Ex Anankes

Cultural Syncretism and the Experience of Necessitation in *Saint Seiya: The Hades*' Gameplay

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Introduction

The present study explores how some gameplay peculiarities of the PS2 game *Saint Seiya: The Hades* (Dimps Corporation 2006) are the features of a particularly thorough and in-depth adaptation of the game's source material, i.e., *Saint Seiya,* a worldwide successful manga by Masami Kurumada (1986). *Saint Seiya* is a systematically syncretic work, intermingling narrative structures and cultural references from distant cultures; besides the expected Japanese cultural and narrative references, Ancient Greek culture is *Saint Seiya*'s deepest and most evident influence. Here, we argue that *Saint Seiya: The Hades'* gameplay both instantiates and allows for a direct performative experience of the core notion of *Ananke* or Necessity (*Ἀνάγκη*), which rests at the core of Ancient Greek spirituality and understanding of the world.

In particular, we argue that the type of gaming experience in *Saint Seiya: The Hades* is religious in a strong sense that is deeply rooted into the game's narrative content. Resting on a complex intertextual, multicultural and syncretic background, *Saint Seiya: The Hades* throws the player into the core of the Greek spiritual experience of the world and, in doing so, manages to adapt the spirit of its source material.

Saint Seiya (聖闘士星矢, セイントセイヤ, *Seinto Seiya*), i.e., *Seiya, the Holy Warrior* [referred to as *StS*], is a *shōnen manga* (少年漫画, i.e., a comic book intended for a young male audience) by Masami Kurumada. *StS* had its original run between the late-1980s and the early-1990s (1 January 1986 – 19 November 1990) as a serialization in the renowned magazine *Shūkan Shōnen Jump* (週刊少年ジャンプ) (Weekly Shonen Jump 1986–1990). *StS* was not Kurumada's first hit (Kurumada 1977–1981), but it certainly turned out to be his most innovative and globally impactful work, particularly in Asia, Europe, and Latin America ("Introduction to Saint Seiya" 2009).

As fairly typical of the *shōnen* genre, *StS* is a coming-of-age tale centering around five teenage protagonists who reach maturity by defeating adversity against all odds through the power of friendship and obstinate hard work.[1] *StS*'s young protagonists are mystical warriors at the service of the Greek goddess Athena – who has been conveniently reincarnated as Saori Kido, a thirteen-year-old heiress in late-20th-century Japan. Athena and her Saints face a series of superhuman or straightforwardly divine adversaries in several holy wars fought to protect the Earth from the evil designs of other Olympians.[2] These divine antagonists, who either seek to punish humanity for its *hubris* (Poseidon) or to completely eradicate it (Hades), are ultimately defeated by our human heroes, albeit with Athena's help and by unleashing superhuman powers through great effort and personal sacrifice. While *StS* kicks off as an urban fantasy packed with action and one-on-one fights, the setting quickly morphs into an almost timeless space made of classical temples and ancient ruins still inhabited by gods and heroes; there, every fight cannot but be a knightly duel straight out of a traditional epic tale.

In other words, *StS* systematically revisits the classical myths and founding literary models of the Western tradition. However, it does so in a Japanese format and from a Japanese point of view, by reinterpreting those Western models in an eclectically original elaboration. The resulting *mélange* of cultural and literary traditions, with partly overlapping themes, ended up being both a commercial success and a pop-cultural reference for a whole generation, especially in those pockets of the world whose educational systems emphasize the Greco-Roman roots of Western culture.

On the one hand, a major component of *StS*'s enormous and long-lived pop-cultural influence has certainly been the extraordinary popularity of its anime adaptation, animated feature films, sequels, prequels, and spinoffs, not to mention the commercial success of the various lines of collectible merchandise and games (Bandai Catalogue 2023).

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1 *The power of friendship* is a quite popular trope in both Eastern and Western literature. In the West, Alexandre Dumas's *Les trois Mousquetaires* (serialized between 1844–48) is perhaps the best-known example iterating this trope. In Japanese literature, the trope is related to the dramatic figure of Minamoto no Yoshitsune and his loyal friends, Shizuka Gozen and the warrior monk Benkei. Their adventures are depicted in *Gikeiki* (義経記) (1911), the "The Chronicle of Yoshitsune" (*Nanboku-chō* period, 1333–1392). Cf. "Friendship Tropes" (2022).

2 Across *StS*'s expanded narrative — comprehensive of the manga, its anime adaptations and four animated films – not only does Saori/Athena fight her divine relatives (Poseidon, Eris, Apollo, and Hades), but she also wages war against iconic members of other pantheons. For example, the anime "filler" series *Odin and the Nibelungen Ring* (1987), the movie *Saint Seiya: The Heated Battle of the Gods* (1988), and the later *Soul of Gold* (2015) take place in Kurumada's version of Asgard, where Athena and her Saints fight Odin's misled warriors, Balder and Loki respectively. In the 1989 animated film *Warriors of the Final Holy War,* the main adversary is borrowed from the Christian lore, being none other than Lucifer himself. While not being a part of the original manga narrative, the Odin's arc, through its inclusion in the anime adaptation (*Saint Seiya*, Toei Animation, 1986–1989, ep. 74–99; and *Saint Seiya: Soul of Gold*, Toei Animation, 2015), has become part of the mainstream *StS*'s narrative and, as such, has been included in some game adaptations – e.g., *Saint Seiya: Soldiers' Soul* (Dimps 2015); *Saint Seiya: Cosmo Slottle* (Bandai Namco Entertainment 2014); *Saint Seiya: Shining Soldiers* (Bandai Namco Entertainment 2020); *Saint Seiya: Cosmo Fantasy* (Namco Bandai 2016–2019).

On the other hand, these marketing strategies – that, for over thirty years, have ensured the prolonged international success of the *StS* franchise – rely on the intrinsic appeal of Kurumada's *opus magnum*. This holds especially true of the broad transcultural appeal of its subject matter and its key notions, beginning with *StS*'s multilayered and overarching syncretism. *StS*'s most poignant feature is its essentially syncretic approach, characterizing its narrative features, guiding themes, and religious and cultural references.

In the present contribution, we focus on some of *StS*'s syncretic core features that bring together Japanese and Classical Greek notions, mythologies, values, and narrative models. In particular, we examine how these syncretic elements are paradigmatically expressed in the somewhat unusual gameplay of one of the many *StS*-based videogames.

Since the late 1980s a plethora of such games, following different formats (RPG, beat 'em up, and hybrid fighting games), have been released for various platforms ("List of *Saint Seiya* Videogames" 2021). Here we focus on *Saint Seiya: The Hades* [referred to as: *StSH*], a 3D fighting game for PlayStation2 developed by Dimps and released by Namco Bandai Games in 2006. We limit our analysis to *StSH's* story-mode, which follows faithfully the anime adaptation of *StS's* final story arc (Kurumada 2002–08), defined by its ultimate antagonist: the God of the Underworld, Hades. *StSH*'s faithfulness to the source material goes as far as including a series of cut scenes and side storylines that the player is free to explore,[3] but it still stands as a defining pillar for the gameplay itself and it has interesting implications for the very meaning of the gaming experience. Namely, in *StSH* the source story must be played out as it is written, no matter what. Put otherwise, while the player's performance is essential for the game to progress – trivially, the game cannot advance if the player does not beat the progressive levels by winning each level's assigned duels – the player's free choices (e.g., the PC selection) are ultimately irrelevant and get automatically overturned if at any point any previous choices have become incompatible with the canon version of the unfolding plot. In contrast with the narrative structure of most games, which offer a multidirectional plethora of alternative storylines to pursue depending on the player's choices at any given crucial moment in the game, *StSH* remains a fundamentally linear and highly necessitated narrative.

Our key claim is the following: either intentionally or by a fortunate accident, the peculiarities of the gameplay in *StSH* both instantiate and allow for a direct, pragmatic, and performative experience of the abstract notion of *Ananke* or Necessity (Ἀνάγκη). This Necessity is a crucial notion both in *StS*'s core matter – i.e., the Greek Myth and the Ancient Greek religious experience accompanying it – and in the literary genre constituting one of *StS*'s main sources of inspiration and points of reference, i.e., Greco-Roman classical epic.

