

Case History: Final Fantasy Series

Anyone who considers him or herself even a modest console video game player will have heard the name Final Fantasy. A role-playing game (or RPG) series created by the Japanese software developer Square Soft, Final Fantasy has always been at the forefront of the console RPG market, setting, rather than following, the trend. While the series, which has had a total of nine installments, has changed significantly over the years, adjusting to changes in the market and the American culture, the series has always followed its tried-and-true formula of challenging battles, deep storylines, state-of-the-art graphics and music, and engaging gameplay that sucks the player into the Final Fantasy world.

Back in the early days of Nintendo's Famicom (as the Nintendo Entertainment System was known in Japan), Square developed numerous titles, each of which met only with modest success. The most prominent of these few games is probably Rad Racer, a racing game which tried to employ the use of 3-D glasses, but not to much success. Unfortunately, the relatively small base of Famicom owners at the time made things difficult on Square; they needed a blockbuster hit.

Looking at the market, Square saw that Enix's Dragon Warrior games always sell extremely well. Seeing many ways to improve upon Enix's formula, Square decided to put their all into one game, an attempt to revolutionize the RPG market. Under the supervision of producer Hironobu Sakaguchi, whose imagination has driven all the Final Fantasy games to success, Square put all their hopes behind this last ditch effort...Final Fantasy.

The first Final Fantasy took Dragon Warrior's basic format and made various improvements, incorporating a few aspects from the only well-known RPG at the time, Dungeons and Dragons, a paper and dice RPG played almost like an interactive novel with a friend, who tells a story as you interact with him. Compared to Dragon Warrior, Dungeons and Dragons has far more complicated statistics, more varied monsters, battles in which both sides could have multiple members and, in general, stories which were far more complicated than Dragon Warrior's rescue-the-princess scenario. Square's first Final Fantasy brought to the console RPG all of these elements, with four-character parties, a gigantic world to explore, a more complicated storyline (though still nothing compared to what was to come), and a battle system which was far more complicated than Dragon Warrior's. Throw in graphics which were as advanced as anything else the NES had to offer that day, and music composed by Nobuo Uematsu, who has been responsible for the series' music ever since, and Square had put together a masterpiece.

Released in Japan on December 18th, 1987, the game was a great hit in Japan, quickly making Square one of the front runners of the RPG console market. With this level of success, Square had almost no choice but to make the sequel Final Fantasy II, released almost exactly one year later on December 17th 1988. Final Fantasy II took what was, at the time, a bold step forward in RPG story-telling: the characters the player played were actual characters. They were not simply a knight, or a mage, which the player controlled, but they all had their own personalities, backgrounds and roles in the story, just like the protagonists of a novel.

In fact, Final Fantasy II was the beginning of a great trend started by Square and copied by other RPG developers: games with deeper and more dramatic plots, developed

characters and various themes such as friendship, betrayal, loss and rebellion. Final Fantasy II's story is very reminiscent of traditional Japanese anime stories. Animes tend to feature a lot of character development, as you watch them go through various experiences together, fall in love with each other and betray each other. Also present in many animes are a mysterious, powerful enemy, whose true purpose is usually not known until towards the end of the storyline, and various plot twists which explain the unusual behavior of a character or unknown events from earlier in the story. While these somewhat formulaic (though not any more formulaic than the traditional Hollywood movie) plots were popular in Japan, they were much less so in the United States at the time. This is mostly because animes are, in essence, cartoons, which Americans associate with GI Joe and other children's shows.

Final Fantasy III was released by Square the following year, and it made even more changes and improvements to the formula. Besides just continuing down the road of deeper, more intricate stories, Final Fantasy III also features the most complicated battle system of any Final Fantasy at the time of its release. With character class systems where the game's protagonists can learn various skills and traits as the player deems fit throughout the game, changing from class to class to learn new skills, the battle system took a lot of planning and strategy in order for the player to meet with success.

Traditionally, the increase in battle system complexity and strategy would be a good thing, but, following the trend in increased story depth, many players had shifted their interests from the battle system to the story. Final Fantasy games were being viewed as interactive novels rather than what one would traditionally consider a "video game." Adding complexity to the battle system, many felt, detracted from the story. Players did

not want to fight hordes of monsters to build their character's skills, which they didn't care about. They just wanted to see what was going to happen next. As a result, Final Fantasy III's battle system was met with some mixed opinions.

It wasn't until after Final Fantasy III was released in Japan that the original Final Fantasy was brought to the United States, released in July of 1990. While Dragon Warrior came out beforehand, it sold poorly (in fact, Nintendo was giving away free copies of the game with Nintendo Power subscriptions). This was not the case with Final Fantasy, which sold extremely well, almost single-handedly creating the RPG market in the United States. Unfortunately, because of poor business relations between Square and Nintendo at the time, Final Fantasy II and Final Fantasy III were never brought over to the United States. Due to their deeper, Japanese-styled storylines, they would have been more difficult to localize for the American market.

