not know that *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl* are remakes. Almost all the design considerations come from their originals, which results in the elements from later Pokémon games feeling out of place, as the remakes simply had no thought put into them other than the most bare basics. Obviously, I'm not saying you can't enjoy *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl*. From my perspective, though, I don't see any interesting artistic intent behind any aspect of these games other than things that were decided for a game made 15 years prior on a console far more technically limited than the platform these games run on.

Pokémon Diamond and Pearl have a whole slew of issues, like the previously mentioned slow health bar. In spite of my criticisms towards the remakes simply aping design from the original, the originals also clearly had oversights such as the scarcity of fire types in the region, resulting in the games' fire type specialist utilizing steel/ground, ghost/flying, and normal types. The games' narrative is unevenly placed, with several elements, such as the Pokémon Giratina, feeling rather out of place, seemingly tucked in a random cave. Beyond that, the post-game area feels barren, featuring battles and little much else. I love the original games enough to where I don't think a remake was ever a necessity to properly enjoy them. That isn't to say a remake should have never been created, as one could have easily been released to solve these issues.

And one such remake exists. It's called *Pokémon Platinum*, which refines and tightens many aspects of the originals to deliver a more fulfilling journey. In almost every way possible, *Platinum* is a far better remaster of the original games than these Nintendo Switch remakes. Most basic is the actual thought put behind issues the original games had which could be altered to better deliver their intended vision. Simply put, this is called game design. Divorced from the medium of video games, this could be called creativity. Having originally concluded this article with an attack on the ingenuity of the creatives behind the remakes (and obviously, featuring a play on the phrase "creative"), I don't believe they are to blame. Rather, it is the poor business decisions that surround the franchise, as well as the general culture of video game development firms, which clearly influenced the dismal state of *Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl*. Regardless of it being due to scheduling, funding, a combination of both, or something I can't even imagine, it is severely disappointing as a big fan of these titles. Instead of being a triumphant return to games that I absolutely adore, these games felt more like a pale imitation. Hopefully, the *Pokémon* franchise will adapt and learn from these titles—which, frankly, are likely the result of a third party studio not understanding how to create one of these games. But even if they don't, the original games, or, preferably, *Platinum*, still exist and are amazing video games that show why this franchise is so massively popular on an international scale.

BEING OPEN ABOUT PLA'S OPEN WORLD



MITCHELL MADAYAG

2nd Year, Intended Japanese and Economics

It's pronounced "Ar-see-us" and I will die on that hill.

Editor-In-Chief

Back when *Pokémon Legends Arceus* was first revealed in February of 2021 as part of the *Pokémon* franchise's 25th anniversary celebration, I was skeptical about how much additional gameplay would be offered from the seemingly open world at the time. That is not to say I wasn't at all hyped about the reveal since it appeared that *Pokémon* was stepping away from their recently monotonous traditions to head towards an exciting new direction for once, offering varied regional starters, a complete overhaul to the *Pokémon* experience, and a narrative focused on a legendary *Pokémon* that deserved more. The icing on the cake being that it was happening to my favorite *Pokémon* region of all time.

When I was finally able to tour the Hisui region first-hand, I realized I should have tempered my expectations more. As much as *PLA* lauds itself over its vast explorable lands, there is not really much to boast about to begin with. Other than being impressively large for a *Pokémon* game, the region of Hisui is disappointingly empty and boring to traverse. There is not much to actually do in the overworld aside from interacting with *Pokémon* and gathering miscellaneous materials, and with little to do in between, it makes traveling feel sluggish until you are finally able to ride the likes of Wyrdeer and Sneasler. Trainers anxiously waiting for you to step in their line of sight and battle are all but gone due to the game's primitive setting taking place prior to when trainers were commonplace, and the few people you do battle only command one or two *Pokémon*. You could satisfy this battling itch by fighting higher-leveled wild *Pokémon* or the dangerous Alpha *Pokémon*, but the feeling isn't the same. I will say that I found it surprisingly addictive catching and researching various *Pokémon* at first, but it started to feel more and more repetitive by the third area, almost in the same vein as a mobile game.

