

Game Analysis:

Trails in the sky FC

Fustinoni Hugo

Summary :

I. Technical Specifications.....	
II. Analysis of Gameplay Mechanics and System.....	
A. Combat System.....	
B. Orbment.....	
C. Cooking System.....	
D. Bestiary.....	
E. Exploration and Level Design.....	
F. Quests.....	
III. Progression & Balancing.....	
IV. Gameplay Loops.....	
V. Narration.....	
A. Narration summary without spoilers.....	
B. Integration into gameplay.....	
VI. Art Direction.....	
VII. Audio.....	
VIII. Conclusion.....	

I. Technical Specifications

- **Title:** The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky (FC) / Sora no Kiseki
 - **Studio & Publisher:** Nihon Falcom / XSEED
 - **Release Date:** June 24, 2004
 - **Genre:** Turn-based RPG / Tactical-Lite
 - **Pitch:** *Sora no Kiseki* is a JRPG that emphasizes narrative and world-building through an isometric view in a 3D world. Its combat system adopts elements of the tactical genre in a simplified manner, relying primarily on positioning and the "Orbment" system for light customization.
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II. Analysis of Gameplay Mechanics & Systems

A. Combat System

Description: The combat utilizes a turn-based system centered on an action-order grid (AT Bar). Players control a party of four characters, each taking turns individually. The turn order is visible on the bar on the left side of the screen. Allies are represented by portraits with blue borders.

Character Gauges: Each character possesses three bars: **HP**, **EP**, and **CP**.

- **EP (Energy Points):** These are equivalent to mana and are used to cast **Arts** (magic). The gauge starts at maximum capacity and increases with levels. EP can be restored using items, food, or by visiting checkpoints and inns.
- **CP (Craft Points):** These are gained by attacking or being attacked. Once the gauge reaches **100**, the character can unleash a devastating **S-Break**—a powerful attack that empties the bar but allows the unit to "interrupt" the turn order and act immediately. A more powerful version is available at **200 CP**. CP is retained between battles. The CP mechanic ensures that the player has a "comeback" in case of a difficult fight, if the gauge is filled enough.
- **Visual Status:** Character portraits next to their statistics change facial expressions at specific HP thresholds.

Statistics & Elements:

PARAMETERS		
TERM	MEANING	DESCRIPTION
HP	HIT POINTS	CHARACTER IS K.O.ED IF THESE REACH 0.
EP	ENERGY POINTS	ENERGY STORED WITHIN THE ORBMENT. THESE ARE REQUIRED TO USE ARTS.
CP	CRAFT POINTS	POINTS REQUIRED TO USE CRAFTS. THESE ARE GAINED BY DEALING OUT OR RECEIVING DAMAGE DURING BATTLE.

TERM	MEANING	DESCRIPTION
STR	STRENGTH	A HIGHER VALUE = MORE PHYSICAL DAMAGE DEALT
DEF	DEFENSE	A HIGHER VALUE = LESS PHYSICAL DAMAGE RECEIVED
ATS	MAGIC STRENGTH	A HIGHER VALUE = MORE ARTS DAMAGE DEALT
ADF	MAGIC DEFENSE	A HIGHER VALUE = LESS ARTS DAMAGE RECEIVED
SPD	TURN SPEED	A HIGHER VALUE = LESS TIME BETWEEN TURNS
DEX	DEXTERITY	A HIGHER VALUE = EASIER TO LAND HITS
AGL	AGILITY	A HIGHER VALUE = EASIER TO AVOID ATTACKS
MOV	MOVEMENT	INDICATES THE RANGE OF MOVEMENT FOR 1 TURN
RNG	ATTACK RANGE	INDICATES A WEAPON'S FIRING RANGE

Characters are defined by various statistics (STR, DEF, ATS, ADF, etc.). I think that damage is generally calculated by subtracting the defender's stats from the attacker's, depending on the attack type.

The system also features **Elemental Efficiency**. The higher the efficiency value, the more damage the unit receives from that specific element. During combat, blue tiles represent movement range, while the target enemy is highlighted in red to indicate the area of effect.



