THE JRPG BIBLE

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THE JRPG BIBLE

ALL QUIET ON TH

✹ VIBRANT, QUIRKY, AND UNDENIABLY STYLISH, MOST JAPANESE GAMES ARE TOO OUTLANDISH TO SNUGGLE INTO THE UPPER ECHELON OF THE UK GAMES CHART. ASIDE FROM THE FAMILIAR POPULARITY OF THE LATEST FINAL FANTASY, RYU'S GAWKING BATTLE CRY AND THE TIP-TAPPING OF FAMILIES EVERYWHERE STEPPING ONTO THEIR WII FIT BOARDS, IT'S BECOMING INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT FOR GAMES FROM THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN TO MAKE THEIR MARK ON THE WEST

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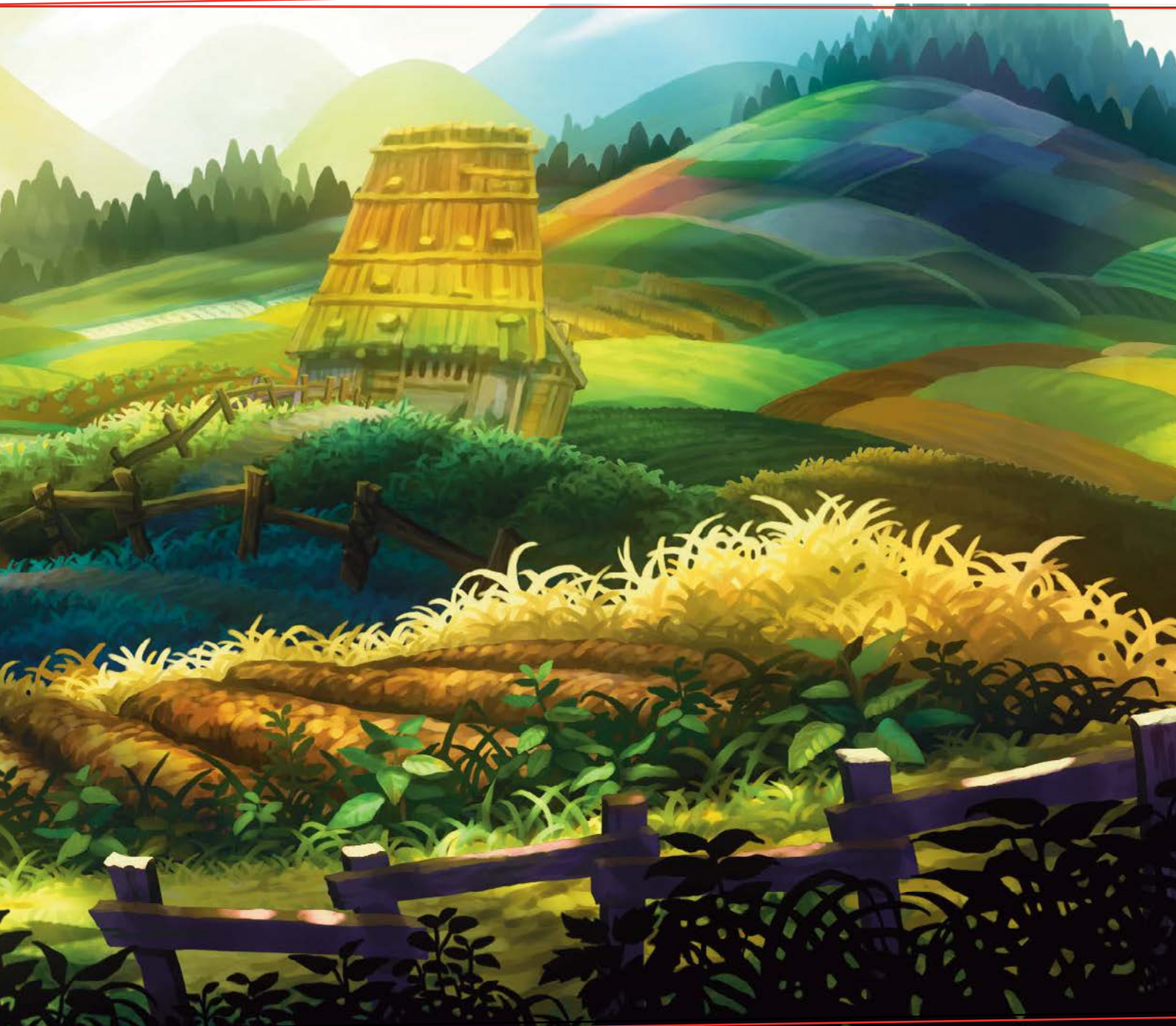
'**O**h wow, the car-battering bonus stages make a triumphant return in *Super Street Fighter IV*, you say? A handful of new characters too? Plus costumes!?'

Not many series have a hold over their fans like *Street Fighter*. Released to critical acclaim across the world, there's no doubt that *Street Fighter IV* was like the rebirth of Take That – smarter, more mature, and certainly better to look at. A subtle re-imaging made the series more relevant to the consumer today, and its accessibility brought along hordes of new fans that were merely glints in their unsuspecting parents' eyes when *Street Fighter II* was sapping away their spare funds in the local arcade.

It may have been naïve to assume players would once again rush to their local retailer and pick up the next incarnation of the series, especially as *Super Street Fighter IV* landed little over a year after its predecessor. With minor adjustments made and the balance of combat tweaked to perfection, the minuscule evolution peaked at number two in the UK chart; a modest result in a week that saw the release of EA's World Cup money-maker. The fact is, Capcom's efficiency at delivering another 'must-buy' game has earned the series an unprecedented safeguard when it comes to sales figures and critical acclaim.

FUTURE FANTASY

☀ IF YOSHINORI KITASE'S pedigree in the gaming industry is anything to go by, he should probably be listened to when he discusses what he thinks the future of Japanese exports could look like in the West. "There are videogames which work in conjunction with trading cards, and they are often found in the arcade game market in Japan. You place a card – possibly with a character – onto a mat and move it to get a corresponding 3D character on the monitor to fight as the card moves (you will even find football and warlord versions). Square Enix has some games in the genre, such as *Lord Of Vermillion*. I cannot quite predict its future success for sure, but do think it has great potential."

"FINAL FANTASY STANDS OUT, WITH ITS UNIQUE TASTE THAT CANNOT BE FOUND IN THE WEST"

Similar to the lure of *Street Fighter*, Square Enix also has a brand that continues to capture millions of Western minds with every new release. The post-*Final Fantasy VII* era has seen the emergence of a behemoth, and, unlike Capcom's premium fighter, a brand that has often been reliant on name rather than increasing quality. Ten days after *Final Fantasy XIII* went on sale in Europe, Square Enix was clinking glasses together and celebrating the most successful launch for the series to date. Debuting at number one in the UK games chart on 13 March, it took the balletic brutality of Sony's *God of War III* to send it plummeting a week later.

f you've played a *Final Fantasy* game, chances are Yoshinori Kitase was one of the creative forces behind it. Before recently acting as producer for *Final Fantasy XIII*, Kitase directed *Chrono Trigger* and *Final Fantasy VII* – two titles that redefined how Japanese role-playing games should be made. With nearly two decades' worth of experience at Square Enix, he understands the difficulty of asserting a recognisable brand into the Western market successfully, and is more than wary of the threat top-quality games from outside Japan can pose.

"It is difficult, indeed. If we were to mimic Western ways of making games, such products would only be buried in a galaxy of fantastic Western titles and never be notic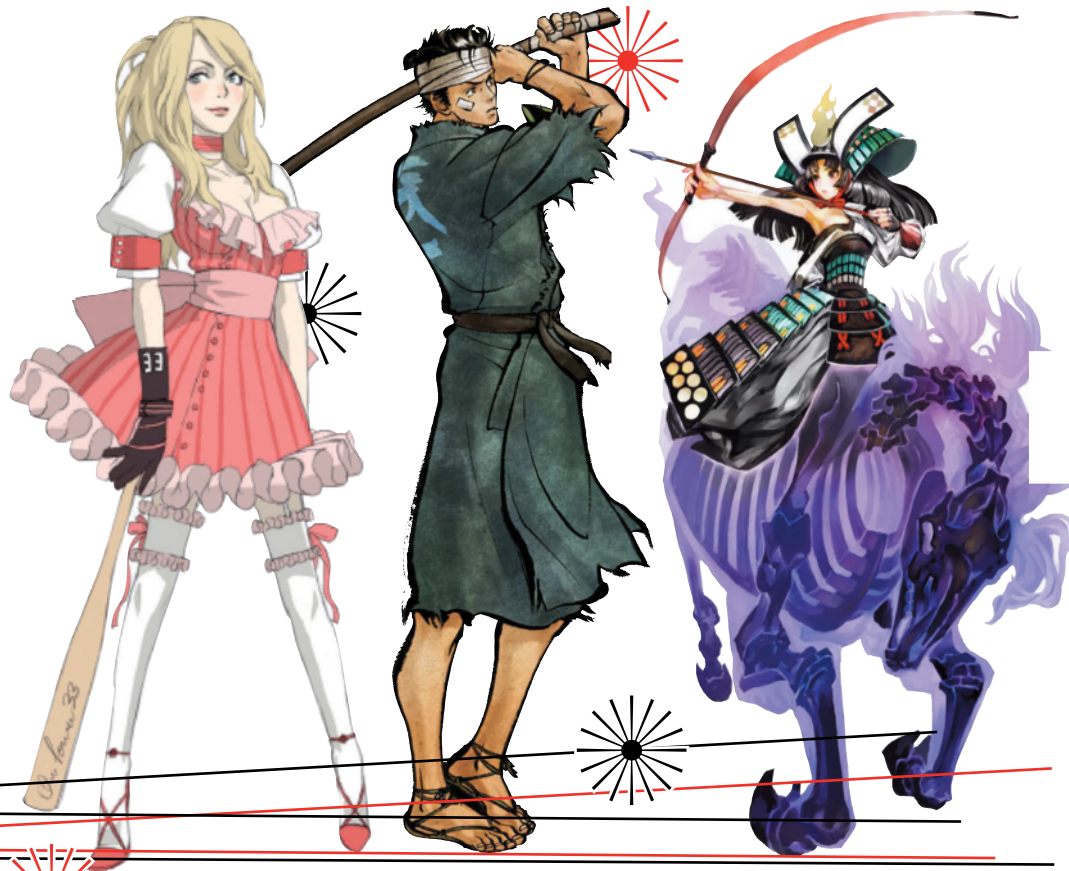ed. We do reckon that it is rather to our advantage that our Japanese game creators can produce titles with their own values and interpretation of the culture. And that is exactly why the fantasy world of *Final Fantasy* stands out, with its unique taste that cannot be found in the West."

Kitase's experience in conquering Europe has held some major learning curves though. In an age where the internet is a publisher's most obvious marketing tool, he believes getting up close and personal with those who are actually going to buy the game provides invaluable feedback that discussion boards simply fail to muster.

"I have visited Europe on tour with many titles before. On each occasion, I met lots of European media people and realised that we have many avid *Final Fantasy* fans in Europe, especially with *Final Fantasy VII* onwards. So I had high hopes that *Final Fantasy XIII* would also be accepted."

Even at a time where many gamers seek to be whisked off to increasingly surreal and original worlds, Kitase indicates that Western grounds are becoming less fertile as the years pass, and has witnessed a huge shift in the strategies Square Enix implements to ensure its products are going to perform admirably outside of Japan.

"It really has [got more difficult to sell outwardly Japanese games in the West]. Just like *Final Fantasy XIII* has adapted to transitions of the market so well, we expect it to be vital that changes in the global market and our working environment should be correctly analysed and adapted to. I learned two

things through my involvement with *Final Fantasy XIII*: information travels around the world almost instantly, and must therefore be utilised appropriately. You must visit the regions and experience direct communications with local people.

"The two may seem to contradict each other but both are important. In particular, I have become so convinced by the importance of the second point. If you follow it, you will give yourself opportunities to verbally correct any information that has been inaccurately or wrongly communicated online. It also allows you to listen to local voices that you cannot collect in Japan, and to reflect them on your next project."

Despite emphasising the importance of face-to-face confrontations with the consumer, Kitase acknowledges adapting to market conditions and utilising the internet is the only way to ensure that any improvements made to their series will generate sufficient interest. Where it was commonplace for Japan to receive a new Square Enix game a good year or so before the West, it was the company's willingness to bypass this strategy that galvanised *Final Fantasy XIII*'s chances of being an unequivocal success.

"I feel we managed to implement effective marketing activities. In comparison to *Final Fantasy XII*, the market has changed dramatically in two aspects. Firstly, the most popular console then may not necessarily have maintained the position in some countries. And, secondly, we have gone into the 'internet era', when information spreads around the world as soon as it is transmitted (which also means that any information can go past its sell-by date very quickly). We therefore decided to make the title available for both platforms, while placing an emphasis on finding the best approach to get through to both user groups separately in each country.

"Also, after we decided to aim at a semi-simultaneous global release (three months between the Japanese and US/European releases), we managed to communicate our information while ensuring maximum freshness of it. Prime examples of this policy would include the fact that a video clip was sent out simultaneously online, informing of the world release date, as well as the fact that launch events were held at San Francisco, Paris and London at the same time. I believe that these achievements formed a good basis for a commercial success."

On the other side of the coin, away from enormous budgets and bleak title songs from *X-Factor* winners, Rising Star Games quietly gets on with business. Widely regarded as the premium publisher of niche Japanese games in the UK, its humble output of carefully selected products has also seen a major shift in direction over the last year. Although best known for supporting the Wii and DS with quality titles, Product

NINTENDO HAS ALWAYS been the company to take off in unexpected directions, with the notion that huge risks hold great rewards. The Wii is evidence of this, as the HD-less, family-friendly console continues to sell by the bucketload in the West. Robert Saunders, Head of Communication in the UK, describes the impact as something that has forced people to re-evaluate their preconceptions of gaming, as Nintendo "titles are created to be inclusive with everyone in mind, to be accessible to anyone and everyone, regardless of where they live and where they play.

"On Wii, both *Wii Sports* and *Wii Fit* have clearly had an impact. On DS, titles like *Nintendogs* and *Brain Training* have made a strong impression. What all these titles have in common is their ability to appeal to anyone... anyone can enjoy and play. Additionally, they appeal because they change people's preconceptions about videogames; essentially they make people stop and reconsider a category they previously were convinced was not for them. This is important. But there are also more 'gamer' orientated titles such as *Super Mario Galaxy*, *New Super Mario Bros*, *Legend of Zelda*, et cetera. While not having the more 'obvious' impact that titles like *Wii Fit* and *Brain Training* have achieved, they are still significant, in that they are beautifully created and stand as some of the most critically acclaimed titles ever released... they are also significant, but in a different way."

Nintendo's success stretches far beyond the UK, and has affected gaming on a global scale. A little closer to home, Saunders recognises the industrious work of Rising Star Games.

"They have found a business model that clearly works, and have found success in bringing some very 'Japanese' IP to audiences in the UK and Europe, where perhaps they might otherwise have fallen by the wayside. As a gamer myself, there are many great experiences I would have missed out on, were it not for Rising Star bringing them to the West."

Manager Yen Hau explains how the company has been forced to move in coherence with the Western games market.

"It's always the ambition of a business to expand and move with the market. We've always been, and will continue to be, a strong supporter of Nintendo formats, but we also recognise the needs of the company to strengthen and grow. With the country recovering from recession, we really must look at any opportunities to continue the fantastic growth we have been experiencing over the past few years. Is this a natural progression or strategic move? We believe it's our strength to be able to adapt quickly to market conditions that's proven so successful for us down the years. We've always worked under the philosophy of bringing the best Japanese games to European audiences, irrespective of the format."

Rising Star Games' insatiable desire to allow Western users to experience Japanese games has allowed the company to naturally evolve with the current generation of consoles. Taking baby-steps into the PS3 and Xbox 360 world, its 2010 line-up consisted of a transition from Nintendo, as the publisher embarked on its first steps into a wider world. Even in times of economical crisis, Hau believes Rising Star's foundations have stood the company in good stead to beat whimpering market conditions.

"The benefit of being a smaller publisher is that we don't have to sell millions of units to be successful, and as a result we can change our strategies almost instantly. This allows us to adapt to market conditions very well, and that's a key reason why Rising Star Games continues to grow without the need to downsize."

With this said, Rising Star Games hasn't been without its problems. Previous partner Marvelous Entertainment recently sold its 50 per cent stake in

OFTEN, ANY DEVELOPER'S most prominent problem is overcoming cultural and language-related barriers in an effective manner. If poor voice-work and cultural 'in-jokes' alienate the user, there's little chance they're going to continue playing. Japanese games have often been mocked for poor localisation, something Nintendo's Robert Saunders believes can be overcome with an open-mind.

"The facts speak for themselves – yes it is [easy for games to get lost in translation]. The reverse is also true, and many great games developed in the West fail to make an impact in Japan. It's misleading to lump all games into the 'from Japan' category and base your assumptions from that starting point. With the recent launch of *Monster Hunter Tri* and the upcoming launch of *Dragon Quest IX*, we're really looking to open up these more 'Japanese' titles to Western audiences."

With greater funds being invested into translation than ever, a dedicated team can make the jump-over without raising any eyebrows, and Rising Star Games' Yen Hau says the art form is improving.

"It really depends on how good a job the translators do. A lot of resources are poured into the translation process for Europe, and we have seen a steady increase in the quality of English translations. We were suitably impressed upon hearing the *Fragile Dreams* English voiceover for the first time; it really is one of the best conversions we've heard. The danger that some context is lost when translating from Japanese to English still exists, but we try to limit that by working with trusted and experienced translators to ensure we deliver the best possible localisation to PAL territories. Generally, we believe that it's a lot better now than a couple of years ago, and many publishers have picked up on the importance a good translation has on the overall experience of the game."

the company to Intergrow, citing poor sales results as the catalyst for the decision. Last year's charming *Little King's Story* was undoubtedly lapped up and praised by journalists across Europe, but sales figures amounted to approximately 140,000 units shifted across the globe after six months of trading. This figure is something many lesser-scoring and wholly average Western produced games can blitz in a matter of weeks – if not hours – in the UK. Despite this, Hau revels in the showering of accolade recent Rising Star titles have received, and believes any game, no matter where it was produced, can leave a sizeable dent in the UK games chart if it possesses palpable quality.

"We believe the divide between Western and Japanese titles makes little-to-no difference at all to consumers; if the game is good enough, then it doesn't matter where it was made. When we released *No More Heroes*, *Harvest Moon* and *Little King's Story*, the quality of those games spoke for themselves. We also believe that Western gamers, especially here in the UK, are becoming increasingly more receptive to the niche titles coming out of Japan. Look at the previous successes of *ICO*, *Katamari Damacy* and, let's not forget, *Wii Fit* – all three introduced
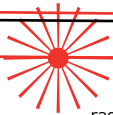
radical new gameplay mechanics upon their respective releases, and have subsequently become incredibly successful."

Conversely, Hau insists that British gamers are, in general, largely interested in Japanese products, but aren't adequately informed about niche titles on a regular basis. "The big triple-A titles from Japan are successful in the West because they've done the work in earlier games, which were truly excellent. *Cooking Mama* started out as a completely left-field Japanese game, which consumers took to their hearts and went on to sell over one million units. We don't believe Western audiences aren't interested in Japanese games; they just need to be better informed about them. Rising Star Games is living proof that there is a Western audience for titles other than these big franchises. We have built a business out of identifying this interest and bringing to Europe Japanese games that fans are screaming for but are not evidently available. Our recent release of *Fragile Dreams* is testament to this philosophy and proves that a market for Japanese games still exists."

Expanding on this point, Kitase also acknowledges that today's chart-toppers are constantly striving to sculpt a more impressive experience in order to survive, regardless of genre or the amount of coin lodged in the proverbial marketing purse.

"Even in the genre of the first-person shooter, only a limited number of publishers (or titles) can enjoy a big success, while first-person shooters with no originality simply do not sell well and disappear quickly. In this respect, I must say that it is immaterial whether the title is niche or major. The situation will always be tough on any title that fails to come up with some kind of originality to present."

It's without question that Rising Star Games cannot afford to overindulge in prime-time TV spots, billboards and endless online advertisement, even for their most successful launches, and have intelligently aimed to build a Japanese presence within the confines of the UK games industry. Where gamers would mindlessly flock into Square Enix's arms for a musty, corporate-smelling embrace on the back of another hit sequel, Rising Star perceives itself as a company of the people, who are simply looking to broaden the horizons of the average UK user.

"Our objectives have evolved over the last five years, becoming more focussed, and really narrowing down who our core audience is. When we launched the 'Home of Japanese Games' branding strategy, it was to emphasise and communicate what we stand for, and what consumers can expect from Rising Star Games. This not only allowed us to concentrate on one very important sector, but also gave us the opportunity to generate relations with non-traditional gamers, those outside of the gaming community but have similar interests. The results speak for themselves – Rising Star Games is now regarded as one of the most trusted and favoured publishers in the otaku community, and we've forged strong relations with the Japanese Society [and] the Japan National Tourism Organisation."

When it boils down to results, the inescapable trend that the more established publishers such as Square Enix reign supreme is difficult to overlook. Even Hau, one of the industry's most optimistic faces, concedes that a larger budget inevitably creates a springboard for long-term achievement.

"The *Final Fantasy* franchise is probably one of the strongest in the videogames industry, so it came as no surprise that it went to the top of the UK charts on its release. You can't blame a publisher for supporting its epic triple-A title with a similarly epic marketing budget. Does a hefty budget guarantee a proportional return on sales? Of course nothing is guaranteed, but it certainly makes it a lot easier to reach a mass audience."

If this is the case, what does the future hold for Japanese games in the West? *Final Fantasy XIII's* credibility rested not only on review scores, but also how well it sold. Its performance to date is something most Japanese games simply can't replicate outside of the country, and signals a juggernaut that will continue to roll now its momentum is set. If any of the top-grossing Japanese series suddenly falter in the UK, the Western front may be open to invasion from the most ambitious usurpers to the throne. Offering advice to those developers who look to buck the trend, Hau's message couldn't be clearer.

"If developers want their games to be successful in the West, they need to take into consideration what Western audiences like at the initial planning stages, rather than create a game for the Japanese market and then hope that it performs outside of this. Once they have a firmer grasp of their target market then they can set about creating the game they want without compromising their core culture."

INFORMATION TRAVELS THE WORLD ALMOST INSTANTLY, AND THEREFORE MUST BE UTILISED APPROPRIATELY
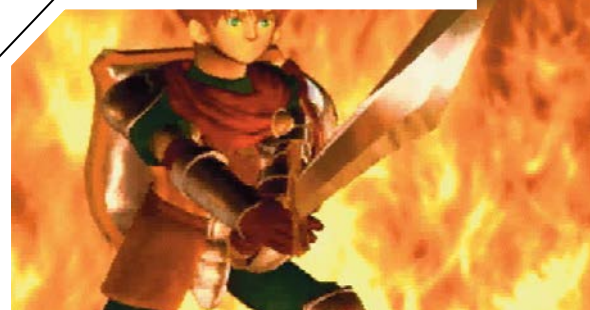
SHINING FORCE

Join us as we meet Hiroyuki Takahashi, president of Camelot and mastermind behind the Nineties vintage Shining Force games, in a dungeon in deepest Shinjuku

The Game Gear titles lacked town exploration but provided a healthy dose of portable strategy gaming nonetheless. A DS remake is long-overdue.

Released: 1992-1998
Format: Mega Drive, Game Gear, Mega CD, Saturn
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Camelot Software Planning

KEY STAFF:
Hiroyuki Takahashi
(Planning, production, scenario)
Shugo Takahashi
(Planning, production, scenario)
Yasuhiro Taguchi
(Programming)
Haruki Kodera
(Programming)

IT SHOULDN'T HAVE been this complicated. From the outside looking in, *Shining Force* throughout the Nineties represented everything that was great about Sega: a 'big' Sega property and a unique calling card for the Mega Drive and Saturn, it delivered some of the finest deep tactical role-playing of the decade. Yet while the series' course through to *Shining Force III* led mesmerised players to a vast Holy Land of blissful RPG perfection, Sega's treatment of the games and their second-party developer, Camelot, only went from bad to rotten.

Prior to collaborating with Sega on the development of 1991's preparatory dungeon-crawler *Shining In The Darkness*, Hiroyuki Takahashi had been in employment at Enix, working on the *Dragon Quest* series of games and in particular making a significant contribution to the production of *Dragon Quest IV*. After that, he left Square Enix, went independent, formed his own company and soon began work on *Shining In The Darkness*. As Takahashi clarifies, "I was never an employee of Sega, but from *Darkness* on I worked as game designer and team leader on the *Shining Force* series. My younger brother Shugo wasn't a Sega employee, either."