Final Fantasy IV, which was originally being developed for the Famicom, was eventually brought to Nintendo's new 16-bit Super Famicom (known as the Super Nintendo Entertainment System in the United States). Released in Japan on August 21, 1991, Final Fantasy IV was a monumental leap above the previous Final Fantasies. With the new technology, Square was able to implement vastly improved graphics, beautiful music (no longer limited by the NES's weak sound chip, finally letting Nobuo Uematsu express some of his musical ability), and, more importantly, a vastly superior game in terms of story, gameplay and innovation.

To begin with, Final Fantasy IV was the first game in the series, and quite possibly the first game ever, in which the story was no longer just background necessary for the player to do other stuff. Final Fantasy IV's story is vast, deep and, clearly, the

focus of the game. With some of the most memorable characters ever created, a story of how the protagonist turns from a dark knight to a paladin, and themes of love and loss, people played the game not to fight monsters, but to live out a fantasy adventure as the main character.

Final Fantasy IV also had another important development: it was the first console RPG ever to use a real-time battle system. What this means is, instead of battle taking place, unrealistically, in “rounds”, where, in each round every character and enemy would be able to attack once, battle takes place in real time. When a character is ready to fight, then he is capable of taking in a command from the player. Fast characters would be able to take in two or three commands before a slow character would take one. In addition, time does not stop as the player is deciding what command to give, meaning the enemies could attack while the player was trying to make up his mind. This led to battles which were more action-oriented and exciting, rather than the more purely strategic turn-based battles in earlier games. Real-time battle systems were introduced in Final Fantasy IV and have always been used ever since in all Final Fantasy games.

Also, in response to the lukewarm reception of the increased complexity of the battle system, Final Fantasy IV did away with a lot of skills and abilities of Final Fantasy III. As a result, players did not need to build their characters as much, and it was no longer necessary to fight monsters over and over to build levels and character skills. Battles, while still present, were less essential as story took the focus.

While Final Fantasy IV was a huge hit in Japan, when it was brought over to the United States (as Final Fantasy II just a few months later in November of 1991), it did fairly well, but it was not the blockbuster hit it was in Japan. This can mostly be

attributed to the fact that, even after the original Final Fantasy was brought overseas, the RPG market in the United States was in its infancy and far from mainstream. The emphasis on story rather than fighting turned off many Americans and publishers from Japan were unwilling to take the risk of bringing RPG's over to the states.

With Final Fantasy V, released in Japan on December 6th, 1992, Square took Final Fantasy IV's story and combined it with Final Fantasy III's complicated battle system. In fact, the character class system of Final Fantasy V was even more complicated than Final Fantasy III's, and players had to develop their characters very carefully and strategically. As players played the game, the characters could be completely customized and adapt to the needs of the party in various dungeons or areas. Like with Final Fantasy III, many welcomed the complicated system, and many disapproved.

Final Fantasy V was not brought over to the United States, though it is unknown why. Some believe that Square thought the system would be too difficult for Americans to handle. Others thought perhaps Square and Nintendo were running into problems again. One way or another, it was not brought to the Anthology was rather poor and many players viewed Square with disdain for their sloppy efforts.

Final Fantasy VI was released in Japan in April of 1994 and is still revered by many as the greatest RPG ever created. Making graphical jumps above the previous Final Fantasy games and with perhaps the best musical score ever done by Uematsu, Final Fantasy VI was quite simply a beautiful game. But it is not the graphics or music which really characterize Final Fantasy VI...it is the new direction in which Final Fantasy VI took RPG stories: cinematic and dramatic.

The Final Fantasy VI story deals with the very mature themes of teenage pregnancy, suicide and the loss of loved ones. Final Fantasy VI had a much more adult-oriented story. While previous stories did have drama, they still had a cartoon-like feel and their stories seemed more happy-go-lucky, save-the-world-ish than Final Fantasy VI's more mature story. While still limited by the Super Famicom's hardware, Square's cinematic, rather than cartoonish, goals for the series were clear.

Final Fantasy VI, once again, eliminated the complicated battle system of Final Fantasy III and V. In addition, it was unique as being the only Final Fantasy with no real main character. There were various protagonists, but the story followed each one of them and how their various paths intertwined.