In the present study, we argue that *StS* can and should be considered a syncretic narrative of the sacred, underlining how *StS*'s syncretism is grounded on the commonalities between Ancient Greek and traditional Japanese polytheistic cultures. We, thus, outline

3 Saint Seiya: *The Hades* offers the following game modes: 'Hades' (story mode); '1000 Days' (versus mode); 'Legend' (arcade mode); 'Infinite Clash' (survival mode); 'Flash Clash' (time mode); 'Zodiac Holidays' (a section that shows myth-clothes models, characters in 3D graphic, videos, and audio tracks).

the relationship between *StS* and its main literary genres of reference. We do so by analyzing the narrative functions of *StS*'s main characters and the intrinsic emphasis on the role of predestination that is built into *StS*'s literary and cultural references. With this background and contextualization in place, finally we focus on *StSH* as a cross-media adaptation. In particular, we examine how *StSH* captures and enacts *StS's* core notion of *necessity*, allowing the player to experience it performatively both through its narrative content and its unusually rigid gameplay constraints.

Saint Seiya as a Syncretic Narrative of the Sacred Between Greece and Japan

While the line between mythological and religious narratives has long been defined and redefined, it often remains blurred.[4] Broadly, both the myths that are transmitted in epical or cosmological authoritative tales, and the religious narratives that are objects of active belief share an analogous twofold nature. On the one hand, they express the underlying system of values embraced by a culture at its roots;[5] and, on the other hand, they constitute a culture's foundational models for storytelling.[6]

As a reformulation of ancient Greek values, religious views, and narrative models within a modern Japanese cultural framework, *StS* is undeniably anachronistic – in both the sense of timelessness and unfaithfulness to historical facts. Since *StS* takes Greek mythology as its main world-building material and assumes the relationship between humanity, divinity, and anything in between as one of its thematic guidelines, it could be described as a highly intertextual epic narrative of the sacred.

This is evident even at first sight, just glancing at the title. Kurumada's choice of the English title term "**Saint**" to label Seiya, his four fellow co-protagonists and their comrades immediately catches the eye. Far from being a mere marketing strategy banking on a widespread taste for the exotic,[7] the term "Saint" is significant and informative: it unambiguously defines the main characters' *raison d'être* and narrative role, and it sheds light on the nature of *StS*'s narrative as a whole.

The term "Saint" derives from the Latin *sanctus,* i.e., the past participle of the verb *sancire* – whose primary meaning is "to remove", "to separate" and, thus, in virtue of that separation, to consecrate. "Sanctitude", then, is what marks and separates the domain of *sacer,* narrowly construed (i.e., that which belongs to an absolutely otherworldly do-

4 Useful board overviews, even if dated, remain Rahner (1957) and Daniélou (1966).

5 In his work *On the Gods and the Cosmos* (Περὶ θεῶν καὶ κόσμου), Sallustius (2000) describes the various forms of the myths: theological, physical, animistic, material, and mixed.

6 For example, there is a sense in which nearly all Western narratives are in a large measure a crossover fanfic between Homer and the Bible, the quintessential "Book".

7 English synonyms of Japanese words are often chosen to mark similarities between Eastern and Western culture. English is a tool used to add an exotic taste, to act like an actual "**limen**" between reality and manga/anime reality. Kurumada's use of English terms often implies a pronunciation based on some play on words: e.g., "**Cloth**" (the western style armor, opposed to the Japanese style *yoroi*), pronounced by a Japanese speaker, sounds very similar to "**Cross**".

main), from the space of all human affairs.[8] As such, "Saints" function as *limina*, borders between the earthly and the otherworldly domains. As most limens, they work as connections as much as dividers. Kurumada's Saints are liminal holy warriors of this kind. Being consecrated to the goddess Athena, Kurumada's Saints fight in her name and on her behalf in order to protect the goddess herself, peace on Earth, the innocent, humanity in general and everything nice, as proper *shōnen* heroes ought to do. A Saint fights exclusively with his body and the "cloth" protecting it. These "cloths" are a total of 88 holy armors forged by Hephaestus on Athena's request during the mythical age, each in the image of and in correspondence with a constellation.[9] As expected of a *shōnen* manga, these young warriors could only manage to conquer their destined "cloth" after years of extreme and inhumane training culminating in a rite of passage (be it a duel against another contender, the killing of the father-*sensei* [Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 17–19, 40 and 59] or another form of initiation trial [Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 1 and 41]) granting access to the power of the universe within us (**cosmos**).[10]

Even from such a fast-paced overview of the *StS*'s premise, it is indisputable that Kurumada's *magnum opus* is conceived and construed as a proper syncretic **epos**. Notably *StS* brings together concepts and suggestions from different cultures across time and space. *StS*'s universe is populated by Greek gods walking the Earth along with Buddhas and bodhisattvas (Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 3).[11] But *StS*'s universe is also a world where the human protagonists' superpowers stem both from a loose interpretation of contemporary atomic physics and from the notion of **sympathy** resonating between a macrocosm and

8 Just like these liminal functions demark the space of the sacred, a similar separation occurs in the demarcation of the ludic space *per se*, as per Huizinga (1972:10): "All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."

9 In the *StS*'s mythos, Athena herself claims that the 88 constellations are embodied into the Cloths. This claim implies a generous dose of anachronism, matching the above-mentioned syncretically freestyle approach to cultures and religions. The number of constellations became 88 in 1930, quite a bit after the Mythical Time when the cloths were forged upon Athena's request. Not to mention the insertion of modern constellations that fit poorly both with the cloths' mythical origin as well as with the internal chronology of *StS*'s spin offs. For example, in Shiori Teshirogi's *Saint Seiya: The Lost Canvas* (2006–11) and its anime adaptation (set during the first half of the 18th century) the constellations are already 88, including Puppis, Carina, and Vela – despite these having come to be only after Nicolas-Louis Lacaille's dismembering of Navis Argo in 1763 (Lacaille 1763). Cf. Kurumada/Teshirogi (2009–11), episode 19; Kurumada/Teshirogi (2006–2011), vol. 9; Kurumada (1986–90) chap. 4.

10 "**Cosmos**" is an inner spiritual essence originated in the Big Bang. Every human being has a cosmos inside their body, but only a Saint can burn it, like one burns gasoline, and use this preternatural fuel to fight. Cf. Kurumada (1986–90), chap. 1.

11 For instance, Virgo Shaka is called "the man who is almost a god". The name Shaka derives from Shaka Nyorai, which is one of the ten honorific tiles of the Shakyamuni Buddha – i.e., Shakyamuni who has come from the realm of truth.

a microcosm – a notion typically crucial in late-medieval and Renaissance Western natural philosophy (e.g., Allers 1944: 319–407; Boas 1969: 212–38; Conger 1967 [1922]; Dales 1977: 557–72; Finckh 1999; Guthrie 1967: 56–73). Conceptions and ideas so far apart from each other should not be able to coexist coherently in a single narrative universe, and yet they do surprisingly smoothly.

Overall, this multifaceted syncretism shaping Kurumada's epic is grounded on the common polytheistic roots shared both by *Shinto* animism, i.e., the still practiced native religion of Japan, and Ancient Greek religiosity, whose Pantheon represents the full expression of polytheistic religious views in Western culture (Sabbatucci 1999: 91). In a sense, polytheism is primarily a *forma mentis* and a worldview. First and foremost, polytheism is a cultural way of thinking and interpreting the world through the personifications of natural elements and phenomena (e.g., the Sun, the Moon, the Sea, Lightening, but also this or that river, etc.), as well as those anthropological functions and practices (e.g., Love, War, Metallurgy, etc.) that a culture perceives as foundational (ibid.). Despite being two geographically and chronologically very distant worldviews, just like the world conceptualized by Thales of Miletus (DK 11 A 22)[12] and early Greek philosophy is full of gods in every corner (θεοί or δαίμονες),[13] so the *Shinto* world pullulates with *kami*.[14]

Not only are Greek polytheism and Japanese *Shinto* animism heavily naturalistic, but they also seem to share close similarities in their myths and mythologies – similarities which have been long and repeatedly underlined by many scholars (e.g., Matsumoto 1928; Matsumura 1958 [1954]; Sioris 1987; Kárpáti 1993: 9–21). Besides, both ancient Greek culture – particularly in the archaic period that finds its narrative formulation in the Homeric poems – and traditional Japanese culture have been described as "shame civilizations" placing great emphasis on the notions of honor, duty and individual responsibility to the collective.[15] While such an assessment is, in both cases, somewhat of an overgeneralization, it nonetheless points the finger to a recognizably analogous substratum of social and ethical values. In principle, then, this (at least apparent) proximity of cultural coordinates – and especially the proximity of their respective archetypes on the nature of the sacred and its narrative formulation – is an effective starting point for the cultural *pastiche* that gives *StS* its peculiar allure suspended between what is foreign and what is familiar. Evidently this is an allure resonating in the same way and in opposite directions with both *StS*'s intended Japanese readership and its Western audience.