If it sounds like Takahashi's keen to distance himself from Sega it's because he is. There's a whole litany of hurt to relate, but for a start consider this: for each of the three *Shining* Mega Drive games, Sega gave Takahashi's team the bare minimum funding offered to out-of-house developers. *Shining In The Darkness* was a success, but apparently not enough to merit a raise for the development of *Shining Force*; and although *Shining Force* was a hit, there was still no raise forthcoming when it came time for a sequel to be built. There is more, but in the interests of chronology let's return to the story of the series' conception. **CONTINUED >.**

I BELIEVE ENGAGING BATTLES ARE THE MOST CRUCIAL FACTOR IN AN RPG

■ The *Shining* world isn't one for equal opportunities, unfortunately. All elves tend to be archers and all women, magic users.

■ When attacking, the perspective changes to this dramatic angle, making for one of the series' most iconic features.

■ A few of the *Shining Force* games were never localised into English, but are perfectly playable in Japanese anyway.

■ Spanning three separately released discs, *Shining Force III* is a true 32-bit epic.

■ *Shining Force III* took the series into 3D and was one of the best looking RPGs on Saturn.

The *Shining* series' icon-based menus made it one of the most user-friendly RPGs of all time.

Helping Nintendo

■ With Sega effectively turning its back on Camelot, Takahashi began the search for another major company that could benefit from little Camelot's big skills. He recalls how back in 1998 Nintendo was "very isolated" and "seemed to be helpless". The reason for that sentiment? "I felt Nintendo's line-up of games was lacking. There's no doubt that Nintendo is the company that produced today's game market, and it's Nintendo that has provided the highest-quality game software to the largest number of users. But back then I felt as though NCL's line-up was missing something, so it was Camelot's turn to help. Nintendo was most in need of our assistance." As well as the excellent *Mario Tennis* and *Golf*, Camelot went on to create a sublime handheld tactical RPG series in *Golden Sun*.

Shining Force was launched in March 1992. "At that time, the games industry's way of thinking about role-playing games put the emphasis squarely on telling an interesting story," Takahashi laments. "That was apparently the purpose of role-playing games – just to tell a good story. However, I've always believed that engaging battles are the most crucial factor in an RPG. Even today, you see many role-playing games that are designed according to a philosophy where battles are just a bonus and the story is the main thing. I could never accept that and I wouldn't go along with it. RPG players spend such a great amount of their time in battle that there's no way a battle system should be treated merely as something that's tacked onto a good story."

As it transpires, a relatively obscure Japanese PC game called *Silver Ghost*, released by Kure Software Koubou in 1988, exerted an influence on the design of *Shining Force*. "Prior to *Silver Ghost*," Takahashi explains, "I didn't like tactical simulation games at all – they gave players too much time to think… their tempo was all over the place. But *Silver Ghost* was different: it was a simulation action type of game where you had to direct, oversee and command multiple characters; it was the title that convinced me simulation games didn't have to be crap."

■■■ *SHINING FORCE'*S MOST obvious inheritance from *Silver Ghost* is the gochakyara (multiple character) system, whereby the chess-like command of units drove the series' battle system and satisfied Takahashi's desire for a truly engaging brand of tactical combat. Daring to mention Intelligent

Systems' (ostensibly) similarly structured *Fire Emblem* series only earns us a humorous retort: "The original Famicom *Fire Emblem* game? The tempo of that title was so bad that it wasn't something I even wanted to play. *Fire Emblem* had zero influence on *Shining Force*." Takahashi continues, "Rather, before participating in the *Shining Project* I was thinking, 'I wonder if there's any way we can take the battles from *Dragon Quest* and make them more fun?' *Shining Force'*s battle system came about as a result of following that line of thinking to its logical conclusion" – evidently with a little help from *Silver Ghost*.

Even with *Shining In The Darkness* completed (see Dungeon Fascination boxout for more on the production of that series prologue), development of *Shining Force* was ambitious and consequently proved extremely difficult for Takahashi's team to perfect. "From the battle system through to the combat screen, we entered development with the aim of making everything new, featuring only things that had never been seen in a game before. *Shining In The Darkness* was more successful than I had anticipated – in terms of sales and reviews – so I think I might have been overestimating my ability as a creator somewhat… In fact it was terribly difficult to produce *Shining Force*. For the battle screen and title screen we took inspiration from a certain other game, but what I didn't realise until after we'd finished development was that that game had used half of its four megs of ROM on those two features alone. Of course, we didn't copy the exact screen designs, but still… we created such memory-intensive battle screens that it was incredibly hard to pull it off. But hey, I remember feeling young and powerful back then.

"My basic stance as far as RPG development is concerned, is to produce worthwhile and enjoyable battles. *Shining Force* was the first embodiment of

I DIDN'T LIKE TACTICAL SIMULATION GAMES. THEY GAVE PLAYERS TOO MUCH TIME TO THINK

■ *Shining Force Gaiden: Final Conflict* was never officially translated, but a fan-made patch is available online if you know where to look.

■ The 3D presentation of *Shining Force III* allowed the story scenes to play out with dynamic camera angles that dramatically followed the action.

■ The *Shining Force III* Premium Disc is a great place to find lots of concept art like this.

that philosophy. I felt that the primitive battles in games such as *Wizardry* and *Dragon Quest* were enjoyable, but we introduced the notion of 'distance and range' to form *Shining Force*'s tactical battles. However, in order to produce and hone that battle system we had to go through an incredibly difficult period of experimentation with trial-and-error procedures… We overcame so many obstacles to develop that battle system, but it was a labour of love and we ended up deeply attached to it."

■■■ Unfortunately for Takahashi, while players and critics universally appreciated his team's fine work on *Shining Force*, Sega's bosses were less enthusiastic. In part this was a result of differences in attitude and approach between the Sega managers Takahashi had initially dealt with and those who succeeded them – new additions to the administration one by one transforming the company from a modest game-loving outfit to an austere profit-obsessed corporation. "From 1990 on," Takahashi explains, "Sega gradually became a larger scale business. New managers were recruited and things started to change. When Sega's managers were replaced, we came to be seen just as a small, unruly subsidiary that wanted things its own way, and because of that we were forced out of Sega's main line of business. From that point on, I felt that Sega had ceased to be a true software-orientated company."

This sad state of affairs forced Takahashi to begin production of *Shining Force II* with a team that had been decimated and, effectively, rebuilt. Most of the original *Shining Force* staff were beginners who had potential but no prior experience. However, even though they now had a successful game in their back catalogue, Sega's reluctance to increase the level of funding it granted for the development of this sequel meant that from an economic perspective there was little motivation to stick with the project.

"We were in a really precarious situation at that point," Takahashi admits, "because we knew that if we couldn't produce another hit we would have no future. The number of staff we had working on the *Shining Force* series varied with each game until the Saturn era, during which time the team was pretty settled and didn't change much. We carefully chose our staff from among many candidates, and after *Shining Force II* the core staff remained and grew stronger together. *Shining Force II* was an experimental

HIROYUKI TAKAHASHI
Camelot President
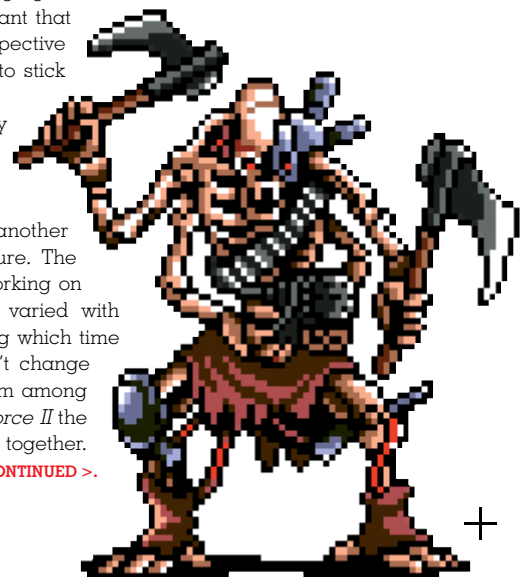
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

PC-88 release *Silver Ghost* provided Takahashi with a template for *Shining Force*'s advanced version of its multiple character system.

The *Golden Sun* games benefited from experience gained during Camelot's work on the Game Gear-based *Shining Force Gaiden* titles.

SHINING FORCE III SERVED AS PROOF WE COULD DO OTHER TYPES OF STORY

title where we improved the story and enhanced the game's 'RPG-ness'."

Between 1992 and 1995, Takahashi also found time to oversee Camelot's production of the *Shining Force Gaiden* series of Game Gear-based spin-offs. "We developed the *Gaiden* series as a simpler variation of *Shining Force* – one that could easily be played on a portable console. At the time, I believe that a lot of games for handhelds were developed without much thought. But we wanted to produce a portable title that would be a genuine system seller, something that was more than just a 'not bad for a handheld game' type of affair." They succeeded in doing just that, and although the first *Gaiden* outing was initially restricted to a local Japanese release (a Sega publishing issue that would again hinder Camelot when it was time for the world to experience *Shining Force III*), it did eventually receive a translation as part of 1995's Mega CD compilation *Shining Force CD*.

While Takahashi's aims at the outset of the *Shining Force* series' development had been battle-orientated ambitions, the post-*Shining Force II* hardware migration from Mega Drive to Saturn – along with the maturing of Sega's core audience – meant that change was now essential. Specifically, Takahashi was aware of the need to give more attention to Camelot's storytelling, which had always been composed as an overarching, catch-all conceptualisation that included both the main *Shining Force* series and its different-name/same-bloodline close relatives. In the mid-Nineties there was a distinct shift in style: the early-period narrative can be traced right up to Camelot's 1995 Saturn debut, *Shining Wisdom*, but the following year's *Shining The Holy Ark* brought with it a revamped, more complex tone.

"Until *Wisdom*, the idea had been simply to develop a story that would attract a broad range of users," says Takahashi "From *Holy Ark* on, the story and game world were redesigned to focus on the Saturn players of the time. Japanese Saturn owners were generally in their late-teens or early-twenties. The age group had shifted away from children, so with these Saturn owners as the focus, we constructed a world where the concept was 'fantasy that can be enjoyed by adults'. This new approach led to a darker, deeper world than we had been creating for the 'all ages' category prior to *Holy Ark*. We started to work on the plot of a story that would be appropriate in such a world.

Things moved up another notch once Camelot turned its attention to the epic, triple-scenario *Shining Force III*. "We wanted *Shining Force III* to serve as proof to those users that we could do other types of story," Takahashi remembers. "But on the other hand, we didn't want to reject those fans who had never complained about the good-against-evil story lines. In that sense, in order to appease both sets of fans, *Shining Force III* ended up as a compilation of the results of lots of trial and error." The resulting game still told a story of good versus evil but radically allowed you to play from the perspective of 'evil' on its second disc, revealing that the definitions between the two weren't so clear cut.

Dungeon Fascination

■ "When I was working as a producer at Enix," Takahashi says, "I remember seeing a 3D dungeon game brought in by a freelance game creator. I was very impressed. I thought that if he was in charge of programming we'd definitely be able to make something special, and so I started to plan. That game creator was Taguchi, who is still our main programmer today… Because we were on such a tight budget, apart from the programming and graphics, I did nearly all of the work on *Shining In The Darkness*. I suppose the basic concept behind *Darkness* was 'realism'. I thought it would be exciting if the player could actually travel to a fantasy world and walk around, exploring old houses, dungeons and other places. It was in essence a continuation of the sense of excitement you'd get from moving through the dungeons in older games such as *Wizardry*. By 'reality' I'm not talking about true realism – I mean the feeling that you really are progressing through actual houses and dungeons, and the same thing applied to the battles. In *Darkness*, *Wisdom* and *Holy Ark*, you can find evidence of our preference for the sense of 'being there' over accommodating standard game styles. I felt there were possibilities unfurling in the RPG genre, and I wanted to challenge myself to create RPGs in various styles."

Relative to team size and resources, Camelot's efforts with the *Shining* series had always been a little bit on the ambitious side, but the three-disc creation of *Shining Force III* was the team's boldest experiment and remains the high point of a series that has very few lows. The game's development was anything but simple: "We put everything we had into *Shining Force III* – it took so much time and so much of our money that no matter how many copies we sold, we would never have been able to make much money out it. I'm both a game creator and a business manager, and from the business perspective you could say that *Shining Force III* was a ridiculous challenge. It's a miracle that the game was fully realised."

■■■ The passing of time means that Hiroyuki Takahashi is now willing to speak frankly about his disappointments, even if he has no regrets. In the case of *Shining Force III*, that spells rejection, demotion and imposed limitations. "I can tell you this now: at the time of *Shining Force III*, Sega's management was, I believe, in a state of complete chaos," reveals Takahashi. "It's probably hard for you to fathom, but what was once a major part of Sega's market – namely the *Shining* series – was ejected from Sega's 'main line' of games, and the money we received from Sega to produce *Shining Force III* was less than half what they would spend on the development of 'main' games."

The ultimate fallout from this situation meant that English speakers were only treated to the first of *Shining Force III*'s three parts. "Release abroad was terribly limited," Takahashi reflects, "but that was just a consequence of it

■ The first two Mega Drive games had some wonderful art that was sadly replaced by inferior work for the US and UK releases.

being treated so poorly by Sega in Japan. And it wasn't just *Shining Force III* that was mistreated. For example, at one point Sega was refusing to even release *Shining The Holy Ark*. We had hoped that all three *Shining Force III* scenarios would be released internationally, but our hopes weren't fulfilled. Regardless, we made *Shining Force III* in order to give something back to the fans who had supported the series up to that point. Of course it's a shame that the game wasn't a big hit, but even though it's been more than ten years since the release of *Shining Force III*, people still love the game. And because of that, it's a game that has made me genuinely happy."

And will the West ever get to experience that same happiness? It would have been remiss of us not to ask about the prospect of a *Shining Force III* remake/re-release, but Takahashi's response isn't one we wanted to hear: "Even though we produced all of the plans, graphics, did all of the programming, and produced all of the music for the *Shining* series, Sega maintains the rights. That's why we can have no say in the matter." A wry smile speaks volumes.
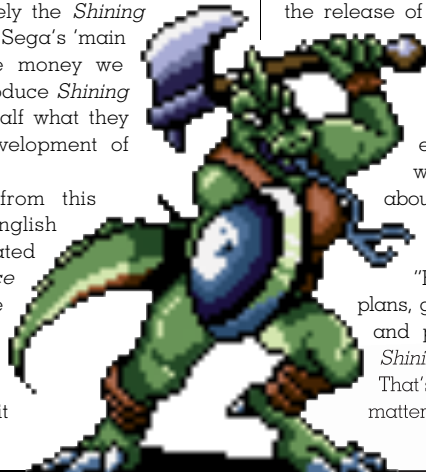
Dreamcast Unbelievers
Time for Camelot to leave Sega behind

■ "We were in attendance as guests when Sega announced the Dreamcast," Takahashi confides. "On stage there were Sega managers alongside representatives of four major software houses who were pledging to support Sega's Dreamcast market… Everyone was grinning." Here the story takes a predictably blue tone: "Camelot had at that point been rejected; we were apparently no longer needed in Sega's marketplace. Even though people recognised that we had made the greatest contribution to the growth of Sega's consumer market, I felt on that day as though the time had come for us to leave. I felt lonely, but at the same time I felt relieved because I sensed that there was no future for Dreamcast. Sega had become even less of a software-orientated company. Even if Camelot had made the best software for Sega, recovery of its market share still would have been impossible…"
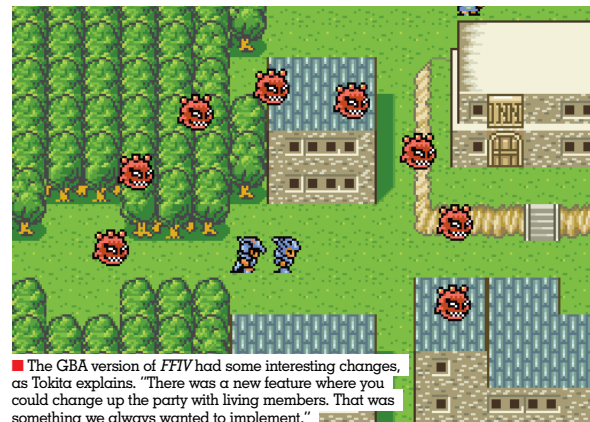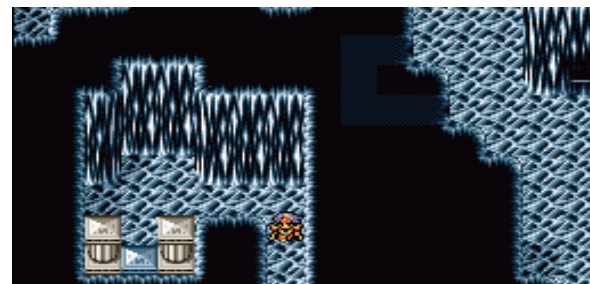
FINAL FANTASY IV

Despite being the fourth game in the series, Final Fantasy IV was only just the beginning of Square's rise to JRPG domination. Original designer Takashi Tokita explains the making of a genre masterpiece

Released: 1991
Format: SNES
Publisher: Square
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:
Hironobu Sakaguchi
Director
Takashi Tokita
Lead Designer
Yoshitaka Amano
Character Designer
Nobuo Uematsu
Composer

WITH FOURTEEN MAIN entries, plus countless sequels and spin-offs, which edition of *Final Fantasy* can be considered the most important? The first is a strong contender, since the series simply wouldn't exist without it. *Final Fantasy VII* is obviously important for catapulting the series into the modern age and introducing the genre to a global audience. But, for our money, it's 1991's *Final Fantasy IV* that may well be the defining moment in the franchise's evolution. It was the first to redefine the JRPG as a more linear, story-focussed genre. It introduced the Active Time Battle system, which added new strategies to otherwise standard combat, and went on to dominate the series for many years. And it was the first to put you in control of proper, multi-faceted characters that would actually change as people, shaped by the events of the unfolding narrative.

But enough about *Final Fantasy IV*'s achievements for now. Let's go back to the start and see how this landmark role playing game came to be. The year was 1990 and Square had just shipped *Final Fantasy III* for the Famicom. A young designer named Takashi Tokita, who had started at the company as a programmer on *Rad Racer* before contributing sound effects to *FFIII*, found himself in charge of the series' first Super Famicom entry as lead designer.

"I guess I did get a credit for the sound effects in *FFIII*, but that wasn't my main job," Tokita clarifies. "I was involved in graphic design, and I was also responsible for jotting down ideas, drawing up images. I was kind of involved in every aspect of it; whenever I had some spare time on my hands I got involved in whatever was available. Up until *Final Fantasy III* I was working as a part-timer at the company; I had joined a theatre troupe and I worked on *FFIII* as a part-time job. But, starting with *Final Fantasy IV*, I got an offer to be a full employee of the **CONTINUED >.**

■ The GBA version of *FFIV* had some interesting changes, as Tokita explains. "There was a new feature where you could change up the party with living members. That was something we always wanted to implement."

THE STAFF WANTED TO DO SOMETHING THAT DRAGON QUEST HADN'T DONE BEFORE

Girl:My mom's dragon fell so my mom did too...

■ Tokita has taken many roles in the development of *FFIV*, even including voice acting in the Japanese release of the DS remake.

Off Fight
Sold Item

Cecil 221 HP 221

FloatEye Kain 190/ 190
Eagle Cecil 200/ 200

D.Mist Kain 129/ 190
Cecil 148/ 221
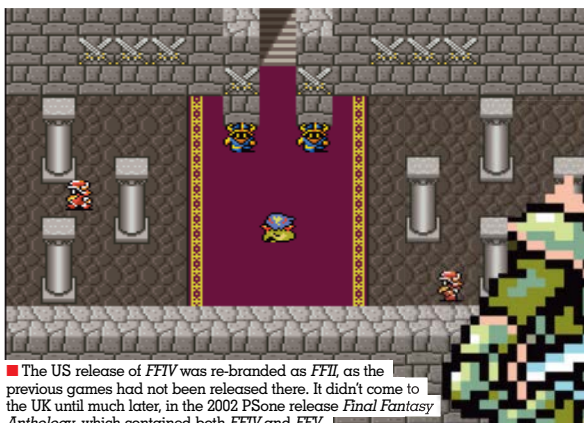
■ The US release of *FFIV* was re-branded as *FFII*, as the previous games had not been released there. It didn't come to the UK until much later, in the 2002 PSone release *Final Fantasy Anthology*, which contained both *FFIV* and *FFV*.

Fight FuSoYa 1900/1900
art Rosa 2564/2564
Sneak Cecil 3477/3477
Ninja Rydia 1643/164
Item Edge 2375/2

FROM THE FORUM

Thar Be Dragons

■ THE *FINAL Fantasy* series was one of a handful of games responsible for defining what the Japanese RPG would become, but it wasn't the most famous, at least not in its home country. That accolade goes to the phenomenally popular *Dragon Quest*, so we can't help but ask Tokita what he thought of his biggest rival at the time. "There were already existing games like *Ultima* and *Wizardry*. *Dragon Quest* was those two games, with a Japanese type of comic style added; they were the origin of Japanese RPGs for the NES. *Dragon Quest II* was the first RPG that I completed. There, I felt the possibilities of storytelling within a game. That's where I started becoming more interested in the RPG genre. There was motivation among the staff to kind of do something that *Dragon Quest* hadn't done. A lot of the staff had played *Ultima* and *Wizardry* as well, but they really wanted to set out and do something that *Dragon Quest* hadn't done before."

■ The original English localisation of *FFIV* leaves a lot to be desired. It's much more fleshed out and engaging in the subsequent remakes.

company, and so I became a game designer and *FFIV* was the first job I worked on full-time. "Back then," Tokita adds, "I was involved in graphics, and then I was given the title of game designer. It was a lot to deal with all of a sudden. I'm kind of surprised that Hironobu Sakaguchi, the director at the time, gave me all that responsibility." The opportunity presented to Tokita couldn't have had more potential. The first three *Final Fantasy* games had all proven hugely popular in Japan, while the US edition of the first game had just been released that year, and *Final Fantasy IV* would be released there as its direct follow-up. Additionally, this was the first game in the series to be developed for Nintendo's new Super Famicom hardware, so the team would be able to create something even more impressive than any previous entry.

■■■ "The biggest difference between the Famicom and Super Famicom," says Tokita, "was the memory, where the ROM and CPU both increased. The number of characters that you could push out into the game increased, and the effects that were made possible were expanded. You could get bigger effects. The memory size played a big role in the effects and sound that were possible in *Final Fantasy IV*." These technological advancements enabled Square to create a richer, more detailed world, with characters that had more distinct designs – both essential features for an RPG – and Tokita is quick to praise the role of the Super Famicom's unique visual tricks in *FFIV*'s design. "I guess the two biggest aspects were that the color variations increased with the SNES platform and that it also had Mode 7, which allowed for rotation of the perspective, the world." Which allowed Square to create a vast overworld, which appeared to expand out far over the horizon. "Boy, that takes me back," he adds after recalling memories that have probably laid dormant for the best part of two decades.

Anyone who's played the original release of *FFIV*, rather than the many remakes that have appeared in recent years, will know that graphics weren't really the game's strong point. It looked more like a slightly more detailed NES game than the big and bold imagery of 1994's *Final Fantasy VI*. Rather, *FFIV*'s emphasis was well and truly on its story and characters, which Tokita personally oversaw with great

dedication. "Back in the day, obviously I was involved in the scriptwriting," he confirms. "Connecting the game through the script was my area, that was my job. Without that, and without that pressure, the game wouldn't have been developed, so that was a great experience on my part. It was interesting for me to be able to create the script and be able to bring it all together from the player's standpoint."

"Back then I only went home once a week, so the rent was kind of a waste," he adds with a chuckle. Tokita certainly put in the hours, and it shows all the way through *Final Fantasy IV*. Previous games in the series may have featured story and characters before, but only in the loosest possible sense of the words. Characters

THE SNES MEMORY PLAYED A BIG ROLE IN THE EFFECTS AND SOUND THAT WERE POSSIBLE

were mere archetypes; custom-named by the player and chosen for their class and skills, they were depicted as generic warriors on an even more generic quest. But in *Final Fantasy IV*, Square introduced a more guided narrative experience in which main character Cecil was anything but one-dimensional. Starting off as a powerful dark knight, Cecil defects from his army after following questionable orders from the king that result in the slaughter of a whole town full of innocent people. From there he embarks on a personal journey that literally transforms him as a character, a quest for redemption that bucked previous RPG trends by portraying an initially flawed hero rather than an idealised one.

Tokita acknowledges that RPGs before *FFIV* were mainly about the freedom of open-world exploration and discovery, but that this contributed to an unfocused, sometimes confusing, experience. For *Final Fantasy IV* he was inspired more by the editing of movies, which allowed the team to create a more dramatic tale that frequently escalated in excitement, right up to its incredible finale on the surface of the moon.

