

While only 8 episodes of the *Reign of the Seven Spellblades* had been released so far, the direction it's moving in does not seem particularly promising. The flaws of its story elements are largely in line with many shonen (borderline seinen) anime of the modern era; the series seems more focused on checking things off a checklist than developing a succinct narrative.

Take episode 8 for example. We spent a large amount of time setting up a "tournament arc" with a whole host of unestablished characters that will definitely be absolutely humiliated in the upcoming episodes. This is a typical "power fantasy troupe", and while there is nothing inherently wrong with this kind of story-telling, it leads to a rather uninspiring plot. The inevitability of Nanao or Oliver's win leads me to question why this plot point even exists in the first place. If its purpose is to establish the strength of our main characters, the arc seems quite overindulgent. Did *The Eminence in Shadow* (which ironically can also be labeled overindulgent) not just satirize this type of writing just a few seasons ago?

These kind of issues are rampant throughout the show; in just a few episodes, viewers have had the privilege of witnessing "revenge fantasy", "gender bender", "mad scientist", "demi-human discrimination", and "classism". Some of these troupes actually can inspire interesting themes – for example, the "gender bender" could have led to a discussion on gender identity and prejudice – but at the pace of which the show introduces new characters and concepts, it seems rather unlikely. It just feels like nothing in the show is adequately developed before being abandoned.

In contrast, *Naruto* develops its characters and major themes before overwhelming the audience with loose plot points. The first 6-7 episodes serve as an introduction to the world and its key characters, outlining Naruto's discrimination by the village and subsequent desire to feel recognized and Sasuke's goal of "killing a certain man". This seems very basic, but I'm not sure many modern anime do the same.

It's likely true that *Naruto* had the luxury of knowing that it would have a long running production, and it could afford to use its time introducing characters in such "low stakes" environments. However, very quickly afterwards, it's clear that the struggles of shinobi life is what will dominate the narrative going forward. The phrase "that's my nindo, my ninja way, believe it!" may be a bit annoying at this point, but it hammers home what exactly the theme of the show is. How can one rationalize a world of violence and brutality? And as such, what is humanity for the shinobi?

For Zabuza, the show's first major antagonist, people are tools meant to be used and discarded. This attitude is a reflection of the very nature of his existence; starting from the murder of all his classmates as his (elementary/middle school) graduation exam, he has been used as a weapon for his entire life. This pattern is what sows the seeds of pain in the ninja world and will be the backbone for all of the conflict and suffering throughout the rest of the show.

Haku's life interestingly runs quite parallel to Naruto's, with discrimination over a genetic trait leading to his murder of his father and culminating in his desire to have a place where he is wanted. Perhaps symbolically, Haku's desire manifests with the ice mirror ability he uses to fight

Naruto; his dream is exactly the same as Naruto's, so his tragedy shakes the beliefs of the main characters to the core. The man he gives his life to protect claims that he is a tool to be used and disposed of, yet this is the only man who accepts him for who he is and what he has done. "When a person becomes strong like you, does that person really behave like you?" Naruto asks Zabuza in an attempt to rationalize what it means to be wanted and respected in their world.

Zabuza is perhaps one of the most inhumane villains we see in the entire show, yet even he is unable to reject the importance of human connection. At Haku's death, he feels emotional pain incongruous to his own beliefs, uncharacteristically shedding tears and giving his life to kill the man who disrespects Haku. If the show introduces monsters then immediately humanizes them, how could the violence in its world ever be justified? There are few true villains in *Naruto*, just people on opposing sides of conflict.

It's entirely possible that *Seven Spellblades* can do the same with its themes by the end of the season, but in 19 episodes, *Naruto* has clearly defined the building blocks for the rest of its 500+ episode run (this number includes a lot of filler episodes). Of course, the show is no masterpiece, and has major issues in its episode-by-episode pacing, with filler episodes and long flashbacks. Part of this is inevitable due to its sheer length, but I wish the studio could come up with more creative ways to tie plot points and character motivations together rather than defaulting to completely replaying a scene which we have seen many times before.

Another important concept in action anime is the combat system. Many popular shows such as *Naruto*, *Hunter x Hunter*, and *Jujutsu Kaisen* (seemingly less so with Gojo's ridiculous abilities) try their best to avoid the common pitfall of making combat boil down to pure "power scaling". While we've slowly been introduced to a few types of magic and fencing styles in *Seven Spellblades*, action still revolves simply around how quick or powerful a mage is and whether or not they have a "spellblade". Oliver's explanation of how important distances are in mage battles seems to be more of an afterthought in an attempt to justify how certain mages are just "stronger" rather than a demonstration of dynamic, tactical skill usage in combat (We don't really see characters thinking about this ever. People just seem to shoot spells then run at each other.). By episode 8, Naruto and Sasuke, who are inexperienced and clearly punching above their weight class, are able to influence a showdown between two elite ninjas using ingenuity and tying basic concepts already introduced in the show together.