Actions:

- **Attack:** Strike a target within the movement range (**MOV**).
- **Move:** Relocate to a specific tile. While moving takes a full turn, selecting "Attack" automatically moves the character toward the enemy.
Critique: There are very few situations where using a "Move" command is more beneficial than simply attacking. Consequently, players rarely have to choose between repositioning to dodge or tanking a hit to counter-attack.
- **Art:** Magic spells. The casting delay acts as a power balancer. To prevent magic from becoming too dominant, designers imposed a "casting time" cost. Each spell takes a turn to charge, exposing the player to status ailments and enemy attacks. This forces strategic planning based on the turn order.
- **Craft:** Special character-specific skills used in exchange for CP.
- **Item:** Use an object on oneself or an ally within MOV range.
- **Run:** Guarantees escape from non-scripted battles.



Turn Effects: Some turns on the AT Bar grant bonuses (HP Heal, Critical, etc.) to whichever entity acts on that turn. This adds a layer of RNG, though players can "steal" these bonuses

Icon	Activation Banner	Effect
		Unit recovers 10%/50% of their max HP.
		Unit recovers 10%/50% of their max EP.
		Unit recovers 10/50 CP.
		Unit's STR or ATS increased by 10%/50% when calculating damage.
		Damage or HP/EP restoration done by unit increased by 50%.
		Unit makes targets drop sepith for each hit their animation does. Sepith dropped depends on the sepith the target would drop (all types for player characters).

by using an **S-Break** to jump the queue.

There is also a **status effect system** that applies buffs and debuffs to active entities. In fact, there are two distinct types of status effect

	Poison [note 1] 毒	Take damage after every turn.	Wears off.
	Blind 暗闇	Attacks and crafts have a 50% chance to miss.	Wears off.
	Seal 封技	Cannot use normal attacks, crafts, or S-Crafts.	Wears off.
	Mute 封魔	Cannot use orbal arts.	Wears off.
	Sleep 睡眠	Cannot act. Wake up if attacked.	Wears off.
	Faint 気絶	Cannot act.	Wears off.
	Freeze 凍結	Cannot act. Take damage after every turn.	Wears off.
	Petrify 石化	Cannot act. Instant K.O. if attacked.	Permanent until removed.
	Confuse 混乱	Prevents control, attacks enemy and ally alike.	Wears off.
	Rage 怒り	Forces attacks on provoker.	Wears off.
	AT Delay ^[note 2] 遅延	Delays turn.	One-time effect.

cts:

Raised		Lowered	
	STR Up ^[note 1]		STR Down ^[note 1]
	DEF Up ^[note 2]		DEF Down ^[note 2]
	SPD Up		SPD Down
	ATS Up ^[note 3]		ATS Down ^[note 3]
	ADF Up ^[note 3]		ADF Down ^[note 3]
	DEX Up ^[note 4]		DEX Down ^[note 4]
	AGL Up		AGL Down ^[note 5]
	MOV Up		MOV Down ^[note 5]

- Only one instance of a specific status effect can be active on a unit at a time. Reapplying the same effect does not increase its potency (for stat modifiers) or stack its duration; instead, it replaces the potency and duration of the previous effect.

Turn effects are tied to the turn order. On certain turns, an icon for one of these effects appears and activates the corresponding effect during the entity's turn. It is a nice mechanic but tied to RNG; the player doesn't really have control over which turn the effect activates, even if certain techniques allow for stealing an opponent's turn and thus taking the bonus. I would have liked the game to offer an additional strategic layer to better exploit this mechanic, such as in *Radiant Historia: Perfect Chronology*, where units can “give” their turn to another unit.

Another critique I would like to make regarding the combat system is that, while the battles are quite pleasant and simple, I find that the game's strategic grid ultimately has little value. There isn't really a notion of movement on the grid except to attack the opponent. Too few enemies force the player to move to dodge certain attacks. There are also no spells allowing for moving, pulling/pushing an enemy, nor even tiles/terrain with specific properties to vary each battle—features found in *Dofus*, *Radiant Historia*(down below), *Fire Emblem*, or many others.