Of course, this new emphasis on storytelling had the effect of streamlining the game to the point where exploration was virtually non-existent and customisation was limited to just the equipment of your characters. But *Final Fantasy IV* was certainly not without a sense of strategy. Its most important innovation was the introduction of the Active Time Battle system, which completely revolutionised the way RPG combat functioned. Previous *Final Fantasy* games worked much like the *Dragon Quest* series, in that they were purely turn-based and could become quite tedious in the length of time they took to play. But in *Final Fantasy IV*, Square tweaked the system so that it was based more on the speed of each character. Commands were still entered through a menu, but would play out almost in real time as characters became ready to perform them. Unlike true turn-based games, this meant that you were constantly engaged by the battles. Get distracted and you could leave yourself open to attack. Fail to input commands quickly and you'd just be wasting valuable time.

■■■ The inspiration behind ATB is perhaps the most unusual in game development history. As the story goes, *FFIV*'s planner, Hiroyuki Itoh, got the idea when watching a formula one race, seeing the way some drivers would overtake and even lap their opponents. In *Final Fantasy IV* this translates as the speed of each character relative to both their allies and enemies. The fastest characters are often able to act twice as often as the slower ones, while big spells can take ages to cast, forcing the mages to effectively duck out of battle for several seconds. It's a masterstroke that forces you to really consider the properties of your party and make careful decisions, weighing time spent against the potential damage dealt.

While sheer inspiration can be credited for some of these accomplishments, *Final Fantasy IV*, like most great games, was made through great effort and iteration, and, as Tokita explains, even some of the greatest struggles eventually resulted in a more polished product. "When we initially wrote up the script," he says by way of example, "there was a lot of long, extended dialogue. We had to cut it down to about one-fourth of its original size. It wasn't like trimming it down; we had to cut out big chunks of it. But it kind of made it more of a condensed,

TAKASHI TOKITA
Lead Designer

Meteor Shower

■ GAME TESTING CAN be an arduous process on any game, but on *Final Fantasy IV* it even began to affect the team's ability to take care of personal hygiene, as Tokita recounts. "We were at the end of the testing period. I went home, I took a shower, and when I got back the screen was completely still, nothing was moving anymore – just some mysterious bug that had come up in development. We figured out what the issue was; it was something with the song data, where it was just continuously looping and nothing would come out. Something was wrong with the song files. After all the test players had gone home, we had to connect it to a bunch of different TVs and play each of the songs through to check that they were in line with the game. We had some limitations on whether we could take a shower during the testing process... "

meaty version of the story." This editing exercise has led many to inaccurately assume that entire sections of story are just waiting to be re-inserted into the game, and some have urged Square Enix to add them into one of the remakes, but Tokita remains against the idea. "If we went back and implemented that, it would change the whole experience. It wouldn't be *Final Fantasy IV* any more."

And who would want *Final Fantasy IV* to be any different? For many, it was the first game in the series to really grab them and prove the worth of the Japanese RPG style, and it has therefore become one of the most revered SNES titles made. If you want further proof then look no further than the fact that this is by far the most remade and re-released *Final Fantasy* game of all time, having been ported to the PlayStation, WonderSwan Color and Virtual Console, and remade in many different forms for Game Boy Advance, Japanese mobile phones, PSP and DS… almost all of which were produced under the careful supervision of Tokita himself. It's clearly a game that remains close to the designer's heart even after years of working on other titles. "Of course, there were a lot of people involved in the project," he concedes, "but to bring the title together on my own, to finish it up was a big thing I'm proud of. I connected the maps, established the event scenes. When you put it in movie terms, it was kind of like being a cameraman and an editor at the same time. It helped me be really confident in myself." ⓖ

■ Hiromichi Tanaka, lead designer of *FFIII* and later head of *FFXI* and *XIV*, was originally meant to design *FFIV* but left to join what would eventually become the *Secret Of Mana* project.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

FFIV virtually restarted the series, refocusing the emphasis on linear story and distancing itself from the poular *Dragon Quest*.

FFV retained the linear narrative that would dominate the series for years, but increased gameplay complexity with its job system.

Hall Of Fame...
Aeris

When Aeris died in Final Fantasy VII, millions of gamers mourned, so just why did this female videogame character mean so much to so many?

AS SEPHIROTH DESCENDED through the darkness, piercing his sword through Aeris, many a jaw dropped. It was at once heart-lifting and heart-breaking: a genuinely emotional gaming experience, an example of the art of games. And yet it took from us one of the most cherished characters of the entire industry.

Aeris's story is far from happy. Hunted by Shinra all her life and used as a test subject, Aeris witnessed the death of her parents at an early age. The love of her life, Zack, was also lost on an away mission to Nibelheim. Aeris later fell for Cloud because of an uncanny resemblance to Zack and teamed up with Avalanche. They managed to rescue her from Shinra after a failed mission to save the Sector 7 Pillar, but Aeris ultimately died, while summoning Holy, at the hands of Sephiroth in the City of Ancients. To say the least, it was a troubled life. Yet through it all, Aeris had an eternal optimism. "And let me handle Sephiroth. And Cloud, you take care of yourself. So you don't have a breakdown, okay?" she joked before heading off to the City of Ancients and certain doom.

From beginning to end, her positivity was almost an alien concept among the morose surroundings of Gaia. Whether selling flowers to Cloud or summoning Holy, Aeris symbolises life in a story racked with death and ruin. The last of the Cetra – a peaceful race capable of healing and communicating with the Lifestream – Aeris's entire design, from the beautiful pink dress to the long flowing hair, is one of elegance radiating humanity, as though she were the last remnant of the peace that Cloud and company seek. She is also the one hope of restoring that tranquillity, the true hero of the story. For not only is Aeris the natural antithesis of Jenova (Jenova strives to destroy the planet; Aeris to heal it), she also summons Holy and saves the planet,

sacrificing herself in the process. In life, Aeris became a hero. In death, she became a legend.

Over a decade has passed and website forums still swarm with fans questioning their loss. Many argue that Squaresoft hurried completion of *Final Fantasy VII*, negating her resurrection. The arguments for this are sound: during Cloud's dream about her death, Aeris says: "Then I'll be going now. I'll come back when it's all over", when above the Highwind, Tifa says: "She planned on coming back all along. She always talked about the 'next time'." Then there is the inexplicable fact that, when using PC program Mtrainer, Aeris is made playable after death and even has her own scenes and lines. Such is the love for Aeris that Japanese fans sent a lengthy petition to scenario writer Yoshinori Kitase, demanding a return. Yet this seems to negate the possibility that Aeris was resurrected. After all, she seemed to know she was protected by a higher power.

"It feels like I'm being lead by something," she says. "I'll come back when its all over," she adds before dying summoning Holy, the magic of healing, the one magic perhaps capable of resurrection, which engulfs her corpse as it descends in the water. Finally, there is the possibility that the player decides Aeris's fate. The concluding FMV shows her hand reaching from Holy to Cloud as though there is a link between the two, perhaps Cloud is capable of bringing Aeris back.

So, what is the link? The most seemingly random element of gameplay in *Final Fantasy VII* are the choices Cloud has to make between Aeris and Tifa, which result in the date scene at the Gold Saucer. If Cloud dates Aeris, he will be told that: Jenova (Valvados in the scene) has a weakness for love; Jenova has not yet harmed Aeris for she is contained within Holy; Cloud's love will bring Aeris back and, finally, "The legendary hero and our story live happily ever after." So, which is the right interpretation? Well, there isn't one. The beauty of Aeris is the mystery in which she is shrouded, which will go on, whereas, had Yoshinori Kitase written a clear resurrection, that mystique would be lost.

Of course, the death of Aeris is not the end of her story. Her journey within the Lifestream has been novelised by Benny Matsuyama's short story, Maiden Who Travels The Planet, in which she meets several old friends on her mission to use the Lifestream to aid Holy and destroy Meteor. She also appeared in the anime movie *Advent Children* and in *Kingdom Hearts*, *Kingdom Hearts: Chain Of Memories*, *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Final Fantasy: Before Crisis*.

Aeris's mortality has helped establish the immortality of *Final Fantasy VII*. Resurrection or no resurrection, Aeris will always be remembered as a gaming legend.

>. MAGIC MOMENTS

■ **The beginning, the end or the rebirth? The question is still being asked a decade later.**

■ **Does the date scene hold more than meets the eye? Teasingly subtle hints abound.**

■ **Aeris prays for Holy, saving the planet from Meteors' destruction in the City of Ancient.**

HALL OF FAME... AERIS

SMILE

Considering the bleak, dystopian atmosphere of Midgar, the fact that Aeris is always seen to be smiling marks her out as a symbol of hope to her companions. When she dies, this sense of hope dies with her and it is here that *Final Fantasy VII*'s plot becomes much darker in tone.

JACKET

Although Tetsuya Nomura was the lead designer for Aeris, Square's illustrator Yoshitaka Amano originally drew the character. Amano initially designed Aeris without a jacket so this item was removed when Aeris was designed for her cameo appearance in *Kingdom Hearts*.

STAFF

Aeris is a healer, and so her weapons are more defensive than other *FFVII* characters. Her final weapon, bizarrely, is an umbrella. Her Limit Breaks and magic are also used primarily for healing and defence.

HAIR

Aeris's hair, which is simply tied in a braid with pink ribbons, reflects her personality, feminine, laidback, and friendly, and directly contrasts Cloud's sharp, spiky and angular hair. You know what they say, opposites attract.

EYES

The green eyes symbolise nature and her oneness with the planet, in contrast to the red of Tifa's eyes The colour green has many cultural meanings, many of which can be applied to Aeris. In Medieval culture, green symbolised rebirth and regeneration as well as witchcraft, while the colour is also used in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* to represent hope.

DRESS

The long, pink dress is in contrast to Tifa Lockheart's mini skirt, and is designed to appear ladylike. In *Final Fantasy: Before Crisis*, Tetsuya Nomura added white and green to the dress design. In *Kingdom Hearts*, Aeris also wore a belt.

HIKING BOOTS

For walking, naturally. As both the 'Flower Girl' and a member of the deeply spiritual Cetra race, her connection to nature is important and is reflected in her choice of footwear.

■ A highlight in the annals of the industry. The death of a hero, the birth of a legend.

■ Aeris's corpse descends into the light of Holy, her journey within the Lifestream begins.

■ Is this, as Cloud says, "An answer from the planet?" can he bring Aeris back?

HALL OF FAME... AERIS
THE WOMEN OF FINAL FANTASY

Final Fantasy I

1. White Mage
FF's characters are 'non gender specific' – only the White Mage looks like it could be female.

2. Darryl
She is a mermaid who is given legs in the Sunken Shrine.

3. Conneria

4. Crescent Lake

5. Arylon

6. Onrac

7. Malmond

8. Fairy

9. Mermaid

10. Matoya
Warriors of Light recover her special crystal, returning her eyesight. First of the 'mad old woman' archetype.

11. Pravoka

12. Princess Sara
Daughter of the King of Coneria. Rescued by the Warriors of Light from Garland in the Temple of Fiends.

13. Kary
Six-armed creature with human head and serpentine lower body.

Final Fantasy II

14. Leila
Lost sea battle with Firion. Gives up her ship and joins the party.

15. Maria
Learns that Dark Knight, a servant to the Emperor, is her brother, Leon. The first lead female – remarkable in an era dominated by male leads.

16. Nelly
Captured by Pavel. Sent to work in Mythril Mine. Later rescued by the heroes. Her father, Josef, is killed in the Snow Cave.

17. Hilda
Daughter of the King of Fynn, Captured during efforts to free him from the Empire as Palamecia. Rescued by Firion. Her boyfriend, Scott the Prince of Kason, is killed, leaving Hilda to his brother, Gordon. Becomes queen.

18. Vampire lady

19. Lamia Queen

20. Vampire girl

Final Fantasy III

21. Refia
Raised by Mythril smith Takka. Refia is a feisty youth who runs away from her rigorous training.

22. Aria
Found in a shipwreck. Joins the party to restore the Water Crystal. Killed during the mission.

23. Delilah
Mad old lady. Lives in the sewers and keeps exploding shoes.

24. Princess Sara Atley
The Princess of Sasune is capable of ending Jinn's curse.

25. Medusa

26. Thanatos

27. Shadow Master

28. Shiva

29. Dullahan

30. Gutsco

31. Kunoichi

Final Fantasy IV

32. Rosa
Lives in Baron Town. Becomes a White Wizard to protect others. Falls ill when searching for lost lover, Cecil. Her character was met with criticism for her weakness and reliance on Cecil, often yelling "Save me, Cecil".

33. Porom
Mysidia Elder takes her under his wing. Wise and brave, in contrast to the rude Black Mage Palom. *FFIV* was the first to take lead female characters to US.

34. Rydia Battle
Falls ill after using a Tita Summon (an earthquake). Joins Cecil after he saves her. Swallowed by *Leviathan*, raised in the Land of Summons. Is an adult when she rejoins Cecil.

35. Anna
Father dies when Red Wings attack Damcyan Castle. Gives her life to save lover Edward.

36. Luca
Daughter of King Giott. Princess of Dwarves. The Keeper of Calbrena dolls. The Key to the Sealed Cave.

37. Asura
Queen of Phantom Beasts joins the party after you defeat her.

38. Sandy

39. Queen Eblan

40. Cindy

41. Miss Vamp

42. Mindy

43. Queen Eblan

44. Draculady

Final Fantasy V

45. Faris Scherwiz
Lost at sea. Becomes pirate leader. Captures Bartz, Lenna and Galuf before learning of her relationship to Lenna (her sister) and King Tycoon (her father) when she joins the party.

46. Lenna Charlotte Tycoon
First in a new generation of Warriors of Dawn. Searches for her father lost en route to the Wind Shrine. Joins Bartz and Galuf. Unlike her sister (Faris), Lenna represents water and is a beautiful, feminine queen.

47. Krile Mayer Baldesion
Princess of Bal Castle. Inherits Galuf's power after he is killed by Exdeath. Becomes a Crystal Warrior. The first of many 'perky young girl' archetypes in the series – to be followed by the likes of Yuffie and Rikku.

48. Syldra
This Thunder Dragon pulls the pirate ship. Sacrifices herself to save childhood friend, Faris. Returns as a summon.

49. Stella
She dies before the game begins, but a flashback of her death is shown in her daughter Bartz's old house.

50. Jenica
This nurse looks after Lenna and Faris. A prime example of the 'Elderly guardian' archetype.

51. Girl

52. ZephyrZone

53. Siren

54. WoodSprite

55. Syldra

56. Chamcubia

57. Shiva

58. Mellusion

59. Cherie

60. Magissa

61. Belladonna

62. Almucia

Final Fantasy VI

63. Celes Chere
FFVI introduces both more lead and secondary female characters. Celes Chere is a beautiful warrior. Her parents are killed by the Empire. She is given to Cid Del Norte Marquez as a Magitek knight. Potentially the strongest member of your party.

64. Terra Branford
An Esper with strong magical powers. Sought by the emperor, she becomes a magitek soldier before joining the rebels. Another strong party member.

65. Elayne
Cyan's wife. Murdered with her son and the citizens of Doma by Kefka's warfare.

66. Madonna
Falls into the Esper world and suffers severe injuries. Nursed to health by the Esper Maduin, with whom she conceives Terra.

67. Siren

68. Sraphin

69. Old woman

70. Starlet

71. Rachel
Saves her lover Locke's life on a rickety bridge. Loses memory. Later dies in raid by the Empire.

72. Matron

73. Maria
Opera diva who looks like Celes.

74. Madam

75. Lola
Girl from Miranda, in mourning.

76. Katarin
Has issues with pregnancy and childbirth. (A huge step toward acknowledging the female gaming market.)

77. Daryl
Dies racing her ship, the Falcon, against boyfriend Setzer Gabbiani's Blackjack. A female NPC with a full backstory.

78. Barb-E

79. Godess

80. Critic

81. Dahling

82. Chadarnook

Final Fantasy IV

58.
57.
55.
56.
54.
53. 52.

44.
43.
42.
41.

Final Fantasy IV

Final Fantasy IV

Final Fantasy I

Final Fantasy II

Final Fantasy III

KEY

■ – Player characters
■ – Allies
□ – Enemies
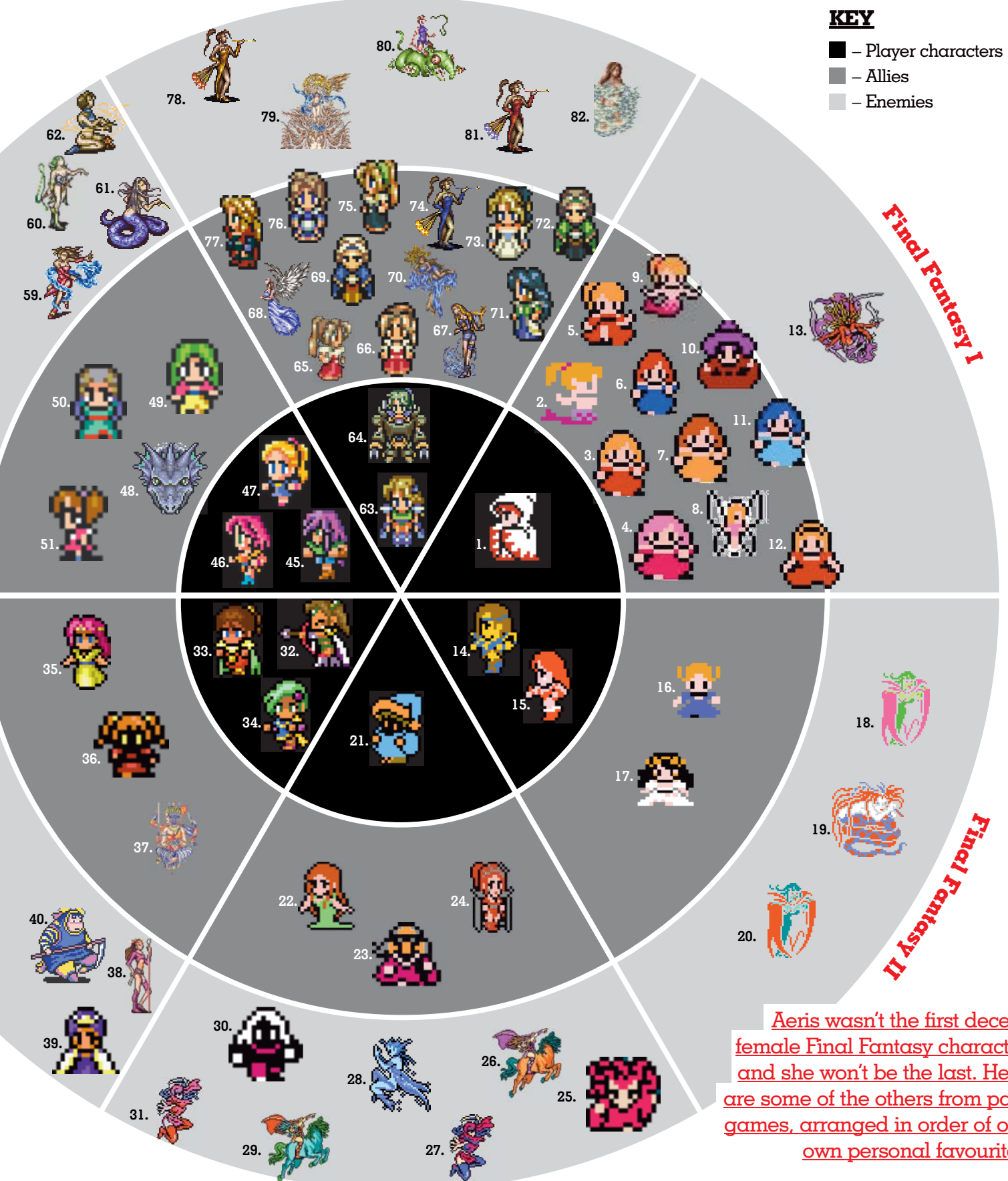
Aeris wasn't the first decent female Final Fantasy character and she won't be the last. Here are some of the others from past games, arranged in order of our own personal favourites

LEVEL-UP
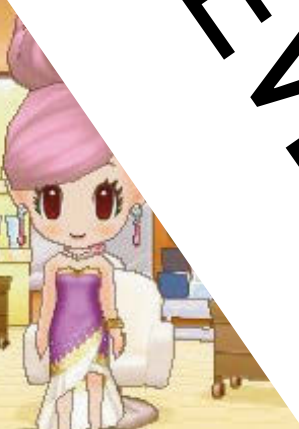
Ten years ago, Level-5 was a relative unknown in the Japanese games industry, but now it practically runs the show. CEO and founder Akihiro Hino explains the company's incredible rise to power

2000 DARK CLOUD

2002 DARK CHRONICLE
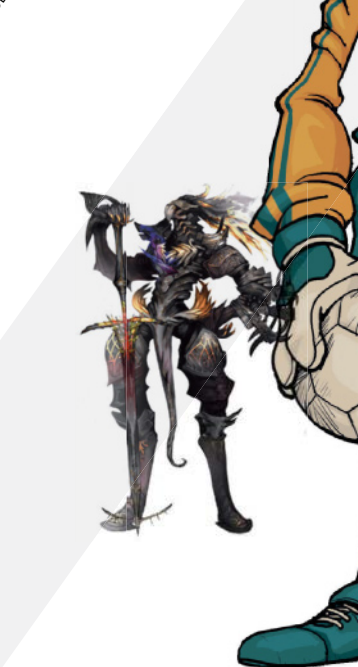
As Japan's videogame industry reportedly flounders behind that of the West, unable to reclaim the former glories it achieved in the Nineties, there's at least one studio bucking the trend with a combined critical and commercial acclaim that puts other Japanese publishers – some two to three times older – to total shame. That studio is Level-5, the Fukuoko-based developer with such a long string of incredible achievements to its name that it's hard to know where to begin. It has been courted by and partnered with each of the three main platform holders in its time, has become one of the most trusted external developers under Square Enix, has worked on the most venerable videogame franchise in Japan, launched its own multi-million selling IP, created its own anime series, and even co-developed two games with Japan's greatest animation house, Studio Ghibli. Most incredible of all, it has done all of this in little more than a decade.

Ten years ago, few people outside of the Japanese games industry had heard of Level-5, but some may have known the name Akihiro Hino. Working at Riverhillsoft, an obscure but prolific developer of graphic adventure games, Hino was best known as the lead programmer on *Overblood* – an early survival-horror game for PlayStation, only now remembered through YouTube infamy for its ludicrous plot and hilarious voice acting. Following development of a sequel, a 30-year-old Hino left Riverhillsoft in 1998, which is where the Level-5 story begins.

"At my former company I served as a team director," Hino explains. "We broke off to form our own company, which became the Level-5 you know today. Basically, we created a company with a group of members that all knew each other, so it was like our team just became a new company."

The name Level-5, says Hino, was picked because the team wanted to convey the message that they would deliver the highest-quality product, "like a five-star restaurant." It's a name that the company lived up to immediately with its debut release, 2000's *Dark Cloud*, a game generally regarded as the first

great PlayStation 2 RPG. "*Dark Cloud* had the challenge of being an interesting project that makes the best use of the hardware's capabilities," says Hino of the game he personally scripted and designed. "Seeing as the PlayStation 2 had enhanced processing power over its PlayStation predecessor, we wanted to introduce elements that could only be actualised on the PlayStation 2 hardware. So on *Dark Cloud*, we attempted to include the Georama feature [*Dark Cloud*'s city-building component], which wasn't possible on the original PlayStation due to its slower processing speed."

Dark Cloud was so good, in fact, that Sony itself chose to publish the game, signalling the start of Level-5's uncanny ability to partner up with the biggest platform holders and publishers in Japan. "While at my former employer, I had the chance to work along with Sony Computer Entertainment, so when we decided to go independent, I was able to consult with them on a lot of things," says Hino. "Because they helped us in forming our own company, this led them to give us the responsibility of developing a project for them."

Level-5 immediately followed *Dark Cloud* with a sequel, named *Dark Chronicle*, leading many to assume that the fledgling developer intended to carve a niche for itself as an RPG specialist, though this is an assumption Hino is quick to dismiss. "We originally liked RPGs but we never intended to keep on making RPGs exclusively. The games we developed first, while being RPGs, had a lot of action elements in them, so they became more like action-RPGs in reality." Despite these claims, however, Level-5's next project was indeed an RPG – and not just any RPG, but the latest in Japan's most beloved series... *Dragon Quest*.

According to Hino, the staff at Enix had previously played his games and were huge fans. "That opened the door for us to talk about working on a title together," he says, and when Enix merged with Square in 2003 Level-5 ended up collaborating on *Dragon Quest VIII* for PS2. One of the most beautiful-looking RPGs of its generation, *Dragon Quest VIII* went on to sell an incredible 7 million copies worldwide, so we have to imagine that Square Enix was happy with Level-5's work, especially as the developer was re-commissioned to create *Dragon Quest IX* for DS, easily the most revolutionary game in the long-running series, and another commercial success with over 5 million copies sold.

