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TALES OF SYMPHONIA

GameCube

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The best video game of the summer for the Nintendo GameCube has just been released, and guess what -- it doesn't star Mario, Donkey Kong or Pokemon.

Though you probably haven't heard of it, Namco's Tales of Symphonia (\$59.99; rated Teen) is a wonderfully crafted fantasy adventure, especially for fans of such role-playing games (RPGs) as Final Fantasy or action-puzzle hybrids like Zelda.

Now available in North America, this Japanese title begins in the land of Sylvarant, whose mana depletion -- the spiritual energy source that sustains human, animal and plant life -- is allowing for menacing creatures to seep through dimensional rifts. In order to replenish the mana supply and restore peace to the land, a "Chosen" is born every generation to venture out and perform several daunting tasks.

You play as the teenaged Lloyd Irving, who decides to accompany the saviour, a young girl named Colette Brunel, along with others who specialize in melee combat or magic spell-casting. Together they form a well-rounded "party," as it's referred to in RPG-speak.

Tales of Symphonia involves plenty of real-time -- not turn-based -- combat against a wide array of monsters, so all party members can strike enemies at once, and vice-versa. Players control Lloyd, while the game's artificial intelligence handles the other party members. Have friends over? Up to three other GameCube players can plug in a controller and take control over a party member.

Tales of Symphonia also involves some puzzle-solving, such as pushing around crates to form a bridge or figuring out how to shrink the party down in size to squeeze through small spaces.

"Cel-shaded" graphics make this game resemble an anime cartoon. While some may feel the visuals are too child-like, it works for this kind of fantasy storyline.

The only major hitch with this game is the shortage of save points. Therefore, if the party members die during battle players must start from the last save point, which could take a long time to play all over again.

Still, because of its deep battle system, stylish graphics and enormous game world, Tales of Symphonia is a highly recommended GameCube exclusive.

Rating Three 1/2 (out of 4)

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