This is why, for me, it is **"tactical-lite"** in the sense that the notion of strategy is barely present throughout the game. Combat ends when either our team or all members of the opposing team are K.O. Here again, varying the victory/defeat conditions, even in a narrative JRPG, could have brought some freshness for the player. (There are a few battles where NPCs accompany us, and we must protect them while taking down the opponent without controlling them; I would have appreciated having more battles like that).



B. Orbment:

The Orbment system is the game's original feature. Orbments are gauntlets that contain quartz, allowing the use of elemental magic. The purpose of this system is to allow the player to customize the statistics and special abilities of each of their characters. There are several types of quartz:

- Earth
- Water
- Fire
- Wind
- Time
- Space

- Mirage

Each of these families contains different versions of quartz within it, possessing various properties (for example, water quartz will provide more healing-related spells, while fire quartz is linked to physical attack). Below, we can also see that there is an elemental value per quartz. Indeed, this elemental value represents how many points the character has in a branch, keeping in mind that some quartz can provide points in several branches at once. To create them, you need quartz shards and sepith (the game's currency) which are dropped by enemies.

	Name	Effect	Elemental Value	Synthesis Cost	Location
	Defense 1 防御 1	DEF+5%	 x1	 x20	Orbal Factories
	Defense 2 防御 2	DEF+10%	 x3	 x200	Orbal Factories: Chapter 3 onwards
	Defense 3 防御 3	DEF+15%	 x5	 x800	Orbal Factories: Finale onwards Chest in Erbe Scenic Route
	Poison 毒の刃	Poison enemy with 10% success.	 x3	 x50	Orbal Factories: Chapter 2 onwards Bandit, Sky Bandit drop
	Mute 封魔の刃	Mute enemy with 10% success.	 x3	 x50	Orbal Factories: Chapter 2 onwards Blue Penguin drop
	Petrify 石化の刃	Petrify enemy with 10% success.	 x3	<i>Not synthesizable</i>	Junior Bracer 6th Class reward

Each quartz gives access to different Arts depending on its type but also its positioning within the character's orbment. Much like Final Fantasy 7, released seven years earlier, and its Materia system, gems can be inserted into predefined slots (some require a specific type of gem). You can see in the screenshot below that the orbment on the right is split into two—one orange part/segment and the other blue. The sum of the elemental values of the quartz in each distinct segment defines which Arts the character will have access to. Each orbment configuration varies by character; some have predefined elemental slots, while others are more customizable. The way the quartz slots have been arranged naturally limits certain characters in their magical capacity. For example, the screenshot above shows Estelle's configuration. She has no predefined elements, which allows her to be a very

versatile "mage."



Conversely, a character like Agate Crosner has a very low capacity, giving him access to only 34 out of 43 possible spells, and some are forbidden to him. However, this flaw is "compensated" because he is oriented toward Fire Quartz, thus damage, and deals enormous physical damage.

Agate Crosner

Agate is biased towards Fire Arts.

FC

SC

TC

In the First Chapter, Agate has 2x Fire and 4x Neutral Orblent slots, with 3x configurable lines. He features a maximum line configuration of 1x Fire and 2x Neutral Orblent slots, limiting his capability as an Arts user.

Agate has the lowest capability with access to 34 of the 43 Arts. He is not able to use Titanic Roar, Crest, La Curia, Volcanic Rave, Forte, Plasma Wave, White Gehenna, Anti-Sept All or Saint.

Finally, a character like Joshua Bright is more of an assassin "archetype." He has a predefined slot for Time (oriented toward critical hits) and 4 neutral slots (any magic),

knowing that Time arts generally bring accuracy and critical damage bonuses.

Joshua Astray 

Joshua is biased towards [Time Arts](#).

[FC](#) [SC](#) [TC](#)

In the [First Chapter](#), Joshua has 2x **Time** and 4x **Neutral** Orbment slots, with 2x configurable lines. He features a maximum line configuration of 2x *Time* and 3x *Neutral* Orbment slots, allowing him high proficiency as an [Arts](#) user.

