

HOSHIGAMI

RUINING BLUE EARTH

沈みゆく蒼き大地

Playstation

Developer: Max Five

Publisher: Atlus



Final Fantasy Tactics: The Legend

As anybody that has ever actually played Final Fantasy Tactics will tell you, it was a combination of elements that lifted that game from mere strategy RPG to one of the top RPGs on the PlayStation—period. The complex mix of political and religious intrigue; the stunning, unbelievable score that has yet to be equaled; and an amazing, 60 fps engine that kept everything moving at a stunning pace. Clearly this game was crafted by Square to be the next big thing. Too bad it wasn't...

Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20: what was passed over and filed away yesterday becomes the legend of today.

Without question, Final Fantasy Tactics has reached that legendary status, thanks in no small part to a rabid fan base that evangelized the game to anyone who would listen long after it had been laid to rest. During its first retail life, it didn't even sell well enough to make it as a 'Greatest Hits' title (though I'm sure no one is really mourning

the lack of the infernal green bar marring its lovely facade).

Which makes it all the more odd that it's taken this long for somebody to attempt to claim the thunder that FFT failed to capture in its first run for the gold. After all, if publishers had kept their ears to the ground, there would have, long ago, been a follow-up to this amazing series, if not by Square, by someone that understood that there was something truly



magical buried in FFT's husk that sales number did not fully bear out.

Something magical that was just waiting for a second chance...

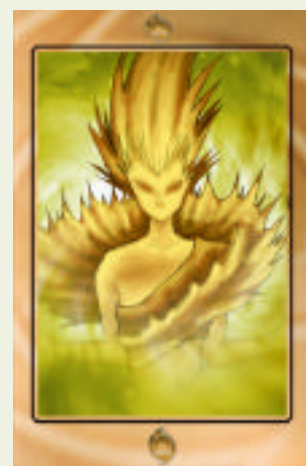
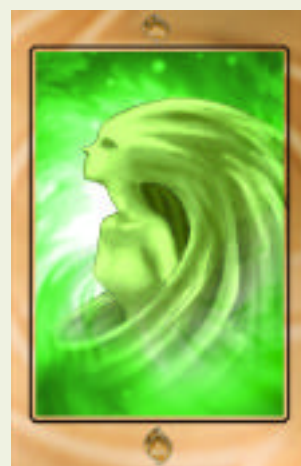
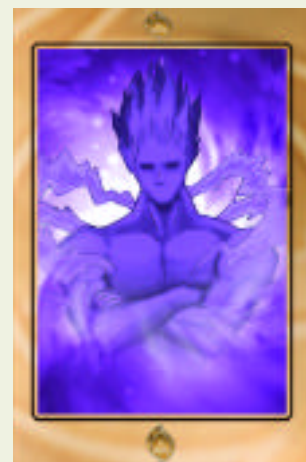
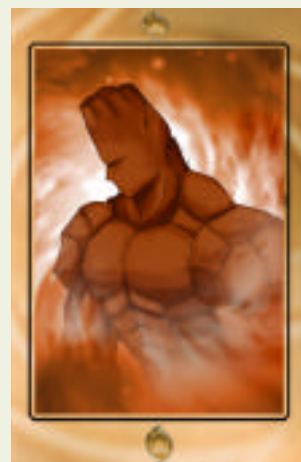
A Moment of Hesitation...

Now, as thousands of people scramble like mad dogs to snap up the recent re-print of Final Fantasy Tactics (those blank discs were a nice touch, Sony), it's nice to know that gamers are getting two games in the very same vein in the very near future...so near, in fact, that you can go get one of them right now: Saiyuki Journey West by Koei. Nice game, solid strategy elements and first generation PlayStation graphics—hey, it can't all be sunshine and lollipops...or can it?

As it turns out, that's merely an appetizer for what another relatively low-key publisher has been tinkering away at for (seemingly) ages. Set for a November release Atlus is nearly ready to bring forth the true heir to Final Fantasy Tactics' strategy RPG throne.

The Story Thus Far...

As was the case with FFT (which was built on ideas pioneered in the Ogre Battle series), Hoshigami's entire story hinges on political



intrigue, sans the usual overtly religious slant that led to a lot of head scratching in Final Fantasy Tactics (if you can explain the entire story of that game to me in less than a thousand words, you're a better man than I).