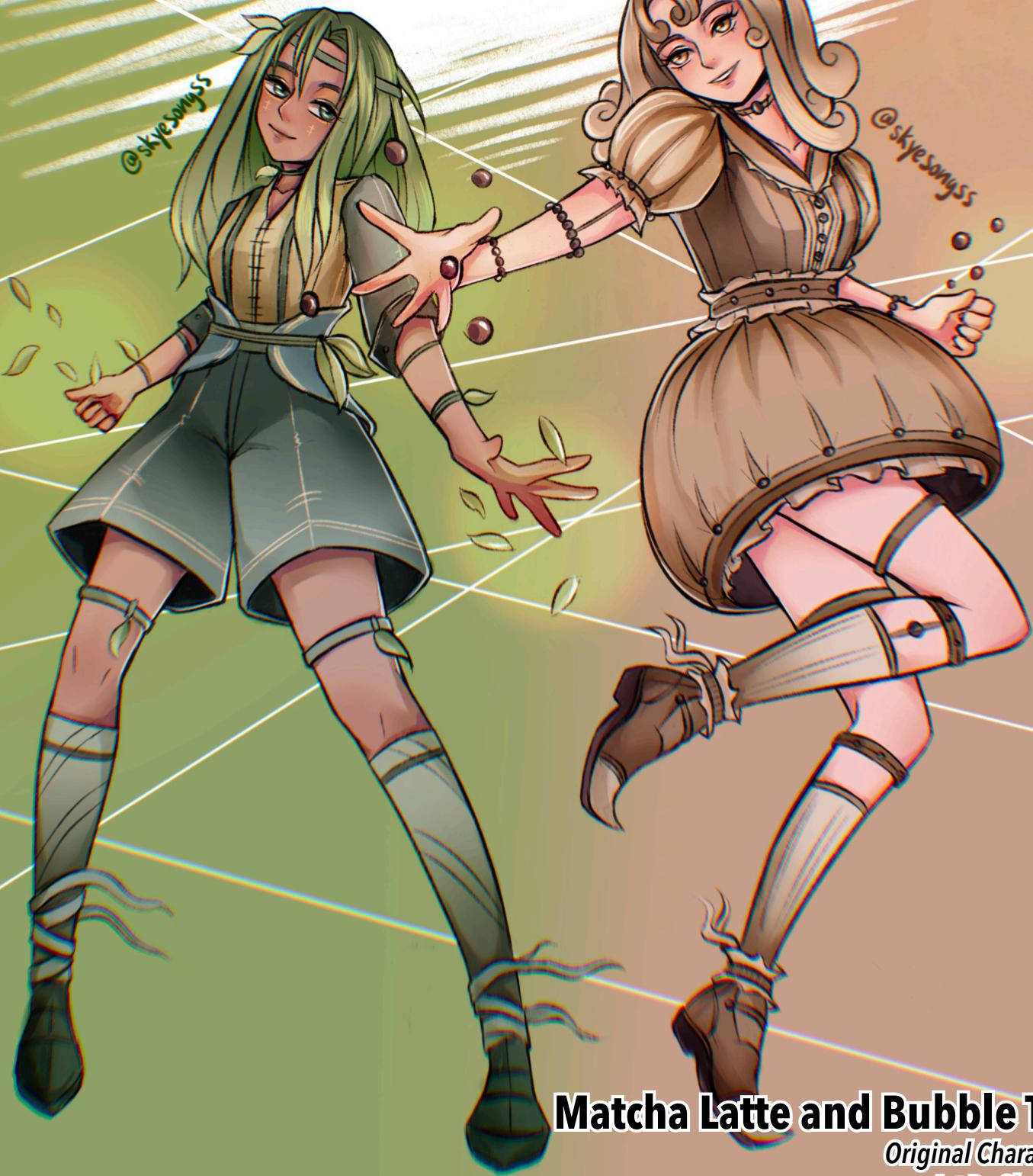


It would be overwhelmingly unfair to compare JRPG-adventure experiment *PLA* to the likes of critically acclaimed action-adventure game *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, but the difference is painfully clear which game took more time in development. Although *BoTW*'s world could also be considered too big for its own good, there are almost always interesting structures and events to check out, such as shrines and Bokoblin camps, encouraging constant exploration as you journey from landmark to landmark. *PLA* on the other hand, lacks any sort of interesting destinations to aim towards as the barren lands of Hisui are riddled with look-alike plains and mountains devoid of substance unless you carry an unconditional love for all 242 *Pokémon* present in the game. Human settlements are scarce, again explained by the lore of Hisui, but without any replacements for *Pokémon* gyms, Team Galactic hideouts, and the like, the villages serve no real purpose as they offer little use beyond accepting a few sidequests. Having transformed the vibrant region of Sinnoh to something so dull, *PLA* had discouraged me from actively playing that by the time I reached the Alabaster Icelands, the final free-roam area, I sped through all of the boring "head to the next spot marked on the map" objectives and the ridiculously easy puzzles of Snowpoint Temple just so I can quickly quell Noble Hisuian Avalugg and advance through the story. To make another comparison, in *BoTW*, there is a hidden collectible called the Korok Seeds which are scattered numerous throughout the land of Hyrule and can be found in some of the most bizarre places possible, rewarding players curious enough to interact with their surroundings. However, not even the wisps, this game's versions of the Korok Seeds, were enough to encourage me to investigate the deepest corners of Hisui as they are monotonously attained only by walking to the right spot. In addition, they are useless until you collect all 107, unlike how you can periodically trade in Korok Seeds for increased inventory slots in *BoTW*. Whereas the original Gen IV games are littered with exciting secrets and hidden areas in its "small" 2D environment, *PLA* wishes it could do the same with its overly open world.

As uncharacteristic it was of me to be so negative throughout this article, I genuinely do not dislike *PLA*. I mainly criticized how *PLA* shallowly incorporated a semi-open world into the *Pokémon* formula without consistently making the gameplay feel engaging, but there are definitely a lot more aspects to find faults in such as the graphics and dumbed down cave areas. However, there were a lot of interesting ideas and quality of life changes in *PLA* that it's refreshing we got this over a Gen IX game or another simple remake. If anything, the most promising thing about the release of *PLA* is the possibility of *Pokémon Legends* becoming a recurring series that improves with each installment and continues to put older *Pokémon* generations in a new light. But then again, this is Game Freak and the *Pokémon* Company we're talking about here...

MATCHA LATTE

BUBBLE
&
TEA



Matcha Latte and Bubble Tea

*Original Characters
Art By Skylar Li*

THE WORLD TRANS



PENNY C.

4th Year, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science

I haven't played *NEO* yet, so if anything in that contradicts this article...welp.

Guest

SPOILERS FOR THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU

The World Ends With You (hereafter referred to as *TWEWY*) is one of Square Enix's more unique works. Unlike the company's flagship franchise *Final Fantasy*, *TWEWY* forgoes the high fantasy setting typical of most JRPGs in favor of a fictionalized version of Shibuya, Japan. The game is well known for its street art-inspired visual style, hip hop soundtrack that pushes the limitations of the Nintendo DS, and innovative combat system actively involving both screens of the console. However, its story, which focuses on down-to-earth themes wrapped up in a spiritual and supernatural narrative, has its distinctions too.

Our protagonist Neku Sakuraba wakes up in the middle of a busy crossroads with no memory of how he got there...or anything else about his past. Even weirder, the crowd's completely ignoring him for some reason. The next thing he knows he's thrust into a deadly game run by the Reapers, a group of supernatural beings resembling angels, but with an edgier flair. Neku must team up with fellow player Shiki Misaki to defeat animal-like creatures called Noise (and, eventually, a few Reapers themselves) using pins that grant them psychic powers, as well as complete a certain task each day for seven days, in order to beat this Reaper's Game. Of course, this partnership gets off to a rough start considering how much of an antisocial emo teen Neku is. In fact, some of his first lines are: "I don't get people. Never have, never will."

