

**CONTENT WARNING** - contains spoilers for *Arcaea*, as well as references to death, violence, abuse, PTSD, and general trauma.

## Introduction

What happens when a game dev team dares to ask the following question: “what if we adapted the plot of *The Big O* into a yuri rhythm game?”

Well, you get *Arcaea*.



*rhythm games are legally mandated to have nonsensically fitting taglines*

*Arcaea* is a vertically scrolling rhythm game, or VSRG, developed and released by indie company lowiro in 2017. The game is well-known for three particular aspects that differentiate it from mobile contemporaries - its unique adaptation of the core *SOUND VOLTEX* formula establishes the backbone of highly intricate charting, the ever present and ever incomprehensible mechanic of the potential system confuses players to this day, and the existence of a legitimate, fully-fledged story behind the gameplay creates a compelling package tied together under the genre tradition of complete abstraction.

Unlike many rhythm games of the 2010s, *Arcaea* has a distinct story that closely links to various aspects of the gameplay, often in significant ways. Some, but not all characters, have powers that directly translate to gameplay as skills that apply when chosen as your “Partner” during songs. This can range from simple changes, like a hard gauge or mirroring the chart, to drastic restrictions like forcing you to full combo a song. These are admittedly minor effects in tandem

with the story, but still highlights a greater impact than the typical rhythm game plot of “just make things up.”

Very few otome titles at the time of this game’s release opted to feature a story of any comparable scale, Cytus being the most notable exception readily available in English. However, this game adopts the visual novel approach so lovingly adopted by many mobile games today, throwing insurmountable walls of text at you between difficult charts in an attempt to decipher just what the world of Arcaea truly means for its inhabitants. This approach can feel very long-winded to many, but it’s a small concession to make for a small indie company creating something widely respected.

While it’s worth briefly discussing every aspect of Arcaea for the sake of completion, this video centres on the story as its primary focus. It’s an aspect worth analysing in more detail, and a lot of videos on the game tend to overlook large swathes of its writing in favour of the pretty colours and loud hardstyle kicks. I think it’s funny that the main theme of my longform videos has trended towards “yuri literary analysis”, so what better time to merge my main interest and the raison d’être of my channel together than this one?

## Synopsis

It’s kind of important to outline the structure of Arcaea’s story before talking about the confusing specifics, so forgive me for the cliché synopsis dump.

The game’s narrative is split into two branches, with the “main story” and several shorter stories each revealing various truths about the greater world. The main story focuses on Hikari and Tairitsu, two young girls who awaken at different locations with no memories of their own. Both of them ponder their surroundings, quickly understanding the purpose behind the numerous shards of glass that populate the environment - these glass pieces are memories that reflect the various possibilities of **other** worlds.

Hikari is remarkably nonchalant about her predicament, almost immediately opting to disregard the remarkable situation she is abruptly thrust into. She operates almost entirely on the subconscious level, with her sole motivation in Arcaea attracting her towards more memories. It’s not a stretch in saying that Hikari is initially “mesmerised by the beauty of the world”, but she conveys apathy for her origins and circumstances that borders on childlike wonder. In return, the memories show her idyllic, utopian realities - “memories of an ugly, yet pretty world” that contrast with the space she occupies here and now.



"How pleasant," *she thought*, "that these figures can move as well. Where are the strings?"

By contrast, Tairitsu promptly begins to dread her new setting. The shard-filled sky overhead seems to overwhelm her, every memory she discovers only encouraging a reaction of bitter disgust. Though she takes it upon herself to gather and destroy these negative memories in the hopes of some twisted fulfillment, Tairitsu continues searching for a small glimpse of light in the darkness that envelops her portion of Arcaea. Unlike Hikari, absentmindedly shepherded where memories appear, Tairitsu unconsciously develops a sense of destructive justice in her narrow quest to purge the "filth and awfulness" that she encounters.

This establishes the narrative "conflict", as Hikari and Tairitsu exist in diametric opposition from the first moments in their new habitat. The former finds amusement in her ennui and seeks to change none of that, while the latter is filled with an immense dissatisfaction for the world and a compulsion to do something about it. Both of them are rapidly tainted by the influence of Arcaea in wildly different ways. Hikari is nearly consumed by her collection of positive memories, potentially ending up comatose in a bad ending, but vowing to control the world rather than bow to its influence. Tairitsu discovers a memory revealing how meaningless Arcaea truly is, lashing out at her own powerlessness. In exchange, she learns how to manipulate the glass, a manifestation of her voidless hostility.

Such character contrast is the first of many presented in-game, eventually driving much of the narrative progression by the main story's end. Arcaea is presented as a hostile, manipulative setting during the early chapters, clearly enabling and denying free agency at the mercy of whoever finds themselves unfortunate enough to wake up there. It preys upon the natural fear of uncertainty, while also granting too much independence through sheer curiosity - nobody



knows anything about themselves, nor this desecrated landscape far beyond considered “peaceful”.



