

A Sonata of Dreams

An In-depth analysis of *Eternal Sonata* for Xbox 360

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Introduction

Every so often you play a video game that has a certain unusual uniqueness to it. It may have just one or even several components that make it stand out amongst the thousands of various titles available to play. *Eternal Sonata*, a role-playing game (RPG) for the Xbox 360, developed by tri-Crescendo (developers of *Baiten Kaitos*) and published by Namco Bandai, is one of those very unique games. From its detailed, colorful, cel-shaded graphics, to its heavy use of musical themes, *Eternal Sonata* has a certain charm from the moment you start it. The interesting story combines fantasy with a bit of history and the game has an engaging and distinctive combat system. In short, *Eternal Sonata* is a fresh next-generation experience that has the ability to draw players in instantly.

A Story within a Story: A Game with a Little History

RPGs, and games in general, are not particularly known for having stories that include historical fact. You generally only see it in World War II based first-person shooters. So an RPG that is influenced by historical fact is unique. There have been a few RPGs that have done this, most recently *Jeanne D'Arc* for the Playstation Portable, which is a fantasy story loosely based on the story of Joan of Arc. With this blend of real life and fantasy, you get an interesting, fresh experience.

The story in *Eternal Sonata* is centered on a dream world inside the mind of the famous composer Frédéric Chopin. The game uniquely takes a real historic figure and creates a dream world involving him, similar to what was done in *Jeanne D'Arc*. This concept is very intriguing as you get a bit of both worlds. You get a bit of imagination mixed in with historical fact, which actually makes for a solid combination. In fact, the game does a terrific job of informing you of various parts of Chopin's real life. The game is broken down into chapters and after certain sections of each chapter you are introduced to the real Chopin. You are shown real life photos of places Chopin lived or had visited. Included with the slide show of photos are several paragraphs of text describing what Chopin did in his life and how certain events inspired a variety of his musical works. While you may see historical interludes in a few WWII shooters, *Eternal Sonata* is different than those first-person shooters. In this case you actually get to play as the imaginary Chopin character in the game. So, in a way, you get to play the part of this historical figure in an imaginary world. A history lesson could never be more fun.

The plot itself seems to deal with many of the challenges that Chopin himself faced. The game centers around a young female protagonist named Polka, who has the ability to cast magic. This is an ill-fated omen in this imaginary world. Those who can perform magic do not have long to live. So Polka is shunned by the world until one day she meets the imaginary form of Chopin. This imaginary Chopin is also capable of performing magic, and thus will soon die. This scenario in the game is very similar to that of Chopin's real life. He was frail and ill for most of his life until his death in 1849 of tuberculosis¹. Since Chopin is ill and dying in the imaginary world as well, the game emulates parts of Chopin's real life. This

seems to be a trend throughout the game. Another example occurs when a revolution breaks out between the various towns and cities in the dream world. The game, during one of its historical interludes, informs the player that in real life, Chopin left Poland and shortly after his departure a revolution between Poland and Russia broke out in Chopin's hometown of Warsaw. In the game, Chopin is a part of the revolution occurring in the fantasy world. It is pretty clear that the developers used various historical facts of Chopin's life and incorporated them into his dream world.

This mixture of both history and fantasy is not only unique, but is also enjoyable. You find yourself enjoying the interludes more than the game itself. It is fascinating to find out true facts about a person's life and then being able to actually play that person as a character in a fantasy dream world. It is almost as if you are playing his life in a way. Overall, it is a very unique and interesting concept that *Tri-Crescendo* pulled off very nicely. It is evident that they put a lot of work into researching Chopin's life. They intended to make this dream world in the game relate heavily to his life experiences. In the days of cookie-cutter game developing, *Eternal Sonata's* mix of history and fantasy is very refreshing.

Music Soothes the Soul

Eternal Sonata is not only rare for its combination of fantasy and history, it is one of the only games in recent memory to be heavily based on a central theme. Sure there are games that focus on certain ideas or themes such as time travel or war, but this game brings themes to a new level. Every aspect of this game revolves around one central theme. That theme is music. The characters, the storyline, the towns, symbols, and even the weapons are all based on music. Every part of this game, from beginning to end, is encompassed by a large musical atmosphere that just adds to the game's unique, artistic quality.

The theme is so evident that the character names themselves are based on music. Every playable character, and even some NPCs (non-playable characters), are named after musical instruments, techniques, or terminology. For example, some of the playable characters are Polka (type of dance), Allegretto (tempo speed), Beat, Waltz, Salsa and many more. Each character has a unique weapon type that also revolves around music. Allegretto, for example, uses swords. These swords come in the shapes of guitars, violins and other musical instruments. Chopin himself uses a conducting baton as a weapon in combat. Beat, the young protagonist, battles his enemies by shooting stuff out of instrument-based guns, such as tubas or trombones. This musical theme is very heavy amongst the characters and it really makes them more enjoyable and intriguing.

