



SOUL HACKERS 2

ATLUS: *Soul Hackers 2* (PlayStation 5 version). [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2022.

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Soul Hackers 2 is an oddity in today's gaming market. In an era, when long dormant series are rarely rebooted, let alone continued, *Soul Hackers 2* boldly continues where the original 1997 *Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers*¹ thematically left off. Albeit the first instalment received a remake for Nintendo 3DS in 2012, it was not as popular as its parent series, *Shin Megami Tensei*, and was completely overshadowed by *Persona 5*², another SMT spin-off, a few years later. *Soul Hackers 2* also dropped the moniker of both *Devil Summoner* and *Shin Megami Tensei*, which has made the already niche game even less recognisable. Even though this sequel, purely through its namesake, distances itself from its own legacy, it still retains the core of the *Megami Tensei* franchise, as it blends together occult themes of demons, religions and mythologies with a futuristic setting. The first instalment focused on cyberspace and a vision of a fully digital city; however, after 25 years of digital communication, our awe and fear of technology typical for the age of Internet infancy are long gone. Thus, the new sequel chooses to address a different topic; artificial intelligence.

The story starts off with an advanced AI that has been overseeing humanity and senses a possible end of the world. It creates two tangible avatars of itself (one of which serves as the main protagonist) to interfere with the human world. They then proceed to resurrect key people who are supposed to help stop the apocalypse by "hacking their souls". The essential idea of saving the world and its over-the-top execution is quite standard for Japanese popular media, but it takes a few refreshing twists. One of the party members has all the characteristics of a typical *shonen*³ protagonist. He is an adolescent, grew up in an orphanage, has amnesia and his visual design includes short spiky hair and a coat with red accents (the red colour is often associated with the lead characters in Japanese media). Instead, the leading role is assumed by a less *cliché* female character. Ringo doubles not only as the player's avatar, but also as a narrative avatar of an advanced AI. Even though she is a pre-defined character, she does not have a set worldview and thus enables the player to reflect their mindset into Ringo. This character design also strongly supports the theme of the AI learning about the world, while the player learns about the lore of said fictional universe alongside her. Albeit she is a pre-made protagonist with very few ways for the player to control her behaviour, because of her initial obliviousness, she still manages to allow a higher level of embodiment, like any player-made character.

As expected from this series as a whole, the game's narrative is rich in religious references. Outside of the staple mythological and religious beings that serve as allies and

1 ATLUS: *Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Atlus, 1997.

2 ATLUS: *Persona 5*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Atlus, 2016.

3 Remark by the author: *Shonen* is a term used to categorise Japanese popular media based on age and gender. The target audience of *shonen* products are teenaged boys and young adult males. Most common themes of *shonen* products are action and adventure; however, it often extends to mystery, sport or comedy. The actual audience often extends beyond the expected target group.

enemies, the narrative itself strongly refers to Christianity. That can be seen as soon as the main protagonists take physical forms and are given names; Ringo – an apple in Japanese, and Figue. Both types of fruit are often attributed to being the biblical forbidden fruit of knowledge. As they are disconnected from the main AI, they also lose most of their computing power, which leads to reducing their knowledge about the world to minimum. Later on, the player finds out that the main objective of the party is to collect Covenants, coloured beams of light which, if collected together, give their wielder the power necessary to end the world. This can allude to the story of Noah, in which, after the Flood ended, God showed that he would never end the world again by creating a rainbow. The biggest caveat is that Christianity does not work simply as a popularising element. The player must possess at least some degree of awareness about the matter, and thus a wider understanding of a topic that is not commonly required to enjoy a mainstream or popular fiction is required. The game does not provide any explanations about the motifs it offers and expects the player to decipher them. Some of these can easily be interpreted by anyone with a basic knowledge of Christianity, but someone with deeper understanding of theology could conduct a more enlightening analysis of the game. This is, however, in dissonance with the global audience that the game is attempting to target. The multicultural approach is obvious from the very beginning, as the names used for the important characters are English codenames and not standard Japanese names (e.g., Arrow, Milady, Iron Mask), even though the game takes place in futuristic Japan. The product strives to be easily approachable in terms of design, but also works with themes that are difficult to grasp.

