



■ ANIME REVIEW ■

Fate/strange Fake: All flash, no grail

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If you are an anime fan, you have almost certainly heard of the *Fate* franchise. Spanning light novels, visual novels, and anime series such as *Fate/Zero*, *Fate/stay night: Unlimited Blade Works*, and *Fate/Apocrypha*, each iteration revolves around the same core concept: the Holy Grail War, a battle royale where seven legendary figures (Servants) are summoned by mages (Masters) to fight for a wish-granting artefact. It is a premise that has proven endlessly flexible. Yet, perhaps no entry twists the formula as radically as *Fate/strange Fake*.

Originally a light novel by Ryōgo Narita (creator of *Baccano!* and *Durarara!!*), *Fate/strange Fake* transplants the Holy Grail War to the American city of Snowfield. However, this is not the usual seven-on-seven affair. Instead, a 'fake' Grail War erupts with thirteen Servants and thirteen Masters (the real count depends on your interpretation). For a franchise that thrives on structure, this promises much-welcome anarchy. The question is whether the 2026 anime delivers.

A FEAST FOR THE EYES, BUT NOT MUCH ELSE

A-1 Pictures has poured considerable resources into the animation, and it shows. The fight sequences are among the most visually spectacular of the year, boasting fluid choreography and striking effects. When *Strange Fake* leans into its action, it is undeniably thrilling. For viewers who enjoy turning off their brains for the 'sakuga' animation of *Demon Slayer* or *Solo Levelling*, this anime will feel right at home.

The problem is that, across 13 episodes, there is little else to hold onto. Unlike the plot-driven narratives that define the franchise's best entries, *Strange Fake* spins its wheels seemingly without a clear destination. The adaptation skips and compresses significant backstories and character moments, operating on a 'rule of cool' philosophy: introduce a colourful cast, showcase dazzling fights, and leave the majority underdeveloped. Keep in mind that, to understand how this story exactly begins, you have to watch *Fate/strange Fake: Whispers of Dawn*, an additional 55-minute special episode released in 2023. The first season is actually a sequel to that 2023 special.

WHERE THE 'STRANGE'NESS BECOMES FRUSTRATING

As a longtime *Fate* fan, one who fell in love with the franchise

through *Fate/stay night* on Animax back in 2017 and still plays the mobile game *Fate/Grand Order* daily, I approached *Strange Fake* with high expectations. However, even having read the first three light novel volumes, I found myself confused by the pacing and narrative choices. Scene transitions felt abrupt. Characters dropped exposition out of nowhere. Key backstories, a hallmark of *Fate* storytelling, are skimmed or absent.

This is a shame because *Fate's* enduring appeal has never been solely about watching legendary figures trade blows. The magic lies in the interactions – King Arthur wrestling with modernity, Gilgamesh clashing with ideals, Hercules embracing tragedy – and in seeing how their histories connect to their present struggles. *Strange Fake* assembles a genuinely fascinating cast, from the enigmatic King Richard the Lionheart and the quirky Alexandre Dumas to the unsettling True Caster faction, but rarely gives them room to breathe. The result dazzles in the moment but leaves little lasting impression.

For anime-only viewers, the experience will vary. The omissions of minor plot details may not matter to those unfamiliar with the

source material, but the show's tendency to skip over connective elements means even newcomers may struggle to piece together certain character motivations. As such, the overall first season feels less like a complete narrative arc and more like a highlight reel.

Longtime *Fate* devotees will recognise the ambition beneath the chaos, but may feel the absence of the character-driven depth that elevated the likes of *Fate/Zero* and *Unlimited Blade Works*. Narita's talent for juggling sprawling ensembles is well established, but this adaptation does not feel like it affords his work the runtime it deserves.

VERDICT: A BEAUTIFUL MISFIRE

Fate/strange Fake is a paradox: bursting with style, yet struggling for substance. Its animation is top-tier, its premise intriguing, and its cast brimming with potential. Yet, the final product feels hollow – a collection of stunning fights in search of a story. If you are here for the spectacle, you will definitely be satisfied. But if you come to *Fate* for rich character work, you may leave wishing for a more complete adaptation.

For my part, I will stay tuned for the second season. Until then, *Fate/strange Fake* remains exactly what its name suggests: a curious, beautiful, but ultimately 'strange' imitation.