"If I can be rid of this trash, or even better the places it represents..."

Eventually, the pair meet in the ruins of a destroyed church. Both are truthfully none too pleased at the revelation of another's presence, but nonetheless act cordially tense. Tairitsu consistently pushes back at Hikari's proposals to work together, but they share knowledge of one key detail - this world is called "Arcaea". After some discussions concerning their previous experiences, the girls attempt to find common ground and put their differences aside for one brief moment.

All this changes when Tairitsu witnesses a premonition of being killed by Hikari in a stray memory, decisively convincing her that Arcaea, and the girl she just met, are beyond salvation. Thus begins a fight to the death between light and darkness, as they reconcile with the truth of their new existence in this apparent purgatory.

While there are other characters who play an equally important role in deciphering this obtuse tale, Hikari and Tairitsu are the ones who ultimately decide its outcome. Pretentious as it sounds, the audience only learn cursory fragments of the realm through its inhabitants, only developing a vague comprehension of its structure as each individual unearths new discoveries by sheer chance. The main characters introduce many concepts that soon become familiar, but they occasionally initiate a process entirely incomprehensible to the viewer - such irregularities are commonplace for *Arcaea*.



## **Conflict within Arcaea's Writing**

One element that *Arcaea* enforces throughout its stories is how characters often form a dichotomy through their logic of the world (or in rare cases, lack thereof.) The main story clearly demonstrates this with Hikari and Tairitsu, as the duo forms an unlikely relationship that shapes interactions between the majority of the cast. They gradually learn to control the world in some way reminiscent of their “old” life, implicitly divulging past memories before waking up in *Arcaea* without dropping fully-fledged hints about anyone’s backstory. For a plot as text-heavy as this one, it’s a thematically fitting approach that finely develops the cast without continual focus on specific aspects of their character.

Tairitsu frequently escalates this dichotomy in her quest to kill Hikari as she continues to question *Arcaea* - how she arrived here, what the fragments are, who the girl in white is. Nothing is explicitly outlined to the audience, no questions that are posed about the land directly answered. Even as they fight each other, aspects of their newfound powers begin to tackle their pasts in different ways, cementing the possibility of inhabiting a meeting place for worlds completely beyond purview. The girl in black controls her fragments with an instinctual ease, while her counterpart slowly adjusts the fabric of reality to her will. Much of the story is defined by these extreme differences of capacity, with any potential conflict driven by an individual's personal choices.

These choices lead to Hikari killing Tairitsu in self-defence, as *Arcaea* shares her desire to survive, but this causes another conflict of interest by proxy. Losing the only other person she knows in the world makes her realise how contradictory *Arcaea* is, driving her to make a decision of her own free will. Against this inherent desire for self-preservation displayed in the main story, she instead chooses to resurrect Tairitsu, refusing her ties to the world for her own satisfaction in the comfort of someone she accepts as an equal. This ties to Aristotle’s ideas of people as “political animals”, as both girls desire a need to live together, even if one rejects any help - Tairitsu always believed in a better world, whether it be *Arcaea* or someplace else, and Hikari unconsciously reciprocates the desire to make that wish come true together.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, translated by C.D.C. Reeve, *Politics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), pp. 75-6



*And beneath the whirling and silver floods stand two girls, each with a blaze in her heart.*

By the ending, Hikari accepts her role in Arcaea's foundations, yet rejects its core purpose as a "second chance" for the dead. The game's bad ending reveals that the cast had died prior to their arrival, being copied into Arcaea without most of their memories. Hikari is the sole exception to this rule as her real counterpart is still alive, yet is completely unaware of the world she has created and the implications of her godhood. The copy is detached from this truth until the narrative climax, but Hikari ultimately opts for a fresh start, unburdened by her forced responsibility as some deity of an irresponsible prison.

In many respects, both characters represent two radical philosophies that are inherently incompatible with each other, ironically because either option inevitably leads to Arcaea's total destruction. Hikari fights for her own and Arcaea's survival, while Tairitsu seeks to deny others her fate by destroying the world. It's easy to describe the latter using good old "political animal" comparisons until I cease making Youtube videos, but she exemplifies the term perfectly. Tairitsu clearly understands that negative memories are wrong, and rationally translates her resolve to destroy them as proof of being "a good person". She comprehends that Arcaea is fundamentally unjust in reviving the dead without consent, but grows independent of the very state that forms around her need for kinship through losing her memories.<sup>2</sup> In essence, she codifies self-sufficiency from the "state" Hikari governs, becoming both a beast of nature and a god in all but title.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Josiah Ober, 'We're All Political Animals - And That's A Good Thing' [accessed at <https://antigonejournal.com/2021/03/political-animals/>]

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, pp. 4-5

On the other hand, Hikari is less concrete in purpose. As a copy of someone akin to a god, she technically doesn't exist - in other words, she is artificial. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes an "artificial person" as a sovereign who represents the words and actions of another, typically the society authorising their authority.<sup>4</sup> This figure is meant to speak for the will of everybody, acting in the name of the state rather than for personal rule.<sup>5</sup> Hikari often does what peaks her fancy the most, but Arcaea usually encourages this because she represents it, knowing that she will subconsciously act in the world's interest for survival. Her lack of ambition makes sense knowing she has no memories of her own, but it's only when her life is threatened that she chooses to embrace complete divinity - Arcaea tells Hikari "do not die" because it ceases to be without her.