It turns out Neku and the other players are actually dead, and the Shibuya they're in exists in a parallel space called the UG (short for Underground), which is essentially an afterlife or purgatory of sorts. The Reaper's Game, then, is a chance for these players to either gain a second chance at life, become Reapers themselves and potentially ascend to an even higher existence...or be killed off for good. Their lives are not the only things on the line, though; at the beginning of the Game, each player must pay an entry fee, giving up the one thing that is most important to them. This "thing" can range from a person they care deeply about, to something more abstract like their dreams, their appearance, or (in Neku's case) their memories.

Over the course of the week, Neku warms up to Shiki and starts to understand people better, thanks to a pin that gives him the power to hear the thoughts of the living and the fact that many of

the Game's tasks involve helping out certain citizens of Shibuya. The duo manages to survive the week, but the Game's overseer declares that only Shiki has earned the right to come back to life, leaving Neku to play the Game again. However, in a cruel twist of fate, Shiki is his entry fee for this next round! Looks like he's started to care about her after all...



From left to right: Neku's partners Shiki, Joshua, and Beat.

Neku ends up repeating the Game twice more, with a different partner each time; mysterious pretty-boy Joshua for the second and kind-hearted yet impulsive Beat for the third. Just like with Shiki, Neku comes to value his friendship with them, which in turn contributes to his growth. Not only do Neku's bonds with his partners help him develop more compassion and trust in others, they also enhance his psychic abilities, and the gameplay symbolizes this; you control Neku on the bottom screen using the stylus and his partner on the top screen using the buttons. The better he syncs with his partners (and you sync your inputs), the more powerful attacks he can use. Ultimately, persevering through the Game's trials alongside the first friends he's made in a long time sparks within him a change of heart.

Which brings us to the thesis of this article: *TWEWY*, at its core, is a game about transformation.

There are many ways in which this theme manifests—that Neku undergoes character development by the end of the game, changing from a headphone-wearing loner to a more sympathetic and outgoing person, is one of the most obvious ones. So is the fact that almost every major Reaper boss undergoes a physical transformation into an animalistic Noise form, one of whose battle themes is literally titled "Transformation". At this point, one cannot help but ask: "If this theme is this pervasive on a superficial level, surely it must also be found in more subtle contexts, right?"

Let us return to the entry fee of the Reaper's Game. The point of this regulation—and the Game as a whole—is to show players what life would be like without their most valued item, motivate



TRANSFORMS WITH YOU



Fan favorite Reaper Sho Minamimoto and his furo—I mean Noise form.

them to win the Game to get it back, and teach them to appreciate said item (and life in general). Naturally, then, Neku is not the only one to have a development arc; each of his partners do so as well, all of which are accompanied by a physical transformation. Shiki, who is envious of her friend Eri's looks and popularity, yet still values her own identity, has her appearance replaced with Eri's as her entry fee. While initially delighted by the change, she eventually realizes that she'd be happier as her authentic self, gets over her envy, and learns to accept herself for who she is. Similarly, Beat feels inferior to his sister Rhyme and acted distant towards her while they were alive. During the Game, Rhyme has forgotten who he is—and halfway through the week, she sacrifices herself to protect him from a Noise attack. These events, in addition to learning that his entry fee was Rhyme's love, cause Beat to realize Rhyme's importance to him. Thus he chooses to become a Reaper as his reward for surviving the first week, and is determined to climb the ranks of the UG to gain enough power to revive Rhyme. Finally, Joshua turns out to be the Composer (basically a minor god) of Shibuya, as well as the mastermind behind the Reaper's Game, who had shapeshifted into a teenager to partake in the Game himself. Now, Joshua's arc is an interesting case.

In *TWEWY*'s ending, it is revealed that the overseer of the Reaper's Game, Kitaniji, was playing a game of his own with Joshua. Joshua wished to destroy Shibuya since he considered it a major source of humanity's corruption, but he decided to give Kitaniji a chance to change it for the better. To do so, Kitaniji attempted to brainwash its citizens—a plot which was quickly thwarted by Neku and his new friends. It is also revealed that Joshua killed Neku in order to bring him to the UG and use him as a pawn in this game, as he believed Neku had the potential to defeat Kitaniji. Hence, during the second week of the Reaper's Game, Joshua disguised himself and partnered with Neku in order to guide and protect him.

Since Kitaniji failed his end of the bet, he is erased from existence. Then, Joshua and Neku play one final game: whoever shoots the other first would earn the right to decide the fate of Shibuya. Neku tries to shoot Joshua—but even after finding out how Joshua deceived and used him, he cannot bring himself to. Both Neku's mercy and the duo's experience as partners in the Reaper's Game show Joshua how Neku has grown as a person, and he realizes that if even the worst person in Shibuya could improve himself, there might be hope for the rest of humanity. So even though Neku loses the shoot-out, Joshua makes the decision to let Shibuya thrive.



But what did Joshua see in Neku, exactly? At the beginning of *TWEWY*, shortly before Neku dies, we see him standing in front of a large mural of a cat. Its artist—aptly named CAT—is an angel who uses his power to imbue his art with subliminal messages: "Gather," which attracts those with a high level of imagination, and "Enjoy the moment," which augments their imagination even further. He does so because he views imagination as essential to the "creation of the future." This applies to both the living world, where talented artists and creatives inspire others in turn, and the UG, where imagination determines success in the Reaper's Game, and its victors can eventually ascend to the rank of Composer, allowing them to shape the world to their liking. Neku's presence near CAT's mural therefore foreshadows his role in the story. While Joshua originally intended for Neku to use his strong imagination to win his game and obliterate Shibuya, he ends up motivating Neku to heal the city's corruption instead—using his influence to transfigure its people and culture.

Thus, through transforming his own character, Neku realizes his ability to transform the world.



THE TRAILS SERIES: A LIGHT IN THE VOID



BLAKE MORRISON

2nd Year, Intended English and Japanese

This JRPG series made me care about its fictional nations more than real ones for a while. I'm back to caring about real nations just as much more again, but I wouldn't care nearly as much as I currently do if it weren't for *Trails*.

Writer

If I had to pick only one video game series to play for the rest of my life, it would be *Trails* (known as the *Kiseki* series in Japanese). For those who don't know what the heck a "Trails" even is, allow me to set the stage for the first game in the series: *Trails in the Sky - First Chapter*.