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12 This claim is transmitted by Aristotle in *De Anima* (1989 [1933]: 411 a7-8): "Θαλῆς ᾠήθη πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι".

13 δαίμων, -ονος: from δαίω (to divide), is a god characterized by their own field of action; θεός is how humans call a god by their name (Sabbatucci 1999: 214). See for example Homer 1919: 3, 27–28: "ἄλλα δὲ καὶ δαίμων ὑποθήσεται: οὐ γὰρ ὀίω/οὔ σε θεῶν ἀέκητι γενέσθαι τε τραφέμεν τε";ibid: 6, 171–172: "τόφρα δέ μ' αἰεὶ κῦμ' ἐφόρει κραιπναί τε θύελλαι/νήσου ἀπ' Ὠγυγίης. νῦν δ' ἐνθάδε κάββαλε δαίμων"; Homer 1920: 15, 418: "οὔθ' ὃ τὸν ἄψ ὤσασθαι, ἐπεί ῥ' ἐπέλασσέ γε δαίμων".

14 According to Motoori's definition, "[…] any being whatsoever which possesses some eminent quality out of the ordinary, and is awe-inspiring, is called Kami" – quoted in Gall (1999: 63–74).

15 Notoriously, the category of "shame culture" is applied to Japanese culture in Benedict (1946). The most impactful analysis of Ancient Greek culture and thought in terms of shame vs guilt culture remains, to our knowledge, Dodds (1951).

Nonetheless, the very possibility of creating such a homogeneous shared narrative space partly depends on the very nature of polytheism itself. In contrast with monotheistic "close-ended" theologies, polytheism's inclusive or "open-ended" structures tend to allow for the easy addition of new deities to a preexisting pantheon, as well as for the relatively unproblematic coexistence of divinities with disparate origins – even when these gods preside over the same element or function. Then, it should not be surprising that Athena can stroll along with the reincarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni (*sic*!) through an Underworld closely resembling a bastardized version of Dante's Inferno, with elements borrowed from Egyptian mythology[16] and Germanic folklore among other traditions.[17]

Epic, Myths, Fairy Tales, and *Bildungsromane*

As we have seen, *StS* is a narrative of the sacred whose syncretic approach is rooted both in the type of sacrality it narrates and the analogy between its referenced cultural contexts – i.e., Classical Greek and Japanese cultures. *StS* has been poignantly described as a modern retelling of a Classical epic, as it is immediately evident given its elevated subject matter dealing with gods, heroes and their high-stakes struggles (Malavasi 2010); in many ways, it is exactly that. Nonetheless, as both a modern and trans-culturally syncretic retelling, *StS* brings a series of further elements to the table, doing so on several levels and, thus, becoming a veritable *pastiche* of different literary genres and traditions.

Obviously, the manga format, being an entirely different medium that relies on a combination of words and images as its integral parts, will diverge from any classical epical literary sources in its stylistic structure. Besides, given the *shōnen* manga intended audience (i.e., pre-teens and teenage boys), with a few exceptions[18] *StS*'s stylistic register is most definitely not the high style typical of classical to Renaissance epic literature.[19] Other major features of divergence from *StS*'s classical epic model are clearly identifiable

16 For example, one of the underlings of Hades is a warrior called "Pharaoh of Sphinx", whose special move consists in subjecting the souls of the dead to the trial of Ma'at. Cf. Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 87.

17 *StS*'s melting-pot inclinations are evident in the figures of the Three Judges. Following the Western tradition, the Judges of the Underworld are Rhadamantys, who wears the cloth of Wyvern; Aeacus, who wears the cloth of Garuda, the divine eagle-like sun-bird, as well the king of birds, in Hindu mythology; and Minos, who wears the cloth of Griffon. There is also a character, Rune, one of Minos' underlings, who wears the cloth of Balrog, from J.R.R.Tolkien's Middle Earth mythology.

18 According to the translators of the Italian edition, Stefano Cerioni and Tiziana Tosolini, *StS* ended up becoming a hybrid between a proper *shōnen* and an Arthurian novel. Due to the lack of clarity of the anime scripts, the dubbing director, Enrico Carabelli, chose to give an Arthurian allure to the whole saga, since, in Western literature, those characters who wear armors are automatically considered to be Knights. Despite the knightly allure that this series has received through the French edition (*Les chevaliers du Zodiaque*) and the very loose Italian adaptation, in Kurumada's manga Seiya and his comrades talk like average teenagers of the 1980s. Cf. Cerioni (2009) and "Gli Adattamenti della Serie" (2016).

19 The kanji chosen for Cosmos [小宇宙] means "little space", easily translated as "microcosm". Kurumada's Cosmos is like Carl Sagan's star-stuff: "The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself" (Sagan/Druyan/Soter 1980). This Cosmos is just a fragment of the Big Bang inside everybody's body, and it yearns for the stars. We could consider

both in the definition of the characters and, consequently, in the type of narrative goals that *StS* aims to achieve. Nonetheless, *StS* maintains several central undoubtedly Homeric conceptual elements that remain overarching, unifying, and that will translate to the *StSH* gaming experience in peculiar ways.

Of Gods and Men, Their Narrative Functions, and Their Syncretic Features

StS's multilayered syncretism goes beyond its cultural contents and their sources, permeating instead both the construction of its characters and the articulation of its narrative structures.

StS's main characters are five thirteen-to-fifteen-year-old boys who, despite carrying important features of individual characterizations, instantiate fundamentally archetypical functions. Both aspects – i.e., the identification of five protagonists and their fundamentally archetypical characterizations – are typical of the *shōnen* manga genre in general and are recurring staples in both classical Asian literature and philosophy. The individuation of exactly five basic principles is common in traditional Eastern narratives and philosophical theories.[20] In a typical story, the main characters are usually five[21], just like the fundamental elements composing all things are five according to the widespread *Wu Xing* (Chinese: 五行, lit. "Five elements", "phases" or "agents") metaphysical, epistemological, and natural-philosophical theory (Wang/Bao/Guan 2020: 211–20). In this instance, *StS*'s five protagonists individually symbolize and incarnate five typified personalities and their underlying dispositions – namely: devotion and perseverance (Seiya); wisdom (Shiryu); everyone's innermost emotional vulnerabilities that need to be faced in order to grow up (Hyoga); kindness, empathy and selflessness (Shun); and the Stoic reliability that saves the day in times of dire need (Ikki). While these characters are endowed with superhuman powers and undergo almost impossible trials that unarguably fall beyond any ordinary experience, their typified characterizations, both as individual characters and complementary parts of a collective unit, make them into relatable symbolic representations of the human experience. Then, the extraordinary circumstances within which these characters are set and act belong to the same order of things encompassing the extraordinary settings typical of myths and fairytales. Even the heroic supererogation[22] that *StS* takes to be the most desirable behavioral standard

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it just like a Japanese version of Star Wars' Force crossbred with Plotinus' amoeba. Cf. Kurumada (1986).

20 In Japanese literature, this trope was consolidated and popularized during the Edo period, when the *kusazoshi (*草双紙*)*, illustrated books, started a series for children called *kurohon* (黒本), i.e., black book, because of their covers. The most popular *kurohon* were the stories about Minamoto no Yorimitsu, also known as Minamoto no Raiko, and his four samurai companions (the *Shitenno*). (cf. Kornicki 2005:502–5).