"You don't know what you are, either..."

These comparisons may seem like an extreme analysis, but they're generally supported by how mysterious the world of Arcaea is. Tairitsu is explicitly called a "beast" and referred to as god-like in the same chapter, while Hikari's control over everything becomes more nondescript as the main story progresses, eventually settling on her becoming an actual god. Neither character is equally right or wrong in their motivation, but Tairitsu's desire for freedom gives her just cause to destroy Arcaea, because it enables an unhealthy society where everybody lacks any real purpose without their past memories to guide them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> T. Hobbes, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin, *Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 106-7

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 115-121

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, p. 82

\* referring to the colour, not the later name given to the Roman Empire until the fall of Constantinople in 1453.



It's easy to gloss over these details because of how abstract the plot becomes at times, but various parts of Arcaea neatly link together as more is revealed about the wider narrative. Perspective focus often shifts between characters at random, some of whom may not even be physically present, supporting the idea that the audience only knows as much as the cast. Arcaea is a world that breeds conflict, whether it's between characters, or your own experiences with the wider game. There's a sense of the writing bleeding into the overall experience, but it fits how the story wants to present itself as enigmatic, rather than forcing and overstaying its welcome like many subversive works.

Many have described Arcaea's writing as hard to follow, and that's a fair argument. The plot is abstract, details are conveyed through what feels like byzantium\* prose, and I can only imagine my pseudo-philosophical analysis only compounds that feeling of "what are you even talking about." It's not hard to guess that most of the audience doesn't follow the story beyond very simple terms, which is entirely fair considering the core gameplay is highly regarded among modern rhythm games. However, it's also fair to say that the story rewards those who think critically about the wider picture, as there's a greater discussion about how we value life in different ways that lies beneath the writing team's desire for toxic yuri subtext.



*If you've chosen life, then choose to live.*

Overall, it's worth paying attention to what Hikari and Tairitsu entail for Arcaea's branching narrative, since they outline important aspects about the world that often have significant consequences for future developments. Many side stories make reference to some detail mentioned before in passing, with a few characters directly encountering an event from the main story *in medias res*. The game reminds you that Arcaea is only as large, or small, as one understands it to be - through the cast, you realise how much this theory rings true.

## **Establishing (and Exceeding) a Writing Balance**

Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, many have concluded that the average human's greatest motivation is being treated badly by an evil woman, and ooooooooooh my god

Ilith represents an interesting exception to many established rules of *Arcaea*. Rather than existing in the world's confines, she awakens in the void that surrounds it, decidedly unmotivated in traversing any further. If the people of *Arcaea* have the potential to become creators who shape the world how they choose, then she is their total antithesis - a god of destruction, only curious in how much weight reality can take before snapping under her whimsical grip. There's no other direct comparison, but Ilith's role within the narrative proves that any, if not all of the laws holding things together, can be broken just as easily as they are proven.

One can argue that Ilith draws parallels to the main characters in different ways, and these comparisons help to identify her worldbuilding role. There's a semblance of the apathetic nature towards *Arcaea* that Hikari first displays, and like Tairitsu, she revels in some malicious eagerness to destroy the world upon knowing its purpose. However, this is where the similarities quickly end - Ilith sees herself far beyond the need for understanding because she can tame destruction at will, but she hardly cares about *why* *Arcaea* should be erased if she is the one to do so. Behind that smug grin lies an individual whose pride and ego overwhelms the natural instinct for concrete purpose, instead predisposed towards a freedom of complete nothingness away from any restraints. In that sense, she is entirely different from the prior cast members, because she acts of her own volition, instead of some instinctual duty that subconsciously dictates her goals.

To call Ilith another godly being like Aristotle hypothesises is apt. Her short story demonstrates remarkable self-sufficiency, commanding the Void and watching over the cast as if she were a celestial channel surfer impatiently padding time for ad breaks. She finds common ground with the darkness around her rather than fellow souls, forming some kind of mutual exchange necessary to fulfill her desires in *Arcaea* - the Void ascribes value as a useful power to be controlled, and Ilith becomes that vehicle for said power to manifest, a means to the end of the world she longs for.<sup>7</sup> It's hard to assess how much this subversion limits or develops Ilith's character when analysing other aspects of the story, but her position gives the audience fascinating insight into how *Arcaea* influences its citizens on a subconscious level, even when it lacks the strength to manifest that will onto every person.