The story opens with the Valaiman Empire invading the peace-loving people of Nightweld, where our hero's Fazz and Leimrey are well-known mercenaries working for the rather sissified Nightweldian army (a bit too peace-loving for their own good as it turns out). As is the case with any self-respecting mercenary the pair are offered a substantial sum of cash and a fledgling mercenaries to help liberate the ancient Tower of the Wind which is currently besieged by Valaimian forces. Naturally after liberating the tower, you head back home to find the town looted and burned and Fazz' love interest, Tinn nowhere to be found.

As you may have guessed, this leads Fazz, Leimrey and company down a path into the dark and seedy political and militaristic underbelly of the Valaimian Empire and their quest to liberate Nightweld from its iron grasp.

You can probably also figure out precisely where this game is going from start to finish, but what it seems to lack in initial story complexity, things aren't entirely what they seem.

As the plot (quickly) thickens you'll encounter such stoic allies as Alveen, Romleth, and Elena (some of which fit the nice warm and fuzzy clichés that we all know and love) as well as the usual cast of vicious enemies with their own agendas in the form of Blackthorn (the big fellow on the cover dueling with Fazz), and Fernandes, the ambitious power-hungry leader of the Valaimian Empire.

Good Things Come to Those With the Patience of a Saint

Originally, Hoshigami was due out some time ago but it's been delayed a few times...for what will become very obvious (and understandable) reasons. This game is very complex, and its legion of systems (of which we'll barely scratch the surface) make it very clear that this game is more than just a Tactics clone.

Systematic

It seems that every RPG developed these days can't really be considered an RPG without featuring fifteen or sixteen hundred different 'systems.' Hoshigami is no different and features a grip, many inspired by FF Tactics with a clutch of new ones thrown into the mix. These systems are the key to Hoshigami's almost excessive complexity—there is so much you can do in each battle, it's almost unnerving. If you're a control freak, though, you'll bask in some incredibly strategic combat and an unprecedented, almost overwhelming, amount of control:

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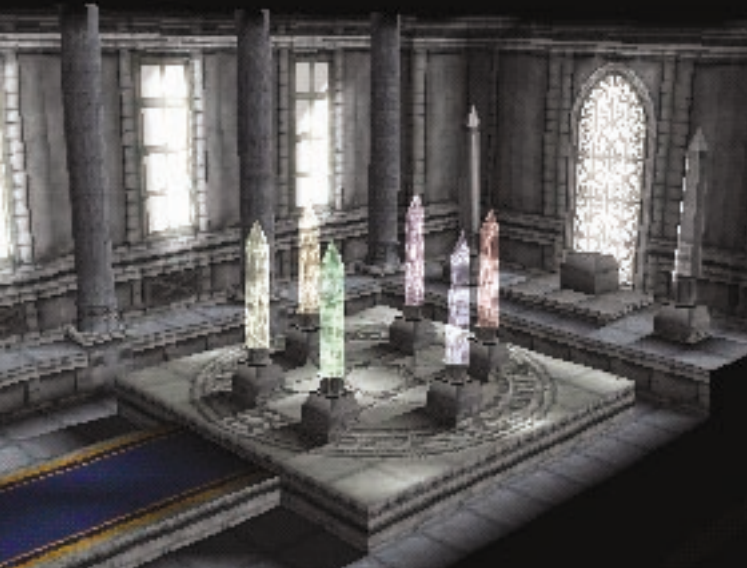
Devotion System

Characters in Hoshigami are aligned with different elemental spirits (gods, if you will) that grant skills as you acquire devotion points during each successful round of combat. Once you 'level up' with enough devotion points, you can select a new skill, with each god granting different skills. As you can switch alignments between sprints, you can acquire a legion of skills across a variety of different elements, and essentially apes the job system of FF Tactics. It's also important to note that the deity you align yourself with will help you in combat against certain opposing deities, so it pays to make sure you're with the right god when you waded into battle—polytheists rejoice.

Attack Session

The Hoshigami web site labels the Attack Session as "the biggest feature of Hoshigami" (silly me, I thought it was the story and overall strategic gameplay). What this allows you to do is "shoot" the enemy into your other characters. By slamming an enemy into another party member who has been placed in "standby" mode, you can essentially bat characters around the screen, delivering blow after armor-shattering blow. For example, Fazz launches an enemy knight into Leimley who delivers a vicious blow which sends that enemy careening into one of your myriad mercenaries also in "standby" mode, who then delivers his own crushing blow—each 'combo' hit causing that much more damage.. According to Atlus, you can keep this going for up to 6 hits, and completely obliterate just about any foe you come across—bet you never thought 10th grade geometry would have any applicability in your day to day life, eh? Sorta makes me wish I hadn't slept through, well, all my classes.