Joshua has high capability with access to 41 of the 43 [Arts](#). He is not able to use Volcanic Rave or Saint.



This system does not allow for "build creation" as understood in games like *Diablo*, *Disgaea*, or others, but it adds a touch of freedom and personalization for the player to experiment with multiple spell combinations. This design, through constraint, allows for the subtle reinforcement of character archetypes, which are also linked to the individual's story (Joshua has an assassin past, Agate: a gruff character with a military past), while leaving enough space for the player to experiment with different combinations of spells and characters.

C. Cooking System:

The cooking system in Trails is peculiar because dishes serve as healing items that are often much more effective than spells. To learn them, you must eat the dishes in restaurants. This allows you to learn the recipe; then you need the ingredients (lootable from monsters or buyable in shops) to be able to make the dishes. Certain dishes grant attack buffs or others in addition to healing. Some can be found in chests. Besides, the game makes fun of the player quite a bit if they try to open an empty chest; there are quite a few jokes like that in the game.

D. Bestiary:

The bestiary is quite varied; we fight monsters and animals as much as robots and soldiers. Each region has a set of related monsters. For example, in the technological zone of Zeiss, you find monsters that are more "robotic" than in the rest of the adventure.

There are also bosses, some found simply by exploring and generally linked to a side quest, and others that are mandatory and come from the main plot. Humans are, for me, the most complex enemies to face. They arrive toward the end of the game and are capable of acting several times in a row as well as using magic and supers themselves.

Every enemy, like the player, has elemental resistances and status resistances.

Solid Dozer

Solid Dozer

ソリッドドーザー



Lv.22

HP:1380

STR:175

DEF:60

ATS:0

ADF:45

SPD:15

EXP:22

A monster trained to attack. Has high DEF and AGL. Uses an attack that slows foes.

Skills

AT Booster

Single [AT Delay 5, Can't miss]