The environments and the character models are also surrounded with musical themes. Each town, field, cave and character is beautifully designed with terrific cel-shaded graphics. Each element has vibrant colors that stand out very well, especially when the game is running in high-definition. Within these elements lie heavy musical touches. Some characters will have musical clefs incorporated into their clothing. Parts of towns have musical themes as well. Much like the characters, each town name and field has a music theme to it. This type of connection between the characters, environments and the musical theme is very different, which adds to the wonderment of this imaginary dream world.

Finally, since the game is based heavily on Chopin's life, it includes many of his signature works. Many of the town themes are nice, simple piano songs. Other songs in the game are mostly upbeat and vibrant but there are still several somber songs as needed. The game still has the necessary battle music as well. The musical workings themselves are not extremely catchy and the official soundtrack for this game probably will not fly off the shelves. However, during the historical interludes you get to hear Chopin's piano Études. These pieces of music are very soothing and give a real musical connection to the game and to the story, much like the history of Chopin's life is connected to his dream world in some way. The piano pieces are just another portion of this game that is heavily influenced by music as a whole, but specifically by the life and works of Chopin.

What tri-Crescendo did with the heavy use of musical themes in this game is not only rare, but quite effective. It is clear they spent a long time in developing not only the plot but the overall theme of this game. To incorporate as much musical themes as they did in this game is an achievement in itself and adds an extra level of depth to the game. The theme seems to add to the overall immersion factor that you get from this fantasy world. From the towns to the character models, the piano pieces, the musical theme adds to the games distinctive attractiveness.

Not Your Mother's Battle System.

Well, we know that the game effectively combines musical themes and has history lessons, but is it any fun to actually play? Like most RPGs, *Eternal Sonata* relies heavily on plot and character development. However, almost all RPGs contain a battle system in one way or another. This is a function that is continually called throughout the game. Therefore if the battle system is unimaginative and the battles are long and boring, the player may be hesitant to continue the game. Players may not get very far with the plot of the game simply because they cannot withstand the monotony of battle. So, you could say that the battle system may be even more important than the plot itself. For most RPGs, it is probably what you spend the most time doing.

Eternal Sonata's battle system seems very familiar but very distinct at the same time. It is a hybrid of various types. You engage the enemy in real time with ability to see them before attacking. You can sneak up behind them or be caught off guard yourself. This affects your turn by either giving you the head start or by allowing the enemy to strike first. Then the fight transfers to a battle stage. From there you participate in a semi-turn, semi-strategy, and semi-action based battle where you can freely move about the battlefield for each character's turn. It feels very similar to battle systems in games such as *Radiata Stories* and *Star Ocean: Till the End of Time* both published by Square-Enix and both developed by tri-Ace. Both those games offer free movement of the battle field and feel very similar in terms of controls and camera, but they are not turn based like *Eternal Sonata*. The similarities in the systems most likely stem from the fact that at one point tri-Crescendo worked with and was responsible for all sound in tri-Ace games. Eventually tri-Crescendo split off into their own development company. It is

apparent that tri-Crescendo's battle system in *Eternal Sonata* is heavily influenced by the workings of tri-Ace. However similar it may seem, it has many aspects that make it unique from its counterparts.

First, as mentioned, it is turned based. The player has the ability to control each character in battle rather than having to choose a single character as you would in *Star Ocean*. You can fight with all characters in *Star Ocean* but can only do so by switching over to them during battle while your other allies are controlled by artificial intelligence. In *Eternal Sonata*, you have complete control over all three characters in battle at all times. Since you have control, battles can be a tad bit longer, but with careful planning (that is where the strategy comes in), most battles can be over within the first round of turns. Most battles can be over within twenty seconds or so, which is similar in length to the battles in *Star Ocean*. Short battles seem to be a very solid approach. It allows the player to participate in many battles, but they do not seem to drag on. Also, with the ability to see the enemy before you engage, you have the option to avoid the combat all together. This means the player can choose how much they want to fight. This is unlike many of the random battle systems found in most RPGs where you are forced to fight (although that trend seems to be fading very quickly). With the ability to choose when to fight, the player will most often enjoy the combat system more. This allows the player to take a break from battle should they choose to do so, but they are still able advance the game further.

Another difference with *Eternal Sonata* is that the battle system varies in difficulty as you progress in the game. This greatly affects the entire system. In most games, battles do get harder along the way, but this game literally begins to take things away from you to make the battles more challenging. This can be good in a way, but can also be a hindrance at times. The player starts to get used to the systems difficulty and then all of a sudden it changes again. The player has no say in the matter and is forced to adapt to the changes. However, your party does receive a boost in abilities to compensate for the change. Even with that, the player really should have the final say in how they want the battles to play out. Some players may simply be playing the game to enjoy the story and characters and do not want to be heavily challenged in combat.