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, pp. 15-18



*In this world, should you embrace what it gives, then it will give all of itself to you.*

For some insight into why Ilith is so uniquely positioned with no proper comparison to most other characters in Arcaea, attention must be given to Lagrange, another figure who seeks to twist the audience's perceptions of how things work. Both of them are introduced with no other perspective to ground them, instead allowing their findings, and their subsequent reactions, to handle their depictions. Unlike Ilith, who starts within the Void, it's implied that Lagrange took considerable effort in travelling there, still not entirely sure of where *there* is. The two never actually meet, with only the former being aware of their joint existence, but they share a strange connection in their solitude, having nobody else on their journey of self-discovery at any point during their respective stories.

Lagrange should be considered as a very loose, yet intricate foil to Ilith, acting as radically different pieces in explaining the abnormal nature of Arcaea. The latter highlights a boundary surrounding the titular world, described as something beyond all comprehension for those without strong egos, while the former learns of how far that boundary stretches, and what that means in relation to anything the audience knows. Lagrange comes to understand that Arcaea was created as a sanctuary for the real Hikari, but we know it as a prison for lost souls masquerading as a utopia. Despite learning that any knowledge of this world is ultimately meaningless, she doesn't immediately aim for godhood upon knowing the truth, like Tairitsu and Ilith. Instead, she settles with the awareness that her ideal world can be far better, witnessing the fight that ends the main story at the conclusion of her last entry. Most would be content with the impression that these routes are meant to juxtapose the different sides of human nature - the natural tendency for freedom, and the human development of enlightenment. That's right. *Arcaea* has unintentionally created a modern interpretation of Plato's Cave. Everyone starts out as a prisoner being shown memories of other worlds, but some will deduce their purpose,



possibly learning to rationalise their former mortality and motivating their ambitions with the world's "true" existence.<sup>8</sup>

In these respects, Lagrange and Ilith showcase two radically opposing viewpoints towards Arcaea, creating an implicit "conflict" through lack of direct interaction. Their respective stories imply there would be little positive conversation between the pair, as Ilith especially takes issue with her foil who occupies her time "spent prattling." One of them is entirely apathetic regarding their circumstances, while the other is interested to such a degree that it almost leads to (another) death. It's even highlighted in their side story titles - "Dark Ambition" reflects Ilith's endless lust for power amidst those who know nothing about themselves, while "Esoteric Order" possibly describes the "truth" that Lagrange tries to make sense of. Like other aspects of the story, this separation plays into the heavy "show, don't tell" philosophy of the writing very well, as audiences can infer a great deal about potential interactions between these two based on how they perceive new discoveries, without the need for them to confront one another personally.

A considerable degree of Arcaea's worldbuilding stems from these two stories, which helps to cement their respective characters' importance towards the overall plot in spite of their mixed focus. Though most of the side stories are generally character-driven as a way of outlining Arcaea's various influences on different people, *Dark Ambition* and *Esoteric Order* instead frames their narrative focus around the worldbuilding by using their cast as the keys to develop a wider understanding of the story. Many will see this as yet another confusing aspect of Arcaea's writing that lacks real cohesion, but this is a unique way of expanding upon the game's core themes of mutual conflict. There's still room for Ilith and Lagrange to further develop in more stories at a later date, but they provide insight into the world that's seldom explored in other areas of Arcaea beyond the main story.

## **The Section Where I Talk About Character Writing**

This is the section where I start talking about other members of the cast, instead of running around between important characters and the rest of Arcaea's writing for several paragraphs WHOOPS

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<sup>8</sup> C.D.C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings - The Argument of Plato's Republic* (Indiapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1988), pp.50-2



*Besides, the future cannot be found within memories.*

*Arcaea* has a diverse ensemble that brings their own charm to the mystique of the world, whether that's through any reactions to their current predicament, or how they engage with *Arcaea* in some way. You don't learn more than one or two significant details about the setting per story, but these are usually weaved into the prose to the point that one barely realises how little is revealed in hindsight. The side stories are typically where most of the worldbuilding exposition takes place, first introducing its "main character" before developing their motivations through answering the overarching question of "what is *Arcaea*?"

Of course, this video has (hopefully) established that no straightforward answer exists. While Tairitsu and Lagrange conceptualise the "truth" of *Arcaea* being a mind palace for the real Hikari to seek refuge from her mental anguish, and Ilith confirms the existence of much, *much* worse realities beyond the white landscape, there's no concrete explanation for why everyone sees this world differently. *Arcaea* truly is a personalised experience, with each story telling you something new about the world that continues to prove it's still very unsolved. A few stories elaborate on characters' backgrounds prior to *Arcaea*, implicitly revealing a key piece of information relating to the wider setting, but others instead develop their person of focus so that the world is characterised in its own way. These choices are often deliberate, helping to convey how *Arcaea* is a character of its own, a living entity like everyone who inhabits it. You learn that each figure's tribulations affect how the environment interacts with them, and influences the decisions they make.