Brought to the United States in October of 1994 Final Fantasy III (as it was called) sold remarkably well for an RPG in the states, though still nothing next to the massive hit it obviously was in Japan. The increase in sales over Final Fantasy II can mostly be attributed to the American market learning and opening up to the RPG genre. Word of Final Fantasy II had spread and, as a result, more people were hearing about how great these games were. In addition, animes and other Japanese media were starting to become more mainstream in the United States, as people slowly began to discover the joys of Japanese story-telling. Still, RPG's were far from mainstream and Final Fantasy VI was more of a cult hit rather than an across-the-board blockbuster.

Square went through a gigantic structural change after Final Fantasy VI. As relations with Nintendo worsened, Sony's Playstation was selling extremely well and featured CD's, which Square needed in order to create the cinematic experience it was

shooting for. Square made the move to Sony and began development of what is probably the most significant RPG game ever created, Final Fantasy VII.

Finally, with CD technology, Square was able to incorporate cinematic full-motion video into its games. Plus, with Sony's powerful 3-D graphics processor, Square now had potential to put the game in rich 3-D environments, finally leaving behind inevitably cartoonish 2-D sprite-based graphics. Square took maximum advantage of this fact by using unbelievably detailed pre-rendered backdrops which could animate as the player moved through the environment, and beautiful computer-rendered full-motion video. All of this took a humongous team of over 120 programmers and artists and a humongous \$30 million dollar budget, unheard of at the time. Graphically, Final Fantasy VII was more than just the best there was, it was a gigantic leap ahead of any other game at the time. All of this worked to give Final Fantasy VII a movie-like feel, exactly what Square wanted.

During development, Final Fantasy VII garnered huge amounts of hype in Japan and in the United States, as American players finally realized what they had been missing out on with previous Final Fantasy games. When it was finally released in Japan on January 31st, 1997, chaos ensued, and over 2 million copies were sold almost instantly. Its release in the United States on September 3rd of 1997, was, for once, equally as chaotic. Final Fantasy VII was extremely well received in the United States and single-handedly moved RPG's from cult status to one of the primary genres for console video games. Suddenly, other companies were bringing over RPG's to the United States and players were gobbling them up, but virtually none could compete with the huge success that Square's Final Fantasy games had met.

Final Fantasy VII also gave birth to another trend in the video games industry: the huge-budget video game. Before, games were made by small teams, with small budgets, but companies were pouring more and more money into games. Final Fantasy VII was the first game to have a Hollywood level budget and huge development teams. Ever since, games have become like movies in their production; small games with little budgets don't cut it anymore in today's video games industry, and Final Fantasy VII is the game that started this trend.

As for the game itself, Final Fantasy VII brought new levels of depth and development to the storyline, with a plot oriented heavily around the protagonist and his past. Final Fantasy VII also stuck with the simple battle system of Final Fantasy VI, allowing the player to focus more on the story. With CD's, Final Fantasy VII was also the longest game in the series at the time: it would take at least forty hours for a player to play through the game.

After the huge hit that Final Fantasy VII was, Square had to follow it up with an equally impressive masterpiece. Final Fantasy VIII, like VII, had a humongous budget, and took computer graphics to a new level. While Final Fantasy VII's character models were impressive and detailed, they were lacking in human-like motion and animation. Final Fantasy VIII uses advanced motion capture technology to make the character models look almost real and able to express little nuances of emotion in their faces and body language. In fact, basically all traces of cartoon-like graphics were gone.

Final Fantasy VIII was released in Japan in February of 1999 and then in the United States the following September. It met with even greater mobs of success than Final Fantasy VII, despite some fundamental changes Final Fantasy VIII made to the

genre. It lacked the genre's focus on weapons and armor, and used a different system based on Guardian Forces, which also changed entirely the way magic was casted. Many thought it was interesting and refreshing to see a change of pace, but some people disliked the changes. One way or another, it was a good thing that Square did not simply toss out another rehashed Final Fantasy, and instead tried to advance the genre further.

Square has also created Final Fantasy IX, a move back to more cartoonish graphics and a more light-hearted storyline, and more Final Fantasy games have been announced for the Sony Playstation 2, which features real-time graphics comparable to the prerendered full-motion videos of previous Final Fantasy games, thus allowing even more expansion and emotional expression in the world of RPG story telling. Square is also working on an extremely realistic Final Fantasy movie, the first fully computer-graphics movie ever created with a realistic presentation as opposed to the more cartoonish feel of Toy Story and other such movies.

Today, Square's games, which encompass all sorts of genres other than just RPG's, are always given a huge budget and are usually well received by gaming audiences in both Japan and America, mostly a response to American audiences opening up to Japanese media. The evolution of Square's Final Fantasy series has been as much a cause of technological improvements as changes in Japanese and especially American culture, and has always set rather than followed the trend in the video game industry.