21 Tatsuo Yoshida is considered the father of the *Kurohon* Renaissance, from his first work, the manga *Shonen Ninja Butai Gekko* (1963) to the anime *Kagaku Ninjatai Gatchaman* (1972). Other major titles that portrayed a group of five elements are *Hokuto no Ken* (1983); *Yoroiden Samurai Troopers* (1988); *Bishojo Senshi Sailor Moon* (1992); *ONEPIECE* (1997); and the infinite series of *tokusatsu* (live actions): *Ultraman* (1966), *Kamen Rider* (1971–73), *Himitsu Sentai Goranger* (1975).

22 We talk about "supererogation" very much in the sense analyzed in Urmson (1958: 192–216).

carries the same type of idealized exemplars and cautionary tales typical of fairy tales (Bettelheim 1976). Above all, *StS*'s epic materials are reshaped and adapted into a hybrid narrative structure that – besides its obvious analogies to Eastern and Western classical epics – holds a close family resemblance to the structure of fairy tales.[23]

Most structuralist actantial analyses of fairy tales can, then, be applied to *StS* without many issues and yield enlightening results, particularly insofar as the characters and their roles are concerned. For example, referring to a hermeneutical model like Propp's (1928), the Hero's function is clearly split and spread over the five main characters, for the reasons and in the ways mentioned above. But such an analysis is even more interesting if applied to Athena's character. For Athena, *StS* implements a stacking of roles and functions that perfectly exemplifies its overarching syncretic approach in both narrative paradigms and cultural references, causing the final product to shift from its source materials. The Athena of the classical myth is the Goddess of Tactics and Wisdom. She was born fully formed from the head of her father Zeus (Hesiod 1914: 886–91) and fought against the Giants (Hero), at some point actively intervening in the Trojan War (Homer 1920: Book V-VI) and lending a helping hand to Ulysses through his misadventures, as any proper hands-on hero and helper should (Homer 1919: 3.27). Even a passing mention of Athena's deeds suffices to show that, overall, the mythical Athena is eminently characterized both as a Hero and as a Magical Helper of the Hero's Journey (Campbell 1949). This holds partly true for Kurumada's Athena as well. On the one hand, Athena herself dresses for the part of the Hero in *StS*'s concluding arc, finally wielding her own divine armor for the first time throughout the story, in order to fight her uncle Hades. On the other hand, Athena still serves as the main Magical Helper throughout *StS*, giving hope and strength to Seiya and his comrades through her divine cosmos. Yet, more often than not, Kurumada's Athena ends up being a Melusine-like Princess, i.e., the damsel in distress for the heroes to save (Harf-Lancner 1984).

Both characterizations, despite appearing to be somewhat contradictory, coexist in *StS*'s Athena and make her into a seemingly odd hybrid. However, this is neither at odds with *StS*'s encompassing syncretism, nor is it the only compiling of diverse elements into Athena's figure – as is clear from the Christological features of this Goddess who is incarnated through a veritable parthenogenesis (Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 44) and walks amongst men to bleed and suffer beside them, both helping them and being saved by them. Then, Athena's twofold characterization does not seem to be particularly incoherent when considering the character's narrative role with respect to the story's protagonists. Both as Damsel in Distress and Magical Helper, making the protagonists into actual heroes is Athena's primary function. There are no heroes without heroic deeds. As a Princess in need of saving, Athena provides the final goal at the end of the quest that the protagonists need to undertake in order to call themselves heroes (Isaac 2016: 361). As a Magical Helper, Athena is the Goddess through whose mediation the heroes can

23 This is particularly true if we consider fairy tales to be somewhat refined and erudite literary products, as some scholars have claimed. For example, as Ute Heidmann convincingly claimed (2010: 113–52; 2020: 1–14), a well-known fairytale such as Bluebeard, is a complex foiled retelling of Dido's story from Virgil's *Aeneid*.

access the higher granted power[24] that allows them to surpass their human limitations and accomplish truly superhuman deeds (Thompson 1958 [1932]: 96–97, 100–1, 105–6, 106–9,108-2, 116–7). Reconciling divinity and humanity, the damsel in distress and the powerful helper, the savior and the saved in one figure, Athena occupies the same liminal narrative space in which *StS* itself is set. As the personification of a threshold herself, Athena makes it possible for the heroes to cross that border and surpass that limit between human and superhuman, thus becoming Saints in the most authentic sense.

Non Plus Ultra? On Limits and Liminality

Surpassing one's limits, in order to fulfill and fully actualize one's true potential, is a recurring pillar of coming-of-age stories and, *a fortiori*, of the *shōnen* genre itself. This is particularly evident in *StS*, to the point of constituting an essential narrative feature for its plot structure. It would not be far-fetched to claim that in *StS* all the narrative elements directly borrowed from classical epic, traditional literature, and fairytales are brought together in the overarching structure of a (graphic) Bildungsroman. This would not be particularly surprising, since the surpassing of one's limits through some sort of rite of passage, in order to access a higher state of being (be it that of an élite holy warrior, the "Seventh" and the "Eight Sense"[25], or just becoming a better version of oneself), characterizes most Bildungsromane as a major structural and conceptual aspect.

StS's young protagonists need to surpass their limits again and again throughout the story, first and foremost by facing and surpassing their own masters. *StS*'s *sensei*[26] are greater-than-life father figures who – as most parental figures in the *shōnen* genre – have the twofold function of friends and foes, falling both under the category of the Helper aiding the hero's journey and of the adversary to be defeated.[27] Just like Athena, the *sensei* embody a limit, albeit of a different kind. These characters are themselves a *limen*, a threshold (and, oftentimes, a dead body) over which the hero must pass. Analogously to what happens with Athena's characterization, the apparent contradiction in the *sensei*'s double nature is easily reconciled through their narrative role. *StS*'s *sensei* are able to fully carry out their function as Magical Helpers only insofar as they are obstacles on the Heroes' path: their contribution to the Hero's Journey lies exactly in their being the enemies whom the heroes need to defeat in order to progress. Following the honor

24 In geek culture the definition of "**granted power**" is interlaced with the DnD RPG system developed by Gary Gygax and Dave Anderson (1974). The idea behind the abilities of the Priest character class (nowadays most commonly known as Cleric) was the notion that it is a deity who provides the power to cast spells or heal. In the first module, *Greyhawk* (1975:14), Gygax was forced to create and customize a specific deity so that Priest characters could receive their powers. In a similar fashion, Athena lends a spark of her own Cosmos to her Saints in dire need.

25 Kurumada (1986–1990), chap. 29; Kurumada (1986–89), ep. 42.

26 *Sensei* (先生 born before = elder) is an honorific title used to address persons of authority or to show respect to someone who has achieved a certain level of mastery in an art form or some other skillful enterprise – e.g., musicians, artists, novelists, martial artists. *Sensei* has the same meaning as the Sanskrit term *guru* (गुरु). In martial arts, a sensei is a father figure that shares his wisdom with his pupils, like a father with his children. Cf. Goldsbury (2010).

27 A notorious example is the relationship between Cygnus Hyoga and his teacher, Aquarius Camus. Cf. Kurumada (1986–1990), chap. 21 and 40.

code and the logic typical of both the epical chivalric tradition and Japanese *bushido*,[28] genuine pride and affection remain on the *sensei*'s part in their own defeat, since such defeat provides their pupil with their final teachings and the skills necessary for a hero to continue on his journey.

The increasingly more overpowered adversaries that the protagonists face through a series of knightly duels constitute *limina* of a similar kind, causing and marking the heroes' progression in power. On the one hand, when these adversaries happen to be just as honorable and resolute in their convictions as the heroes are, a duel to the death becomes, more often than not, the beginning of a beautiful friendship[29]. On the other hand, not only is the heroes' progression an effective advancement through the ranks of their superhuman military élite,[30] but it makes the distinction between humanity and divinity increasingly more blurred – to the point that a human can mortally wound a god, therefore effectively voiding the distinction itself of any real relevance (Kurumada 1986–1990, chap. 110). In Kurumada's fictional universe, gods can be killed and humans can overpower them. The distinction between humans and gods effectively is quantitative rather than qualitative, ultimately amounting to a matter of degree – and degrees can be climbed (Kurumada 1988). But, overall, this seamless passage between humanity and divinity simply symbolizes and dramatizes, on a mythical and epic scale, the passage from childhood to adulthood, which constitutes the core of the Bildungsroman as a genre (Iversen 2010).