The character that first inspired me to make this video (aside from Lagrange) is Saya, someone with very similar motivations, but manifested in a more precocious curiosity, rather than a thirst for knowledge. Saya attempts to understand *Arcaea* on a metaphysical level instead of finding

answers regarding what it is, being able to physically interact with memories rather than simply observing them. Her desire to “learn more” feels like a refreshing middle ground between the chaos and soul-searching that encompasses Arcaea’s writing, as you find a character well-suited towards the audience surrogate role without taking too much attention away from... well, everything else about the story.



*A hundred questions rise in her mind... She will have them answered.*

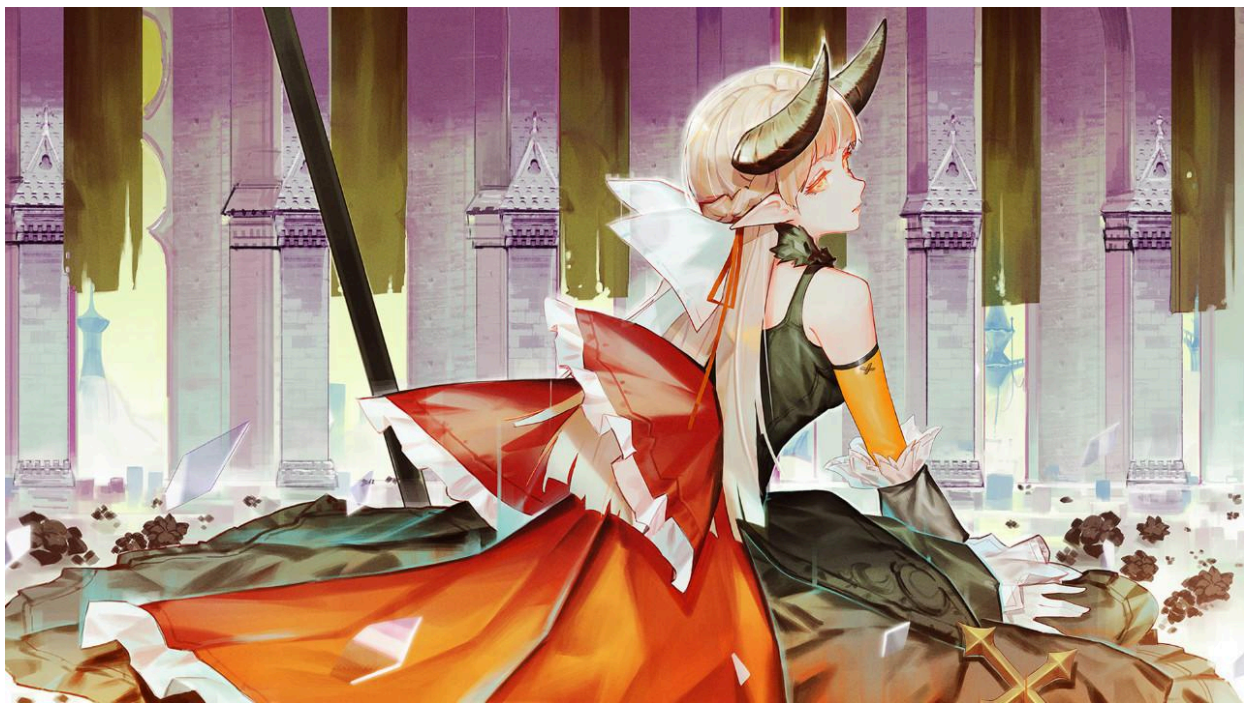
Saya stands out as a character of relative simplicity compared to everyone else, assuming we discount the Drakengard-styled outfit she has going on. There’s no deep analysis of Arcaea as a setting like we see in Lagrange’s story, nor are there any groundbreaking revelations that get expanded upon in two easily missed drip-fed sentences every three months. Saya just wants to know everything about Arcaea, and she’ll do it through any means necessary. It’s fitting that her story isn’t very difficult to parse, as it portrays the complete opposite intentions by showing just how complex the entire game is, from its story to its mechanics. If the main story is meant to establish Arcaea’s setting, and characters like Lagrange and Ilith remind us that the truth sucks, then Saya is there to keep us asking questions. She ponders how this world works, and we reciprocate in our own interest for these stories to keep us captivated.

However, Saya is characterised with a deceptive amount of depth. She claims to seek knowledge of what makes Arcaea tick, but there’s an impression that she wants something much greater by the end of her story. Being able to understand memories proves to her that “humans can act as gods” in this world, and though she doesn’t act upon that information, you’re fed the implication that her conviction may soon overwhelm her curiosity in a much different manner from Hikari. This is something that players may intuit as they read more stories, but the game frames Saya as a potential antagonist through her sheer force of free will to learn



everything. In doing this, the narrative produces another “conflict” through Arcaea’s influence, returning to my earlier point of how the world pushes characters to stay in various ways - it keeps Hikari alive as its god, shows Tairitsu negative memories to motivate her, and now constantly enables Saya’s interest for reasons yet unclear.