The protagonists of the various games in the *Trails* series (minus that of *Kuro no Kiseki*, the most recent game)

The year is 1202 of the Septian Calendar. Nestled in the southwestern corner of the continent of Zemuria is the Liberl Kingdom, a nation with a relatively small population and an area of around 16,000 square miles (that is, when measured in the units of our world, making Liberl the size of Switzerland). Despite its small size, Liberl is a nation renowned for its technological advances since the start of the Orbals Revolution in 1150, which is essentially Zemuria's version of the industrial revolution, but instead of coal it's fueled by magic gemstones called septium (more on that later). To the east of Liberl is the Republic of Calvard, a superpower nation that encompasses many diverse cultures across the central and eastern regions of Zemuria. But more importantly for the story of *Trails in the Sky*, to the north of Liberl is the Imperial Empire of Erebonia, another superpower nation—except this one is more militarized than Calvard, and it has a history of annexing neighboring nations to the east and north... and in recent history to the south as well.



A map of Zemuria... so far

In 1192, at practically the same time Queen Alicia von Auslese II of Liberl received a declaration of war from Erebonia, Erebonian orbals fired on Haken Gate at Liberl's northern border, shattering the flimsy defenses in mere moments and making way for their ranks of mechanized infantry. This was the beginning of the Hundred Days War between Liberl and Erebonia. And Erebonia nearly crushed Liberl. It took less than a month for 13 divisions of Erebonia's army (which was half of their total military capability and yet three times as much as what Liberl could muster) to occupy almost all of the small kingdom and rout its army back to the southeast Grancel region and Leiston Fortress, Liberl's last line of defense. Erebonia's blitzkrieg tactics had proved so effective that Calvard, Liberl's tentative ally, was not able to send any forces to support them in time.



Orbal Tanks from the 1st Armored Division of the Imperial Army of Erebonian

But right as everything seemed lost, Liberl deployed three state of the art orbals airships they had developed in secret behind the walls of Leiston Fortress, having completed them just before the Erebonians gained a decisive victory. With their newly acquired air supremacy, Liberl was able to fend off the Erebonian occupation and reclaim all its lost territory. Soon after, the Septium Church, one of the largest international organizations in Zemuria, mediated a cease-fire between Erebonia and Liberl. Negotiations culminated in 1193 with the governments of the erstwhile warring nations signing a non-aggression pact. By 1202 it has been 10 years since the tumult of the Hundred Days War, and this is where *Trails in the Sky* begins: in the small town of Rolent in northeastern Liberl, where 16-year-old Estelle Bright wakes up to a big day. It's the day of her entry examination into the Bracer Guild, a non-governmental organization active across Zemuria that strives to keep the peace and protect civilians above all. As you might have already concluded, it's groups like the Bracer Guild that Zemuria needs the most in its current age of unchecked technological progress and imperialistic nation-building. The job of a bracer is most significantly that of a mediator, between civilians and nation, nation and nation, nation and... "other" organizations, some good, some dubious, the latter of which bracers often directly oppose. And have I mentioned that the magic gemstones powering all this new orbals technology originate from the Ancient Zemurian Civilization that collapsed in a near-apocalypse some 1200 years ago, and that present day Zemuria, on its current course of reviving ancient technology for warmongering ends, is likely to repeat that near-apocalypse, and perhaps it won't just be "near" this time?



The previous page of this article may have read to you like a wall of exposition, and that's exactly what it was. It's also the bare minimum amount of exposition you need to understand the core political conflict that Liberl and its citizens find themselves in in *Trails in the Sky First Chapter*. And that's the narrative context for just the first of the 11 mainline *Trails* games that have been released over the past 18 years. If you're thinking that *Trails* is similar to other popular JRPG series like *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Quest*, *Persona*, or *Tales of*, feel free to drop those misconceptions. Unlike those JRPGs, all the *Trails* games revolve around how they take place in the same world and in the same chronologically close and interwoven timeline (something *Persona* technically also does but does not revolve around), with certain games in the series even occurring at the same time but in different locations. A testament to this chronological interconnectedness is that only about seven in-universe years have passed over these 11 games, starting in 1202 with *Trails in the Sky* leading to 1208 with *Kuro no Kiseki*. Another marker of the density of these games is that it easily takes over 700 hours to play them all if you include the time spent reading all the non-player character dialogue and in-universe supplementary texts. You also may have thought that the narrative context for *Trails in the Sky* as I presented it was a little predictable: the played out premise of the small nation up against the large imperial power. But rest assured: *Trails* as a whole is anything but a clear-cut good nation vs. bad nation story. Much of the narrative complexity of *Trails* comes down to how each arc in the series takes place in a different nation. The *Trails in the Sky* trilogy (made up of *First Chapter*, *Second Chapter*, and *The Third*) takes place in Liberl, the *Trails from Zero* and *Trails to Azure* duology takes place in the city state of Crossbell, *Trails of Cold Steel* 1 through 4 take place in the Erebonian Empire (yes, that's right, the ones you may have assumed to be the one-dimensional bad guys of *Trails in the Sky* take center stage here), *Trails into Reverie* takes place in Crossbell and Erebonia, and *Kuro no Kiseki* takes place in The Calvard Republic.



The overarching narrative and worldbuilding of the *Trails* series are its crowning achievements. Taking on the perspective of the citizens of a different nation in Zemuria for every narrative arc not only expands the worldbuilding, it turns this JRPG series into a vicarious condemnation of xenophobia and jingoism (which is to say extreme nationalism). By experiencing

each nation's side of the story, the player can't help but come to understand that every nation and everyone in them perceives themselves as the main characters in their own story, each with their own valid motivations when considered from their own perspectives (most of the time). In other words, you'd be hard pressed to find a hardcore fan of this series who's unhealthily nationalistic, and if they were before, they likely aren't now. This isn't to say that *Trails* is peddling a specific political ideology, even if the writers clearly and justly disavow imperialism and fascism. The constitutional monarchy of Liberl, the parliamentary government of Crossbell, and the hybrid system in Erebonia of an elected diet and a landed noble class are all shown to have their benefits and detriments. While you might expect the monarchial and aristocratic elements of Liberl and Erebonia's governments to be the main subjects of critique in *Trails*, Crossbell's government, although it is the one superficially closest to a modern democracy, does not escape scrutiny either. This is mainly because Crossbell is not a sovereign state but rather a state under the suzerainty (authority over foreign policy) of Erebonia and Calvard, the two superpower nations that envelope it to the west and east. This makes Crossbell a suzerain state, a term that I first learned from *Trails*, not a history or political science class, funny enough. Throughout its history, Crossbell has been, by sheer consequence of its geography, the site of a sometimes veiled, sometimes all-out proxy war between Erebonia and Calvard, resulting in the most geopolitically interesting setting in a video game I've ever seen.