In summary, limits, borders, and their surpassing recur in many forms throughout *StS*, where they play an essential role. Namely, as we have seen, limits constitute a core element for defining either the essential function or the narrative progression of most primary and supporting characters; however, limits are also the basic building blocks for articulating and advancing the story itself through the series of duels that the heroes must win – thus crossing the limits encountered on their path and overcoming

28 Loosely related to the Western notion of "**chivalry**", the *Bushido* (武士道, literally: "the Path of the warrior") is the summa of all the codes, practices, philosophies, and principles of samurai culture, which ruled Japan during the Shogunate Period (1181–1868). The term was used for the first time in the *Kōyō Gunkan* (甲陽軍鑑), in 1616 (Kasaya 2014: 7). The most complete and well-known dissertation about *Bushido* was provided in *Hagakure Kikigai* (葉隠聞書) by Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1906 [1700 ca.]). Japanese author Mishima (1987 [1967]) wrote an introduction to *Hagakure*.

29 This trope has its roots in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Jastrow/Clay 1920). Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends after Gilgamesh defeats Enkidu in a fight. The trope occurs, for example, in Arthurian romans, in the legend of Robin Hood, and in the fourth and fifth chapters of Alexandre Dumas's *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, when D'Artagnan challenges Athos, Porthos and Aramis to a duel behind the Carmelites' monastery at noon.

30 The Hero's journey starts when he conquers his cloth. The hero (and his rank accordingly) grows fight after fight, thus advancing in his formative journey. Despite Pegasus Seiya being the core hero of *StS*, Dragon Shiryu's progression is the epitome of this scheme. Shiryu initially obtains the Dragon Cloth. After a series of fights and establishing a bond of friendship with the other main characters, he defeats the Silver Saint Perseus Algol, but can only do so by losing his sight. Having later acquired the Seventh Sense and having managed to defeat a couple of Gold Saints for good measure, Shiryu overcomes his own limits battle after battle, growing to be able to stand against the gods themselves (Poseidon and Hades). Cf., e.g., Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 27, 32, 35, 39, 54, 78 and 105.

their own. While this kind of narrative structure might result in a somewhat repetitive manga/anime format, it lends itself to be easily adapted, with very few changes, into a heavily story-reliant fighting game.

In general, then, not only are the vast majority of *StS*'s Helpers and Antagonists complexly liminal characters, but *StS* itself appears to be an intrinsically liminal work under several respects, first and foremost in its literary genre. The substantial presence of core features characterizing epics, fairytales and coming-of-age literature – both as genre categories and source-materials – makes *StS* into a veritable literary *pastiche* situated on the border between classical epic and the modern Bildungsroman, in a timeless fairytale-like atmosphere.

Overall, *StS*'s mostly epical main threads are tightly woven into the materials, structures, narrative devices, and frameworks that, as we have seen, characterize both fairytales and coming-of-age novels. While classical epics provide most of *StS*'s explicit references and content materials, the final result, with its liminal nature and overarching syncretic features, is something quite closer to the medieval and early modern chivalric romance and *chanson de geste* tradition (Meneghetti 1994). Whereas epics create a tale about the world producing a collective and social response, romances and novels aim for a purely individual response. Epic heroes satisfy the collective need to glorify a particular historical moment, creating a mythical account of those historical facts that are collectively perceived as foundational. Chivalric romances and novels instead focus on the reader's private experience – be it emotional, educational, escapist, and so on.

StS undoubtedly stages content straight out of classical epics; however, any historical reality is thoroughly removed from the spotlight, even merely as a prime matter to be reshaped through the mythical mold. The resulting atmosphere and moral outlook are arguably closer to those of a fairytale rather than of the *Iliad* (Homer 1920); the framing and emphasis on moral themes and coming-of-age experiences certainly underline how much of a Bildungsroman *StS* ultimately is. While *StS* begins as an urban fantasy showing some aspects of everyday life that would be mundane for a modern reader, it soon shifts into a rather atemporal and almost abstract chivalric tale that leaves no room whatsoever for the mundane. Even the small slices of daily life presented to the reader are transported into a timeless and quite unrealistic setting, where they become functional as symbolizing universal human emotions, phenomena, and values (e.g., familial and romantic love, loyalty, devotion, justice, etc.). When ancient gods walk the Earth and clash against each other due to ancestral grudges and irreconcilable differences on general principles (e.g., the relationship between humanity and divinity, the existence of free will and its implications, etc.), the few slices of life remaining can only be those greater than life itself. By the Hades-Sanctuary arc, we do not get to see much of Saori Kido the heiress, as we used to earlier on in the story; instead, only the goddess Athena is left. Until the very end, Kurumada's gods remain odd creatures who – much like the gods of the Greek Pantheon – are ruled by their passions, bleed, suffer, eat, sleep, and can even die. However, while in the first few chapters we follow Athena through her relatively mundane daily life, by the beginning of the Hades–Sanctuary arc we still see her sleeping, but now on a stone altar in a temple rather than in a certainly more comfortable bed. The same progressive removal from the mundane holds true for the heroes, whose "normal" life – by the end – revolves around one epic battle after another, all against increasingly pow-

erful adversaries and, ultimately, against the god of Death himself (Jauss 1981). After all, in Kurumada's narrative universe, the limen between humans and gods is a mere matter of degree, rather than an insurmountable qualitative distinction, and is there ultimately to be crossed.

Adventures, Chance, Destiny, and Necessity

All types of epics (including classical and chivalric epic), along with fairy tales and – albeit in a different measure and different ways – even *Bildungsomane*, include some kind of hero's adventure as a narrative backbone. Quests, battles, or facing some form of radical otherness, only to make it through to the other side, are all fairly structured examples of the typical heroic adventure recurring across these types of narratives, and preeminently in epic texts (Miller 2000).

Looking at the common meanings that can be found in a dictionary lemma, one of the oldest uses of the term "adventure" is the one referring to "(1.a) a chance occurrence or event, an accident" (Oxford English Dictionary 1989 [1884–1928]: "adventure"). It would not be far-fetched to claim that this is the underlying meaning to the other most common uses of the word, i.e., those denoting respectively any extraordinary, marvelous, or unexpected events, as well as any audacious, perilous or novel endeavor and experience (ibid.) The etymology of "adventure" is even more revealing, deriving ultimately from the Latin verb *advenio, advenis, adveni, adventum, advenire*, which means "to come (to), arrive (at)", "reach", "come from outside", "be brought at", "develop", "supervene", oftentimes "with emphasis on attendant circumstances" (Glare 2012 [1968]: 55). An adventure is therefore a happening that is somewhat built into the circumstances: we see it coming. In other words, an adventure is something that **will** arrive or happen to the hero – and the hero should be expecting it. Almost a century ago, Eberwein (1933) had already drawn a tight relationship between adventure, *evenio/eventus* ("event", "occurrence", "outcome", implying a reference to a transcendental power), and *advenio/adventus*, underlying how adventure and *advenio/adventus* soon acquired a religious connotation and came to signify something that **must** happen.

In *StS*, the main 'advent' – in this layered literal sense – is Hades' coming. The god of the Underworld is scheduled to rise and fight Athena once every couple of centuries, give or take a few years, in the quintessential Holy War in *StS*'s universe (Kurumada 1986–1990, chap. 68). The whole connotation of Hades' umpteenth coming and its resulting Holy War has a pervasive prophetic tone. There is a clear sense of fatalistic determination in the circumstances required for the war to begin, just as there are undeniable elements of predestination in determining who will be the holy warriors chosen to fight that war. Therefore – despite the number of personal sacrifices, blood, tears and almost inhuman effort still required to become Saints – *StS*'s heroes, ultimately, end up embodying the paradigm of the Chosen One. The Chosen are those who are destined by a higher power to face whatever threat moves the narrative in order to overcome it and finally restore the initial (and somewhat idealized) status quo.