Elemental Efficacy

100

100

100

100

Blocked Status

Sepith Dropped

x9

x2

x2

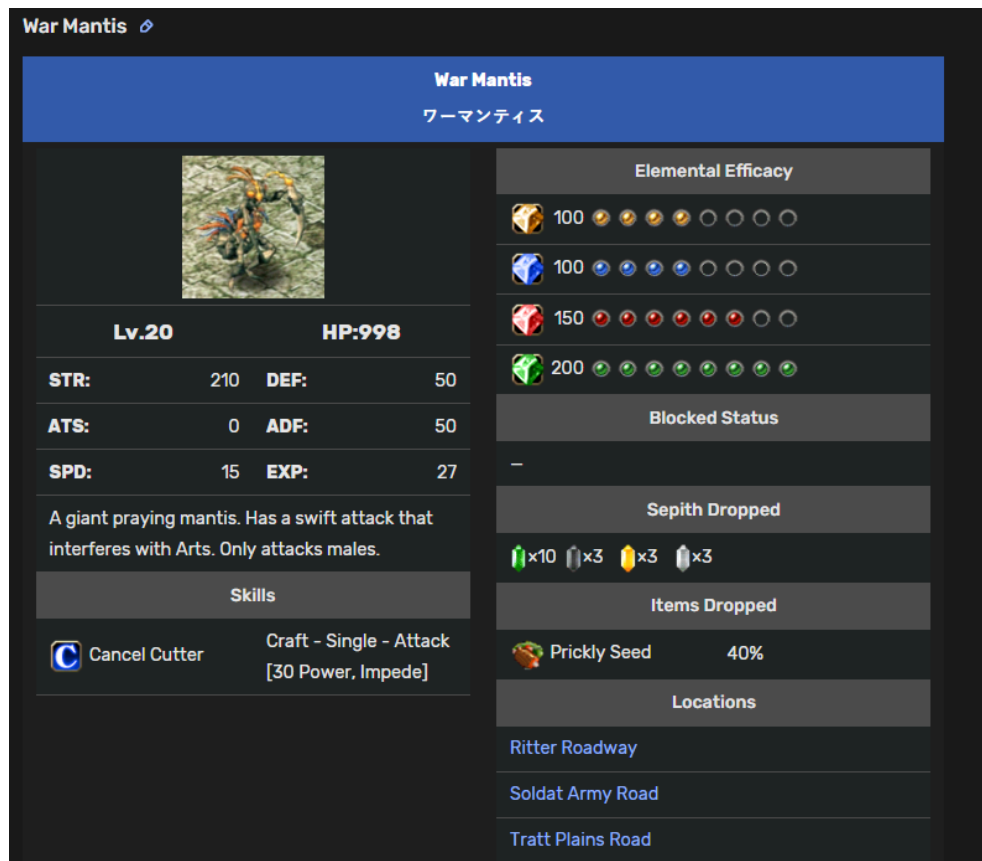
x2

Locations

Leiston Fortress

Ritter Roadway (Only during Ritter Road Monster 2)

Spike Jellyfish

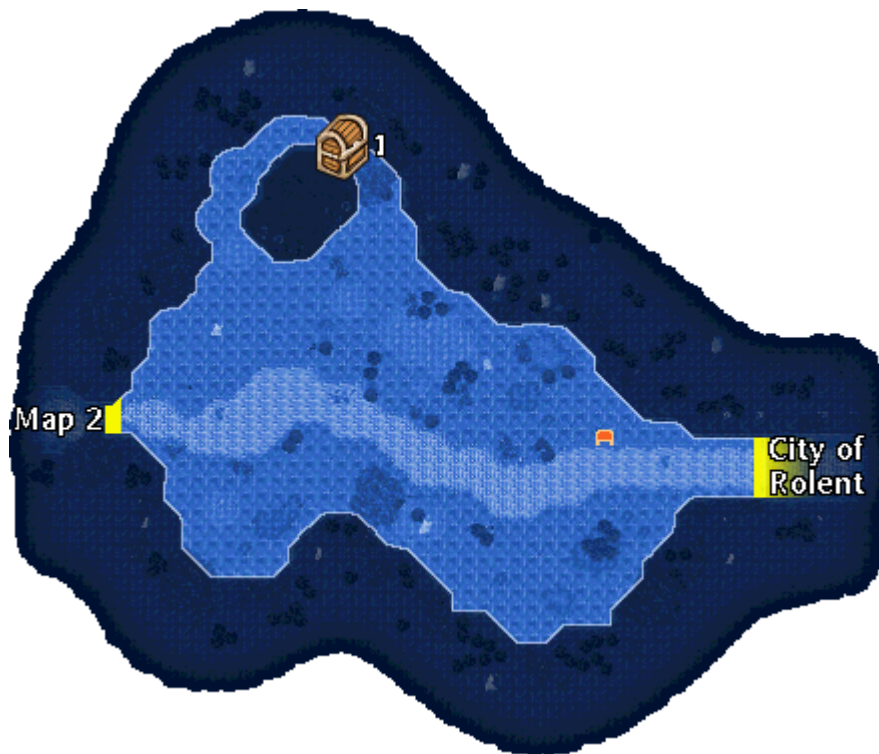


In each region, there is a position where an extremely rare enemy can appear and give a huge amount of XP but is generally complicated to beat because it leaves the combat during the very first turns, much like the Metal Slimes from Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker. XP is capped at a certain stage in each region. It is therefore necessary to adapt your strategy to the enemies; some take fire, others wind damage. Their behavior is generally quite classic: some buff and debuff, while others simply attack. This system creates a fairly simple risk/reward pattern: the player takes the risk of facing a frail enemy with extraordinary evasion and escape capabilities for a large mass of experience; however, they also risk simply losing resources (CP/EP) if the target escapes. You generally have to launch **S-BREAKS**, which are guaranteed to hit, to kill them and thus spend major resources for a nice reward.