In just half a decade, Level-5 had gone from complete obscurity to the darling of the Japanese games industry, quickly becoming the go-to team for many of the country's biggest publishers. Wisely, however, Hino and his team didn't just capitalise on these arrangements by continuing to work for hire, but made sure to learn from its relationships and eventually build itself up into a publisher with its own intellectual properties. "Working with each of these companies enabled us to learn a lot of things," he reveals. "The way each company thinks, from Square Enix, which has powerful I.P.s like *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, to

hardware manufacturers like SCE and Nintendo, they all vary considerably, so it was a very interesting study from which we gained a lot of experience. For instance, I believe that associating with each of these companies and learning from them how to not only protect the things you create, but how to deploy and expand on them, had a hand in Level-5 becoming what it is today."

The best two examples of what Level-5 has become today are, on the surface, very different to each other, but both in fact epitomise the developer's incredible capacity to build huge brands out of nothing. The first is a series so popular it has branched out beyond gamers to a vast demographic that straddles national boundaries, age and gender. It is, of course, *Professor Layton*. What began as a simple puzzle game, designed to appeal to the *Touch Generations* audience created by Nintendo and the DS, has exploded into a multimedia brand that now encompasses four games, with another two on the way, as well as a full-length animated movie. Likewise, the less well known but equally successful *Inazuma Eleven* started out as a great gameplay idea – football crossed with RPG – but has blossomed into a huge franchise, complete with four games and an animated TV series currently being localised for Europe.

Level-5 clearly now thinks in terms of brands as much as it does games, and each of its new titles is launched as a true intellectual property that can seamlessly cross over into different media. "If I am to say what is characteristic of Level-5, it would be that we observe our target audience, and it's probably that this desire to watch our customers that sets us apart," elaborates Hino. "We observe the conditions of the market, trying to tell what players currently want, before we start developing our games.

"I feel that there is a tendency in game companies right now to enter production with an eye set on 'what creators want to make' or 'what we as creators should be making'. But there is no point in releasing games that users do not want to play. By observing

your customers and the market as a whole, you can determine what is missing from the current line-up of game content, and if you fill that particular hole in the content, you probably will have a hit on your hands.

"In the case of *Little Battlers eXperience*, for instance, we didn't see any robot content on the market that might be considered a hit, so if we released a robot-related IP at that point in time, we had a chance to hit it big." *Little Battlers eXperience* is perhaps the most cunningly conceived Level-5 IP yet. Based around the Japanese youth obsession with plastic robot toys, it pits such collectible figurines against each other in battles set against the sort of cardboard dioramas you might find in a hobby shop or in an enthusiast's collection. The game was originally intended for release in 2009 but was delayed to coincide with the launch of a TV series tie-in as well as

"THERE IS NO POINT IN RELEASING GAMES THAT USERS DO NOT WANT TO PLAY. BY OBSERVING YOUR CUSTOMERS AND THE MARKET AS A WHOLE, YOU CAN DETERMINE WHAT IS MISSING"

a line of toys created by giant robot specialist Bandai. How's that for understanding your audience?

Curiously for a studio focussed on appealing to the peculiarities of Japanese tastes, Level-5 has had a tremendous amount of success in the West, thanks largely to the *Professor Layton* series as well as the high quality of its RPGs, and it's here where Hino's next challenge awaits. The company has recently opened a luxurious new office in America, with plans to open similar establishments in the UK and Europe, all geared toward localising and publishing even more of the company's Japanese games. "Eventually we

would love to be able to publish our games under the Level-5 brand in North America and Europe, perhaps starting with digital distribution, and then expanding into different fields, in both Europe and North America," he confirms. "To that end, we first need to establish a base to start our operations from, and then need to continue to investigate each area's market conditions. We are currently making headway with these preparations, and are planning to expand our operations in the near future."

Level-5 America's first big task is to localise the PlayStation 3 version of *Ni No Kuni*, the developer's incredible-looking RPG collaboration with Studio Ghibli. "Having the honour of working together with Studio Ghibli had a great impact on our company, both creatively and promotionally," says Hino, who personally announced the US release of the RPG at this year's Tokyo Game Show. Sadly, the DS edition looks set to remain Japan-only, but the PlayStation 3 edition has always been the most interesting of the two thanks to the way it uses real-time visuals that look as though you've stepped right into the world of Ghibli imagination.

TRUE FANTASY ALIVE?

■ Level-5 may be the biggest Japanese success story of recent years, but even this studio has slipped up from time to time. Its most obvious public misstep to date is the cancellation of *True Fantasy Live Online*. Once in development under Microsoft and promoted as the console's great hope for the MMO genre, it was cancelled in 2004 after three years' development. So what went wrong? "It was actually

Microsoft's decision to pull the plug on it," reveals Akihiro Hino. "We wanted to see the development of it through to the end. At the time, the Xbox's penetration into the Japanese market wasn't very high, and *True Fantasy Live Online* leaned heavily towards Japanese players' tastes. I think they probably didn't expect the release of one title to change things for the better, so they decided to cancel it."

With MMOs now more popular than ever, and Microsoft finally opening up the 360 to the genre, could we ever see *True Fantasy Live Online* make a comeback? Unfortunately, Hino doesn't seem optimistic. "I think it was a terribly disappointing outcome, and I hope that someday we can resume development again, but the current conditions don't allow any chance for it."

The Japanese release of *Professor Layton Vs. Ace Attorney* will see the return of the *Layton* series' regular voice cast, while the *Ace Attorney* characters will be voiced by the actors from the upcoming live action film by Takashi Miike.

Though Level-5's output has mostly concentrated on Nintendo handhelds in recent years, Hino assures us that the studio will jump from format to format as the market dictates. At TGS, the developer was vocally supportive of the PlayStation Vita, describing it as a "battleship" of a handheld.

Level-5 has its own mobile phone publishing arm in Japan and currently has plans to support Western mobile platforms like iPad and iPhone, though Hino is unwilling to confirm specifics at this point.

HE UNWOUND FUTURE

2008 WHITE KNIGHT CHRONICLES

2009 DRAGON QUEST IX: SENTINELS OF THE STARRY SKIES

2009 INAZUMA ELEVEN 2

2009 PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE LAST SPECTER

2010 INAZUMA ELEVEN 3

2010 WHITE KNIGHT CHRONICLES II

2041

NI NO KUNI PS3 ■ The DS version is Japan-only, but the one we're really excited about – the PS3 edition – is somehow even better. Featuring some of the most stunning visuals of the generation so far, *Ni No Kuni* matches the animation of Studio Ghibli with a Level-5 game design that purposely evokes classic JRPGs of the NES era.

PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE MASK OF MIRACLE 3DS
■ Though a 3DS launch title in Japan, *Mask Of Miracle* will release later here in the UK to make room for the fourth and final DS *Layton*. Set directly after the animated movie, this 3D instalment makes use of gyro controls to inject some new life into the puzzles, and was good enough to be the top-selling 3DS launch title in Japan.

FANTASY LIFE 3DS ■ Another Brownie Brown collaboration, this was originally in development for DS before making the jump to 3D. The game is a life simulation RPG, with similarities to *Harvest Moon* and *Animal Crossing*, and will make strong use of both online play and Street Pass so that players can experience its world together.

GIRL'S RPG 3DS ■ Another example of Level-5 laser-targeting a select audience, this 'made for girls' RPG also has the distinction of being created by an all-female development team. The aim of the game is to run a hostess club, which will be frequented by the stars of famous anime like *Lupin III* or *Baki The Grappler*.

FIVE GO TO THE FUTURE

Level-5 has an incredible number of new games in the works. Here are those we currently know about...

INAZUMA ELEVEN GO 3DS
■ It took three years for the original *Inazuma Eleven* to come to this country, so we expect Level-5 to skip some of its sequels and localise this forthcoming 3DS entry next. Like previous games in the football RPG series, *Go* will arrive in two forms, *Pokémon*-style, each offering slightly different content over the other.

PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE SPECTRE'S CALL DS
■ Out now in the US, and coming to the UK in November, the final DS instalment is best imported from the US if you want the definitive version. The bonus 100-hour *London Life* RPG, created by *Mother 3* developer Brownie Brown, will be completely absent from the European release, you see.

TIME TRAVELERS 3DS ■ *Time Travelers* is **games™**'s pick of the forthcoming Level-5 crop, for no other reason than the fact it's made by Jiro Ishii, one of the minds behind the riveting *Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors*. His aim this time is to create a game "without genre", containing one of the biggest, most believable game worlds in 3D.

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM AGE PSP
■ The prime example of Level-5's move toward multimedia franchises, *Gundam AGE* is a new anime series and toy line co-developed between Bandai, Sunrise and Level-5, which will also be producing an RPG to go alongside the new series.

PROFESSOR LAYTON VS. ACE ATTORNEY 3DS ■ New details on the crossover of the year reveal that Phoenix Wright and Professor Layton will clash pointy fingers in Labyrinth City, where Wright must defend a witch against the town mob, who will – in typical Capcom fictional law style – appear in court to challenge his assertions.

If Hino's announcement is a welcome surprise for a community of hardcore gamers eager for more quality RPGs, then Level-5's other big announcement of the year may well send those players into a frothing frenzy. In June of this year it was revealed that Level-5's newest recruit was Yasumi Matsuno, one of the biggest and most respected names in the world of Japanese RPGs. The man behind *Ogre Battle*, *Vagrant Story*, *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Final Fantasy XII* has been relatively inactive during the past five years, save for script work on Platinum Games' *MadWorld* and a PSP remake of *Tactics Ogre*, so news that he will now be given complete creative freedom to make whatever he likes at Level-5 is exciting indeed.

"For a while now, we have been talking about wanting to make a game together," says Hino of his shock collaboration with the master of tactical RPGs. "We were hoping that Mr Matsuno would create something brand new that only he could think of. So when production of the previous titles he was involved with settled down, it finally seemed like the perfect timing to welcome him into our company. My wish is to provide Mr Matsuno, whom I deem a key person who can affect change in the games industry, with whatever support he needs to uncover a brand new 'Matsuno World'." We don't really know what a Matsuno World would involve, but Hino sounds very excited about it so we'll trust him just this once.

With so many challenges ahead, and such a vast number of games currently in development, you have to wonder how Level-5 manages with the workload. The studio currently has nine announced titles in development, with several more secret projects underway. Has it become a victim of its own success, as each of its new franchises spawns sequel after sequel? Hino certainly seems to agree, though he shows no sign of crumbling under the pressure. "It is my thinking that the game industry needs to continuously create new titles, and it is Level-5's target to start a brand new title each year. As we continue to make sequels in each of our series, we are also

"AS WE CONTINUE TO MAKE SEQUELS IN EACH SERIES, WE ARE ALSO PLANNING NEW PROPERTIES, SO THIS CAUSES US TO WORK ON MANY DIFFERENT TITLES AT THE SAME TIME"

planning new properties, so this causes us to be working on many different titles at the same time. But I believe we manage to keep the size and number of titles appropriate to our company's capacity, so it doesn't feel especially difficult to work on these all at once. Instead, we take great pleasure in how the players receive each and every one of our titles."

It's breathtaking how easily Hino manages to take the sheer size and scale of running Level-5 in his stride, especially given that he personally works on and designs many of the studio's games even now. But Hino isn't one for self-promotion, and merely credits his achievements to a team effort. "I manage my time very strictly, down to the minute, so that I can perform at my optimal level," he says. "It is because I have the support of a lot of staff on both the development side and the administrative side, that I am able to proceed with such schedules."

With a seemingly bottomless reservoir of energy and enthusiasm, as well as a magical ability to turn each of its new games into evergreen franchises, Level-5 is showing no sign of slowing down. Were we in the habit of placing ludicrous bets on the far-flung future of gaming, we'd wager that twenty years from now it won't be Sony, Nintendo and Square Enix publishing Level-5's games, but that it may be the other way round.

Though the DS version of *Ni No Kuni* was announced long before the PS3 edition, Hino assures us that the two were planned and developed simultaneously right from the off.

A QUEST BY ANY OTHER NAME

How Dragon Quest aped computer RPGs, captured a nation, and set the course of a genre for years to come

IF YOU KNOW a thing or two about the history of videogames, you may know that Enix's *Dragon Quest* is known for being the beginning of the 'Japanese RPG', a style of role-playing game design that has become so distinct (and yet somewhat nebulous) that many longtime gamers would rather argue about what's wrong with them than bother playing them anymore. And while many Japanese developers attempt to change the definition of 'JRPG' on a yearly basis, from the brazen ambitions of *Final Fantasy XIII* to the pop stylings of the *Persona* series, it all goes

IT ADAPTED AND SIMPLIFIED THE FINER POINTS OF COMPUTER RPGS

back to *Dragon Quest*, which sees sequels once in a blue moon, and each new game isn't generally all that different from the last, other than in looks (though *Dragon Quest IX* on DS did bring several changes and improvements to the series, chiefly its multiplayer options). No matter what, mainline *Dragon Quest* titles sell by the boatload, always reminding the public that the king is not yet dead.

Of course, it wasn't always like that. *Dragon Quest* itself was the brainchild of Yuji Horii, a former freelance writer who made a name for himself in the early Eighties penning murder-mystery adventure games for Enix (though his break into the industry came from winning the company's design competition with a self-made tennis game). He loved computers, as well as computer games, particularly the great RPGs of the time, such as *Wizardry* and *Ultima*. Though his detective stories earned him a certain degree of fame, Horii often thought of creating something directly inspired by those computer RPGs. Together with programming partner Koichi Nakamura, and later bringing on the artistic talents of Akira Toriyama and the music of Koichi Sugiyama, the *Dragon Quest* project was set into motion, ultimately released on Nintendo's Famicom in 1986.

And the rest is history. Sort of. *Dragon Quest* was a relatively modest hit at first. Sure, it sold well,

■ *Final Fantasy* bore a strong resemblance to *Dragon Quest*, but the series soon morphed into something else entirely.

but so did lots of Famicom games in those halcyon days. It would take a few more months after release to see the game's popularity remain steady, and for observers to marvel at the incredible number of players, young and especially old, who were becoming enraptured in *Dragon Quest*'s simple world and trading strategies with one another (an outcome not quite duplicated outside Japan, but that's another story).

Dragon Quest adapted and simplified the finer points of computer RPGs in a way that hadn't been done before. It wasn't that you absolutely needed a keyboard and floppy disk drive to play *Wizardry*; it's that no one was trying it with anything else. What *Dragon Quest* did was create a gamepad-friendly template that was pretty much the true catalyst in the JRPG explosion rather than anything to do with its setting or story. Press the A button while your character is walking around the world, and a command window pops up with instructions for talking, browsing your inventory, or searching below your feet. An 'overworld' shows you a bird's-eye-view of the land with easily discernible areas. Enemy encounters change the screen into a first-person view where you carefully choose commands from yet more menus. You don't have any faux-3D dungeons, and no extra characters to 'roll', but you still get a long journey to the end, and all of it easily navigable with two buttons and a cross pad.

■■■ CONTROLLER ASIDE, LITTLE else in *Dragon Quest* was terribly innovative. *Ultima* also had an overworld, simple menus, and separate enemy battles, but Horii's team got the format on a mass-market console first, at a time when a glut of challenging action games became synonymous with Nintendo's system -- and ironically, *Ultima* ended up being more *Dragon Quest*-ified for later NES ports made in Japan.

FINAL FANTASY WAS A DRAGON QUEST CLONE THAT BECAME AS BIG – IN SOME WAYS BIGGER

Following the original *Dragon Quest*'s groundswell of popularity was a revelation. Any company making Famicom games not only had a new competitor to look out for, but an amazing example to copy. But before anyone could get a grip on how to replicate Enix's success, Horii and company outdid themselves when *Dragon Quest II* came out in January of 1987. After that, though, the rest of the industry was ready to show its hand, and for the next several years, other developers continued to make good on the template unintentionally standardised by *Dragon Quest*. If it called itself an RPG, chances are you were getting those white-on-black menus, stubby characters, and thrilling battle screens... or at worst, a terribly cheap knock-off that barely got the point.
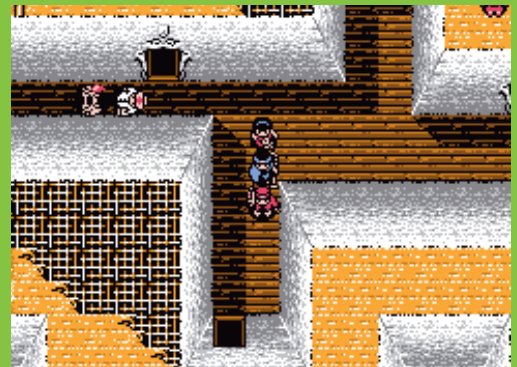
■ *Dragon Quest*'s style met Japanese horror in Capcom's *Sweet Home*, based on a tacky film of the same name.
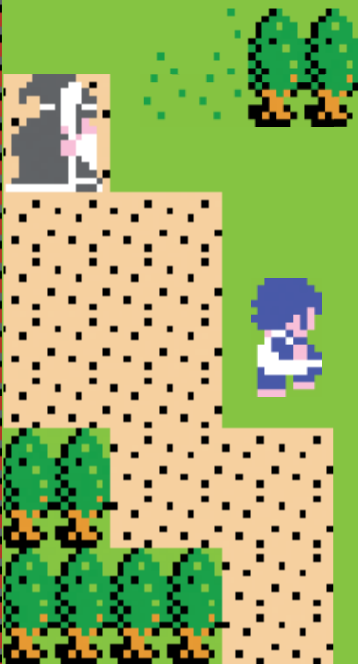
Top 5 Clones of Super Mario Bros.

■ Little Nemo: The Dream Master:
Winsor McCay's 1920s comic strip seems like an odd property to adapt into a game, but it worked out. Great levels, great music and great power-ups, Capcom hit it spot-on with this animal-suit-based platformer. An under-appreciated gem from the early Nineties NES library.

■ Alex Kidd In Miracle World:
Sega did its best to make Alex its own platforming superstar, gunning for Mario with an equally cheery action game. But even the goodness of Miracle World couldn't fend off the plumber, and after a few sequels Alex was dragged off the stage to make room for Sonic.

■ Mr. Gimmick:
A latter-day NES game, Sunsoft's blobby green hero Mr. Gimmick bounds through several varied worlds, with great physics, deceptively challenging levels (which, admittedly, offset the colorful cartoon graphics when you start seeing red), and an amazing soundtrack. Seek it out and be merry.

■ M.C. Kids:
This McDonald's tie-in stars Mick and Mack, two identically-dressed best friends, in a jaunty platformer that is an obvious *Mario Bros. 3* rip-off, but is still kind of decent, with clever level design that includes lots of springboards. Still, it had quite a way to go before matching *SMB3*.

■ Kid Kool:
Spiky-haired Kid Kool must collect seven 'Wonder Herbs' to counteract the king's life-threatening sickness. At least he's fast on his feet, which allows for lots of long leaps in this game's large levels. Oddly enough, its designers reworked it for both *Psycho Fox* and *Decap Attack* on Mega Drive.
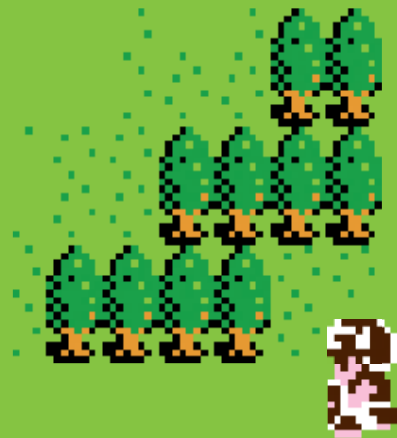
■ A bit simplistic in terms of graphics (characters always face forward), the original *Dragon Quest* set forth Japan's RPG design sensibilities.

■ Bandai's extra-stocky Knight Gundam got a few RPGs of his own, though as one might guess, they stayed safely within *Dragon Quest*'s boundaries.

■ When brought to the NES, *Ultima: Exodus* was given a familiar *Dragon Quest*-like makeover.

■ *Famicom Jump* was a crossover extravaganza with characters from Japan's famous manga magazine, but ended up as a watered-down *DQ*-like experience.

The first game to really take a page from Enix's book was *The Glory Of Heracles* by Data East, released shortly after *DQII* in 1987. Rather than make another medieval-tinged adventure, *Heracles* was inspired by Greek mythology, obviously following the great Heracles in a story loosely based on the myth of the hero's twelve labours. A stereotypical Greek style was abundant, but there's no getting away from the fact that it was still a distinctly Japanese RPG. For one thing, Heracles probably wasn't fighting various small-time monsters quite so much on his travels. Subsequent *Heracles* games curiously put the titular hero in a supporting role in the player's otherwise original party, as if the great warrior was now taking on a mentor role.

With two sequels released through the SNES era, the *Heracles* series became a treasured franchise much like *Dragon Quest*, though no one outside of Japan would really hear of it until a DS sequel-slash-reboot, also called *Glory Of Heracles*, was localised for English early in 2010. The games were renowned for their stories and dialogue, all but the first written by Kazushige Nojima, who went on to compete with *Dragon Quest* in a much larger capacity when he joined Square to work on *Final Fantasy VII* and a few more of its sequels.

■■■ SPEAKING OF *FINAL Fantasy*, it would be remiss not to bring it up. After all, it was a *Dragon Quest* clone that became as big (and in some ways bigger) than *Dragon Quest* itself. As the story goes, *Final Fantasy* was so named because it was Square's last grasp at relevancy in the 8-bit era, and with few *Dragon Quest* lookalikes at the time (*FF* also debuted in 1987), there was still some room to stand out. And stand out it did: *FF* grabbed as much attention as the first *DQ* had, and in just a couple

of short years had become *Dragon Quest*'s chief rival. *FF*'s adherence to the *Dragon Quest* template was loose, however. The overworld remained, as did the swords and sorcery, but its shift to third-person battle screens was a marked change for the genre at the time. Plus, the story in a *Final Fantasy* game usually made for a longer game, with more heavy-handed plot revelations in later sequels. *Dragon Quest* sequels took liberties with their storytelling, but always kept Toriyama's cartoon style and Sugiyama's unobtrusive music. *FF* generally leaned in a more dramatic direction, keeping the lightheartedness to a minimum. By the end of the Nineties, *Final Fantasy* had taken a sharp turn away from the *Dragon Quest* template, with even more concentrated stories, frequent experimentation with battle systems and, of course, all that lovely CGI animation. When Square and Enix merged in 2003, it was initially a shock to see their rival franchises under the same roof, but by then, they were two different sides of a coin.

As the months went beyond 1987, RPGs became a standard genre in Japan in short order, and the next wave of games came from an unlikely source: comics and TV. And like a lot of games based on such licenses, they weren't all great. *Famicom Jump* from Bandai brought together the heroes of Shonen Jump's manga, like Goku from *Dragon Ball* or *Fist Of The North Star*'s Kenshiro, and threw them into a hybrid action-RPG that saw players fighting through the various comics' worlds. Other games took popular characters like Doraemon and the cutesy *SD Gundam* fleet, shoving them into formats that they didn't really fit in. To see them enter *DQ*-like battle screens is one thing, but they also came from minutes-long cartoons, making an hours-long story for an RPG seem like some sort of miscommunication happened in the development process.

Dragon Quest's template was naturally catching the attention of developers outside the Nintendo realm, as well. Sega's Master System classic *Phantasy Star* did almost everything *Dragon Quest* hadn't: It brought in the first-person mazes from PC RPGs, as well as dystopian science fiction elements, and a female

Top 5
Clones of **Mega Man**

■ The Krion Conquest:
The most blatant *Mega Man* clone ever made, *Krion* stars Francesca, a do-good witch who not only looks a lot like Capcom's hero (big head and all), but also has elemental powers. The difference is that she doesn't steal them from bosses. Passable game, but a boggling curio.

■ Power Blazer:
A stocky blue hero fighting robots? That sounds familiar. Unfortunately, Taito's *Power Blazer* (a more cartoony, Japan-only predecessor to *Power Blade*) plays okay, but is needlessly difficult thanks to enemies re-spawning every time their positions scroll off-screen.

■ Darkwing Duck:
Capcom itself made this competent cousin to *Mega Man*, starring the vigilante duck from the TV series. With a multipurpose pistol, Darkwing Duck has a variety of ways to take down enemies. Everything about the action makes *Darkwing* scream *Mega Man*, including the graphics, character design and music.