A lot of players might start to feel as if Arcaea loves to beat the unreliable narrator trope until it's well and truly dead. This is a sentiment I can relate to as I work my way through this script. Nonetheless, I think portraying a familiar sense of uncertainty in this nondescript manner somewhat humanises many of the game’s characters, because it’s rather natural being lost in a new place with no real attachment binding you yet. It makes sense why every character reacts so differently, and often so violently, to the idea that they are isolated in every sense of the word - from home, from people, from *themselves*. Knowing that they’re (mostly) dead imposes the stark reality that they have become little more than abandoned history, linking towards a theme of perceived artistic value which fits the nature of *Arcaea* all too well. It brings forth endless discussions about art preservation, if we as a collective are doing enough to protect our “historical significance”. What makes music, illustrations, or the worth of a human life important to us? Who ascribes that importance? The cast answers those questions, and the audience determines whether they are correct.



*Lives and memories can vanish in a second... but not here.*

Remember when I mentioned that Saya was being positioned as a future villain for another story? That’s where our next character enters the picture. Lethe is someone whose story outlines another key rule of Arcaea - everyone has at least one trait, or lack thereof, along with knowledge of the name “Arcaea” in their minds. Some of these powers are described in more detail than others, like with Ilith’s control over the Void, or Saya’s ability to enter memories. With

that in mind, Lethe retaining some of her past memories doesn't seem all that remarkable at first mention, until you realise that she is the *only* person who can remember. Nearly every other character's backstory is only referenced either in passing, or scarcely bears mentioning - Lethe's exception to this rule gives Saya a new motivation, as there exists memories that are completely locked away from her prying eyes.

It's not much of a coincidence that Lethe has a mythological namesake. In Ancient Greek legend, the goddess of the same name was associated with forgetfulness and oblivion, aspects that are frequently emphasised in our heroine's story. Drinking from the eponymous river stripped a person of their previous memories, a process required for the dead to initiate reincarnation - the irony of these facts is not lost on you. Though Arcaea's Lethe remembers her past occupation and one of her colleagues, it's fitting that her next cycle of life is thus incomplete as a result. She tends to memories with the same diligence as her old job as a "reaper" of souls, but this puts at her at odds with how the world intends for its new faces to tread a new path for themselves. Saya even boasts as such during their confrontation - "I'm sure that we all have a part to play here... except for, evidently, you." Through Lethe's route, you come to understand that all living beings are inherently drawn towards conflict, but how one engages with it depends on their life experiences and moral obligations. If those factors are removed from the equation, what makes humans, or gods, any different from beasts? Maybe Rousseau was right, freedom *is* complicated.

This character-driven focus of Arcaea's writing is arguably both its greatest strength, and one of its most evident weaknesses. Newer stories are penned with the idea that their characters need to be compared and contrasted, which downplays any room for individual depth. Lethe and Saya are two notable examples that avert and follow this idea respectively - the former is given ample space to develop her character through her backstory, presenting a dichotomy between past and present selves to showcase personal growth, while the latter is generally led by the complex worldbuilding until she becomes more personally involved in later story entries. It might sound harsh, but Arcaea's ambitious narrative often works against its favour when needing to flesh out its cast, and it can be argued that the story is generally seen as the game's most difficult aspect of an otherwise easily accessible package. That being said, Arcaea has a strong character roster that adds a great deal to the eccentric nature of its world, carving the game's firm place in a genre where plot is a consistent afterthought.



*There isn't any shame in wanting to be happy... And there isn't any shame in sadness.*

Now that I've laid out some of my gripes with the game's writing and its relevance to the complete package, let's talk about how it's improved since the end of the main story in *Final Verdict*. What better demonstration than with the song pack that literally got updated as I write this part of the script? (Thanks, lowiro.)

*Lasting Eden* introduces us to Maya, a character who quickly upends many of the generalisations that the previous updates had worked to codify. She wakes up in Arcaea fully recalling her last moments and all the horrors those memories entail, while the world decides to mess with her by feeding into her trauma whenever possible, instead of trying to provide some twisted comfort. Throughout *Lasting Eden*, Maya juxtaposes numerous aspects of the existing game, from the rules imposed on the world and its people, to the way her skill can radically change gameplay functions in World Mode after each song. She is completely aware of her death from the start, constantly being reminded of her prior suffering through the screams and visions of her own world's end. Like Tairitsu, she's always harassed by negative memories, but instead of rejecting what's on offer, Maya interprets a proposal of acceptance, to move on from the past that binds her so tightly. One can argue that this is another example of how Arcaea gaslights its newcomers into staying, but *Lasting Eden* is a creative way of developing a new character and the world to set the scene for a bigger story.