E. Exploration & Level Design:

Exploration in this game is very limited and generally forced by side quests. There are almost no optional dungeons aside from one or two towers. Otherwise, for everything regarding caves, caverns, or others, the main plot necessarily takes us there. Here is what a "local" map of the game looks like (below). The shape is very basic, but above all, the only goal of exploration is to find a chest giving equipment and/or healing outside the main path (light blue zone) and face a powerful/rare enemy. I find it a real shame. To avoid confrontations, you just have to stay right on the main road. There are no particular events or NPCs to find who give us a quest. However, in a way, the game rewards the player's

curiosity beyond simple hidden chests. Indeed, every non-playable character has a proper name and dialogues that are unique to them and change with the events of the game. You can buy newspaper pages relating events linked to the burgeoning conflict between Liberl and Erebonia. This adds a more than welcome touch of optional narration.





Below is the world map with each region that Estelle and Joshua will have to cross on foot. To continue on exploration, given the linear structure of the game, it is not possible to return to a previous region once a new region is unlocked.



F. Quests:

Quests are passed to us via a request board at the Bracer Guild. There is a main quest and secondary ones. These are linked to the main plot, which can cause certain problems because, if you have advanced too far in the story, then the secondary quests—even if activated at the Bracer Guild—are considered failed because they weren't done in time. Moreover, there are very/too few fascinating quests (finding a pirate's treasure, discovering who is the burglar of the mayor's manor in the port city); they often require finding a mini-boss scattered in a certain zone, which brings many rewards (weapons, sephith, exp, etc.). There is no interaction with the environment, aside from enemies, chests, and NPCs (almost exclusive to towns/villages). Finally, one last point to address: finishing quests optimally (without raising an alert during the infiltration of the castle, for example) allows for obtaining more Bracer points. Bracer points allow you to receive rewards like certain quartz or equipment. There are several Bracer point tiers, and each represents a "rank," witnessing both the narrative and gameplay progress of the player. Estelle and Joshua's goal is to receive as many points as possible to finally be considered not as Junior Bracers, but as professionals.

III. Progression & Balancing:

Progression is, like the rest of the game, linear and sequenced. As mentioned earlier, the experience level is tied to the chapter the player is in; they can only reach a certain level. Moreover, quartz is also blocked behind the main plot, as is the number of possible quartz slots. They must be unlocked using Sepith, which is generated by killing monsters. At the start of the adventure, you must therefore make a choice between opening a gem slot or buying more powerful quartz.

Water 					
	Name	Effect	Elemental Value	Synthesis Cost	Location
	HP 1 H P 1	Max HP+5%	 x1	 x20	Orbal Factories
	HP 2 H P 2	Max HP+10%	 x3	 x200	Orbal Factories: Chapter 2 onwards Giantfoot, Wisdom drop
	HP 3 H P 3	Max HP+15%	 x5	 x800	Orbal Factories: Chapter 3 onwards
	Mind 1 精神 1	ATS+5%	 x1	 x30	Orbal Factories: Chapter 1 onwards
	Mind 2 精神 2	ATS+10%	 x3	 x300	Orbal Factories: Chapter 3 onwards
	Mind 3 精神 3	ATS+15%	 x5	 x900	Orbal Factories: Finale onwards Chest in Carnelia Tower
	Freeze 凍結の刃	Freeze enemy with 10% success.	 x3	 x50	Orbal Factories: Finale onwards
	Heal 治癒	HP slowly recovers by walking.	 x3  x2	Not synthesizable	Kloe Rinz starting equipment

This also allows for framing the player's rise in power without necessarily limiting only statistical gain. The introduction of the different systems is quite fluid and well-paced; access to the Orbment system, for example, happens through the main quest at the very beginning of the game. However, it is only at the end that secondary Limit Breaks with other properties are unlocked. The entire progression is timed like a stage play to better serve the narrative. This makes it possible to **restrict "grinding,"** which can potentially break the narrative tension and the stakes of the battles by being much stronger than the opponent. This would generate strong ludo-narrative dissonance for the player. Certain characters join our team gradually or leave temporarily. They are generally at a higher level than the team and serve in very specific moments, and they are mandatory and generally much stronger than the current members. Only the final dungeon allows for choosing which secondary team members will join us. The battles are not fundamentally difficult but can become so if you don't take the time to go look for hidden chests. The same goes for bosses.