The graphical evolution of *Trails*: from *Trails in the Sky First Chapter* (2004) to *Kuro no Kiseki* (2021)

Trails also resembles, and even surpasses in several areas, the worldbuilding of the best novels I've read. For instance, in Brandon Sanderson's epic fantasy novel series *The Stormlight Archive*, all the worldbuilding exposition is mandatory reading, unless the reader decides to glaze their eyes over it to get to the action. This is obviously the case for most books, meant to be read linearly. That said, even though *The Stormlight Archive*'s integration of worldbuilding and exposition with narrative and character action is done very well, there is an inescapable amount of contrivance that crops up when the writer directly tells the reader about the world, explaining it so that they can understand the larger context of the story. In *Trails*, this kind of contrivance is to an extent bypassed by way of its non-player character dialogue and in-universe supplementary texts. Each *Trails* game has hundreds of named NPCs inhabiting Zemuria's various towns and cities whose dialogue updates after almost every major narrative event. Every game also includes newspapers and books that the player can purchase and find, each one fleshing out the world beyond what the main story's exposition can naturally convey. It also helps that the dialogue of the characters and the prose of these in-universe texts are well-written, which is in large part thanks to the efforts of XSEED Games and NIS America in translating the massive scripts of these games into first-rate English.



The main cast of *Trails in the Sky* First and Second Chapter (minus Olivier, the best character)

Admittedly, for as complex as the world of *Trails* is, it does not exactly mirror the convoluted sociopolitical conditions of real life, but in order to tell the kind of adventurous story *Trails* is trying to tell at the end of the day, a convincing albeit still somewhat abstracted geopolitical world is the best fit. Nonetheless, *Trails'* abstractions don't stop it from having the most in-depth depiction of a world I've seen in a video game series. It's even one of the most thought-out worlds I've seen depicted in all of fiction, and I've read some damn good fantasy and science fiction novels in my day. I've been going on about how the worldbuilding of *Trails* is second to none in video games, but the character writing is nothing to scoff at either. Estelle, the main protagonist of the *Trails in the Sky* arc, is in particular a delightfully endearing and well-developed character. The protagonists of the other arcs in the series, Lloyd Bannings and Rean Schwarzer, while not quite on the level of Estelle, are still appealing characters who (mostly) eschew archetypes in their many layered coming of age character arcs.



The main cast of *Trails from Zero* and *Trails to Azure*, aka Zero no Kiseki and Ao no Kiseki, collectively known as the Crossbell Duology

However, *Trails* is still a JRPG series, and so many of the characters are what, at least at first, appear to be "anime archetypes." The arc in the series most accused of seemingly over-relying on anime archetypes would have to be *Trails of Cold Steel*. The main setting of *Cold Steel* is essentially a high school (specifically a military academy in Erebonia), and that naturally doesn't help the "stock anime" impression many people have of these games. Yet even the main cast of *Cold Steel* manages to exceed their anime archetypes to a large extent by developing from high-strung teenagers into competent young adults over the span of four games and two and a half in-universe years. As the longest arc in the series, *Cold Steel* also has some pacing issues that, while not absent in the other games (these being text-heavy story-based JRPGs, after all), are more pronounced. This is all to say that the *Cold Steel* arc is often made out to be the scapegoat of the *Trails* series (not always without good reason). That said, the arc's protagonist, Rean Schwarzer, is not, contrary to what many think, simply a self-insert anime protagonist. Some might even call him a stock anime harem protagonist, a label that has unfortunately been thrown at the *Cold Steel* games because of their misguided imitation of some of the social simulation elements in another popular JRPG series... *Persona*.



The main cast of *Trails of Cold Steel* 1 and 2

Rean surpasses your usual overpowered self-insert protagonist in that he harbors a wealth of insecurities that would believably come about in a young person who has special powers and responsibilities thrust upon them. Many people fixate on the "special powers and responsibilities" part of his character and assume that this cliche setup inevitably creates a cliché character. However, Rean's somewhat subtle writing makes what could have been a flat and archetypal protagonist in *Cold Steel* 1 and 2 an actually compelling character, but in *Cold Steel* 3 and 4 Rean's character takes one step further into a more actualized adulthood. Despite being the most conventional *Trails* protagonist, Rean experiences tremendous growth as a person, to the point where his "overpowered-ness" even feels somewhat earned by the end of *Cold Steel* 4 (despite how much of his character depth comes from how his "special position" is in many ways forced upon him). But if this guy is the quote unquote worst protagonist in *Trails*, then the others must be amazing, right? Right. Estelle Bright, the protagonist of the *Trails in the Sky* arc is, hence her name, a brilliantly passionate and charming person who can brighten up any situation, no matter how dark. My gushing over her character may trigger the "Mary Sue" alarm bells of you genre savvy readers out there, but worry not: Estelle still has flaws like any good character. She is headstrong, often overly emotional, and reckless, but these are flaws that can be honed into strengths when channeled in the right direction, a development that is immensely satisfying to watch take place in Estelle over the course of the Sky arc. Estelle's character arc also beautifully complements the geopolitical situation of Liberl, which at the start of *Trails in the Sky* is still licking its wounds ten years after the Hundred Days War.