The bond between themes of predestination goes well beyond matters of semantics or etymology and is both explicit and well rooted within the history of the adventure literary genres, sometimes determining their development. A reference to fate and destiny

has been included in the notion of *adventure* at least since 1040, when it occurs explicitly in *The Life of Saint Alexis* (e.g., Anonymous 1974 [1872]: vv. 441–442). At this stage, the notion of destiny or fatalistic determination does not concern just a single character, but a whole collective. The collective heroism that is at the root of the knightly outlook typical of the *chanson de geste* frames adventures as an inexplicable but not disturbing destiny, i.e., an element of chance that is thrown into the great scheme of things and is tackled by a social group as a whole. This underlying outlook changes when, around the turn between the first and second feudal ages (Bloch 1949: 75), the narrative paradigm shifts from group combats to individual duels. Then the term "adventure" assumes a new connotation, coming to mean primarily something befalling one individual rather than a whole collective (ibid.). At this point, an adventure does not have much to do with chance anymore, but rather with a change disrupting the status quo, whose restoration has now become a hero's duty. By the mid-12th century, Benoît de Sainte-Maure overtly associates "*avenire*" (i.e., the future or, more precisely, a future happening) and "*aventure*", confirming that the military feats performed by an exceptional man are both those knightly feats determining a battle's outcome and a sign of the favor that destiny itself bestows upon the hero (Köhler 1985[1956]: 93).

Overall, in a chivalric epic, not only is the experiencing of adventures a necessary condition for being a knight, but it is first and foremost a condition that a knight is necessarily destined to satisfy. Analogously, the election of Athena's Saints in *StS* relies on a similar component of predestination, which contributes to emphasizing the Saints' liminal role as borders between the human and the divine. Both in *StS* and medieval chivalric epics, the predestined inclusion of the hero within the élite chosen to serve a divinity or a righteous cause is influenced by the development of soteriological theories of election in Western thought. Nonetheless, the notions of destiny and necessitation are cardinal concepts in ancient Greek thought and, therefore, in the classical epic tradition as well. Through the mediation of classical epic as a major literary and conceptual source, destiny and necessitation turn out to be essential core notions in *StS*'s conceptual framework.

The Ancient Greek language employs two distinct terms to describe destiny, thus distinguishing two separate entities with two distinct and opposite connotations: *Tyche* (Τύχη) and *Ananke* (Ἀνάγκη). *Tyche*, equivalent to the Latin *fortuna*, belongs to the same semantic field as the verb τυγχάνω (*tunkhánō*, "to happen") and primarily translates roughly as "luck", both as a cause beyond human control – thus with a layered connotation of chance, providence, fate – and either as a divine or even a human act along with its resulting outcomes (Liddell/Scott 1940: τύχη). The deity Tyche – i.e., the personification of this "chance" – deals with contingencies, namely those things that may or may not happen in all their apparent randomness, thus presiding mostly to the fates of individuals and socio-political entities (e.g., Politt 1994). *Ananke* (ἀνάγκη), on the contrary, has nothing to do with randomness or contingency. The noun likely has a semantic connection to ἤνεγκον (*ḗnenkon*), aorist of φέρω (*phérō*, "to carry" and, consequently, "to drag"), thus inheriting the connotation of an absolute and inescapable pull. *Ananke* is a necessity that leaves no room for recourse. *Ananke* is an all-encompassing force, an irresistible compulsion or an unbreakable tie (Liddell/Scott 1940: ἀνάγκη). *Ananke* is the necessity of the laws governing the cosmos, the laws of physics and the laws of logic. As the personification of this all-ruling necessity, Ananke is one of the primordial deities in An-

cient Greek cosmogonical myths.[31] When, in orphic and orphic-influenced mythology, Ananke and her brother-spouse Chronos (i.e., Father Time) come into being (often by self-generation), the primordial **chaos** (χάος) gives way to the ordered cosmos ruled by the progressive unfolding of changes that is regulated and determined by necessary laws. However, Ananke's rule does not only apply to the deterministic world of natural phenomena, mathematical truths and the like, but extends its reach to the sphere of human life as well. Indeed, Ananke becomes the Mother of the Moirai (Μοῖραι, i.e., the Greek counterpart to the Latin *Parcae*), who oversee the thread of individual human lives from the beginning to the end (Plato 1903a).[32] Overall, then, the notions of *tyche* and *ananke* capture and map two opposite sides of extrinsic determination: one is completely open to any contingency and does not allow for the outcome to be easily known beforehand; the other is an absolute predetermination in virtue of which a different outcome – be it the conclusion in a logical argument from given premises, a physical phenomenon being the effect of a given cause, or the action of an agent – would be impossible.

When Homer uses ἀναγκαίη in the *Iliad* (1920: 4.300) or ἥ μιν ἀνάγκη in the *Odyssey* (1919: 4.557), he is referring to this type of absolute necessity and inescapable force (e.g., Aristotle 1984: 37a, 16: "τὸ γὰρ μὴ ἐνδέχεσθαι μηδενὶ διχῶς λέγεται, τὸ μὲν εἰ ἐξ ἀνάγκης τινὶ") that is and will remain a ubiquitous notion throughout archaic, classical, and post classical Greek culture as an integral part of the Greek way of thinking. *Ananke* is both one of the grounding principles of the universe (e.g., Plato 1903, 48a: "οὖν ἡ τοῦδε τοῦ κόσμου γένεσις ἐξ ἀνάγκης τε καὶ νοῦ συστάσεως ἐγεννήθη") and the inevitable destiny that rules individual existences (e.g., Xenophon 1971, 1.1.11: "τίσιν ἀνάγκαις ἕκαστα γίγνεται τῶν οὐρανίων"). Most importantly, even the gods cannot fight this necessity and are subject to it (e.g., Simonides 1962, fr. 542: "Ἀνάγκᾳ/δ' οὐδὲ θεοὶ μάχονται"). So, ultimately, the notion of *ananke* rests at the roots of Greek religion and permeates the particular religiosity expressing Greek polytheism. In Kurumada's syncretic approach, *ananke* comes to be explicitly associated and overlapped with a partly overlapping notion that is widespread in South and East Asian cultures, i.e., the Buddhist notion of *karma* (par. 3).

Overall, this absolute necessity and unavoidable necessitation is pervasive throughout *StS*'s conceptual framework, as can be expected given its crucial role in *StS*'s cultural references and literary influences. Nonetheless, despite the weight of predestination becoming increasingly heavier with the progression of the story and the heroes' journey, the underlying *ananke* permeating and moving *StS's* universe remains for the most part a subtextual presence.

31 The inclusion of the personification of *ananke* among the deities of the beginning is not universal: for example, Ananke is not a character in Hesiod's *Theogony*, but it is most common in orphic literature (West 1983; Meisner 2018).

32 For instance, Plato 1903a: 617c: "θυγατέρας τῆς ἀνάγκης, Μοίρας, λευχειμονούσας, στέμματα ἐπὶ τῶν κεφαλῶν ἐχούσας, Λάχεσίν τε καὶ Κλωθὼ καὶ Ἄτροπον, ὑμνεῖν πρὸς τὴν τῶν Σειρήνων ἁρμονίαν, Λάχεσιν μὲν τὰ γεγονότα, Κλωθὼ δὲ τὰ ὄντα, Ἄτροπον δὲ τὰ μέλλοντα."

Even Buddha Must Die: Narratives, Gameplay and Syncretic Necessities

It is in *StSH* that *ananke* comes to the foreground as an explicit and appropriately unavoidable driving force directly experienced in the gameplay – besides its obvious presence in the narrative content, which the game inherited from *StS*. This overwhelming necessitation is pervasive in a measure that goes well beyond the expected narrative constraints of *StSH*'s genre, throughout the game structure itself and ultimately overrules most of the player's choices.