And these four systems are only a few of the elements that make Hoshigami tick—Max Five went ahead and threw in everything, the kitchen sink and your neighbor's kitchen sink. While this may prove initially daunting, the sheer amount of ways you can level the enemy forces will certainly make for some interesting battles and some pretty intense replay value.

Tactics 101

Basic gameplay in Hoshigami is also a bit more than run-of-the-mill. In addition to all the above noted systems, the actual maps aren't set up like they are in most strat RPGs. While most strategy RPGs force you to trek across the map, round after round, before you actually encounter any combat (FFT did this far too often and was probably its biggest flaw), this is definitely not the case in Hoshigami.

Even if the bulk of an enemy contingent is across the screen there are always a few enemies in the immediate vicinity to kick

Coinfeign System

This is the key to Hoshigami's magic system. All spells are cast via coinfeigns (CF) you can buy at the town stores. Each and every character can wield magic to some degree, though certain characters, statistically, are more proficient than others. Each type of coin



conveys a certain form of magic based upon the elemental spirit it's aligned with. You can level up coins by engraving seals on them—to dramatic effect. Through careful planning and decoding of the engraving process (looks like 10th grade geometry isn't the only "I'll never use this in real life" math skill you'll kick yourself over sleeping through) you can go from a coin that can barely summon a torch-like fire ball, to a thermonuclear blast that'll incinerate all but the sturdiest enemies and casting a CF that's of the same class as your chosen elemental spirit will cause that much more damage.

R.A.P System

While Atlus seems to think the Attack Session is the most important (and innovative) aspect to Hoshigami, I'm firmly in R.A.P.'s camp: Ready-for-Action Point. What this amazing little system allows you to do is draw from a pool of points which can be used towards attacking, healing, movement, spell-casting, etc. Each character has a set number of points to draw from, and once you run out of points, your turn ends. You can use these points in any fashion and in any order, i.e. you can move, attack and then wait and let someone else in your party go, then move and attack some more—all up until your party's turn ends or you run out of R.A.P.s. You can even attack (depending on the amount of R.A.P. your character has) attack up to four times in a row. This takes combat to a whole other level, as not only can you control your party down to the last second, but the enemy also operates with the same behavior. So if you run out of R.A.P.s near an enemy, make sure you use your last bit of juice to "shoot" him away (preferably over a cliff) as when his turn comes up, he'll use all his points to hack you into the Grim Reaper's waiting arms.

around while the rest of your party works its way into the larger fray. This keeps it from bogging down in turn after turn of complete inaction.

This also helps to boost actual strategy considerably: after all, if you decide not to engage the forward (or rear guard), they can prove to be deadly late in a battle, after your troops are depleted and prove to be easy prey for the small gaggle of goons you left to one side at the onset of the conflict. It also doesn't hurt that it's generally a lot more fun cracking skulls than skulking around the map.



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Weapon effects are also somewhat different from many RPGs. For instance, you can (and probably will) actually attack your friends. Leimley, for example, wields a very large spear that can hit two squares at once. If one of your allies happens to be between you and an enemy, he's going to catch a swift beating as well. Same goes for archers—if you don't have the right angle to launch an attack, you could just as well catch one of your friends in the eye with an errant bolt. This adds another layer of strategy and was enough to make me utter a string of profanity

Meet Me Halfway

Speaking of the maps, they tend to be quite a bit larger than comparable maps in most other games of this ilk. Not only that, they also tend to be more complex as well, which certainly makes up for Shining Force 3's large but simple maps, and FFT's small but complex maps.

Artwork, in general, is quite good. The actual characters themselves, aesthetically, aren't as

well-drawn as those found in its inspiration but the addition of the large character portraits to illustrate key story points makes up for any real shortcoming in the actual style of the characters (they're more cartoony and less 'real' looking than their Tactics counterparts).

Animation is solid across the board, and spell effects are, in parts, awe-inspiring. Naturally, you'll be working for a while before you see gargantuan gouts of flame or Titanic-sinking ice attacks, but when you do it's a nice feast for the ol' ocular nerves. Some of the effects on the Attack Session are very pretty as well, with some nice explosions and solid transparency effects—especially when you pinball an enemy into oblivion.