■ MegaMari:
Japan's indie darling 'Touhou' shoot-'em-up series has even more indie fan games based on it, including this deliberate *Mega Man* clone featuring key heroine Mari, and bosses that shoot elaborate bullet hell curtains at the player, making it faithful – arguably too faithful – to its source material.
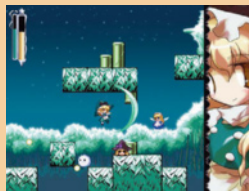
■ Shockman:
The PC Engine got its very own helping of *Mega Man*-styled fun with the *Shockman* series (or *Shubibinman*, in Japan), which follows the exploits of a boy and girl who can transform into scowling superheroes, and like *Mega Man* they shoot down armies of rogue robots the entire way.
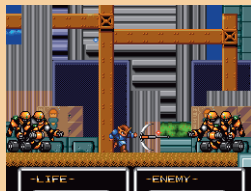
hero at the center of it all. 1987 had also seen the beginnings of the 16-bit era. RPGs like Hudson Soft's *Necromancer* for PC Engine and *Sword Of Vermillion* on Mega Drive didn't stray far from the *Dragon Quest* formula, but when CD-ROM drives arrived, developers were frequently tossing in animated, voiced cut-scenes in RPGs (and almost every other type of game) to do their best to outshine the adventures on Nintendo's systems. Meanwhile, *Dragon Quest* games just kept selling and selling, with the 1988 release of *Dragon Quest III* arriving alongside an absolute fever pitch of *Dragon Quest* excitement – it ended up as the highest-selling sequel of the four Famicom entries.

There were certainly many more RPGs cloning the best bits of Enix's hit – too many to shine a light on them all here – but taking after *Dragon Quest* didn't always mean you were making a regular knights-versus-monsters story over and over again. Remarkably, in the years following its release, some developers were
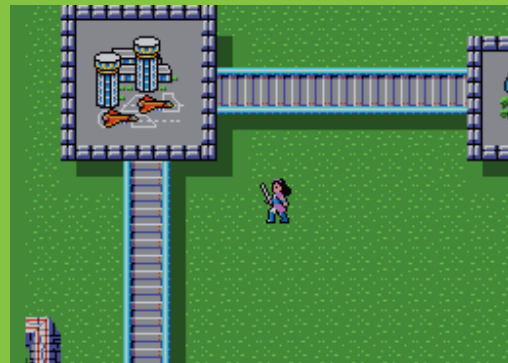
apparently trying not to rip off *Dragon Quest*, they were just going by the template, and experimentation became gradually more frequent. The aforementioned *Heracles* and *Necromancer* count, with the latter known for its incredibly dark, borderline gothic tone, making it the creepiest example of the genre in 1989.

Those games still make a certain amount of sense, though, and at their core they look and act as much as any traditional RPG of the time. It's when developers weren't even thinking of high fantasy adventures that Japanese RPGs became something truly distinct. One of the odder examples has to be *Childs Quest* from Namco, a comical adventure where you play a talent agent dragging along a preteen girl-pop group named 'Childs' through many Japanese towns (plus a stop in Hawaii – 'the big time'). Battle screens are not exactly battles, but back-and-forth conversations between the manager and the 'enemy' to try and raise the girls' fame; get the gruff police officer or snarling dog to admit their love of Childs, and you can move on. Managerial duties also include keeping the members of Childs themselves happy, because any topping up of their 'frustration' stat can see them leaving the group in a huff – an analogue to death in *Dragon Quest*, one might say. Take all that and the additional duty of putting on concerts, and you have a remarkably creative RPG for 1989, not to mention something of a forebear to Namco's own *Idolmaster* franchise.

AGAIN, IF YOU know a bit about games, you probably know of *Sweet Home*, the Capcom game based on a horror movie of the time, and which also acted as a young Shinji Mikami's inspiration in making *Resident Evil*. The twist: *Sweet Home* was an RPG – indeed, a horror RPG that managed to work as well. Five companions of varying ages break into a famous artist's secluded abandoned mansion,

Talk Magic
Item Equip
Str Seek
Open Take

his castle burned...King
Erik bade me...take you and
raise you as my son.

Top 5 Clones of Xevious

■ **Terra Cresta:**
Put *Terra Cresta* and *Xevious* side-to-side, step back several meters, squint, and see if you can tell them apart. Nichibutsu expended almost no imagination in making *Cresta*, a vertical shooter where you shoot and/or bomb robotic enemies of various shapes and sizes. Well, all right, it did add dinosaurs.

■ **Raiden:**
What *Xevious* brought to shooters, *Raiden* amplified. You still flew above grassy areas and such, but the dinky pellet-sized bombs in Namco's game became screen-clearing WMDs in *Raiden*. However, it wasn't quite the turning point as *Xevious* was, but still a pretty good start to the Nineties for the genre.

■ **Star Force:**
Born in the arcade like *Xevious*, but made by Tecmo, *Star Force* was strictly space-based, but otherwise followed *Xevious'* lead by featuring a stumpy ship that could destroy many different parts of the environment. Hudson ported *Star Force* to Famicom, and then used it as the framework for *Star Soldier*.

■ **Twinbee:**
The first 'cute-'em-up', Konami's *Twinbee* borrowed *Xevious's* dual-weapon setup (a blaster that fires ahead, bombs for ground targets), but slathered it with peppy music, adorable characters, and pastel colours. Soon, *Twinbee* joined the pantheon of great Konami shooters, along with *Gradius* and its ilk.

■ **Brain Battleship GALG:**
Brain Battleship GALG's box calls the game a 'scrolling RPG', a label that would have pre-dated *Dragon Quest* by a year. But it's actually just a bog-standard shooter that plays like Namco's hit. A shame, really – they could have added experience points or something.

■ *Childs Quest* took a big step away from RPG norms, presenting a purely comedic girl band adventure.

and the place has more than its fair share of dark secrets inside. You get the usual feel of the *Dragon Quest* template, including characters with defined roles, strengths and weaknesses, and, of course, random battles against zombies and other creepy crawlies inside the mansion. The extra twist to those battles is the 'pray' command, which engages the player in a quick game of chance – hit the button when a meter slides to its maximum point – and affects the strength of items and techniques, spending 'prayer points' accordingly. Many elements in *Sweet Home* quite obviously influenced *Resident Evil* beyond the secluded mansion setting: players get bits of backstory hidden in diaries in the game, and there is frequent encouragement for the player to split up the group and rely on their strengths for certain tasks. But the most remarkable thing is that, although Capcom took the RPG in a direction no one else had, no other big Japanese company attempted a horror RPG for quite some time. For what it's worth, the slow pace of early *Resident Evil* games belied a sort of adventure-slash-RPG way of thinking.

■■■ THE *DRAGON QUEST* property was a veritable cultural force by the start of the Nineties, and there were no more signs that RPGs were a fad. They had essentially become shining examples of Japanese game making; a point of pride among the developers and fans. It seemed as though every developer was taking an idea, no matter what it was, and seeing if it would work by slapping it in *Dragon Quest's* template. Many were natural fits, like Namco's samurai adventure *Jubei Quest*, Konami's outer-space epic *Lagrange Point*, or the barter-focused gameplay of *The Rainbow Silk Road*. Some had female heroes; some had a more strategic bent; some on the CD systems were getting ever closer to feeling like movies. Even Nintendo couldn't help but get on the

DRAGON QUEST WAS A VERITABLE CULTURAL FORCE BY THE START OF THE NINETIES

bandwagon, when famous author Shigesato Itoi had his own dreams of a *Dragon Quest*-like game. That game was *Mother*, the predecessor to *EarthBound*, and it successfully merged the *Dragon Quest* style with a modern-day setting, mysticism, and a pastiche of Americana. Now a trilogy, the *Mother* series commands a fanbase as passionate as they come. And though it wasn't mimicking *Dragon Quest*, the *Megami Tensei* series from Atlus also got its humble start on the Famicom, and has since birthed *Persona 3* and *4*, two of the best present-day examples in the genre.

It's arguable that *Dragon Quest's* permeance tainted the perception of what a 'real' computer RPG was, and the great games that came before it. Were those who were copying *DQ* even aware of *Wizardry*? Were the RPGs based on kids' shows scraping the bottom of the barrel, if not burrowing through it? And what does the early innovation in the genre say about today's Japanese RPGs, which have mostly stayed firm in the realm of sword-wielding warriors facing off against immeasurable evil, and usually adopt *Final Fantasy's* drama-heavy approach? These days, Japan has several games about dressing up girl bands, but you sure won't be taking them across the country, through fields and over mountains, hoping you don't get into a random battle in a precarious part of town. Regardless, one thing is for sure: when a new *Dragon Quest* game is announced, the king still reigns.

Dragon Quest IX

DEVELOPER: LEVEL-5 | CHARACTER DESIGN: AKIRA TORIYAMA | YEAR: 2010

■ BLUE DRAGON, *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Quest* all share one common element... well, one common element beyond the fact that all three have the same word in their titles. We're talking, of course, about Akira Toriyama, the legendary character designer who can't so much be accused of perpetuating the spiky-haired anime kid stereotype as credited with helping popularise it in the first place. His immediately recognisable style has been a mainstay of the series since 1986 but proved even more important to *Dragon Quest IX* as the new character creation system essentially allowed you to assemble your own Toriyama character. There's way too much amazing art to squeeze onto this spread, but here's a selection of the best bits to celebrate both the 25th anniversary of the franchise and the announcement of *Dragon Quest X*. Enjoy.
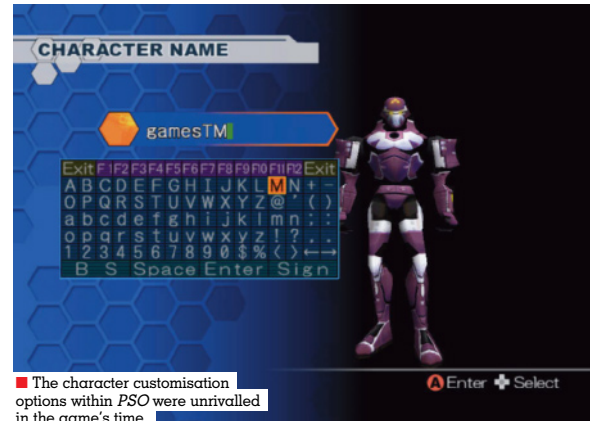
PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

With a sequel announced at Tokyo Game Show, we sit down with famed Phantasy Star creator, Yuji Naka, as well as PSO's main designer and art director, Satoshi Sakai

■ The character customisation options within *PSO* were unrivalled in the game's time.

■ You can still play *PSO* today, even though Sega has stopped supporting it.

> I KNEW IT WOULD BE 3D AND IT COULDN'T LOOK CHEAP. IT HAD A COMIC-LIKE LOOK TO IT AT FIRST

Released: 2000
Format: Dreamcast, PC, GameCube, Xbox
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sonic Team

KEY STAFF:
Yuji Naka
Producer
Satoshi Sakai
Main Designer/Art Director
Takao Miyoshi
Director
Fumitaka Shibata
Sound Director

YUJI NAKA IS the king of his own world and he knows it. He carries himself with the relaxed, confident attitude of a man who feels that failure is impossible. He is informal and passionate. His formal, considered conversational style betrays the fast-and-loose speech of his Kansai heritage. Whether it's his fame or sheer natural ability, the 45-year old game designer knows how to secure the full attention of everyone in the room. It's that kind of leadership he brought to his teams when he created the most popular games ever to come out of Sega, the two most important of which are, without a doubt, *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Phantasy Star*. Both games were so successful that, even in Naka's absence (he left the company in 2006), Sega is still trying to replicate their secret formula.

We meet Naka on the first floor of the main building on Sega's campus, located in a nondescript and fairly quiet Tokyo business district. Young employees who never had the chance to work with Naka gawk and stare, while trying to pretend they didn't notice. Even though he doesn't work there any more, Naka carries himself like he owns the place. The only moment where his calm seems to fade is when he's asked to put on a visitor's badge. "Does that feel strange?" we ask him. "Yeah. A little," he replies with a laugh.

We're at Sega to talk about *Phantasy Star Online* with Naka and art director Satoshi Sakai. The game turns ten years old this month, and, even though we didn't know it at the time of our **CONTINUED >.**

■ Decking out and customizing your character was the main draw of *PSO*. There was always more loot to find.

■ While the game was the first online console hit, many players chose to play by themselves and never worked with others.
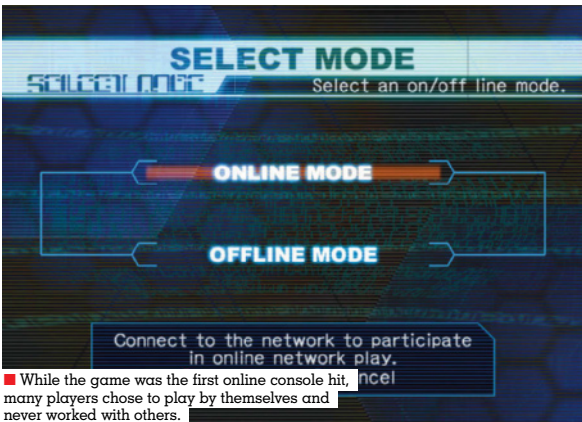
Posted by:
THEVULTURE

▲ Still have it in my DC collection. Even though I spent the entire time playing it in offline mode, I still managed to get hours out of it. Rich, vibrant visuals that Sega did so well, interesting enough story. Not kidding myself that I had a clue what I was doing with the Mag. I just fed it all sorts to see what would happen. As for the online side? What, on dial-up? With BT's prices? Pffff… Fat chance.

Posted by:
RIVAONI

▲ One of my absolute favourite games of all time. *Phantasy Star Online* was my *WOW*. It got me into online gaming properly, and I spent an unhealthy amount of time (and a ridiculous amount of my mother's money) playing online and off. I've played every single iteration across all formats and reached level 101 with my RAcast on Version 2 even though by that point I was using it as a glorified online chat room, so would never have reached level 200.

So many great moments, trying to find a name that would give me a good Section ID and ultimately a good drop rate, exchanging items, weapons and Mags in order to give my character the appearance I wanted it to have, and trying to avoid hackers at all cost to prevent having to restart yet another character.

■ *PSO*'s lobbies doubled as chat rooms and eventually became more popular than the main quests.

interview, Sega was preparing to shut down the last servers for the original *Phantasy Star Online* – or *PSO: Blue Burst* as the PC version is now called – after years of expansion packs.

Sakai and Naka's involvement with the game's original incarnation ended years ago, and Sega is now a very different company than it was during its time as a hardware manufacturer. At that time, even before production work had begun on *PSO*, Naka's team was split into three after the completion of *Sonic Adventure*. One group focused solely on pushing the graphical capabilities of the Dreamcast to their limits, another looked into the possibility of an online game, and the third worked on various projects that would eventually lead to the creation of *Chu Chu Rocket*. "Everyone was spread out doing their own thing in the studio," says Naka. But, eventually, these three teams came together for *Phantasy Star Online*.

■■■ NOT THAT THEY had much choice. "Word came from the top that we had to make an online game," said Naka. At the time, Sega was headed by Isao Okawa, who declared that 2000 would be the year of the network game. Unfortunately, the teams were spread pretty thin at that point. "The *Sakura Wars* team had to keep making *Sakura Wars*, the *Jet Set Radio* team had to do *Jet Set Radio*. Everybody was hoping somebody else would do it." Despite the fact that Sonic Team wasn't the best fit for the project, Okawa gave the responsibility to Naka's team. Not everyone was thrilled, but as Naka put it, "Okawa had a clear vision of the future."

SATOSHI SAKAI
Designer/Art Director

There was just one issue: nobody knew what online gaming meant in 2000. While PC online gaming had been around for decades, and truly exploded in the mid-Nineties, the PC-free game culture of Japan had never shown much interest. Not only did the team have to create a new genre, it had to sell online gaming to a country of console gamers. It wasn't going to be an easy sell, given that the internet service providers in Japan charged a per-minute fee for dial-up, and broadband was almost unheard of at the time. According to Sakai, Okawa showed the courage of his convictions by bundling a year's worth of internet access free with each Dreamcast. In the end, it cost Sega nothing, because Okawa paid for it from his own pocket. Naka suggests that the chairman felt that strongly about it, it really was going to be the next big thing.

Naka knew he had to make an online game, but what did that mean? How do you play a game online? How do you communicate? How do you relay the story? What did the phrase 'online game' mean in 2000? "Cheap graphics," he replies. Stark and boring visuals were associated with online games at the time. "Even today, that's the case. That's why I had my graphics team and online team separate, but I decided to combine their skills into one game and have both graphics and online together." The combination would eventually prove to be nearly unstoppable, but that wasn't a forgone conclusion. If the game was to use all the power of the Dreamcast, he needed his art team behind him. That's where Sakai came in.

At the time, the game was simply called *Third World*. Though the team was aiming to create a sci-fi atmosphere, no one thought of associating it with the long-dormant *Phantasy Star* series, which hadn't seen a release since the Mega Drive era. According

Stayin' Alive

Feeling nostalgic? Turns out, with PSO, you can go home again

■ Sega recently announced that they were ending support for the Japanese version *Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst* – on 27 December 2010, after nearly ten years of continuous service. Fans outside of Japan faced exile from *PSO* much earlier, and came up with a workaround that should allow Japanese players (as well as anyone else) to continue enjoying the game. The most hardcore *PSO* devotees created unofficial servers to host their games, and even at this very moment, there are players around the world still playing *PSO* on their Dreamcasts, Gamecubes, and PCs. Want to give it a shot? Simply visit http:www.schtserv. com to check it out. While its online access isn't as user-friendly as it was in the old days, it's still just as fun.
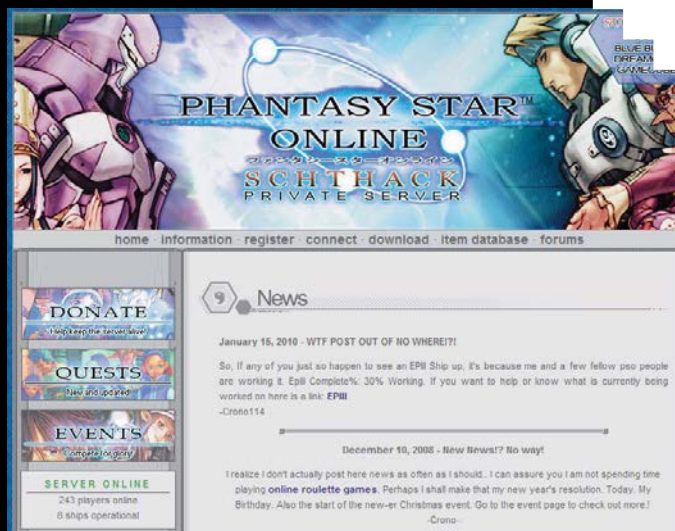
■ Though loved by online gamers, *PSO* drove a wedge through *Phantasy Star* fans who lamented the loss of the original single-player RPG series.

WE WANTED DREAMCAST GRAPHICS AND THE SAME LEVEL OF GAMEPLAY AS DIABLO

to Sakai, "I knew it would be 3D and it couldn't look cheap. I wanted to do sci-fi fantasy. That, with the freedom of online gameplay, worked together. It had a comic-like look to it at first, but we couldn't show off our realistic art like that. So we made it more realistic." When creating concept art for the game, Sakai drew a dragon and, when Naka saw the image, something clicked. *The Third World* became *Phantasy Star Online*.

■■■ A SIMPLE IDEA, a name, and some concept art don't form a game. Naka needed to figure out how the gameplay would work, and was in a position that very few game makers ever find themselves: he was doing something completely unlike what any of his peers had ever done. While Western gamers today often look at the online components that come out of Japanese games and infer that online-play isn't important in Japan, in 2000 it was non-existent. Naka had to look outside his own country for inspiration, something that, until quite recently, no Japanese game maker would ever do – or at least admit to. In 2000, there were really only three big names in online RPGs: *Ultima*, *Everquest*, and *Diablo*. And it was the latter loot-gathering classic that would serve as inspiration for *PSO*.

Diablo had impressed Naka because the game surprised him on not just a gameplay level, but a technical one as well. "The biggest issue with online games was memory. They require a lot of it, and the graphics suffer as a result. I was impressed with

how smooth the gameplay of *Diablo* was, but it was a 2D game. We wanted a game with Dreamcast graphics and the same level of gameplay as *Diablo*." It also helped that the main programmer on the game was an addict of Blizzard's loot-whoring masterpiece.

Ten years on, it's easy to look back and see the gameplay connections between *PSO* and *Diablo*, but very few critics pointed it out at the time. Part of the reason was the lack of overlap between the console-focused audience of *PSO*, and the PC game-focused *Diablo* audience. The graphics also played a role; *PSO* looked nothing like *Diablo* and the inspiration drawn from it was purely mechanical. *PSO*'s artistic direction came from somewhere else.

The freedom available to Sega teams during the Dreamcast era is hard to imagine in today's stricter, higher-stakes environment. Teams were left with little supervision, to create the kind of games they wanted to make. It produced some of the all-time classics of the console, including *Jet Set Radio*, *Space Channel 5* and *Phantasy Star Online*.

Sakai's art team was also free. Most of the staff from *Phantasy Star IV* had left Sega by the time *PSO* production was underway. With the sense that 3D was a new start for videogame **CONTINUED >.**

YUJI NAKA
Producer

Stone Age Internet

It's still better than BT was, right?

■ OKAWA'S DECISION to include a year of internet was a bold move, and absolutely necessary to ensure that players would continue to play the game; they simply didn't want to pay per-minute to play anything. Around the time of the game's release, Japanese phone company NTT unveiled an 'unlimited telephone' plan that allowed users unlimited internet from 11AM to 8PM for ¥1,800 yen a month (about £9 with the exchange rates of the time). Around the same time, workers at Sega noticed the servers were getting hammered at 11 o'clock almost every night. Naka wasn't happy about this and wanted to work with a different ISP, but since Okawa was footing the bill, the call was up to him. "We probably helped out NTT a lot."

art, the team felt little obligation to adhere to the style set down in the game's 16-bit predecessors. "*Phantasy Star* has changed from game to game with each title. *I* and *II* might have been similar, but the designers had a lot of freedom. We had only the fixed image of sci-fi RPG," says Sakai. What little influence that was apparent came in the name of enemy and item names. Naka and Sakai believed that too many things were different to allow more influence. The platform, graphics, even genre (action-RPG versus RPG, a distinction that's very clear to Naka) was different.

Sakai often mentions freedom within *PSO* itself. For him, everything came together in just the right way. The game had the right combination of setting, art, and gameplay, to give the player an unparalleled sense of freedom. Players were free to explore as they saw fit, and Sakai claims that the game's art and sci-fi fantasy setting only work to heighten this sensation. By the time production finished, the team felt that they had created something truly new and original. They were quite proud of it, but they had no way of knowing how the public would react. The free internet included with the game, thanks to Okawa, would certainly move sales in Japan, but they weren't all 100 per cent confident. Sega wasn't too concerned with sales abroad. At the time, Japanese publishers made games for Japan, and any sales on top of the domestic ones were just a bonus.

■■■ AS IT TURNED out, they needn't have worried; the game sold almost exactly as many units as Sega was expecting. Naka was actually a little disappointed by this: "To be honest, I wanted the game to sell a little more. But actually we sold as much as we could handle. After release, the server load was borderline. Any more and the game would have crashed." Naka's perfectionism comes out as he talks about the game's performance. Despite selling well and winning numerous awards, he still doesn't seem satisfied, even ten years on. "The team probably didn't have the right knowledge, because everything was new to them. There were provider problems as well. In Hiroshima and Okayama the network didn't work right and they had to investigate these new kinds of problems. It was stressful."

Naka's exacting expectations of himself aside, the game sold miraculously well in an era where 'console' meant offline gaming almost by definition, and the fan base that it created was perhaps the most fervent and rabid until *World Of Warcraft* came along. That, if nothing else, pleased and surprised Naka. "We on the development team were surprised. Originally, we aimed to offer twenty days of gameplay. So we gave the first month free. No one cared that the free trial was only a month; they kept on playing. Twenty days was

■ With only four stages in total, *PSO* could become a little dull but the levelling and random loot kept people playing, regardless.

WE SOLD AS MUCH AS WE COULD HANDLE. THE SERVER LOAD WAS BORDERLINE

the target for one character. People made multiple characters and started over."

The game pleased critics as well. *PSO* took home 17 awards, including top honours at the Japanese Game Awards. Unfortunately, the game's chief champion Okawa didn't live to see the game win. While *PSO* was in production, Okawa was in poor health, and he was hospitalised by the time the game was released. Naka said, "I was making reports and sending pictures to the hospital, but Okawa was probably too sick to see them. Three days after he died, *PSO* won the Japan Game Award."

■■■ DESPITE ALL THE acclaim and the loss of their biggest supporter, the team received no break. They went to work maintaining the overworked *PSO* servers, while working a gruelling schedule that enabled them to release *Phantasy Star Online Version 2* in less than six months. Work on *PSO* never really stopped. The game was ported to the PC, GameCube, and Xbox. Even after those versions shut down (as well as the Dreamcast version), Sega was pouring work and resources into *PSO* until December of 2010, when it finally

■ Loot was the real heart of the game. From boxed items to enemy drops, there was always a better piece of kit to get.

shut down the last servers for the final iteration on PC. On top of building up the original game, Sega expanded the franchise to include *Phantasy Star Portable* for the PSP, *Phantasy Star Zero* for DS, and the critically panned *Phantasy Star Universe* on Xbox 360 and PC.