StSH is, overall, a pretty straightforward brawler game, conceived as the follow-up chapter to the previously released *Saint Seiya: The Sanctuary* (Dimps 2005). In the featured story mode, the progression of the game quite faithfully follows the unfolding of *StS*'s plot. In a sense, the game's actual and consistent goal is recreating or reenacting *StS*'s narrative, since most other intermediate goals shift along with the progression of the story, in conformity with the source material. Throughout the different phases of the gameplay, the explicitly stated end-goals change, as does the player's character – which is automatically assigned by the AI, accordingly to the plot requirements at each stage of the story or level of the game. The game can be divided into two main phases, the first taking place at Athena's Sanctuary and the second in the Underworld. At the beginning, when Hades' troops invade Athena's Sanctuary, the player, as one of the Saints, must defeat the invaders in order to save Athena's life. Going through the levels, the player's character is automatically reassigned – e.g., independently from which character the player has chosen up to that point, the battle at the Sixth Temple against three undead "traitors" can only be fought as the guardian of the Sixth Temple, Shaka. At the end of the first part, Athena ends up killing herself anyway – thus throwing to the wind the game's initial goal – in order to go and fight her uncle on his home turf; but, alas, she fails to bring her own Cloth, which her faithful Saints (i.e., the player) now need to deliver. Consequently, in the second stage, the main action moves from Athena's Sanctuary to Hades' domain, the Underworld. The invaded has now become the invader. The player must defeat Hades' defenders in order to advance through the *Meikai* (冥界) and find Athena, ultimately coming face to face with the god of Death himself (cf. Malavasi 2010). Initially intended to have a sequel, *StSH* does not adapt the entirety of *StS*'s "Hades Arc", but the game ends with Andromeda Shun becoming Hades himself, thus fulfilling his destiny to become the living body for Hades' soul and divine cosmos (Kurumada 1986–90, chap. 89).

StSH is as much of a plot-driven narrative as its manga and anime sources: external events and circumstances drive the progression of the story, determining the characters' actions and reactions. Action-stories are paradigmatic examples of plot-driven narratives. These tend to be high-paced and leave little to no room for character introspection and digressions, which makes them particularly suitable for videogame adaptations. In the vast majority of instances, videogames themselves are plot-driven narratives with different degrees of interference. There are games that could be considered character- rather than plot-driven – for example, some puzzle, simulation, and harem games. Character-driven games are those where the player's choices determine the game's outcome with little external interference beyond the game premises and parameters. On the contrary, in plot-driven videogames, the narrative progresses at a high pace within a relatively tightly set frame and "on rails", i.e., developing from binding premises and

pursuing stated objectives by completing the tasks or intermediate levels required to reach them in a precise sequence, like a train on a track. This, on the one hand, allows for a highly immersive game-play experience through the player's selected character; but, on the other hand, it tends to restrict the array of possible choices left open to contingency.

It is true that story trees or multi-linear narratives (i.e., those "choose-your-own-adventure" narratives allowing for possible different developments and outcomes) are frequently expressed in videogames, as is the case with those games allowing for alternate storylines or equally successful endings. This is normally the case for most gameplay modes of a given game, including the versus or the story mode in a brawler game. Nonetheless, even with relatively open-structured multi-linear games, such as open-world RPGs, the narrative is far from being completely open-ended – trivially, because otherwise the game would not have a definite conclusion; and, less trivially, because the finite number of possible winning choices can only yield a finite number of possible successful outcomes. Most beat 'em up games are just as multilinear, opening different narrative lines – oftentimes veritable alternate histories – depending on the character selection and the player's choices.[33] While the game progresses along the established narrative flow by overcoming a similar sequence of adversaries and completing the same tasks, usually there are major differences among the narrative interludes, backstories unlocked and final rewards.

Neither *StSH* nor its predecessor, *Sanctuary*, allow anything like that. In both cases, the story mode seems to be as close to a mono-linear narrative as one could get: the narrative is set and established beforehand, depriving the player of any freedom of movement or choice. In *Sanctuary*, once the whole story mode arc proper had been completed, it was possible to access different ending mini-narratives (*omake* [お負け], literally: "extras") that were roughly equivalent to different possible after-credit scenes in a movie. Like an after-credit scene, *Sanctuary*'s *omake* have no impact on the main story. *StSH*, however, does not include anything like that. Once *StSH*'s story mode has been successfully completed, the player unlocks three further levels (*Kanon's Last Fight*, *Ikki Strikes Back* and *Fierce Fighting! Road to Giudecca*) that are accessible in sequence rather than through any deliberate choice to select one rather than the other. These further levels are thematically in continuity with the story mode's main narrative and reenact events in the manga that are either synchronic to the gameplay storyline or are meant to bridge the previous narrative to the intended sequel game, never realized.

In *StSH*, the pinnacle of the player's freedom is being able to select different possible answers throughout (some of) their character's interactions; however, the player's choices make no difference whatsoever for the unfolding of the plot or the progression of the story. Overall, in St*SH*, the player's choices are completely overdetermined by the necessities imposed by the plot and implemented in a faithful reenactment of *StS*'s own narrative. The resulting gaming experience is, therefore, at least doubly performative: first, it maintains the performativity intrinsic to any gaming experience (Bosman 2019); and, second, it makes the player perform a series of roles following a rigidly established

33 Striking examples in this sense are the *Tekken* games (Namco 1994), *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games 1992) and, in a measure, *King of Fighters* (SNK 1994), among others.

script, exactly in the same way an actor would perform. In a sense, the player gets to be the Chosen One – chosen, that is, by the AI – over and over again, switching character depending on which one is crucial for the progression of the story at any given stage. The script (i.e., *StS*'s plot) is binding. The player's actions can either only succeed in fulfilling the requirements for advancing to the next stage in the same way in which within *StS*'s narrative the heroes advance to the next stage and the next adversary – or fail to do so, thus interrupting the progression of the story and ultimately losing the game.

As we mentioned above, the plot and narrative structure of a highly sequential coming-of-age epic adventure make *StS* particularly suitable for a videogame adaptation. The plot-driven and action-packed series of duels between the five protagonists and their foils of the moment is a ready-made sequential structure, already articulated in progressive levels. While *StS*'s pathos and moral dilemmas, which fill out page after page of Kurumada's manga emphasizing its chivalric atmosphere, are not rendered as part of *StSH*'s gameplay per se, they have been adapted as CG cutscenes and thus removed from the player's direct sphere of action. In this instance the player goes back to being a spectator, making it evident that the frame of mind underlying *StSH* remains exactly that of *StS*, without any meaningful shifts in the narrative approach despite the different medium.

One could argue that, at the end of the day, *StSH* is simply a mediocre game, full of missed opportunities and wasted potential. From a certain point of view, it would not be a wrong assessment. However, what *StSH* lacks in entertainment value it makes up for in philosophical relevance as a cross-media adaptation that genuinely captures the spirit of its source material. The apparent structural weaknesses in *StSH*'s gameplay are also *StSH*'s peculiar features of authentic conceptual interest, since they faithfully and performatively render the essence of *StS*'s syncretic ethos, by enacting both the typical features of *StS*'s narrative genres and its overwhelming necessitation as fully integrated elements of the gameplay.

In *StSH*, *ananke* is enacted and, *a fortiori*, enforced by the characteristics of the gameplay. The full spectrum of the game's features forces the player to experience the overruling necessity that is so central in Ancient Greek culture and, therefore, permeates *StS* to its very roots. One of the most immediately evident examples of this necessitation throughout *StSH* is, of course, the above-mentioned automated selection of the player's characters, which is reiterated at the various stages of the game in order to match the narrative of the manga without any exceptions. But this is far from being the only or even the principal iteration of *ananke* in *StSH*'s gameplay and in the game specific narrative content. We shall now focus our attention on an emblematic case that exemplifies how a particularly syncretic instance of *ananke, via* the cognate Buddhist notion of karma, is at play at a pivotal point in *StS* and faithfully adapted in *StSH*. Then we shall draw some general considerations on the gameplay's big picture.