With that said, it is now possible to explain the various parts of the battle system that make it unique. In the beginning of the game you start off with the basic battle settings. You begin the battle with an unlimited amount of time to scan the battlefield. Before each turn the character is allotted Tactical Time that allows you to scan the field and make strategic decisions. Once you move that character, your tactical time ends and the Action Gauge kicks in. From there, the character has roughly six seconds to complete all actions. Within these six seconds the character can use items, special attacks, guard, or just attack the enemy normally. Each function is mapped to a corresponding button on the controller, which allows for quick access with no real menus involved. This type of one-button functionality works really well, and it helps speed up the battles. Guarding is good for when the enemy attacks you. Guarding at the right time will decrease damage. The items available in battle are pre-set. Before battle, you choose via the main menu the items you want to be available in battle, but you are only given a certain number of slots you can fill. A few games have done this and it is a realistic approach to item usage. The Attack command simply allows the player to attack the enemy normally and the specials perform certain skills (more on that later).

As the game progresses some of the functions in battle begin to get limited. Eventually you will be given only four seconds of tactical time rather than unlimited time, and then the action gauge will also decrease, giving you less time to complete any actions. These losses come with a gain however. The characters and the party gain stronger abilities to help aid the deficiencies. These additions help balance out the system for the most part and keep the battles quick and relatively easy. However, as previously mentioned, this could easily frustrate some players who enjoyed the initial battle settings. Although tri-Crescendo offers a unique experience with the battle difficulty concept, they should have really allowed the player the option to choose battle setting as they saw fit.

A major portion of the battle system is the skill system used in combat. As the game begins each character is given two abilities, one light special attack and one dark special attack. As the battle system changes and gets more difficult, the game gives you the ability to choose from four special attacks in battle, two light and two dark. This is where the battle system is extremely unique. In the battlefield, there are various light and dark sections. Depending on the battle map, if the character is in a shadow or a dark area they will only be allowed to use their dark special attacks. The same goes for light special attacks. They are only allowed to be used when the character is in a light section such as sunlight or torch lit areas. This leads to a very unique and overall fun experience that makes the skills used in battle much more engaging.

As the game progresses each character gets a variety of new abilities and can choose from many different types of light or dark special attacks, each differing in range, strength and type. Some of the special attacks may use line of sight, allowing the skill to hit many enemies in a line, some may be an area-of-effect attack, or some may just hit a single enemy. There are also healing spells for some of the characters. With this system of light and dark, there is a large amount of strategy. Certain enemies cast a field of light or dark around them. If you engage these enemies in close range combat, you can only use light attacks on them. There are even items that will allow your characters to have fields of dark or light, allowing the player to manipulate which skills they can use. Eventually, it will get to the point in the game where the player's party gets an Echo meter. This meter will fill up as the enemy is hit. With a full meter of thirty-two echoes, a character can use a special attack and its power will be much greater than if they used that skill with only twelve echoes. These echoes add on to the sometimes complex strategy elements of the battle system.

Below is a screenshot from the battle system in *Eternal Sonata*. The key battle functions are circled and are as follows:

1. Echo counter
2. One-button function mapping
3. Action Time gauge
4. Tactical Time gauge
5. Next player indicator
6. Damage indicator
7. Hit combo counter



Screenshot of the battle system.²

The layout of the battle system is very busy, but tri-Crescendo did a great job of organizing it. For the most part, it does not seem to distract the player during battle. The time gauges are both located on the left side of the screen (item 3 and 4), so all information regarding time is in close proximity allowing the player to quickly look at the timers. The same applies for both the combo related counters. They are located on the right side of the screen (item 1 and 7). The main functions of battle are displayed in the lower center (item 2), which is a solid place for the developers to put it. Since it is vital information, it is still in the center, but it does not distract you from the battle. Even as the battles get harder and more strategic (and you are given less time to plan) you still seem to be able notice the action gauge going down and how high the echo counter is growing since the information is grouped together. Grouping important key information together is a sound design guideline that the developers followed. The layout also has great, vibrant colors for the text such as the HP and the damage indicators (item 6). You can clearly see the damage dealt to the enemy even amidst the chaos of battle. Also, the character whose turn is next is indicated by a blue “Next” text display (item 5), which helps you keep track of the order in which the characters will go. In the end, the layout of the battle system not only matches the artistic

style of the game, but its solid organization should help reduce the cognitive load on the user, making battles less overwhelming and more enjoyable.

Overall, the battle system is very clever and unique. Tri-Crescendo did a very solid job with this battle system with the only real concern being the fact the player cannot choose the level of difficulty. The system fits into the artistic flair and style of the game. The battles are not very long and the player can avoid them if they wish. The varying difficulty may make some players happy while annoying others. The layout and general organization of the key information is designed well. With the light and dark skill system, tactical time, action gauge and echoes, the battles offer a very solid balance of challenge, interaction and fun that most players should enjoy just as much as the other aspects of the game.

Conclusion

Tri-Crescendo has developed an interesting, unique experience for the Xbox 360 console. *Eternal Sonata* may not receive as much fanfare as larger products such as *Halo 3* or *Assassin's Creed*, but it is a game that is definitely worth experiencing. With its great blend of history and fantasy, its rare heavy usage of musical themes, and its solid battle system, tri-Crescendo has made *Eternal Sonata* a visual, artistic game that not only allows the player to enjoy themselves, but allows them to be totally engrossed in a fantasy world. The game is full of vibrant colors, interesting characters and a gripping plot that makes it a truly unique gaming experience.

References

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