The main cast of *Trails of Cold Steel 3* and 4

At the start of the Hundred Days War, the northern towns of Liberl stood no chance against the Erebonian army's advance. Despite the sudden ferocity of the Erebonian invasion, they didn't indiscriminately target civilians. For instance, Estelle's hometown of Rolent was one of the first Liberl settlements the Imperial army reached. Rolent had and still has no military installations aside from a defensive wall and guard posts, and so the Erebonians, instead of storming the town, decided to fire upon Rolent's ornate clock tower to make its citizens surrender. Although this was intended to be a maneuver that shed no blood on either side, Estelle's mother was crushed beneath the falling debris of the bombarded clock tower, leaving Estelle bereft of her mother at just six years old. This loss irrevocably changes Estelle, but it doesn't change her in the expected "tragic anime backstory" fashion. Estelle does not join the Liberlian army to get revenge on the Erebonians, nor does she become hypernationalistic or even just regularly nationalistic to help cope with the loss of her mother, nor does she direct her trauma into an "us vs. them" narrative. Most importantly, Estelle's trauma does not ruin her. It does not define her character. Like Liberl at large, Estelle bears the scars of the Hundred Days War but moves forward, albeit with occasional difficulty. And it's the difficulty that makes her so human. The deuteragonist (secondary protagonist) of the Sky arc, Joshua Bright, is also a standout character, not only in how he complements Estelle's character arc but also in how he seems to figure as the microcosmic product of another geopolitical incident in recent Zemurian history. However, like with Estelle, that incident does not define him. *Trails* is not just a story about warring nations. It's chiefly about the people caught in the crossfire of those nations and how some of them, like Estelle and Joshua, flawed though they are, strive to limit the crossfire and its collateral damage as much as possible. *Trails* is not just another "friendship saves the day" JRPG story, although friendship naturally plays a big part. *Trails* is about finding a way to mediate between powers much greater than yourself, striving for compromise, and when compromise isn't possible, mustering as many allies and as much influence as possible to fight against the often cruel current of history.

In no arc of *Trails* do the phrases "cruel current of history" and "strive to limit the crossfire" seem more appropriate than in the series' second main arc, which takes place in the city state of Crossbell: the *Trails from Zero* and *Trails to Azure* duology. Although my personal favorite *Trails* protagonist is Estelle, the Crossbell arc has, in my estimation, the best main cast of



The 3D models of the main characters of *Trails of Cold Steel 3*

characters in the series. Much of this comes down to how there are only four main characters as opposed to the (at least) nine that are in the Sky games and the first two *Cold Steel* games respectively. However, *Trails in the Sky First and Second Chapter* handle their main characters better than *Cold Steel* by introducing them sequentially and by focusing segments of the story on certain characters. Conversely, *Cold Steel 1* introduces all of its main characters at once, and although the writers made an attempt to focus on a character or two for every segment of the story, it comes off as a lot more clumsy and less cohesive than the approach taken in the Sky arc. *Trails of Cold Steel 3* and 4 are a noticeable improvement from 1 and 2 because of how much of their narrative focus is on five newly (with the exception of one) introduced characters and their development alongside Rean, but the pacing of these games also suffer somewhat because of the amount of screen time dedicated to the post-timeskip reintroduction of the main cast of *Cold Steel 1* and 2.



The Crossbell arc sidesteps the issues that come with the larger casts of *Cold Steel* and *Sky* by featuring the smallest, and by extension most developed, main cast of characters in the series. The geopolitical situation of Crossbell, stuck in the crossfire of the two giants of Erebonia and Calvard, is already a setting ripe for narrative intrigue, but the personalities of and chemistry between the main characters of Lloyd, Elie, Randy, and Tio manage to perfectly complement this compelling setting while also elevating the narrative with their own varied and complex character arcs. They may seem like archetypes at first: Lloyd is the overearnest yet adroit detective, Elie is the prim and proper yet altruistic diplomat, Randy is the jovial bruiser with a heart of gold, and Tio is the mousy yet quippy technician. However, these characters transcend those archetypes through their many flaws that they have to overcome as they gradually develop into more capable and understanding people. As with Estelle, Joshua, and many of the other characters in the Sky arc, this process is fraught with growing pains, but the more realistic sociopolitical setting of the Crossbell arc better grounds the conflicts its characters go through. *Trails in the Sky* can at times admittedly feel like a "vigilante heroes save the establishment from itself and others" story, which is an inherently less believable premise, whereas the Crossbell arc depicts its heroes mainly having to work as best they can within the corrupt systems of Crossbell (at least until the end of *Trails to Azure*). In contrast to how the main cast of the Sky arc attempts and pulls off independent maneuvers all the time, only until circumstances demand it and prime opportunities present themselves does the main cast of the Crossbell arc attempt and occasionally pull off these kinds of less believable maneuvers, making their struggles and successes feel overall harder earned and easier to invest in.



Of course, like in *Sky* and *Cold Steel*, the Crossbell arc still features a large cast of side characters. This is a given when one of the greatest appeals of *Trails* is its intricate worldbuilding, which an abundance of side characters and NPCs are instrumental in achieving. The difference lies in how the four main characters of the Crossbell arc spend practically the whole duration of their two games together as part of the newly established Special Support Section of the Crossbell Police Department. Because Lloyd is a detective and the group's de facto leader, the SSS functions as an investigative unit, probing into the darker parts of Crossbell, much of which involves the proxy war between Erebonia and Calvard that infests the state to its very political foundations. The SSS' activities take them all across Crossbell, and the player gets to experience alongside them every facet of this city state, such that by the time you get to the climactic story beats in *Trails to Azure*, you end up feeling like you're a fellow Crossbellian rooting for your homeland (without veering into unhealthy or extreme levels of nationalism, I hope). The same applies to feeling like a Liberian when playing through the *Sky* arc and an Erebonian when playing through the *Cold Steel* arc, but I think the Crossbell arc fosters the strongest sense of identification with the player thanks to its small core cast and the relatively realistic geopolitical obstacles that they encounter.