Remember when I said that the story has some effect on the gameplay? Well, it kind of shows up at a couple of points, and you'd be right to assume that it involves the Partner system. Maya alternates between two skills that switch after each World Mode play, which reflects the possible "choices" she can make at the end of her story. This also foreshadows more story chapters added with the 5.0 update, which also expands upon Maya's origins and background... namely



the revelations that she may not entirely be “just” herself at all, and the existence of an unsavoury benefactor with her own goals for Arcaea in sight. Despite the main story ending certain threads on uncertain terms, this new update is a welcome quality improvement to the overall plot, as it forms the basis of another main story chapter that seems to be vastly more coherent than the first. Rhythm games have a running joke where the early life of a title is usually regarded as its lowest point of quality, but Arcaea has thankfully managed to avoid the curse of falling short before growing into something truly impressive, in part thanks to what this update precedes.



*What an agonizingly long journey it has been.*

*Severed Eden* isn't directly focused on Maya, instead following the almost perverse viewpoint of a rather dogged outsider named Insight. The latter is the first real acknowledgement of other worlds outside of short stories and the odd inference from existing knowledge of memories, but Insight makes clear distinction of being from another dimension. It's unknown how she comes to essentially stalk Maya, but in a world where “miracles [...] are rare outside” her home, Insight takes a delusional interest in the girl who contradicts everything that Arcaea stands for. This reminds the audience that Arcaea is a game that preys on expectations - virtually everything we knew about the world prior is systematically dismantled with every new line of text, enforcing the idea that there are new rules that everyone must play by. Maya instead takes fate into her own hands, which earns her the unrelenting attention of Insight as a consequence. It feels like each major game update from this point onwards will include more changes to the overarching story, which makes me excited for how the writing team can break the fourth wall in their quest for radioactive yuri.

Insight's arrival clarifies that Hikari relinquished her power over Arcaea, the former declaring herself the new god "to set everything right". The world fights to reject her from entering, tearing her apart and frying her brain as a self-defense mechanism horrifically similar to Shirou's rejection of Archer's arm in *Fate/stay night*. She briefly glimpses the real Hikari's world while trying to stay intact, essentially violating Arcaea's own personal space as she forces herself onto this space. Referring to Insight as an invader isn't a joke, as she ignores both Arcaea and Maya's boundaries, in the very physical sense, so she can catch their focus in the most bombastic way possible. To that end, she is the closest thing to the philosophical concept of a tyrant - though she displays some goodwill in removing Maya from a place not fit for her, this is done through excessive force requiring ostracism to prevent a power imbalance.<sup>9</sup> A character like Insight shows just how far the narrative can develop, because she evokes considerable discomfort through her intense passion for Maya that hasn't been explored in *Arcaea* before. Update 5.0 tries its hardest to recontextualise the game's strongest qualities, and in this regard, it certainly makes one hell of an impression.

Overall, I think *Arcaea*'s character writing is strong, but not completely devoid of flaws. It's not very easy to follow, and there are moments where you can argue that characters don't even get much personal development in their own story chapters, *especially* for anyone introduced outside a major game update. This is unfortunately part of a larger issue involving *Arcaea* as a rhythm game, as the genre struggles to blend narrative and gameplay together in any way beyond something passable. Story-driven otoge like *Deemo* circumvent this inherent problem by avoiding text whenever possible, instead taking the "show, not tell" idea to its logical conclusion through creative uses of cutscenes. *Arcaea* not having that luxury doesn't make its story any better or worse, but the difference in mediums has a clear impact on how the writing team is able to realise the game's ideas, as this text-based approach sacrifices potential clarity that would be better expressed in visual form. Being aware of these limitations makes it clear the crew has managed to finely polish the end product, but it's still hard to ignore just how detrimental the story's complexity can be when confined to a genre that strongly emphasises factor over form.

## **Rhythm Games as a Storytelling Medium**

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, pp. 87-90



“Time to continue onwards. No matter where we end up...”

There's one question that I imagine has been stuck in your mind since watching this video - why do rhythm games consistently struggle with blending gameplay and storytelling together?

Quite a number of people have tried to answer this in many ways, whether through analyses of similar depth, or actually making a story-focused rhythm game themselves, but this usually fails to narrow any causes down. It's not like rhythm games are completely without story elements - *SOUND VOLTEX* has maintained the bare semblance of a story since *GRAVITY WARS* launched in 2014, while *CHUNITHM CRYSTAL* has a story in *Sybula Seireiki* that's legitimately so dark that it's been added to the “Words That You Must Not Search” wiki. [I wish I made this up.](#) Regardless of this minor detail, these examples support the idea that rhythm games can be an interesting medium for storytelling, since many works often use their extensive song list as a vehicle for conveying details in ways that other genres like VNs and RPGs can't use as effectively. Instead of saying that rhythm games aren't exactly suited to having complex and compelling narratives, I dare say that prospective writers in this field may have restrained their pool of inspiration and ideas too strictly when drafting a new work. This probably explains why so many rhythm game stories often devolve into borderline torture erotica by the end, as writers try pushing the limits of how far they can make characters suffer in the most unnecessary and horrible ways.

