

Review: 'Ni no Kuni' an epic adventure with charm

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This video game image released by Namco Bandai shows a scene from "Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch." (AP Photo/Namco Bandai)

Tokyo's Studio Ghibli is the creator of beloved animated feature films like "Princess Mononoke," "Spirited Away" and "Ponyo." It hasn't made many forays into video games, although its influence is all over popular Japanese series like "Final Fantasy" and "Dragon Quest."

So "Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch" (Namco Bandai, for [PlayStation 3](#), \$59.99), a collaboration between Ghibli and Fukuoka, Japan-based developer Level-5, is something special. Every frame of it

feels suffused with Ghibli magic, to the point where it overcomes any resistance you might have to its old-fashioned gameplay.

Level-5 makes for an ideal partner. It's known for "Dark Cloud," "Dragon Quest VIII" and the Professor Layton series, games whose animation and character designs have always displayed the Ghibli spirit. "Ni no Kuni" takes some familiar Ghibli themes—parallel worlds, missing parents, humans turned bestial—and turns them into a sweeping role-playing adventure.

The tale begins in dark territory: A boy named Oliver is heartbroken when his mother dies of a heart attack. When Oliver's tears soak his favorite toy, Mr. Drippy, it springs to life. Turns out he's a fairy from the alternate world, where Oliver's mom is a powerful sage. ("Ni no kuni" translates to "second country.") If Oliver can stop a dark conspiracy that threatens Drippy's world, he might be able to save Mom as well.

Oliver's journey takes him through a succession of lushly drawn towns, including the bucolic Ding Dong Dell, the sandy Al Mamoon and the industrial Hamelin. There's a lively populace of human and animal characters: the Arab-flavored Al Mamoon, for example, is ruled by "Her Moojesty Cowlipha," while the people of Hamelin dress in pig disguises. Even when exploring the gloomy Tombstone Trail, you'll encounter a few droll corpses.

The areas outside the towns are stuffed with comically named monsters, like the "crashing boar" and the "sillymander." Oliver is initially equipped with little more than a wooden stick, but he can rally "familiars" to do his fighting for him. During any battle, he can switch among three different familiars; the other people who eventually join his crusade can do the same.

This means you can take control of 12 different characters during

combat, and it is chaotic at first. Stick with it, though, and you'll quickly get the hang of switching among the humans and familiars who are best at attack, defense, spell-casting and healing. Many of the monsters you encounter can be recruited to your cause, adding a "Pokemon"-like collect-'em-all challenge to the adventure.

Younger players are likely to be attracted to the colorful graphics and cute monsters, but beware: On the normal difficulty setting, some of these battles are quite challenging, and kids may find them frustrating. Within its dungeons and castles, save locations are sparse, so you run the risk of losing an hour or so of progress if you bump into the wrong creature. Even adult players may feel the need to switch to the easy setting every now and again.

Beyond the main story are dozens of side quests. Some are typical fare, like slaying a monster or retrieving a treasure, but others are weirder. Throughout the game you'll meet "heartbroken" characters who've become immobilized by fear, anger, doubt or other negative emotions. To save them, you have to find people who are so positive that they're overflowing with feelings like courage, kindness or belief. With your magic locket, you can grab chunks of positive feelings and use them to repair the heartbroken.

There's also a deep alchemy system (hosted by a genie named Al-Khemi) that lets you craft your own potions, armor and weapons. And you can even gamble with ghouls, playing slots, blackjack and an original game called Platoon in the Tombstone Trail casino.

Namco's localization team has done a spectacular job translating the comedy from Japanese into English. And the music by Joe Hisaishi, who has composed the scores for most of Ghibli co-founder Hayao Miyazaki's films, is lovely and at times stirring. Overall, "Ni no Kuni" is one of the most satisfying games to come out of Japan in years, deftly

combining the charm of Studio Ghibli's movies with the rewards of a meaty role-playing epic. Four stars out of four.

More information: ninokunigame.com/

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