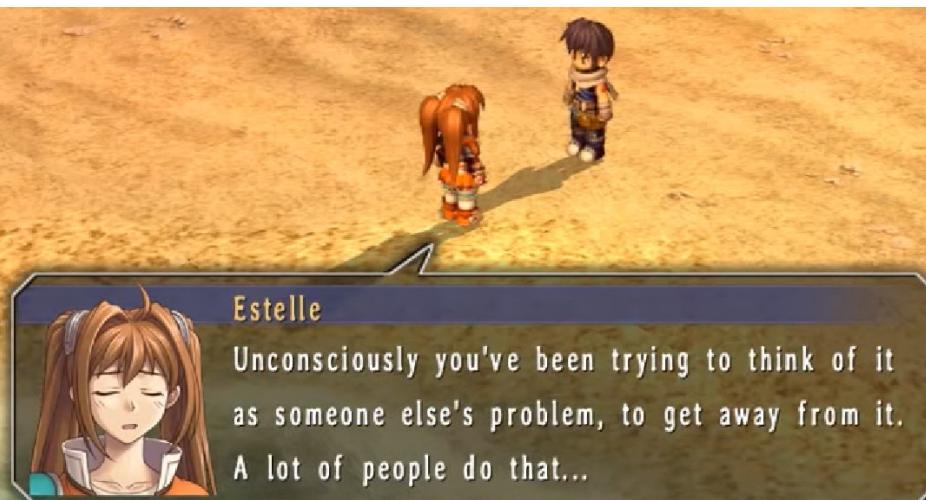
I should probably remind you that these are still JRPGs. They're video games. They have combat. It's the standard turn-based combat system you find in many JRPGs, but with some twists like the ability to interrupt the turn order with special attacks and having another kind of attack called crafts in addition to your standard melee and magic options (the latter of which is known as "arts" in *Trails*). Unlike many mindless turn-based combat systems, the combat in *Trails in the Sky First Chapter* through *Trails to Azure* requires proper planning and strategy on the higher difficulty settings, but the combat in *Cold Steel 1* and onwards is a cakewalk even on the highest difficulty mode (with the possible exception of *Kuro no Kiseki*, as I haven't played it yet). A lot of this comes down to how the magic system in *Trails* games prior to *Cold Steel 1* requires the player to more deliberately organize items called quartz in each character's orbment, which is essentially their personalized magic device. Each orbment slot can hold a single quartz, and these slots are organized into different lines. Depending on how many quartz of a certain elemental type are in a single line, that character will get access to different arts. In *Cold Steel 1* and onwards, arts are no longer acquired through this elemental line system but rather through simply equipping specific quartz. This may seem like a small change, but



A battle in *Trails in the Sky First Chapter* (2004) compared to a battle in *Trails of Cold Steel 3* (2017)

when it's coupled with *Cold Steel 1*'s introduction of an easily exploitable follow-up attack system (the exploitability of which the order system introduced by *Cold Steel 3* exacerbates further), it becomes clear why much of the challenge, if not all of the enjoyment, of *Trails* combat has faded away in the later entries of the series (again, with the possible exception of *Kuro no Kiseki*). Thankfully, it's probably obvious by now that I didn't fall in love with *Trails* because of the combat, so this trend hasn't bothered me much.

What I did fall in love with *Trails* for was its worldview, and I don't mean that in the sense that this series affirms my ideological beliefs. On the contrary, the winding narrative of *Trails*, taking place in a world embroiled in layers upon layers of conspiracies and systemic conflicts, often calls some of my overly idealistic views on the world into question. Conversely, *Trails* challenges some of my overly cynical views on the world by depicting characters like Estelle, Joshua, Lloyd, and Rean working to confront their flaws and grow as people capable perhaps not of fundamentally changing the world but of helping steer its course in a better direction. This is a common character arc in the *Trails* series that is always inspirational and, unexpectedly, often believable (as funny as that is to say about a JRPG series in which groups of mostly teenagers do still go from rescuing lost cats at the start of the game to killing godlike beings by the end). I also got into *Trails* at the most opportune time in my life for playing long story-driven JRPGs: after finishing my university applications and before the COVID-19 pandemic. Once the pandemic began in earnest, I, like many students, suddenly had the most free time and the fewest things to spend that time on that I've ever had, and probably ever will have, in my life. And I could have dealt with that time much, much worse if it weren't for *Trails*. Rather than offering mere escapism from an increasingly bleak reality, *Trails* reflected, albeit with more hope at the end of the tunnel, many of the world's and my own problems back at me at a time when I was increasingly likely to descend into indifference towards both. It was a light in the void for me. I know it has