The gameplay aspects of *Soul Hackers 2* are a standard turn-based JRPG fare. The player only gets four playable characters, but each of them can be equipped with their own 'demons' to personalise the playstyle of the party. The combat is similar to other Megami Tensei games, where every character has different elemental affinities and hitting their weakness rewards the player. In this case, the more weak points the party hits during their turn, the more powerful an attack they release at the end. While there are no inherent flaws to this mechanic, it feels less satisfying than launching an all-out attack for skilfully exploiting weaknesses of all the enemies in *Persona*, as well as less rewarding than getting extra turns in *Shin Megami Tensei*.

The world itself consists of a few enclosed areas. Some of them serve as a city hub, while others are there for the purposes of exploration and combat. While the general areas are fun to explore, the major game-design flaw can be found in the later parts of the 'Soul Matrix' dungeons. They serve as a way to explore the past of other party members and are mandatory for the 'true ending'. The deeper parts of the said dungeons contain portions with teleports that move the player around the area without any hint as to where they will end up. This trial-and-error design can be found in early 2000s JRPGs, but was not engaging even back then and can be considered outdated by modern standards.

The game has only two endings, which is standard for JRPGs, but the final story segment feels rushed. After defeating the main antagonist, the 'true final boss' is revealed and the only narratively impactful choice happens at the very end of the game after the fight. Everything that was required to unlock the true ending thus feels unnecessary from the narrative standpoint. The true ending does not leave anything to imagination and feels like a standard 'happy ending'. The 'bad ending' is much more open to interpretation as it shows how much Ringo would lose if she failed to achieve her personal objective. It is also much closer to the aforementioned Christian themes, as it implies banishment from paradise. Another aspect that leads to the feeling of the game being unfinished is that the number of covenants is just five instead of the expected seven. Even characters present within the game comment on the situation by saying "we just don't know why".

The most prominent problem of *Soul Hackers 2* is its own identity (or its lack thereof). When the original *Soul Hackers* came out, the *Megami Tensei* franchise was not as saturated as it is today, and the topic of cyberspace was a novel concept to explore. The sequel was developed in a very different environment. Post-humanistic topics such as AI and robots and their place in society are a common theme of many popular digital games, such as *Detroit: Become Human*⁴, *Nier Automata*⁵ or *Cyberpunk 2077*⁶ and *Soul Hackers 2* does not bring anything ground-breaking to this narrative genre. Outside of that, it is impossible to not compare *Soul Hackers 2* with *Persona 5* and *Shin Megami Tensei V*⁷. As all the games share the basic core, seeing them side by side underlines the identity problem associated with *Soul Hackers 2*. *Persona 5* immaculately portrays the social problems of our society and manages to flesh out a wide variety of characters, while *Shin Megami Tensei V* manages to create a bleak, hopeless world and stays open to interpretations with its more indirect narrative. It works with symbolism and metaphors and does not expect to be understood by everyone. *Persona 5* is so approachable that it has become mainstream. *Shin Megami Tensei V* is the exact opposite, but does not even try to look approachable and revels in its *niche* status. *Soul Hackers 2* seems to aim at the same audience as *Persona 5*, but the identical general consumer will not be able to understand all its unexplained references due to a lack of knowledge. Given its straightforward storytelling, it does not guide the player to search for information outside the game. The story attempts to combine the approaches applied by both its predecessors, but does not excel at either of them. *Soul Hackers 2*, while still a well-crafted JRPG that can satisfy fans of the *Megami Tensei* franchise, is rightfully overshadowed by its brethren. It may turn out to be a hidden gem in the future, but its potential to reach a wider audience or become a genre milestone is considerably limited by its own contradictory design choices.

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