What's the Score?

One area where Hoshigami doesn't even come close to matching up to Tactics, however, is the musical score. This isn't terribly surprising as FFT has probably the single best implementation of PCM in the history of





video games, beating out even the mighty Astal on Sega Saturn. The music in Tactics is so well-crafted that it annihilates most redbook audio scores. While the music in Hoshigami is good, it's simply not in the celestial league that Tactics resides in. Which is too bad as the tunes in Tactics enhanced the mood to almost heart-rending levels.

Epilogue

Hoshigami has all the makings of the next coming of Final Fantasy Tactics...and then some. There's a bunch of work yet to be done on the actual translation (these are the guys that did the amazingly well-translated Ogre Battle 64, so no worries there), but all the gameplay seems to be intact in the current build Atlus blessed us with. Hopefully the world realizes this time that they should go out and get this when it's new so we can actually get some more titles in this downtrodden genre (and the best RPG genre by a mile as far as I'm concerned).

Look for the full review in the next issue of GameGO! It's a safe bet that you can expect some nice things to be said—let's hope that foresight is 20/20 for a change, eh?

—ECM



FINAL FANTASY X

ファイナルファンタジーX

PLAYSTATION 2

Developer: Square

Publisher: Square



Okay. I'm not a "Square" guy. My video game life doesn't hinge on what their latest release is; how much financing it took to bring their latest products to the shelves; or whether Squall or not Squall is a cry baby. Sure, I liked Tactics. I even liked Vagrant Story, Chrono Cross and Final Fantasy VII and IX...somewhat. Didn't care much for VIII, but that's a big messy gray area that I'm not going to get into right now. Despite all this (especially after viewing the visual masterpiece without a story that was the film), I'm probably not the best guy to review this game, but since ECM wasn't touching it with a ten-foot pole and Kodomo was MIA, the duty fell to me. Now that all the Square fans in the audience are attempting to asphyxiate themselves with their limited edition FFX bandanas, wait just one sec....besides, there'll be plenty of time for that when you wake up from that dream wherein FFXVIII is the "best FF."

Final Fantasy X was designed by some of the best artists in the business. As Rick Baker is to apes, Square is to CG – except "X" even outdoes what you've come to expect from Square. Never has a more beautiful game been produced. Never. Final Fantasy X is among the most celebrated and successful series in video game history. Despite some hiccups along the way, it can be argued on many fronts that

this series has also been the most carefully cared for over its lifespan and the latest incarnation is no exception. The years that it has spent in development are clearly evident in everything from the eye-shattering visuals to the fact that nearly every important conversation is conveyed via voice--not text. Clearly, a lot of love (and not a little money) went into what could be a PS2 magnum opus.

After the requisite, utterly gorgeous CG and real time intro sequence (that seems to just keep going), you find your character (Tidus) thrown into dreamlike environments only to wake up in a world where you feel as though you are the only decent thing in it. Initially the game play feels linear in most respects and doesn't allow for much exploration. Typically, though, Square masks this with deft precision and one will find that it's fairly easy to ignore the limitations of what you're allowed to do, i.e. you can't stray far from the pre-determined path.

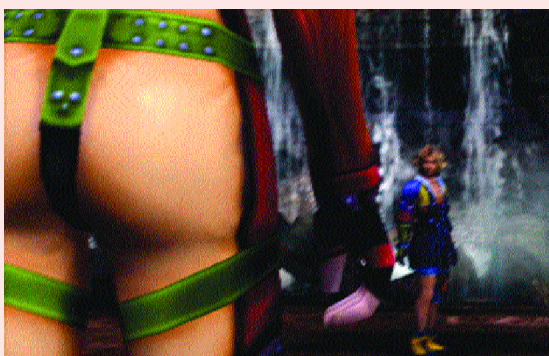
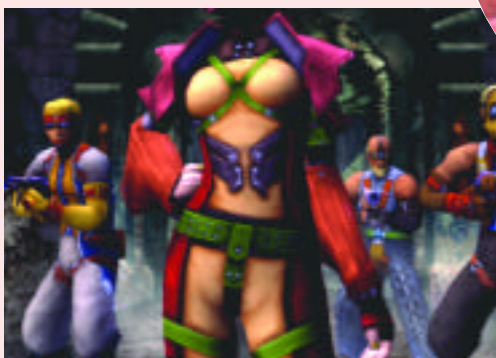
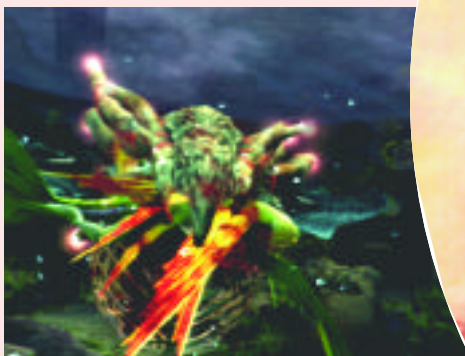
Gone are the maddening random battles every 15 seconds while traipsing across