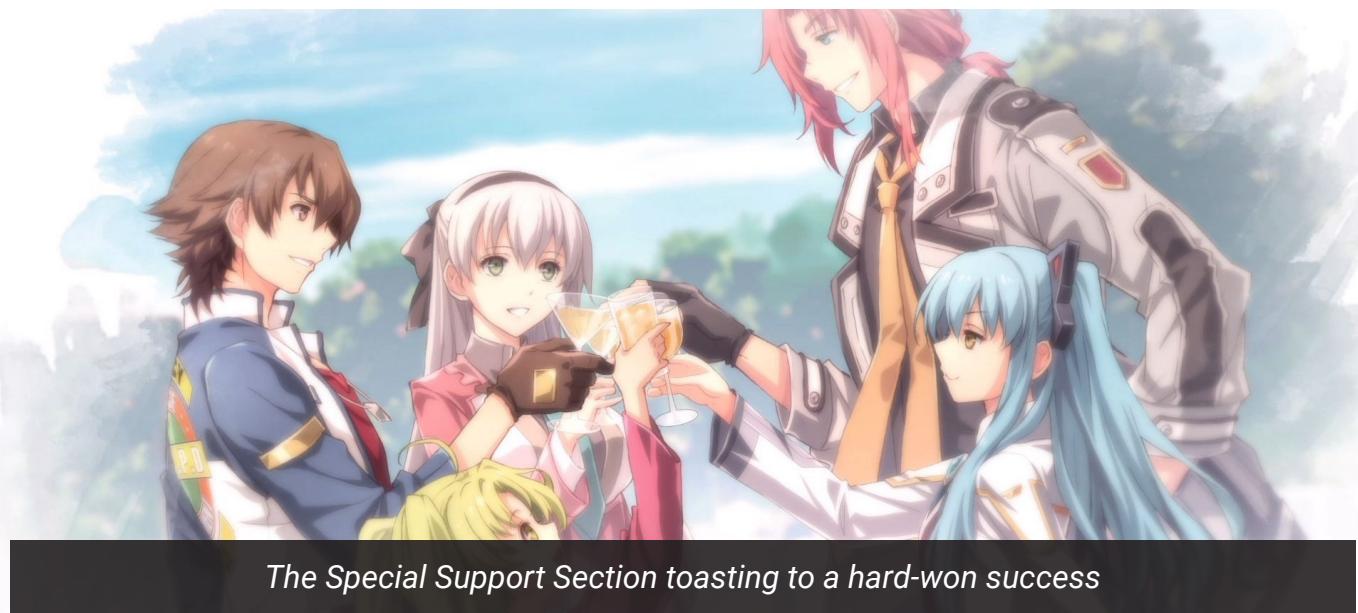


Just as *Trails* does not reflect real world problems as all fire and brimstone so too does it not reflect them as all sunshine and rainbows. The most obvious political allegory in *Trails* is how Erebonia stands in for any major imperial power in history: the German Empire, the Soviet Union, or modern-day China, to name a few. Erebonia also bears a resemblance to America's military-industrial complex (although the American government refuses to call a spade a spade with what is effectively the country's imperial presence across the globe). The geopolitical situation of Crossbell resembles that of various real world countries or city states: Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Ukraine, Israel, Palestine, or 19th-20th century Thailand (which is the actual inspiration behind Crossbell). As for countries that Liberl serves as an allegory for, Canada fits the description given that it's technically a constitutional monarchy (although the monarchy has no real power) and that it has a much more populated and militarized next-door neighbor. As a Canadian myself, I find this comparison very apt. My own background certainly made the geopolitical stakes of *Trails in the Sky*'s narrative easier to invest in, but I was also pleasantly surprised by how the perspectives of the Erebonians were handled in the *Cold Steel* arc, despite some spoilery qualms I have that I'll discuss below. Although I'm hesitant to make this article outdated at release by bringing up a currently unfolding event, I think it's relevant to note that Russia's invasion of Ukraine as of February 24th, 2022, strongly resembles a certain key geopolitical conflict in western Zemuria. The *Trails* series also isn't limited to its mainline games: *Nayuta no Kiseki* (which will soon be released on modern platforms in English as *Legend of Nayuta: Boundless Trails*) is a spin-off game originally released for the PSP in 2012, there's an anime OVA based on *Trails in the Sky Second Chapter*, and a TV anime series is currently in production that will adapt events that take place between *Trails of Cold Steel* 2 and 3. With the series showing no signs of stopping as its overarching narrative only grows in complexity and intrigue, there has never been a better time to get into *Trails*. If anything I've shared here has piqued your interest even a little, please give the games a shot. To the future! With that said, I'll be entering spoiler territory from here on out.



I'm not sure when I'll have another opportunity to write about *Trails*, so here's a rapid fire list of my spoiler-filled critiques and praises for the series. Olivier, or rather Olivert, is one of the most hilarious and compelling

characters I've seen in a JRPG. His comedic rapport with the main cast of *Trails in the Sky* already cemented him as one of my favorites, but his reveal as a prince of Erebonia who, in part thanks to the influence of Estelle and the rest, helps avert another Erebonian occupation of Liberl, took his character to new heights. His appearance in *Trails to Azure* was also entertaining if not too narratively significant, but his role in *Trails of Cold Steel* as a sponsor/distant mentor to the main cast of those games built upon his development in the *Sky* arc in a tangible and satisfying way. Similarly, the way Renne's character arc spans the *Sky* and *Cold Steel* games is executed superbly, especially in how her story intertwines with Estelle and Joshua's. The writers deserve great praise for how they handled the darker elements of Renne's backstory, not sensationalizing them but also not reducing them to a cartoonish version of trauma that is easily overcome with one or two "power of friendship" speeches as is common in many JRPGs. Also, Giliath Osborne is the greatest villain who was never actually a villain. Everything about his character, from how he is sinfully alluded to in *Sky First* and *Second Chapter*, to his intimidating first appearance in *The Third*, to his nail-biting confrontation with the SSS in *Trails to Azure*, to his looming presence in *Cold Steel*, makes it so that Osborne always takes center stage in whatever scene he appears in. The twist that Osborne's true intention in stirring up international unrest was to encourage Zemuria to produce a force capable of defeating Ishmelga and therefore the Erebonian Curse was unexpected yet convincing, but the concept of the curse itself has its issues. It robs many of the series' villains of their agency and cheapens the severity of Zemuria's geopolitical situation, especially in regards to the Hamel incident and Liberl's relations with Erebonia. The writers tried to lampshade this by making it so the curse doesn't change people's minds exactly but instead exacerbates malicious intent that was already there, but this still means that many tragic events in Zemurian history were to a large extent caused by some cartoonishly evil thought entity rather than flawed people making selfish decisions (the latter of which is infinitely more interesting to me). The writers also chickened out by not making KeA commit actual war crimes in *Trails to Azure*. Having no one die as a result of her obliterating the railway guns and Galleria Fortress takes out a lot of the narrative weight of Dieter Crois and co. manipulating her. There's also not enough "reality" in the civil war in *Cold Steel* 2 because practically no one dies (at least on screen). *Cold Steel* 2 and 4 are also unnecessarily padded out with combat and fetch quests, which may be an inevitable consequence of their being developed in much less time than their prequel counterparts, but then again, *Trails to Azure* was developed in around the same amount of time and does not have these issues to nearly the same extent. The world abstraction in *Trails*, which is to say how full-scale environments like cities are shrunk down from entirely realistic to navigable and feasible (in regards to game development limitations) proportions, is usually done really well, to the point where I can't help but notice how it could be slightly better (where are the bathrooms?). At one point there's this continuity error that the abstraction of the combat system causes: when Sieg leaves to deliver a message in *Sky First Chapter*, Kloe can still use her craft that summons Sieg in battle (quantum-teleporting Sieg controlled the Sept-Terrion of space all along plot twist incoming?). But the topic of abstraction in *Trails*, what it does right and how it can be improved, is a whole other article unto itself. For now, my urge to write about my love for this series is sated, but I'll surely come crawling back when the withdrawal symptoms get to me. Forward, relentlessly!



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