IV. Gameplay Loops

Core Loop: Narrative (Plot) -> Combat -> Optimization (Orbment/ Gear) -> Narrative (Resolution / New Hook)

V. Narration

I. Narrative summary without spoilers:

In the kingdom of Liberl, the young and impulsive Estelle and her adopted brother, the mysterious Joshua, begin their career as Bracers (independent peacekeepers). What begins as a simple rite of passage composed of local "small chores" shifts when their father, the legendary Cassius Bright, disappears during an airship trip.

Accompanied by mentors like Schera, the two teenagers travel through the five regions of the kingdom. A simple crystal theft by bandits (the Capua) leads them progressively on the trail of the "Black Orbment," an artifact capable of neutralizing all technology. This investigation reveals a political conspiracy linked to the Hundred Days War and a terrifying secret organization: Ouroboros.

II. Integration into gameplay:

The story is intrinsically linked to the gameplay and vice versa. This is reflected in different ways. Estelle and Joshua, as apprentice Bracers, use a notebook to record the monsters they meet, their map of the zone, and their current quests. It is a real notebook, so choosing a tab allows you to turn the pages.

The game's User Interface is also a means of conveying the narrative and immersing the player; it is very well-thought-out. There is even a way to write to take our own notes in the notebook. There isn't a special need for it, but it's always nice. Finally, world-building gives body to the game. For example, the Orbment system relies on quartz and a technology allowing the use of its properties.

VI. Art Direction:

The game has a chibi style inspired by FF7 but with more polygons / Japanese anime for certain sequences (cutscenes); one easily recognizes the saga's style. The world takes place in a Steampunk universe inspired in part by Hayao Miyazaki and the movie "Castle in the Sky" for the game's setting.

VII. Audio:

The music made by the Falcom Team is truly excellent. I find the combat music really matches the "vibe" of the game, but the sound design is just as good (the sound of hits, the satisfaction of UI sounds, footsteps). Unfortunately, there is no voice acting, but some onomatopoeias are present during the launch of **S-BREAKS**. It truly accompanies and immerses the player, whether in dramatic moments (revelations about Joshua's past) or epic

moments of tension (boss fights); it even supports quieter events and enhances the atmosphere of certain zones. Particularly the village of Rolent, the starting zone where the atmosphere is nostalgic because we know we won't return home for a while. Besides, *Hoshi No Arika* is a song hummed on the harmonica by Joshua at the start of the game.

A Cat relaxing in the Sun :

▶ *Sora no Kiseki FC OST - A Cat Relaxing in the Sun*

Hoshi No Akira :

▶ *Sora no Kiseki FC OST - Hoshi no Arika –Harmonica short Version–*

- *Full version :*

▶ *Sora no Kiseki FC OST - Hoshi no Arika –Full Version–*

Provincial City of Rolent : ▶ *Sora no Kiseki FC OST - Provincial City of Rolent*

Sophisticated Fight : ▶ *Sora no Kiseki FC OST - Sophisticated Fight*

VIII. Conclusion:

To conclude, we can say that *The Legend of Heroes: Trails in the Sky FC* is perfectly aligned with its objectives. It is first and foremost a narrative game before being a gameplay-focused game. However, the combination of the two, intertwined by world-building, works perfectly. There was no moment where I personally found the gameplay repetitive or the story boring. Every system has a reason to exist and is anchored in the game world. From a personal point of view, I still would have liked to have more advanced gameplay systems (that's my Disgaea player side), such as a grid integrating environmental events for more complexity, more encouraged exploration, and why not an even more advanced customization system allowing for the creation of true "builds" for each character.

Perhaps too much complexity could have harmed the accessibility and the rhythm of the game. Finally, it remains a very good game even more than 20 years later. It really is a stage play where the player is the actor in a pre-written scenario, succeeding very well in transmitting emotions, and where progression happens primarily through the narration—here, the gameplay supports the story. I highly recommend playing it.