

Steins;Gate 0: A sequel to the popular time-travel anime series

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Steins;Gate 0 is a 24-episode anime television series that aired in Japan between April and September 2018. It is a sequel, of sorts, to *Steins;Gate* (2009).

Both are based on a science-fiction visual novel series, which is a type of computer-game version of a “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” novel genre that is popular in Japan. In the latter genre, the story consists of multiple branches, which lead the player to different endings.

It must be said, prior to discussing *Steins;Gate 0* in particular, that there is a major contradiction present in Japanese anime and manga generally: namely, the considerable gap between the remarkable technological capabilities and imaginative art work of the creators involved, on the one hand, and their limited social and historical views, on the other.

Here we find talented individuals, studios and production companies equipped with the most sophisticated means of communication, but who have a very confused understanding of the world. This contradiction is expressed in virtually every artistic creation that comes out of the anime industry each year, particularly in those stories where social and historical questions take center stage.

The first *Steins;Gate* series aired in 2011 and told the story of Rintaro Okabe (voice actor Mamoru Miyano), an 18-year-old self-proclaimed “mad scientist” who, along with his friends, creates a cell-phone-operated microwave that can send text messages, which they call “D-mails,” back through time. His initial careless use of the device alters the lives of his friends, including in ways that lead to their deaths, and sets into motion the conditions for an arms race over time travel technology between the United States and Russia that results in

World War III.

(Apparently, the title “Steins;Gate” has no specific meaning, but is meant to bring to mind the German word “Stein,” meaning stone, and the figure of Albert Einstein.)

The original series therefore follows Okabe’s journey to undo the D-mails and find a timeline where his friends can live and the war can be averted. This is made possible when one of his friends creates a device that allows Okabe’s memories to be sent back through time using the microwave oven, effectively allowing his consciousness to time travel into his earlier body.

Steins;Gate 0 takes up one of the alternate endings to the original series, one where Okabe had to choose between the deaths of one of his two friends to avert war, and one in which his world is much darker and gloomier. Kurisu Makise (Asami Imai), the young physicist who made time travel possible and Okabe’s love interest, is dead, but Okabe soon learns that one of her colleagues has been at work developing a new artificial intelligence software that captured Makise’s memories and persona before she died. Okabe is recruited as a tester of the system, called Amadeus, and begins to interact with his lost love through his cell phone on an everyday basis.

It soon becomes clear that the existence of Amadeus provides a renewed threat of world war, since the time travel theories Makise developed did not completely die with her physical body. The situation is exacerbated when a strange girl, Kagari (Megumi Han), from the future shows up who looks strikingly like Makise and who has been brainwashed by some nefarious, unknown government agency.

Both *Steins;Gate* and *Steins;Gate 0*, arguably two of the more interesting anime series created over the last decade, are limited in how they confront politics and

social life. The themes the series attempt to treat, such as world war and government spying, are highly relevant today but poorly understood by many, including the artists involved.

One glaring problem is that the plots of both series are rooted in the notion that world war can be averted so long as time-travel technology ceases to exist! Such a plot is at the level of comic-book material and would not be out of place in one of the more “critical” *Marvel* comics or films. The roots of imperialist war are neither objectively understood nor addressed by the writers and creators of *Steins;Gate 0*.

Furthermore, the US and Russia are depicted simply as rival bourgeois states who compete over time-travel technology, going to equally ruthless methods to murder and spy and hack into computer systems to get a leg up on one another.

While the Russian regime is an authoritarian and reactionary one, it is hardly equal to the United States in geopolitics. American imperialism is the universal aggressor. This position of the series creators is not disconnected from their overall outlook, and it speaks to the ubiquitous problems that exist within these middle-class artistic layers.

The series is generally restricted to what it can do with and say about the immediate characters in and around Okabe’s circle of acquaintances. The most popular Japanese anime and manga series tend to spend more time on character development and explicitly present individuals with moral dilemmas and personal defects that must be overcome, but too often these are embedded in stories with high melodrama, wild plot convolutions, violence and mere visual spectacle.

As in many anime series, there is a heavy emphasis in *Steins;Gate 0* on morality and the consequences of individual failures. One of the “morals” emphasized in both series is that time travel is not a solution to real problems. Again, this may not come as an earthshaking insight.

In the first series, when Okabe tries to prevent his childhood friend, Mayuri (Kana Hanazawa), from dying, he finds that no matter how many dozens of times he goes back and tries to alter the situation, she still inevitably dies (brutally) in one way or another. Here, *Steins;Gate* is another well-meaning fable telling adolescents to confront life and death rather than trying to hide from it.

Steins;Gate 0 also includes a lot of comedy, but, as in many anime series, much of this is low-brow, relying on cheap gags and adolescent humor. Okabe’s sidekick and hacker friend, “Daru” (Tomokazu Seki), is an overweight, perverse young man constantly berated by the females of the group for his frequently naïve and inappropriate observations. Sometimes the banter between Makise and Okabe is clever and entertaining, but much of the humor, unfortunately, is more embarrassing than funny.

There is no doubt that the artists involved are quite imaginative and visually gifted, but works such as this are better suited to adolescent audiences who crave escapism and adventure. The actual concrete world hardly pokes its head into this kind of material, and when it does it is confused and distorted by extreme violence and overcooked morality.

The author also recommends:

Darling in the FranXX: Japanese anime series about fighting for the survival of humanity
[20 August 2018]



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