the 'world' map with an oversized character traversing a tiny representation of what's supposed to be a large environment, this being about the only part of most latter day FF games that ECM enjoys. The battles are a mixture between staged events that are triggered by the character or random battles on an environment map (water, desert, etc...). If I had my druthers, random battles would be left in the dustbin of RPG history, and if Final Fantasy X has a weak link, this is it. Randomness just feels lazy, and it's something that video games should move past—I had high hopes that FFX would finally move beyond this unwieldy throwback, to no avail. That being said, though, somehow FFX doesn't "feel" all that random, despite being aware of the fact that it is. Doesn't make much sense? I guess it's an experience best left to...experience.

Many will herald Square's latest innovations to their combat system as something truly different. Improved and more interactive would be a better description. Without going into great detail, character abilities can be shared and improved on together. Rather than resorting to the age old experience point/level/hit point/magic point system, this installation requires the use of a Sphere Board where character traits are displayed and linked through the use of points that develop as you get stronger.

Some will complain that



the camera can't be manipulated during game play, all of which is in impressive real time that looks as good as most prerendered stuff, but Square is in control here. You don't control the viewpoints and for the most part, it isn't even noticeable and it rarely affects game play. In this light, Square has "cinema sense": it feels as though you are being led down a particular viewpoint with a sense of purpose. Also of note is that the CGI sequences aren't overbearing in any sense of the word and feel like an integral part of the function of the game, rather than being the most important element (see The Bouncer for the polar opposite).

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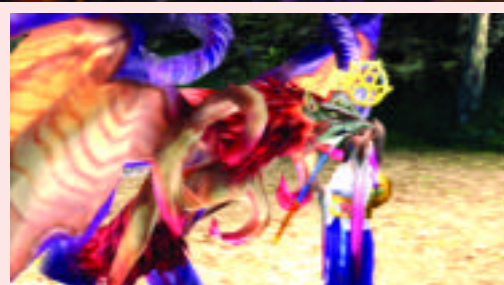


Speaking of flaws that this title doesn't share with other notable Square works (in this case, the film), Final Fantasy X's soundtrack has once again reaffirmed Square's position among the elite in this category. Lush orchestrations dance in the background that always seems appropriate for the situation. One is left, again, feeling satisfied: once again, it matters.

Perhaps the only other nit-pick that I have with the title is the staple Final Fantasy "save point". Here we are again with an age-old RPG standby that is best done away with. There are those that will say that if you can save wherever you want, you'll beat the game too easily. The solution: Ring of Red. You are permitted to save progress between save points as long as you don't die. Once you do, you're back to the initial save point. The idea here is that if you get pulled away from the game, you don't suffer for it.

In any event, the saddest thing about this is that FFX won't be released in the U.S. until early 2002 and despite being very playable in Japanese, the full effect of the story won't be realized until some time next year. Final Fantasy X is the coming out party for RPG's on the Playstation 2, and it's something that no fan of the series, or console, should miss...even ECM.

--Haohmaru



Tidus



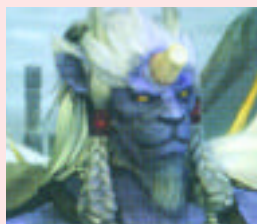
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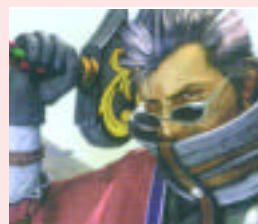
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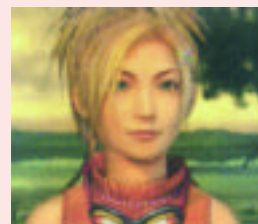
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