The series has struggled to live up to the legacy of the original game. While Sega was busy trying to top *PSO*, Capcom stole its thunder by taking the formula and adapting it into *Monster Hunter*. For various cultural reasons, the ad hoc gameplay of *Monster Hunter* on PSP proved to be far more popular in Japan than online could ever hope to be. By the time Sega realised the right direction to take the series, it was too late and *Phantasy Star* was stuck playing catch-up to *Monster Hunter*. At the same time, the PSP *Phantasy Star* games have failed to capture the attention of the West, and Sega is incredibly slow to localise and release them. It seems that only the

hardcore fans, who created their own private *PSO* servers after the game was shut down, are keeping the series alive.

Now no longer working at Sega and heading his own studio at Prope – which recently released both *Let's Tap* and *Ivy The Kiwi?* for Wii – Naka doesn't seem to mind the series' fortunes, as long as the game's fans remember what he achieved. "As the game creator, *Diablo* influenced us and we wanted to create something better. I'm happy to see others take what we did and work with it. I'm the kind of creator who wants to do something first. If I do something and others follow, I'm happy. If there was no *PSO*, *Monster Hunter* wouldn't have come out. I feel I'm lucky. You have to be there in the right place at the right time. For the younger generation it's difficult, there's so much out there already. I was lucky to have the chance to do that first."

■ Rag Rappys were the Slimes of *Phantasy Star Online* – cute, unchallenging foes that were later mined for merchandise.

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Often imitated, never surpassed (except perhaps by *Phantasy Star Online*), *Diablo* singlehandedly gave rise to the entire 'loot-whoring' genre.

Designer Hiroshi Matsuyama cited *Phantasy Star Online* as a direct influence on his ambitious single-player PS2 MMO series, *.hack*.

Lost Odyssey
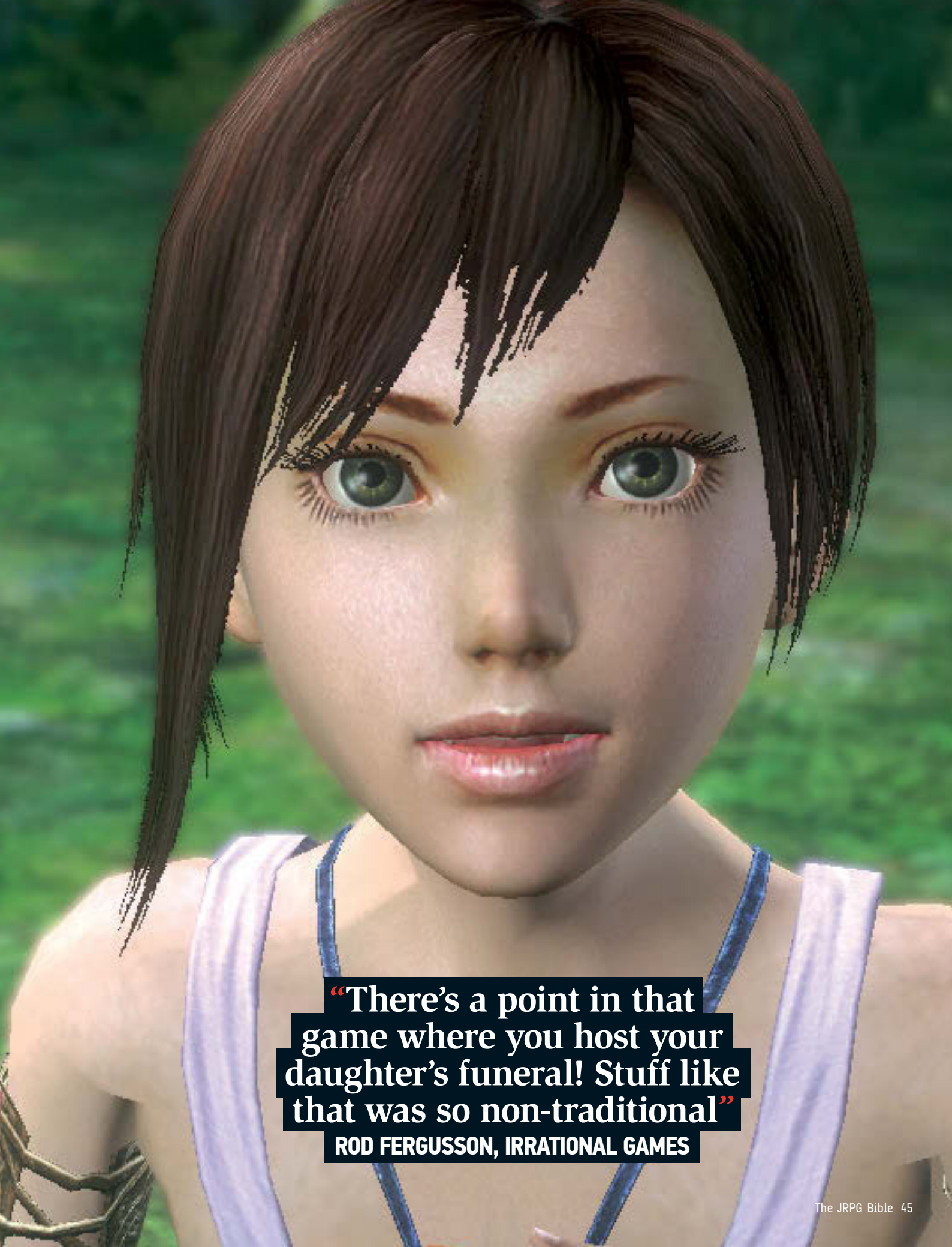
ROD FERGUSSON,
IRRATIONAL GAMES

❝ For me, my favourite games are time-sensitive. I have a real problem going back to play an old game because production values and graphics really do have an impact on me, so when I try to go back I struggle with older games.

An odd one for me was **Lost Odyssey**. I put over 75 hours into that game and I don't play JRPGs that much, but in that one there was just something about the adultness… There's a point in that game where you host your daughter's funeral! Stuff like that was so non-traditional and in that moment in time it really struck me.

I'd love to have a list of favourites like that, but as I change and mature, my tastes do too, so every year I have a new favourite. ❞

"There's a point in that game where you host your daughter's funeral! Stuff like that was so non-traditional"
ROD FERGUSSON, IRRATIONAL GAMES

KINGDOM HEARTS

Disney through the prism of a Squaresoft RPG – Kingdom Hearts was a high concept idea that grew into one of Square Enix's most important series. Here, director Tetsuya Nomura grants a rare interview and discusses the background of the 2002 PS2 title…

Released: March 2002 (Japan)
November 2002 (EU)
Format: PS2
Publisher: Square
Developer: Squaresoft
Key Staff: Tetsuya Nomura: director,
Yoshinori Kitase: producer
Composer: Yoko Shimomura

IT BEGAN IN an elevator. Like those urban legends involving film sets being haunted or actors improvising iconic lines in classic movies, a Disney executive and Square's Shinji Hashimoto, who once operated out of the same complex, supposedly laid the groundwork for the creation of *Kingdom Hearts* in one elevator trip.

And like any of the best urban legends, some of the details are a bit too fanciful. "The conversation in the elevator was more along the lines of 'It would be great to do something together some time' and was not actually a formal idea proposal," explains the game's director, Tetsuya Nomura. "It all started with Mr [Shinji] Hashimoto and some people at Disney discussing that it would be good to do something together and apparently the idea of making a Mickey Mouse RPG came up in his initial conversations with the heads of development at the time."

Nomura, who is very well known to *Final Fantasy* fans for his distinctive character designs from *Final Fantasy VII*, *VIII*, *X* and *XIII*, which undoubtedly influenced an entire generation of Japanese and American developers, relished the challenge of tackling such a treasured intellectual property. "However, this was thought to be quite a difficult prospect and when I heard about it I had already come up with the basic idea for *Kingdom Hearts* so I put my hand up and asked if I could be given responsibility for this project."

Disney actually kicked things off with *Kingdom Hearts* by approaching Square with the idea. One simple elevator conversation soon grew into an ambitious vision of what would be Squaresoft's next big project – the initial idea of a Mickey Mouse RPG evolved into something more conceptual that united many Disney worlds together (with a few original creations) through an overarching narrative.

Nomura received suggestions from others working at Square, while his experience on *Final Fantasy* fed into the structure of the game design. "At the time I was given advice from one of my seniors in the company not to make the story itself too simplistic. I thought that the kind of story development logic with lots of foreshadowing type scenes and mysteries was very much a characteristic of the *Final Fantasy* series and that this would also be a good kind of structure to use for *Kingdom Hearts* as well."

IN KINGDOM HEARTS, young island-dweller Sora, troubled by strange dreams of lingering shadows, travels between Disney lands, encountering many recognisable characters from the films while searching for his missing friends. Some of the locales were obvious choices, like Agrabah from *Aladdin* or the Kingdom of Atlantica from *The Little Mermaid*, yet some nicely eclectic ones fed into the game's scope, too, like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Nomura had a philosophy over which environments made the cut. "The main condition for picking worlds was that none of them overlapped in terms of feel or atmosphere so there would be a good variation in the game," says Nomura. "I am particularly fond of the *Nightmare Before Christmas* world (Halloween Town) from the first game. I thought that this would throw
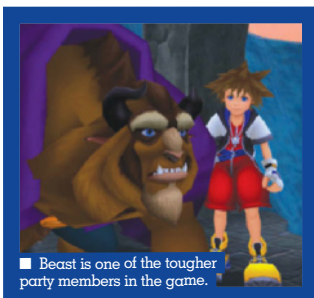
■ Beast is one of the tougher party members in the game.

■ Poor Genie, still forced to wear his handcuffs. Clearly Sora just can't let him go.

THAT OLD GANG OF MINE

The notable Final Fantasy cameos of the Kingdom Hearts series to date. Fan service overdose...
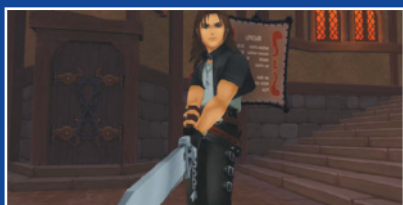

CLOUD (FINAL FANTASY VII)

Grumpy as ever, Cloud gets a little bit too close to darkness when he's hired by Hades to batter Hercules. He plays a much bigger role in the sequel.

SEPHIROTH (FINAL FANTASY VII)

Final Fantasy's most iconic villain is a secret battle in both *Kingdom Hearts* games, and he vanishes with Cloud after fighting Sora in *KHII*.

SQUALL (FINAL FANTASY VIII)

Changing his name after letting his home world fall to Leon – Squall's name in *FFVIII* is Squall Leonhart – the *FFVIII* hero helps Sora on his way.
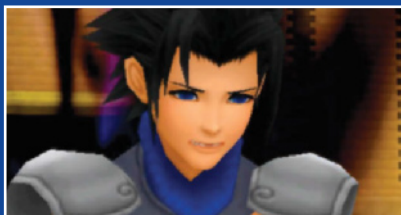

YUFFIE (FINAL FANTASY VII)

The master thief is an optional battle at the Coliseum later in the game, as well as a key part of the Heartless mega-battle in *Kingdom Hearts II*.

YURIPA (FINAL FANTASY X-2)

Final Fantasy X-2's trio of heroines take a break from singing, dancing and being annoying to appear as fairies in *Kingdom Hearts II's* Hollow Bastion.
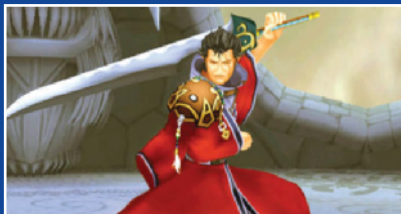

ZACK (CRISIS CORE: FINAL FANTASY VII)

An esoteric choice, *FFVII* flashback player Zack appeared in the PSP's *Birth By Sleep* after being killed at the climax of the excellent *Crisis Core*.

NEKU (THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU)

Okay, not *Final Fantasy*, but it is Square Enix. In last year's 3DS spin-off *Kingdom Hearts 3D*, DS cult hit *TWEWY's* hero Neku pops up with his co-stars.

AURON (FINAL FANTASY X)

Hip flask-bearing, walking dead warrior Auron climbs out of the Underworld, gives Hades some lip and teams up with Sora, echoing his role in *Final Fantasy X*.

the player a real curveball and surprise them with its inclusion. I am always thinking about doing surprises like that."

Indeed, the sequel would later throw in a gorgeous *Steamboat Willie* level, *Tron* scenario and even one based on the *Pirates Of The Caribbean*. What was interesting about the use of the worlds was the way a mini-storyline played out within each that was faithful to the source. Sora, Donald Duck and Goofy, travelling through each land to connect them together using the hero's mystical Keyblade weapon, were essentially supporting spectators to these well-knit Disney vignettes.

"Sora is supposed to be a Disney-esque character," says Nomura when we ask about the creation of the series' protagonist. "I was very aware of this in his colours, the form of the character and his bright and cheery personality. For the Keyblade I wanted to give him a weapon that had a non-aggressive motif to it so I settled on the idea of a key that also ties in with the story itself."

Nomura didn't feel he had to change his artistic style to make the character designs fit with Disney – at the time, he cited how Donald Duck and Tarzan were visually very different despite being Disney characters, meaning there wasn't too much of a struggle in finding a unifying visual language. "I did not feel any particular difficulties really. For example, in the underwater world there are no characters who swim around wearing regular clothes so to fit with that I simply changed the characters costumes around a bit. It was only really minor adjustments and obvious things like this."

Greater challenges lay in weaving Sora's story around the Disney worlds, however, those relating to Disney's restrictions on how its properties may be used. "Because you are dealing with other people's IPs there are naturally bound to be limits in place and it took some work to get around those so that the player does not feel inhibited by them."

Nomura reflects positively on his experience working with Disney, however. "In working together with Disney I was able to experience things that I could not normally to do in my job," he says, mentioning voice acting as an example. He doesn't discuss what he wasn't allowed to put in

■ Summons are often best used in the game's harder boss fights later on.

■ Art direction always determines whether a PS2 game ages well, and *Kingdom Hearts* didn't get a lot wrong by raiding the Disney archives.

grew up with stacks of discoloured Disney VHSs beneath their tellies.

In early videos for the game, a Disney castle level appeared to be among the worlds open for exploration – we asked Nomura if it, which appeared in *Kingdom Hearts II*, or anything else, had to be cut from the game. ''Essentially I managed to do everything that I wanted to do from the start of that project,'' Nomura says. ''I think that there is a bit of a misunderstanding out there but the footage you talk about of Sora running around the Disney castle was simply early test footage and was not an actual scene that was originally included in the game and then cut out later.''

Not that the arc of the game was short on content at about 50 hours in length. Being an action RPG, one of the first to have mainstream appeal, there were plenty of reasons to revisit the worlds, and, with a combat system that gradually grew in complexity, *Kingdom Hearts* always feeds the player with new things to see. Aside from a difficult camera, mapping spells to the face buttons was a workable system, while the option to change the behaviour of your party members, Donald, Goofy and the guest characters on each world, like Beast, Ariel or Peter Pan, offered a good capacity for strategy.

Having three characters in play created a few logistical headaches for the team. ''Sora can move freely but the other members have to be able to follow him wherever he goes, so the kind of problems we had are the typical type that you get in this sort of game where they get caught up on objects and can't keep up with the player [and so on].''

■■■ **A BORROWED STAPLE** of *Final Fantasy*, summoned creatures, allowed for even more novel guest appearances, and were manifested in the form of Disney characters like Genie from *Aladdin*, Mushu from *Mulan*, Tinker Bell from *Peter Pan* and Nomura's personal favourite, Simba from *The Lion*

the game. ''Of course there were things that they would not permit but I can't really talk about those.''

Interestingly, Donald Duck and Goofy carry a staff and shield respectively as Disney wouldn't permit them to carry swords, or other violent weaponry. Each property had a set of guidelines and they weren't allowed to add anything that wasn't already in the films – Nomura's team did get permission to adapt the characters for certain worlds after Disney saw the artist's designs for aquatic versions of Donald and Goofy, however, and the *Nightmare Before Christmas* world pushed that transformation into creepier territory. Disney's animators even met with the Squaresoft team to help them understand their process in what were dubbed 'chalk talks'.

■■■ **THE EFFORT – WHICH** saw some of Squaresoft's team watching a wide variety of Disney videos for months in research – paid off. *Kingdom Hearts* is a faithful work that translates the 2D styling of each licence perfectly into 3D, with the delicate animated touches helping make that transition exciting for seasoned filmgoers and fans. *Kingdom Hearts* was a treat for anyone who

DISNEY'S ANIMATORS MET WITH THE TEAM FOR WHAT WERE DUBBED 'CHALK TALKS'

King. *Final Fantasy* characters, meanwhile, made significant appearances throughout the story. Nomura explains how that came to be. ''Basically we needed to have NPC characters to fill the worlds that were original designs and did not have Disney motifs and if those characters were also new original characters they would not leave such an impression on the player so I decided to have *Final Fantasy* characters as guest stars.''

Characters from *FFVII*, *VIII* and *X* all appeared in a variety of capacities (see 'That Old Gang Of Mine'). It was a fairly curious choice when you considered that grumpy *FFVIII* River Phoenix-inspired Squall essentially lived round the corner

■ Forking out for the right voice actors made sure *Kingdom Hearts* was viewed on a higher level than a typical tie-in.

from duck triplets Huey, Dewey and Louie, but this sort of contrast is something that fans of the series responded positively to; interestingly, all the characters chosen were ones that only Nomura himself had designed, with pre-*FFVI* figures left alone (though in *Kingdom Hearts II*, the inclusion of Vivi from the non-Nomura *IX* expanded that remit a little).

In many cases, too, they'd received an extensive redesign from Nomura and were voiced for the very first time. Some of the casting choices were interesting, others contentious; David Boreanaz, known best for his role as Angel in *Buffy* and its spin-off at the time, voiced the similarly characterised Squall. 'N Sync's Lance Bass had the role of Sephiroth (he was replaced in the sequel), singer Mandy Moore played Aerith and US soap actor Steve Burton arguably put in the strongest work with his moody rendition of Cloud, which led to him reprising the role in *FFVII* movie *Advent Children* and six subsequent games.

"I felt that if we had lots of new original characters it would take time until they were all recognised and wanted for the player to be aware of the protagonist Sora first and foremost here," Nomura explains.

But really, aiming so high with the casting was just conducive to one of *Kingdom Hearts*' goals overall, to tackle the various Disney licences with industry-best production values. In terms of voice actors, that credibility spread to James Woods reprising his role as Hades, Gilbert Gottfried tackling Iago from *Aladdin* and *The Simpsons*'
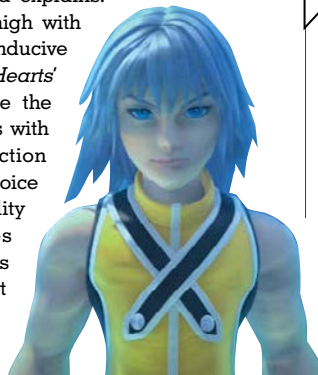
Dan Castellaneta doing a fine impression of Robin Williams' Genie. Many of the original actors from the films returned to join the game's massive cast.

It's easy to be cynical about a product as relentlessly corporate on the surface as *Kingdom Hearts*, yet there were more than a few memorable curios in the design, too. Gummi ships, essentially a way to travel between each world through tunnels of enemies, were essentially Lego spacecraft that the player could completely customise in colour and composition. Nomura explains their origins. "I personally really like toy building blocks and wanted to find a way to include them in the game. I was once

FINAL FANTASY IS LIKE A TOYBOX... I CARRIED THAT PHILOSOPHY INTO KINGDOM HEARTS

told that a core principle for developing *Final Fantasy* was that *Final Fantasy* is like a toybox in that it has so many different cool things packed into it and I carried that philosophy over into *Kingdom Hearts* as well. So I decided to use building blocks and also incorporate a shooting game style section." That creativity stretched to narrative design through gameplay, as well. One of the smarter moments of the story sees Sora lose his Keyblade weapon to rival Riku, with Donald and Goofy abandoning the character, too, acting like the treacherous anthropomorphs they are. What happens instead is that players team up with a dejected Beast (from *Beauty & The Beast* fame), with Sora stuck with a wooden sword that does no damage to enemies.

■■■ **THIS REMOVAL OF** power changes the dynamic of *Kingdom Hearts* completely – and its purpose was for the peaceful characterisation of the game's hero, according to Nomura, who reflects fondly on the decision to do this. "I wanted to make the player aware that their character is not an all-powerful hero but is actually just a regular boy," he says. "This scene was put in so that the player would be made aware of the fact that Sora can only fight when taking up the special Keyblade and when aided by his friends, not just through the back story but in the actual gameplay as well."

Some of the post-game content was inspired, too – a boss fight with the Ice Titan from *Hercules*, and, much like the Dark Aeons from *Final Fantasy X*, some fairly nasty bosses waiting for Sora upon returning to Big Ben in Neverland and the desert outside Agrabah. But the best inclusion? Sephiroth from *Final Fantasy VII*, who arrives out of the sky in a dramatic fashion, before an instrumental rendition of *One-Winged Angel* kicks off a ludicrously hard encounter. "I wanted to have a hidden boss that you could fight after clearing the main game and thought that a very surprising character would be good for this so I decided to use Sephiroth who had not been seen since the original *FFVII* and was well known among fans," says Nomura when we ask him about one of the series' nastiest antagonists. "Sephiroth is also perceived as being a very strong opponent so I thought he fit very well in this role."

Final Fantasy fans would seek out *Kingdom Hearts*, then, for that purpose, yet *Kingdom Hearts* also successfully drew in Disney fans who had never played a Squaresoft RPG before. If you need any better measure of the franchise's success, *Kingdom Hearts II* outsold *Final Fantasy XII* in North America, hence why the third title in the series, announced by Square Enix at E3 an obscene seven years after the second game was released, is of massive importance to a company that's had recent financial struggles.

For the 2013 rerelease, *Kingdom Hearts 1.5 HD ReMix*, Nomura's intention is to pick up new fans as the third instalment lingers on release schedule for the next however many years. "The 'Dark Seekers' story arc will reach its conclusion in the upcoming *Kingdom Hearts III* and this HD remake version is being done with that situation very much in mind. So personally I feel more that this is being made for the sake of the next new chapter than to revisit something old…I really want for as many people as possible to play *KHIII* when it comes out so I made *1.5* with that in mind."

Porting it wasn't an easy task, with many of the PS2 assets sadly being elusive. "The original data no longer existed so it was hard, yes, but despite that, I think that the supreme effort put in by all of the staff on the team stopped it feeling so tricky. Even when comparing it to other HD remakes of other titles I really feel that the *Kingdom Hearts* staff gave a huge amount of effort."

Kingdom Hearts remains the best in the series –the original presented players with unambiguous forces of light and dark, of nostalgia for Disney's strongest animated works and a nicely absurd slice of indulgence for Square's fans. A game that began life in an elevator – an appropriately odd origin for such a bizarre and beloved title. Ⓖ

DISNEY WORLDS

The five greatest Kingdom Hearts Disney levels

AGRABAH
With the streets of Agrabah to explore, Aladdin's admittedly roomy abode and the Cave Of Secrets in the deserts, Squaresoft successfully captured the sense of mysticism that underscores the setting of Disney's Nineties animated hit.

DEEP JUNGLE
From Disney's *Tarzan*, and story-wise, probably the best adaptation of its respective movie's plot, Deep Jungle is one part ground-level jungle and another part kingdom in the tall trees, complete with vine-swinging and peaceful monkeys.

ATLANTICA
With secret tunnels you can't initially access and the largest areas to explore, Atlantica is extremely well-realised. It helps that *Under The Sea* is playing constantly, and that the final battle with a gigantic Ursula is one of the best in the game.

HALLOWEEN TOWN
A rather sinister contrast to the rest of the game, *Kingdom Hearts*' art style adapted very well to *The Nightmare Before Christmas*' stop motion visuals. It's one of the oddest locations in the game, culminating with a fight against a castle-sized Oogie Boogie.

NEVERLAND
Captain Hook's ship isn't an especially exciting interior to explore, but get on deck and it's more interesting, with scraps against large Heartless masquerading as pirate boats. The highlight, though, quite easily, is flying around the *Peter Pan* version of Big Ben.