Now, I should stress that I am inherently not a fiction writer. What I've outlined isn't exactly indicative of the entire rhythm game genre, nor should you take it as any objective critique of *Arcaea*. Maybe the genre is predisposed towards darker stories that explore the fallacies of morality... or maybe people just love writing depressing plots for the hell of it, I don't know. This shouldn't otherwise dismiss the topic of this video. I think *Arcaea* proves that rhythm games are



a suitable home for deeper storytelling, because when it does click together and make some sense, the end result is a critical reflection on how and why we value the intangible elements of life. Sure, the prose does often stretch thin, and there's really no reason for details to be so obtuse a lot of the time. In spite of that, I think it captures a unique take on how we see life - not everything we experience will make sense, but there's still worth in having witnessed it just once, even if it causes untold pain or dangerously addictive joy. Hikari's story ends on a bittersweet note for us, but the outcome of realising her self-worth lies outside Arcaea makes it a satisfying ending for *her*. That's what matters most.



*running out of things to add here so have the CG from Ayu's story*

Striking a balance between dynamic gameplay and engaging story can be difficult for rhythm games, because these factors never exactly line up well in this specific context. Take *SOUND VOLTEX* as an example. Virtually all of the franchise's story is divulged through its unlock systems, which is responsible for a whole different issue that isn't relevant to this video. The rate at which you unlock songs through these systems, combined with arcades being the worst possible avenue to read stories in general, makes the plot feel tacked on like a last minute afterthought. Barely **any** footage or archive of SDVX's story exists online, with the one playlist I [could somehow find](#) on Youtube for *GRAVITY WARS* being the only proof there actually was a system for certain songs to begin with. Simply put, people don't play rhythm games for the story, because there was no incentive doing so for the longest time. *Arcaea* manages to skirt this issue by linking the story and pack unlock chains together, but this doesn't solve the issue of people ignoring the plot because... most players tend to rush their way towards all the songs and ignore any opportunity to read anyway. It's not foolproof.

Finding a way to mesh good stories into rhythm games is a difficult process. I'm probably not capable of answering the question myself, since there's so many other factors that need to be considered before reaching a middle ground. Many developers, lowiro included, have tried to make it work somehow, and to their credit, the stories of mobile rhythm games do stand out incredibly well in the lucrative mobage market. There's likely no catch-all method that will get otoge players interested in a game's story outside of being ridiculously esoteric like *Arcaea* or *Sybula Seireiki*, and that's likely to be the case for a long while. At the very least, you can't deny that efforts are being made to change how we view rhythm games as a narrative medium. What we're getting right now... is pretty damn good.

## Concluding Thoughts

Like every obscure topic I cover on this channel, *Arcaea* is a work that's more deserving of greater praise from the wider audience of rhythm game fans and players alike. The game really tests how perceptions of the genre have changed over the last twenty-five years, both in terms of what's possible with any charting engine, and in devising one of the most ambitious stories penned for a mobile game. Hell, I was surprised at how much I could manage to piece together for this video - I didn't realise how much detail existed in the game's plot until doing further research, and I ended up spending many early mornings trying to make sense of what anything even meant. Either way, *Arcaea* is much more than its impressive roster of artists, illustrators, charts and veteran fans-turned-staff members. The narrative is a big part of this game's identity, and it's a shame that most players often choose to overlook it for everything else.



No one alive is really alone.

I hope this video encourages people to think more critically about *Arcaea* from a writing perspective, and maybe even reflect on what the future of rhythm games can look like. The genre has changed significantly thanks to real-world events like Covid and arcades over the world closing their doors, so being aware of how fans and developers continue to keep music games alive is critical in preserving that cultural importance. Maybe *Arcaea* reflects the state of otoge a bit too well, being the passion child of hardcore rhythm game players dedicated to making the genre more captivating to a modern audience and their sensibilities. A number of characters ask themselves about the importance of cherishing your memories and finding value in both the good and bad - many creatives find themselves in this kind of dilemma right now, and it's not a stretch to say that recent conversations about how we play rhythm games have covered this ground before. Perhaps it's worth keeping an eye on where our stories go next, because we might see those changes reflected in the world of *Arcaea* too.

To conclude with my personal thoughts, I enjoy this game's story. Certain aspects don't always hit the mark, but it tackles its character-focused development very well, exactly the kind of writing that catches my eye. For a genre where characters are often given very little attention or expansion, it's a warm change of pace engaging with a cast who gets the same amount of love and care as the rest of their game. Everyone has a greater purpose to the narrative, rather than just being a vehicle to progress respective stories. I occasionally joke about how *Arcaea* feels like the rhythm game equivalent to *Blue Archive*, another title that's managed to find breakout success and tell its own story, in spite of rejecting many existing genre conventions that are all the rage nowadays. Perhaps that's not a bad comparison, huh... maybe the kids ain't so bad after all.

Look for meaning in your own memories. You might not become a god, but don't let anything stop you from creating something you can be proud of.

"A harmony of light  
awaits you in a lost world  
of musical conflict..."



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