In its most general strokes, the theory of karma (Sanskrit: कर्म, literally: "action") holds that there is a relation between actions and what comes to fruition through or as a consequence of those actions (फल, *phala*, literally "fruits" or "effects"). In turn, the effects of one's actions determine that individual's future actions, in a complexly situational and circular setting, that ordinarily is unbreakable. In its basic form, then, the principle of karma appears to be a kind of overruling law of causation permeating the

whole domain of action and its evaluation, for every agent and across the cycle of rebirths (cf. Sideritis 2019, par. 4). In many ways, Buddhist *karma* and Greek *ananke* have a similar connotation as overwhelming causal forces, exercising a similar action and similar functions on a similarly global scale. In a work like *StS*, the superimposition between the two, resting on an actual overlap, is only natural and morphs into an almost-identification. This almost-identification colors *ananke* with *karma*'s moral connotation and an emphasis on moral evaluation, which is not foreign to Western views of cosmic necessitation – think of the Stoic maxim, *fata volentem docunt, nolentem trahunt* – and it fits perfectly with the staples of *StS*'s literary references.

In both *StS* and *StSH*, the above-mentioned battle of the Sixth Temple is the best example of this syncretic interpenetration between *karma* and *ananke*. For instance, karma and *ananke* are now overtly brought together in a character-relevant and plot-functional fashion, while showcasing the peculiarities of *StSH's* gameplay as well. While this battle is one of the highest narrative and moral moments in the manga, in *StSH* it is the turning point that marks the culmination of the first part of the game. The assigned player's character here is Virgo Shaka, whom we briefly encountered above: Kurumada, playing fast and loose with some tenets of Buddhist thought, makes Shaka into the reincarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni, i.e., Siddhārtha Gautama. Shaka's battle is fought against three adversaries at the same time and takes place in a secret garden accessible through the Virgo Temple. The player immediately recognizes that this is a crucial place and the set for a crucial moment in the game. The petals shed by the two *sala* trees in the garden are (unsurprisingly and quite unrealistically) reminiscent of *sakura* petals and have been a leitmotif throughout the game up to this point, beginning with the game's opening screen. Besides the aesthetic taste bringing a flare of Japan into Greece and even more so into the heavily Indian inspired setting of the Sixth Temple, the *sakura/sala* petals in the opening and throughout *StSH* are deliberately evocative of the *Heike Monogatari*[34] which is one of the most iconic literary representations of *mujō* (無常) — i.e. the Zen notion of impermanence (Hull 1998). The garden behind the Sixth Temple is not just any garden, but **the** Twin Sala Garden, i.e., Siddhārtha's place of death – somehow transported to Greece by the power of manga logic and, appropriately, plot necessities. The reader with even a basic familiarity with the Buddhist tradition will immediately know that Shaka will die here. And die he must, but not without having defeated his three adversaries first. Shaka's death is plot functional, since he realizes that, in order to win the holy war against Hades once and for all, one must fight it offensively rather than defensively, i.e., the fight needs to be taken to the Underworld. By letting himself die, Shaka leads the way for Athena's army and Athena herself, after having left a message for his goddess written

34 Cf. *The Tale of the Heike* (1988), chapter 1.1: "祇園精舎の鐘の声，諸行無常の響きあり。娑羅双樹の花の色，盛者必衰の理をあらわす。おごれる人も久しからず，唯春の夜の夢のごとし。たけき者も遂にはほろびぬ，偏に風の前の塵に同じ。 (The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind)." The passage is one of those well-known and widely quoted literary references, making an appearance even in Takashi Miike's movie, *Sukiyaki Western Django* (Miike, 2007, 0:01:59).

in blood on the Sala petals: *arayashiki*. The Japanese term *arayashiki* (阿頼耶識) translates the Sanskrit term *ālayavijñāna* (आलयविज्ञान), literally 'store-consciousness'. This is a key notion for the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna philosophy and aims to address the problem of the continuity of personal identity raised by the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (अनात्मन्, "absence of self") (Schmithausen 2007). Kurumada is closely inspired by the Yogācāra tradition in his theory of the senses. Indeed, in *StS* the Eight Sense is explicitly the Yogācāra Eight Consciousness, i.e., the *ālayavijñāna* or *arayashiki*. More precisely, Kurumada's Eight Sense is the stage of consciousness where all the individual's awareness and agency (and therefore their karma) are preserved, consenting Athena and her Saints to even defy death and descend to the Underworld remaining, for all intents and purposes, alive or something very much like it.

These few lines provide a sufficient idea of how philosophically and dramatically dense the Battle at the Sixth Temple is and how Shaka, after having beaten Camus, Saga and Shura within an inch of their (not quite)[35] lives, chooses to die anyway, because he must. In *StSH*, the player must go through the same process. Usually, in most beat 'em up games, the resolution of a given conflict is achieved through the victory of the player's character over their adversaries, at which point the player's character can advance victorious to the next level and to the next brawl. This is not the case in *StSH*: the player must win Shaka's fight for the game to continue, but the plot overrules everything else and Shaka dies anyway. The player's victory is required for the plot to move forward but does not affect the content and the development of the plot in one direction rather than another: the plot is set, it is predetermined, and there's nothing that the player can do to change it. The usual cathartic value of the gaming experience, especially in a **beat 'em up**, is accompanied by an overwhelming sense of frustration at the player's ultimate irrelevance. In a sense, winning *StSH* – i.e., defeating the adversaries and successfully completing all the levels – means experiencing a series of losses in the narrative content: Shaka dies; Athena, instead of being saved, kills herself; Shun, the player's character at the descent to the Underworld, ends up becoming Hades and embodying the main antagonist. In *StSH*, winning the game does not mean winning the war. The player cannot do anything but accept it. In the light of *StS*'s cultural and literary references, this is the core of *StSH*'s syncretic "Greekness" allowing the player to directly experience the ultimate tenet of Greek spirituality and religiosity: no one, not even the gods, can fight necessity. In this world of gods that can die and heroes that can defeat them, everyone – the gods, the heroes, the player – must still bend to an overdetermining necessitation, an *ananke* that pervades the narrative content and is built into *StSH's* gameplay itself.

Closing Remarks

Throughout the present study, we have shown that *StS* should be considered a syncretic narrative where the sphere of the sacred plays a central role. We have done so, in the first place, by underlying how *StS*'s syncretism rests on the commonalities between Ancient

35 Aquarius Camus, Gemini Saga and Capricorn Shura are some of Athena's Gold Saints who died in the 'Sanctuary' arc and are now temporarily revived by Hades' power.

Greek and traditional Japanese polytheistic cultures. In the second place, we have examined the interpenetration of different literary traditions and genres making up the backbone and flesh of Kurumada's *opus magnum*. In particular, we have analyzed the narrative functions of *StS*'s main characters, focusing our attention on the intrinsic emphasis on their liminal role and on the centrality of the notions of predestination and necessitation. This centrality is built into *StS*'s literary and cultural references, as well as consequently in its narrative structure and content. Finally, within this syncretic and multi-cultural framework, we have taken under consideration *StSH*'s as a cross-media adaptation. In particular, we have examined how *StSH* captures and enacts *StS's* core notion of necessity, allowing the player to experience it performatively both through its narrative content and its unusually rigid gameplay constraints.

Frank Bosman extensively and convincingly argued that "[t]he act of playing particular games can, in some specific cases, be interpreted as a religious act in itself" (2019: 8). Certainly, a more general claim could be put forward in the wake of Aristotle, albeit with some modern re-contextualisation: while there is a cathartic value in the artistic experience, the same could be said about experiencing various forms of entertainment in general. For example, not many would disagree with the claim that few things are as cleansing for the soul as crushing the attack button in a good ol' fashioned beat 'em up. That the Aristotelian catharsis has a social and religious connotation is an old and well-established interpretation in the sociology of religion, dating back at least to Émile Durkheim (1912). Therefore, playing any game or experiencing a form of entertainment that produces a kind of catharsis would qualify as a religious experience.

Nonetheless, the type of experience that the player goes through in *StSH* is religious in a much stronger and more rooted sense than that. Resting on a complex intertextual, multicultural, and syncretic background, *StSH* throws the player into the core of the Greek spiritual experience of the world, by subjecting them to an enacted and performed necessitation. *StSH*'s necessitation is both *ananke* and *karma*, Western and Eastern, put forward by the narrative and structural content of the gameplay, pervasive and universal. In this way, *StSH* manages to adapt *StS*'s spirit along with its letter, making it performative in a different medium. The resulting product might be a mediocre game, but what makes it mediocre is also what ultimately makes it one of those games that Bosman qualified as a genuine space for authentically religious acts – and rightfully so.

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