The importance of having a global product is greater today than ever before, a solid localisation often able to bridge the gulf between loss and profit, build on a success story or at least spread a brand to new fans around the world. **games™** speaks with Nippon Ichi's localisation team to discuss the trials of turning Disgaea 4 from a Japanese smash to a worldwide phenomenon

PRINNIES
FOR THE
WORLD

It's amazing how much of the work that goes in to creating modern videogames is taken for granted. From subtle orchestration and scoring that accompanies without drawing attention to itself to the art of great level design, there are people slaving away behind the scenes whose hard graft isn't even noticed by your average gamer. The guy that planted the concept seed that led to that ingenious scoring system; the person behind those ridiculous haircuts and outfits that raise both eyebrows and smiles; whoever dreamed up that one weapon or combo that you'll never tire of using. These are gaming's unsung heroes, names that scroll by in the blink of an eye in staff rolls rather than being celebrated on the box, though their behind-the-scenes contributions are invaluable. But as crucial as each and every one of these little guys may be, there's one equally backstage role that has the power to make or break any game that comes to us from foreign climes – more than we ever seem to realise, the fate of an international game can rest on the shoulders of its localisation team.

With scripts that run into the tens of thousands of words, increasingly complex stories to be told and production values that would render even the slightest error that much more embarrassing, the modern localisation crew has more pressure on it than ever before. And where this was once the domain of the literal translator – and before that, the domain of the nearest person to a linguist a team had – it's now a highly creative field where it's far more than just the words that need to be changed in order for a game to reach out to players from beyond its homeland. Especially, for instance, when you're dealing with a game from the cheeky, warped minds of Nippon Ichi.

"The original Japanese script is full of jokes and humour, but it isn't necessarily funny to Western culture," explains Nao Zook, marketing manager for NIS America. "So this is when our localisation team comes in and makes it funny to our audiences. We always try to honour the original Japanese script, though." It's been clear ever since Nippon Ichi's European debut with the original *Disgaea* that this was one of the tenets it understood better than many other JRPG translators – knowing when to stick with the original Japanese themes and subject matter and when to change tack entirely for something more appropriate. Or, for that matter, more inappropriate. It's all about knowing your audience, though each game needs to be tackled on its own terms, as Zook confirms. "We can't really say how much is written fresh. It depends on the title."

We'd have thought that, with its strange subject matter and characters, *Disgaea* might be among the harder tasks a localisation team could look forward to, though according to translator Yoko Nishikawa, that really isn't the case. "Surprisingly, it is a bit easier to adapt *Disgaea* than some of the other titles that we have published, because the *Disgaea* series, from its original version, is geared more towards an international audience than a lot of other JRPGs," she tells us. "That being said, we work

> "Yes, many of these characters are demons, but if their personalities shine through, it won't matter if they are a demon, human, angel or monster because they will no longer be confined by such a one-dimensional classification"
>
> **Steven Carlton, NIS America**

very hard to transfer many of the bizarre aspects of the series to reflect and reference back to Western pop culture, so that the original spirit and intent of the original game can be experienced by an audience that most likely will not be familiar enough with the culture of the original audience."

It's a sentiment echoed by script editor Steven Carlton too. "We stick to the tone of the original, but create humour that works for the Western culture. One of the reasons for this is because what is considered crazy and over-the-top in Japan may fall a little flat, or seem very normal for a Western audience. Although, sometimes the original tone of the game in Japanese may come across as much more controversial when translated into English, so we have to be careful about how we characterise these elements."

This area in particular interests us, especially with regard to *Disgaea* as a franchise. Set in a hellish underworld and packed full of demons,
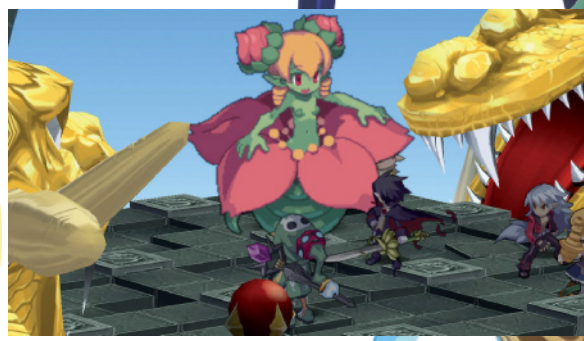
■ **TOP:** Levelling is made easier through the introduction of custom levels.
■ **MIDDLE:** Giant monsters will require every ounce of your cunning to bring down.
■ **BOTTOM:** Stacking characters comes in even handier than it did before.

ABOVE: The localisation doesn't just have to be funny – the game's mechanics must also be made clear.

Safety In Numbers

Okay, so team combo attacks and transforming into monsters might not be anything new to the franchise, but *Disgaea 4* gives these features a total overhaul. Lifting up allies to perform tower attacks remains possible, though it also appears that you can use the stack of characters to reach over obstacles. The Magichange feature – whereby friendly monsters can unite with other characters to be used as offensive tools for a number of turns – also changes, introducing dual-wielding and the use of giant monsters to form even more powerful items. Those new oversized beasts can be created by combining creatures with one another, adding yet further incentive to get some monster classes on your team, though whether you want to use up valuable character slots on fighters that rely on combo strategies to meet their potential is a call only you will be able to make...

miscreants and felonies, the series is rife with elements that could easily offend various groups should their behaviour or depictions get out of hand – how do the team rein this in while still getting across the volatile nature of the Netherworld? "The way that we approach this issue is by letting the personalities of the characters speak for themselves," Carlton explains. "Yes, many of these characters are demons, but if their personalities shine through, it won't matter if they are a demon, human, angel or monster because they will no longer be confined by such a one-dimensional classification. And after that, if people are still going to be offended by those classifications, then the only way to not offend them would be to remove all mention of who these characters are, and where the story is taking place, and we would end up with a completely different game at that point."

Censorship, after all, can only be taken so far before the entire point is lost – niche Japanese games are almost notorious for their risqué subject matter, tackling and twisting themes such as sexuality and religion in ways that would make most God-fearing Western developers wince. But are these differences between audiences and attitude something the team notices and needs to deal with in this, another tale of demon princes, tortured souls and underworlds? "We can tell that there are differences in the Japanese market and the Western market as a whole," Zook concurs. "But when we look at *Disgaea* fans in Japan and Western regions, we don't see much difference. They both enjoy the humour, unique characters, hundreds of hours of gameplay, massive customisation, and so on. What we have found is that *Disgaea* is universal; if you are a hardcore strategy-RPG fan, no matter where you are from, you will enjoy *Disgaea*!"

Surely a sign of localisation done right, Nippon Ichi's team really has a handle on who its market is and what it wants, as Carlton explains. "Every game is different in terms of what the target audience for the game is looking for," he says. "Generally, we can take a much more liberal approach to the localisation with *Disgaea* because the comedy is such a fundamental part of what makes it *Disgaea*. And with comedy, you have to go all out or it just won't work." Having smacked us all upside the head with a big ol' hammer named Truth, Carlton goes on to explain a little about the firm's latest game. "There are a few key themes to *Disgaea 4*, which the narrative basically revolves around. These are the importance of keeping promises, the corruption of the human race, the bond of camaraderie that develops between different

people and the importance of eating sardines. As far as the narrative goes, the story begins with a simple promise that snowballs into a political cause that unites different people together to defend their beliefs." See? For all its occult subject matter and lewd humour, *Disgaea*'s moral compass isn't entirely broken – put down the torches and pitchforks and give the guys a chance, you multicultural angry mob of various religious faiths and beliefs.

Although Nippon Ichi's Japanese leg recently announced financial figures that placed it back in the black, these were based almost entirely on domestic sales – a stronger presence abroad would see the company even more secure in a financial climate where none bar the greatest and most prolific studios can call themselves safe. To this end, it will be looking to its flagship franchise to fill its sails and help guide it towards bigger and better things. So how is the game being tailored to entertain the Western world? "What we are trying to do to help *Disgaea* expand in the Western market is to make appealing package art, spread the word about the game through magazines, online game sites, social networking, and so on, and localise the game perfectly for the Western market," Zook says, the importance of the marketing role suddenly coming to the fore. "As you know, the *Disgaea* game itself provides great fun to Western audiences, but if we, as NIS America, didn't provide appealing packaging, information and access to the game to Western audiences, they wouldn't be able to know about this awesome game."

Awesome it may be, but a localisation job on a *Disgaea* game is a very different task to one on, say, a *Final Fantasy* game – while the latter must tie up numerous story arcs and push ever onwards to a predetermined goal, *Disgaea*'s narrative is far more modular and incidental, giving the team more creative freedom and more chance to come up with that one line destined to send the web into a meme-fuelled frenzy. "Speaking strictly about the success of a game internationally, this is really more dependent on the game itself. For games that rely heavily on the story and characters,

then absolutely the localisation process becomes much more important," Nishikawa tells us. "However, some games, even in the RPG genre, rely much more on their gameplay systems or gimmicks, and what they allow the player to do, and let the stories be less important to the overall game experience. For those kinds of games, the localisation is less important to the game's success, because the audience already knows why they like the game. This all depends on the individual game, as well. Obviously, if you have good source material to start with, generally the localisation will have a much better impact on the audience. Also, different companies may want to retain much stricter control over how we alter their work during our localisation, while other companies may be much more lax. But in any case, whichever type of game we are localising, we will always put top priority on the quality of our localisation."

But while the translation process is clearly crucial to a game's quality, it's not the one-way process it may appear. Zook explains how the localisation team can help imbue Nippon Ichi's titles with more universal appeal before they even leave Japan. "We usually give them feedback after receiving reviews from the Western press – they do take the Western reviewers' and fans' feedback seriously," she reveals, going on to cite more specific examples. "When we released *Prinny: Can I Really Be The Hero?*, we received lots of feedback that the gameplay was too difficult. With that feedback, they added Baby mode to *Prinny 2*." It might be a totally separate wing of the company but its input and feedback does make a difference, it appears – a far cry from the archaic vision of a few guys with thousands of script pages each huddled around a dictionary. "When they make a new game, we usually don't know about it. However, we always try to give them feedback and hope they will utilise the voice of Western fans and users. Regarding the gameplay improvement, we give them feedback any time we can."

And in *Disgaea 4,* more than any other Nippon Ichi title to date, that feedback is evident. The shift to hi-res sprites has been a long time coming

> ## "There are themes to Disgaea 4 – the importance of keeping promises, the corruption of the human race, the bond of camaraderie that develops between people and the importance of eating sardines"
>
> **Steven Carlton, NIS America**

but it immediately opens the game up to a new audience, with players that might once have laughed at *Disgaea 3*'s old-school appearance swung by the game's newfound good looks. True to form, NIS even offers the choice to swap back to the simplistic characters should you so wish, though outside of pure nostalgia there's no real reason to do so – the hand-drawn replacements are beautifully realised, almost to the point where they show up the simple 3D backdrops. It's never been a graphical showcase, though; artistry and imagination here far more important than ridiculous polygon counts and dazzling particle effects.

The wide-scale adoption of RPG mechanics into even the most mainstream games (such as *Call Of Duty*'s leveling and perks) and the appeal of the genre as a whole will also help Nippon Ichi's cause when *Disgaea 4* launches later in the year. 'Stats' and 'classes' aren't the dirty words they once were and, these days, there's far more acceptance of games like this – a point ably proven by the fact that even the *Ghost Recon* franchise has taken its turn to morph into a strategy-RPG under the watchful eye of one Julian Gollop. With its level caps in the clouds and hardcore challenges pouring forth from its almost infinite potential, *Disgaea* is still hardly what you'd call mainstream, though concessions like the map editor – which can be used to create levels in which to train your forces on your own terms – certainly edge it closer than it has been before.

■ **TOP:** Compared to some games, that's a lot of damage. Here, it's barely a scratch.
■ **MIDDLE:** Prinny costume get! *Disgaea*'s oddball characters continue to raise eyebrows.
■ **BOTTOM:** Outnumbered by mushroom folk? Better hope you've got some decent gear...

"*Disgaea 4* will provide the fans more and deeper gameplay and replay value," Nook summarises. "The strength and focus of NIS games are game system, gameplay, characters, and story. On top of that, *Disgaea 4* has incredible graphics that show off Mr Harada's character designs in motion." It certainly is the most fully-featured package the firm has yet assembled, and anyone going into the game with less than a couple of hundred hours to devote to it will never get the most out of it. A fleshed out, more advanced take on the Item World; the ability to create your own pirate crew and send them out into the wide world via PlayStation Network (hackers permitting) and have them return with the booty they collect; a persistent online presence which can see your game invaded by the pirate crews of others... the string of new features runs and runs, building on the rock-solid foundations of some of the strategy-RPG genre's most entertaining children.

"We hope that you will enjoy this new entry into the *Disgaea* series," Nook closes. "Please don't blame us for your sleepless nights." And we won't. After all, it's the team's sleepless nights that facilitate ours, chuckling into the wee small hours at Prinny ridicule, stupidly over-the-top weapons and specials, ingenious challenges, and numbers so huge they humble our ability to count. You don't blame somebody for a treat like that – what you do is you thank them. So, for all the sleep deprivation and bleary-eyed mornings that the *Disgaea* series has provided... thanks, doods.

All Your Grammar Are Belong To Us

The job of a localisation team wasn't always quite so crucial and, back in the day, it was common for glaring errors to be overlooked or simply ignored as games were rushed into new territories. And while the world then was simply amazed by the pretty graphics and interaction, these mistranslations have gone on to become memes in their own right. From the Pokémon trainer who proclaims his love for shorts to the old man in *Zelda* whose name appears to be Error, many games from yesteryear sport mistakes both amusing and just plain daft. These days, mistakes of this magnitude are uncommon (though not unheard of) as standards have risen and presentation is everything. If anything, Engrish is used more as a joke in its own right these days, a nod to the simpler, formative years of gaming − *Mario & Luigi* villain Fawful is a prime example, though NIS has more than its fair share of in-jokes and references too. To play us out, here are a few of our favourite 'lost in translation' moments from over the years...

"I will stop going out because slowness today."
Yu-Gi-Oh! Nightmare Troubadour, DS (2005)

"VICTOLY!!"
Samurai Shodown IV, Neo Geo (1996)

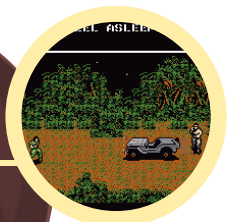## "Somebody set up us the bomb"
Zero Wing, Mega Drive (1989)

"You! Invaders! Get you the hot bullets of shotgun to die!"
Battle Rangers, Arcade (1988)

"I FEEL ASLEEP!!"
Metal Gear, NES (1987)

"A WINNER IS YOU."
Pro Wrestling, NES (1986)

SHINING FORCE III

It's an unfortunate reality of the game industry that many of its finest titles have yet to see the light of day in the UK. Since the dawn of the 8-bit era, publishers on both sides of the Pacific have, for some reason, chosen not to translate their games into English but that isn't going to stop us from playing them...

Stop! If you're thinking of writing a smug letter, explaining to us that *Shining Force III* did in fact get a PAL release, just wait until you've read this first. You see, the UK version of *Shining Force III*, released in June 1998, is only one third of a complete game. Those who've played it, even in its unfinished form, know that *Shining Force III* is an RPG that deserves more attention than it ever received. Released during the wake of *Final Fantasy VII*'s phenomenal debut, *Shining Force III* was lost in the excitement over Squaresoft's title. Which was a real shame as it's a brilliant example of the underappreciated strategy RPG sub-genre.

Like its Mega Drive predecessors, the third *Shining Force* game involves assembling a huge force

▲ Some of the magic attacks and summons make great use of the Saturn's repertoire of visual effects.

of fantasy characters, consisting of centaurs, dwarves and elves, who must fight in a series of tactical battles in which spatial positioning is just as important as attack strength. As with similar style RPGs – such as *Fire Emblem* and *Disgaea* – *Shining Force* offers a more relaxed style of gameplay, due to the fact that the battles are never random and are paced well enough that they can be enjoyed in a single sitting of about 30 to 60 minutes.

▲ The first game starts out with a lengthy prologue. Bear with it though, things soon get more interesting.

Unlike its closest competitors, though, *Shining Force* has a number of features that elevate it far above the others. The most important of these is that in between each battle, the player is able to explore a full three-dimensional town, talk to NPCs, buy new equipment, and search for secret items and characters. And although this feature is commonplace within the RPG genre, it is something that's particularly underused in tactical

▲ As with the Mega Drive games, the attack scenes were the most visually impressive parts of the battles.

games. The world of *Fire Emblem*, with its static menus and 2D dialogue scenes, seems by comparison to be much shallower, less fleshed out than the bustling towns and citadels of *Shining Force III*.

Camelot's creation of a living, breathing world in which to place *Shining Force*'s tactical battles adds more than just an extra layer of gameplay, though; it's actually an essential geo-political backdrop to the game's overarching story. And

▲ For full script translations of *Shining Force III*, go to www.shiningforcecentral.com.

▲ Looking at these screens we can't help shedding a tear at the non-appearance of *Shining Force IV*.

▲ We have only this to say to anyone who reckons the Saturn couldn't do decent FMV: you're obviously wrong.

▲ Here, a completely custom-made force takes part in one of the bonus battles from the premium disc.

while that may sound like we're over-intellectualising a videogame, that's really not the case. The UK version of *Shining Force III* takes place over the lands of two warring states – the Republic of Aspinia and the Empire of Destonia – and puts the player in control of a warrior named Synbios, who must search for and recover his abducted king.

During battle, Synbios meets the major antagonists of the tale: lords, knights, princes and generals, whose actions define the course of the story. It's when visiting the various towns and cities, however, that Synbios is given the opportunity to speak to the world's civilians, who tell him how the war has affected their lives. How the neglect of the Republic's rulers has left many of its towns without food or how the Destonians' industrial revolution has gifted its cities with a life-changing railway system that only wealthy landowners can afford to use. These are themes that don't tend to appear in the average console game, themes that could have been handled in a clumsy, preachy way but, as many of these finer details only ever crop up in optional conversations, never feel forced on the player. They exist for those who feel a connection with the game world and a need to understand its characters in a deeper way than most games ever allow.

Unfortunately though, much of the narrative depth available to players of *Shining Force III* went unseen by the majority of UK Saturn owners. The reason for this was Sega itself. Faced with a rapidly declining Saturn audience in the West, and the imminent arrival of the Dreamcast, Sega of America's support of the Saturn almost came to a complete standstill. A few key releases like *Burning Rangers* and *Panzer Dragoon Saga* trickled through but others, such as the localisation of *Grandia* and the US release of *X-Men Vs Street Fighter*, were written off as a dead loss. Also to be found among the casualties were the concluding chapters of *Shining Force III*.

Play through the Western release of *Shining Force III* from beginning to end and it's clear that a significant portion of the story is unaccounted for. Key characters disappear without any clue to their fate and the game even ends on a huge cliffhanger just before the start of a pivotal battle. Once the credits have rolled, the game makes one final save file – making it clear that the player's progress could be continued in the next instalment. But that instalment, and the one that followed, never made it outside of Japan. If they had, it's hard to imagine *Shining Force III* being hailed as anything other than a modern masterpiece as the second and third chapters pushed the brilliant story of the first to interesting levels seen in far too few RPGs. The second chapter,

for example, reset the story right back to where the first game began but instead of putting the player in control of the Republican Synbios, it revolved around the tale of Medion, the Prince of Destonia. Cleverly telling the civil war's story from the perspective of the 'enemy' allowed the player to see the situation in a completely different light and challenged pre-conceived notions of good and evil as the narrative gradually encouraged the player to identify with the Destonians and see that they weren't completely to blame for the war. The third and final chapter concluded the story by uniting the two opposing forces against the real villains, who had been manipulating them all along. Who were they? Well, you'll have to play the game to find out.

The unfinished state of *Shining Force III*'s Western release is obviously a source of great frustration to fans of the series but nowhere near as upsetting as the consequences of that mistake. Angry at Sega for the way it had mistreated and mismanaged the release of the game, Camelot, which had overseen the *Shining* series for seven years, ended its relationship with Sega and began working with Sony and Nintendo on new projects. This was an undeniable tragedy, as anyone who's played the more recent *Shining* games on PS2 will confirm. The series just hasn't been the same since.

▲ Each town is rendered in real time, so you can change the camera angles and zoom in and out as you please.

BONUS CONTENT

Before digital distribution became mainstream, the release of bonus content was a rarity, but that didn't stop Camelot. Included within the manual to each chapter of *Shining Force III* was a small voucher. If all three of these were posted into Camelot, the player could earn the extremely limited edition 'premium disc'. This highly collectable disc used the final save from *Shining Force III* and allowed the player to assemble a new force selected from every single playable character they had met throughout the adventure. The player could then use that force in a handful of bonus battles, some of which were 3D revisions of memorable battles from the previous games in the series.

FINAL FANTASY X

The first full 3D Final Fantasy game brought the franchise into the modern age. Producer Yoshinori Kitase recalls its creation to games™ as this modern classic prepares for its HD re-release…

Released: July 2001
Format: PlayStation 2
Publisher: Squaresoft
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF
Yoshinori Kitase, director;
Kazushige Nojima, co-writer;
Nobuo Uematsu, composer

EVOLUTION IS ABOUT risk. When *Final Fantasy X* introduced voice-acting and proper 3D to the heavily story-based series upon its release in 2001, it risked moving away from the traditional *Final Fantasy* paradigm of a world map and scrolling text that had defined the franchise since its late Eighties conception. Yet it was a risk the franchise had to take on the new PlayStation 2 hardware, and one that producer Yoshinori Kitase had been considering since the team brought Squall's quest to kill the Sorceress Ultimecia to life in the series' eighth instalment.

"Since the time we were making *Final Fantasy VIII*, the visuals in *Final Fantasy* had been getting more and more realistic and I was feeling more and more dissatisfied at the fact there were no voices to go with it," reveals Kitase. When we ask Kitase what he wanted to accomplish in bringing *Final Fantasy X* to the PS2 that he wasn't able to previously, the answer is pretty simple: "Definitely the implementation of voice acting."

Yet the voice-acting in *Final Fantasy X* would ultimately be contentious in the West, and would serve to disguise the game's other monumental achievements in establishing what the next stage of the RPG should become on the PlayStation 2. *Final Fantasy X* came along two years after *IX*, the final entry of the series on PSone. Whereas *IX* had been mostly developed by creator Hironobu Sakaguchi's ill-fated Square team out in Hawaii, *Final Fantasy X* would be made by the same team that created *VII* and *VIII* – the two biggest commercial entries to date and perhaps the two most loved by the fan base – and both its character design and world creation would reflect that.

Final Fantasy X was a bold sequel in its choice of setting and scenario. *VII* went for a sci-fi/fantasy story, *VIII* focused on a world infused by both outlandish fantasy and European architecture and *IX* was a deliberate throwback to the medieval derring-do that defined earlier entries on the NES and SNES. *X* went for a tropical backdrop, where nature is allowed to run rampant, populated areas are colourful and the absence of major cities is literally written into the lore of the game.

The entire mythos of the world is defined by Sin, the game's primary antagonist; an enormous mythical creature that has forever brought destruction into the populated areas of Spira, *Final Fantasy X*'s world. At the start of this tale, we meet Tidus, hero of the story, who resides in the glorious hi-tech metropolis of Zanarkand, and whose long-absent pseudo-abusive father is a source of great conflict for the character. After meeting a mysterious spirit-child and his father's friend, Auron, Sin destroys Zanarkand, swallowing Tidus and Auron and seemingly transporting them into another world where Zanarkand was destroyed 1,000 years ago.

As Tidus washes up on the island of Besaid, he learns that the majority of the populace are god-fearing and consider advanced technology to be unholy, swearing allegiance to the faith of Yevon. They've all lost something to Sin, and are taught that adhering to the faith's teachings will protect them from this unstoppable entity. They're indoctrinated into thinking they deserve Sin, that the unclean history of humanity warranted Sin's creation as a pan-global penance for all to suffer.

"Sin was created to be a presence in the world that people could simply not avoid, however much they tried," Kitase says. "I created him to represent the kinds of calamitous disasters we have in the real

> ## "WE CREATED SIN AS A THREAT THAT WAS FAR ABOVE THE HUMAN LEVEL, IN THE SAME VEIN AS NATURAL DISASTERS LIKE EARTHQUAKES AND TYPHOONS" YOSHINORI KITASE

world, such as earthquakes and typhoons that people have no hope of protecting themselves from. Building on that, the world of Spira also has the teachings of Yevon, which give meaning to people's lives in the face of inevitable death (although it turns out that these teachings were actually false in the end). So what I really tried to show in *FFX* was how people behave when they face up to this unavoidable fate. I feel that this theme can be applied to us here in the real world as well."

Sin can be defeated by a Summoner, a rare individual who, armed with Aeons (*FFX*'s versions of

ユウナ：笑いながら……旅 したいんだ

Guardian Forces and Summons, like Ifrit, Bahamut et al) has the potential to defeat the creature – but only temporarily. Sin always comes back. It's a perpetual plague on Spira that scares the people into fearing progress and expanding as a civilisation, leading to conservative philosophies formed around the church's teachings, and vilification of those that reject following Yevon's way.

In the midst of this contemplative mythos is Yuna, an orphan raised in Besaid who wants to follow her father's example and defeat Sin. Tidus meets Yuna just as she begins her pilgrimage through Spira, joining her group of guardians as he searches for answers to what happened to his home of Zanarkand.
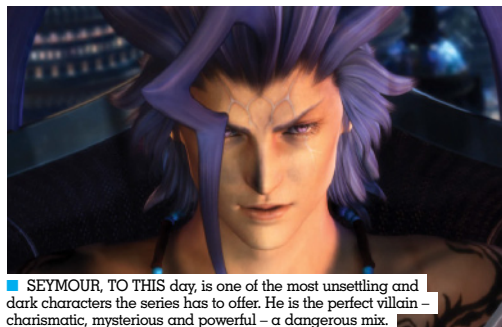
For fans who had built up this stereotype of the *Final Fantasy* protagonist being grumpy and cold, the more upbeat Tidus, voiced enthusiastically by James Arnold Taylor, was a strong contrast to the likes of Squall and Cloud from *VIII* and *VII*, respectively – we put this to Kitase when asking about the character's creation. "Just as you point out, *FFVII* and *FFVIII* had very cool, detached and stoic protagonists – *FFIX* was created

■ SEYMOUR, TO THIS day, is one of the most unsettling and dark characters the series has to offer. He is the perfect villain – charismatic, mysterious and powerful – a dangerous mix.

by a different team based in Hawaii so it is kind of an exception – and so to break the run of this kind of

> ## "AS THE PREVIOUS GAMES HAD ONLY HAD TEXT, THE DEPTH OF EXPRESSION AVAILABLE TO US WAS GREATLY BROADENED BY THE INTRODUCTION OF VOICE" YOSHINORI KITASE

character I created Tidus to be cheerier and more optimistic."

Yuna has the strongest character development in the cast. As a Summoner, she's initially portrayed as deferential to her religion but respectful of everyone's beliefs, a result of dual atheist and religious parentage. As the story progresses, the faith of Yevon starts to unravel – the church itself is revealed to be corrupt, and as Yuna learns she's being manipulated, she joins the rest of her guardians in rebelling against the religious institution. "We tried to depict a heroine who was in no way physically strong but still had a very strong will and determination," Kitase explains. "She has lived her life up until now simply following the creed that she believed in, but when her whole world is shaken, she then has to pick herself up and find a new way forward with her own

Having A Ball

■ Blitzball is one of the deepest and most rounded (sorry) mini-games in *Final Fantasy*'s extensive history – the way it seeps into the wider world is admirable, and it extends beyond its spherical stadiums by requiring the player to recruit NPCs to the struggling Besaid Aurochs in an effort to take them to the top of the league. We asked Kitase where the inspiration for the peculiar pastime came from, and how it became such an integral part of the game's story.

"I wanted to include a fictional sport in our fantasy world like [Lucas Films] did with the pod races in *Star Wars Episode 1*. At the time of development we were in the middle of the fervour about the 2002 World Cup, so I based the mechanics of the game itself around football!" While the football influence isn't surprising, the revelation about *Star Wars* pod racing certainly blind-sided us; the fact that the drag races inspired Kitase to such a level is certainly a significant insight into his creative process…

willpower. That was the kind of strength we wanted to show in her."

Yuna, Tidus and the rest of the party each have a different background that shapes their view of the Yevon faith; there's Wakka, Kimahri and Lulu, who each adhere to the teachings strongly and have learned to fear Sin; then, the inverse of that, Yuna's cousin Rikku who joins the party later in the game is a member of the Al Bhed, heretics who choose to believe in progress, while the later return of Auron to the story reveals that he was a victim of the Yevon church in the most unexpected of ways.

It's a complicated setup, but one that's fascinating in its exploration of how faith can be manipulated to control people, and how science and religion's relationship with one another has always been frail. As subject matter goes, it's examined with roughly the same depth as environmentalism in *Final Fantasy VII* – the subject is there to see and only gradually telegraphed over the course of the game.

As events progress in *Final Fantasy X*, Yevon is revealed as a deeply corrupt religion. A big plot twist hangs on Yuna's relationship with one of the leaders of Yevon, Maester Seymour, an outrageously-dressed and darkly sinister figure who plans to merge with Sin to conquer Spira. The group murder Seymour, which turns your party from potential religious saviours to heretics instantly, and gives the story a new energy that makes the second half of the game especially riveting. Hanging over that tale is Tidus's unresolved relationship with his father, Jecht, whose fate is tied to that of Sin.

Sin is a fascinating creature – shaped like a giant whale with the disconcerting sight of an ancient city resting on its crown; it's an unsettling creation, shrouded in mystery and compounded with pervasive menace. "We created Sin as a threat that was far

■ *FINAL FANTASY* GAMES have always involved summons, but *Final Fantasy X* was the first game to centre on them – even the 'hidden' Aeons were vital for dealing with the more aggressive post-game bosses.

above the human level, in the same vein as natural disasters like earthquakes and typhoons," says Kitase. "Having massive ruins become a part of this creature's physical form helped to visually cement the idea that it is an unimaginably ancient monster on an unprecedented scale. The broad physical shape of Sin is modelled after a whale to give the impression of this being's awesome size as well as its intelligence and otherworldliness."

On a macro level, the game's story is about relationships – the romance between Tidus and Yuna is actually one of the series' weakest to date, a little overcooked by the voice-acting, though the finale manages to bring this thread full circle. Much more interesting is the father-son dynamic of Tidus and Jecht, as the abandoned son lives forever in his father's shadow, and their parallels clearly become a source of anguish for the character. In a departure from the trope of orphans in *Final Fantasy* games, Kitase took a more classic approach in forging Tidus and Jecht's loaded relationship.

"Well this aspect of the story includes the timeless theme of a child trying to exceed the achievements of their parent, which can be found in stories throughout
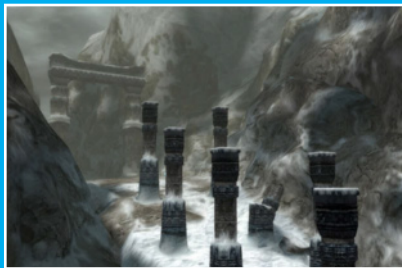
IN-SPIRA-TION

We spoke to *Final Fantasy X*'s lead artist, Yosuke Naora, about what drove him to create such vivid landscapes
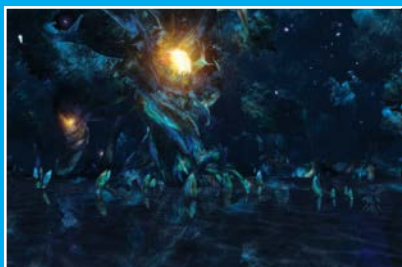
BESAID ISLAND

"In order to very clearly differentiate it from the modern and urbanised Zanarkand, we needed to depict the environment and the people who lived there in a very memorable and striking way and so paid great attention to getting the cultural factors that back that up just right."

LUCA

"We were lucky with this city as the stadium created by Mr Kamikokuryo, the *FFXIII* series art director, immediately gave us a memorable landmark. The design staff also suggested loads of great ideas for things we could do to emphasise that it was a bustling trade port."

MOUNT GAGAZET

"How to depict mountains in order to give the feeling of being on a great journey and the graphics used for them has been a point we paid special attention to, so we lavished an unexpected amount of attention here. Another focus was how we could make it the backdrop for the epic story that takes place there."

ZANARKAND

"The city of Zanarkand had a very strong nautical theme so I gave it the silhouette of a mighty whale. It was important that when the city was attacked it did not just turn out looking like the old Kaiju monster movies, so I emphasised the fantasy elements by incorporating ideas such as the prominence of the water spray."

MACALANIA

"As this area plays host to a very important scene in the story I pulled together lots of different ideas to enhance that. I incorporated a lot of elements that would be instantly recognisable to Japanese people as evoking a tranquil and otherworldly environment."

FAHRENHEIT AIRSHIP

"We actually ran a contest within the team to come up with the base design for the airship. It is, of course, entirely coincidental that the airship's base colours are the same as those worn by the LA Lakers – it was definitely not planned like that!"

■ ALTHOUGH THE GAME was quite serious, there were a few light-hearted nods back to series tropes in there; Omega Weapon, someone called Cid, cactuars, chocobos and airships all made an appearance.

the ages, such as the ancient Greek legends. Also, the bond between parent and child becomes a key factor in finding the one chink in Sin's armour that allows for this otherwise invincible creature to be defeated."

That's the other thing – there's a major connection between Jecht, Tidus and Sin that Kitase refers to here that is quite simply too complicated to go into, but makes sense within the logic of the universe. What's fascinating is the way Tidus has to accept that his father has pursued an arc of redemption since abandoning him as a child, and reconciling that with his own unfortunate memories.

Such storytelling was a good opportunity for the first *Final Fantasy* with voice acting. "As the previous games had only had text, the depth of expression available to us was greatly broadened by the introduction of voice," says Kitase. "On the other hand, by giving them actual voices the facial expressions of the characters became a lot more important and we needed to put a lot more energy into that than we would have done previously."

On a gameplay level, other major changes were brought to the franchise. Summons are a staple of *Final Fantasy*, and in *X* players were allowed to control and customise them like party members, since gathering these creatures was the goal of Yuna's pilgrimage. With that in mind, Kitase and his team worked to ensure the animations demonstrated some kind of dynamic to elaborate their place in the story.

"We decided to make the process of acquiring each of the Aeons an important element to the main story progression as Yuna goes on her pilgrimage around Spira," says Kitase. "This importance that was placed on them made us take a lot of care in their design. It is a staple of the *Final Fantasy* series that there will be a complex

summoning sequence as each one enters battle, but what differentiates *FFX* from the previous games is the interplay between the summoner (Yuna) and the beast that is called forth. For example, after summoning Valefor, Yuna will occasionally pat its head and this was deliberately put in to express their close relationship. By emphasising this relationship between Yuna and the Aeons we managed to give the final scene of the game where she has to part with them even more impact."

And what a final scene it is. The narrative of *Final Fantasy X* is constructed in such a way that the final payoff has an emotional impact not just on central protagonist Tidus, but also Yuna and the whole crew of Guardians. Revelations abound in the final hour of *Final Fantasy X*, and it has one of the most rewarding final cutscenes on the PS2. The end-game was exactly that – once you approached the Final Aeon, that was it, no going back. There's a classic boss rush that actually feels justified – a rarity in the genre.

It's a credit to *Final Fantasy X* that its narrative is so aware of the mechanics it works with, right down to the emotive and poignant finale. For many gamers, *Final Fantasy X* represents not just a technical highlight of the PlayStation 2, but also an emotional one – every character's personality was well-realised and defined with aplomb, every environment hummed with its own atmosphere and sense of place, every narrative beat hit home with intensity.

Final Fantasy X was a scathing criticism of religious extremism, a celebration of technology, a warning against arrogance and a vital landmark in the wider gaming landscape. Kitase understands this, and seems deeply humbled and affected by player's reactions to his work. "By presenting this game to the world and seeing the reactions of those that played it I feel that my outlook on life has been broadened,"

■ SIMILARLY TO *FINAL Fantasy VII*'s lifestream, *X*'s Farplane was an otherworld where souls were sent to rest – justifying the existence of fiends, summons, magic and even Tidus. The memorable Moonflow was a gathering place for all 'unsent' souls.

> ## "SEEING THE REACTIONS OF THOSE THAT PLAYED IT, I FEEL THAT MY OUTLOOK ON LIFE HAS BROADENED"
> YOSHINORI KITASE

he tells us. It's reassuring to know that the impassioned response to *Final Fantasy X* is a two-way relationship – and is perhaps why the game will live on in gaming consciousness for years still to come.

Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster is out now on PlayStation 3 and PS Vita

A Realm Reborn

■ The overwhelming popularity of *Final Fantasy X* has prompted Square Enix to sink years of production into completely remastering the game for PS3 and PSVita – what we've seen of the game so far promises to offer noticeably sharper character models, cleaner HUDs and more defined environments. "The main characters have been completely re-worked from the modelling stage upwards and all the textures on them, such as the skin, have been fully converted to HD to improve the quality," explains Kitase. "The music has been overhauled too – around two-thirds of the tracks in the game have been expertly re-arranged." Kitase also mentioned the game will include content from the International release of the game (that was strangely only released in Japan). "For the players overseas we have included the creature creation mode and Last Mission dungeon from *FFX-2*."
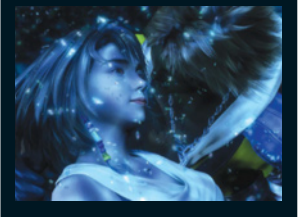
ユウナ：その人たちに死ねと言うのなら
わたしも　あなたと戦います

"It made me want to make The Witcher 3 a similarly emotionally engaging experience"

JAKUB SZAMALEK, CD PROJEKT RED

Final Fantasy X

JAKUB SZAMALEK, CD PROJEKT RED

❝ *There are many games I love and a lot of it depends on what age I was at the time. I have quite a peculiar taste when it comes to games. But when it comes to roleplaying games, apart from* The Witcher, *I really like Japanese titles in that genre.* Final Fantasy X *was a game I look back on now for inspiration, it made me want to make* The Witcher 3 *a similarly emotionally engaging experience. The game was very good at evoking emotions. Of course, it was completely linear, but there were some places where I almost shed a tear. This is definitely something that I would like to achieve in my work. I like games that evoke emotions, like* Shadow Of The Colossus, *which wasn't really about dialogue but about emotions.* Final Fantasy X *was a real inspiration in that regard.* ❞

Hall Of Fame...
Chocobo

Forget Epona, Agro and Yoshi, the most iconic and cherished videogame steed may just be Final Fantasy's original feathered friend

IF THE LONG-RUNNING *Final Fantasy* series has one distinguishing feature it's the fact that each of its landmark entries is a completely self-contained episode, never repeating characters, setting or story from one game to the next. Starting with a clear slate each time, there are few constants that tie the series together: the customary use of the names Cid, Biggs and Wedge, the reappearance of certain species such as the Moogle and, of course, the Chocobo.

Introduced in 1988's *Final Fantasy II* on Famicom, the Chocobo appears in just one forest and can be used as a quick mode of transport in the local area. Standing in for horses, which appear extremely rarely throughout the series, the yellow-feathered bird made for a much more imaginative steed that perfectly fit Squaresoft's unique interpretation of the typical RPG universe.

As that first Chocobo gave *Final Fantasy II* a personality distinct from any other RPG of the time, it was no surprise to see the chirpy yellow mount reappear in nearly every subsequent title. And with each appearance, the significance of our feathered friend increased. With more Chocobo forests cropping up in the game worlds, it became easier to find a bird and use it to travel over the continent – the bonus being that their use negates random encounters.

Subsequent games allowed you to fight against rogue Chocobo or even summon them to aid with powerful attacks in battle. *Final Fantasy IV* on the SNES introduced new breeds of Chocobo, signified by either white or black plumage, that each benefited from their own unique abilities. But it was the epic *Final Fantasy VII* that most fleshed out the role of the Chocobo in the *Final Fantasy* universe.

Final Fantasy VII was, for many Europeans, their first taste of the JRPG and therefore their introduction to the loveable Chocobo. And what an introduction it was, as Squaresoft spent more effort than ever before to make the Chocobo an integral part of the experience with *Final Fantasy VII*. For the first time, players could catch wild Chocobo and keep them in stables for future use. Here they could be crossbred with other Chocobo and fed different types of food in order to breed new colours including blue, green, black and even gold. Each of these breeds featured unique abilities, the blue Chocobo could run through water, green could traverse mountains, black Chocobos could do both and the gold Chocobo could do both while also being able to cross the ocean.

As well inheriting all-terrain skills, the different-coloured birds could also be put to use in the Chocobo Races at the Gold Saucer resort, which had to be won in order to complete a major part of the main quest. Just being able to breed the best Chocobo required hours of experimentation between the different variables of the two Chocobo mates and their food. So, it was hardly surprising to see lengthy and detailed breeding guides turn up on the internet and in the gaming magazines of the day.

THE COMPLEXITY OF the Chocobo's gameplay was mercifully reduced in future games, but the bird remained no less popular. In 1997 the creature received its first spin-off game, *Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon*, which put you in control of a bird called Poulet in a roguelike RPG. A sequel followed, as well as a *Mario Kart*-style racing game, a DS mini-game collection called *Chocobo Tales* and a recent return to the dungeon genre on WiiWare.

Chocobo's spin-off games saw the cute bird made even more cute and cartoonish, attracting a younger audience and allowing Squaresoft to make millions in kid-friendly merchandise. In the main *Final Fantasy* games, however, the design remained relatively realistic. And as the series crossed over onto PlayStation 2, the increased power of the hardware brought more sophisticated visuals and saw the Chocobo redesigned to look even more believable and realistically proportioned.

Countless appearances, spin-off games, and merchandise all attest to the evergreen popularity of the RPG's most famous steed, but if there's one factor that shows just how popular the Chocobo is with fans then it's the history of the bird's use in *Final Fantasy XI*. First released in 2002, it took four years of repeated requests and petitions before Square Enix incorporated Chocobo breeding into the game and another year before racing was also added to the MMO.

Square Enix seems to have learned its lesson now. When *Final Fantasy XIV* was announced back at E3 2009, the debut trailer clearly showed a Chocobo in action, proving the developers know just how important the creature is to RPG fans and that he won't be going away any time soon.
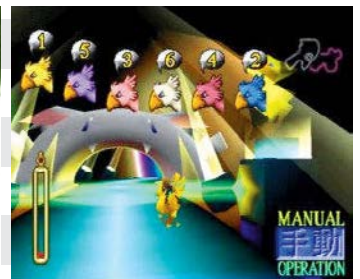
>. MAGIC MOMENTS

■ Edgar makes a daring escape from Figaro castle in *FF VI* by jumping on a moving Chocobo.

■ The PC version of *FF VII* opens with a flock of Chocobo sprinting past the Squaresoft logo.

■ The Chocobo/Mog summon randomly throws out the Fat Chocobo in *FF*'s *VII* and *VIII*.

■ A day at the races in *Final Fantasy VII*'s Gold Saucer resort. Go on, Cloud.

GENERAL APPEARANCE

The behind-the-scenes origin of the Chocobo is unclear to this day, but the bird is generally thought to have been designed by Squaresoft veteran Koichi Ishii. The game designer is said to have been influenced by Kyorochan, a character from a Japanese chocolate advert, and the Horseclaw from Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaa*.

BODY

If the Chocobo were a real creature, it would broadly fall into two different categories of bird. Its plumes of feathers, ridged legs and claws mark it out as a member of the Galliforme family, which also incorporates chickens and turkeys. Its huge size and flightless wings, meanwhile, place it alongside emus and ostriches in the Ratite family.

BEAK

Though the Chocobo cannot speak, it does have an audible call that has changed from game to game. In the earliest *Final Fantasy* titles the bird squawked 'cooc cooc', in later games it made a 'wark' noise and more recently has been heard to emit a 'kweh' sound.

FEATHERS

Chocobo have been spotted in all sorts of different colours, most commonly yellow. Other colours include black, white, green, blue, red, pink, purple, gold and brown. Each colour has a different characteristic that gives it an advantage over certain types of terrain and in rare cases they also gain magic abilities, making them useful in battle.
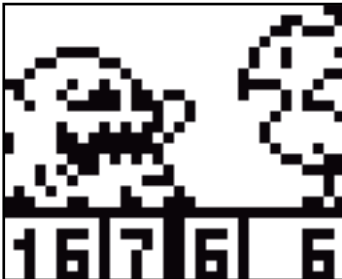
■ *FF VIII* enabled you to download a Chocobo-themed RPG/virtual pet to the PocketStation.

■ Chocobos don't just race on foot, they can also drive go-karts, apparently.

■ *Final Fantasy XIII*'s Sazh Katzroy keeps a baby Chocobo nesting in his hair. Not very hygienic.

■ The trailer for *Final Fantasy XIV* shows the new look for flightless MMORPG birds.

THE BIRD WATCHER'S GUIDE TO FINAL FANTASY

SPANNING MULTIPLE TIMELINES AND REALITIES, EACH FINAL FANTASY CONTAINS ITS OWN WORLD RULES, RACES AND POLITICS. AND THOUGH CHOCOBOS ARE ONE OF THE FEW THINGS TO APPEAR REGULARLY THROUGHOUT THE SERIES, EACH HAS ITS OWN DISTINGUISHING FEATURES. HERE'S YOUR GUIDE TO SOME OF THE MOST INTERESTING BREEDS AND A FEW SPECIAL BIRDS THAT BECAME CHARACTERS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT
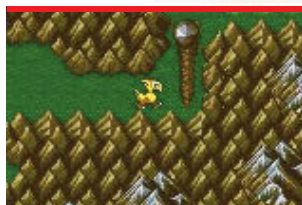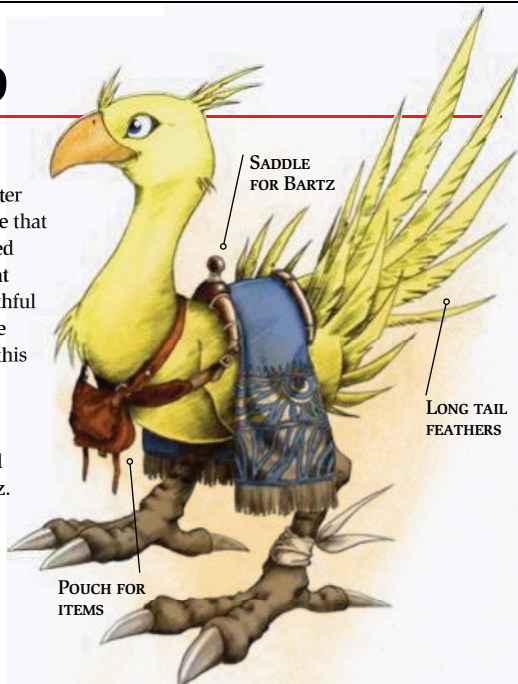
CHOCO

■ Appearing in *FF IX*'s largest side quest, Hot And Cold, Choco helps lead character Zidane dig for maps known as Chocographs. These maps help Zidane search for treasure in the overworld. Choco can also locate a treasure that will transport him to Fat Chocobo, who uses magic to change Choco's colour, granting him the ability to traverse different terrains with ease.

LONG NECK

CURVED BEAK

SHARP DIGGING CLAWS
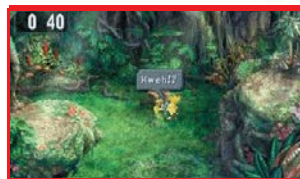
Appearances: Final Fantasy IX
Territories: Chocobo Forest, Chocobo Lagoon
Colours: Yellow, light blue, red, navy blue, gold

BOCO

■ Boco is less a recurring character and more a name that is commonly used for Chocobos that act as pets or faithful companions. The most famous of this type appears in *Final Fantasy V* and belongs to adventuring lead protagonist Bartz. Later on in the game, Boco actually meets and marries a female Chocobo named Koko.

SADDLE FOR BARTZ

LONG TAIL FEATHERS

POUCH FOR ITEMS

Appearances: Final Fantasy V, VIII, IX, Tactics, Tactics A2
Territories: Chocobo Forest, Black Mage Village, Windmill Hut
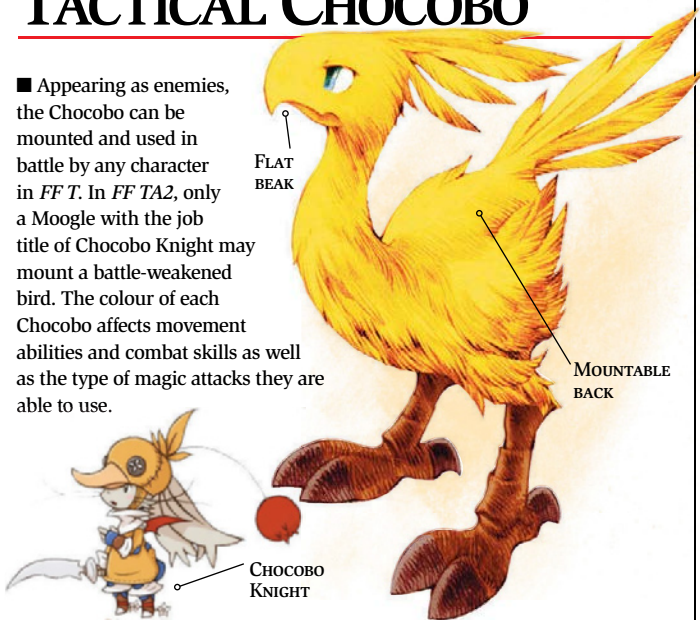**Colours:** Yellow

CHOCOBO

■ The star of the Chocobo spin-off games goes by the name of Poulet in his debut appearance but is confusingly and simply named Chocobo in all subsequent appearances. Much more adorable and kiddie-friendly than his *Final Fantasy* counterpart, this sweet little Chocobo also gets to enjoy a much more diverse set of videogame genres, including roguelikes, kart racers and even mini-game collections.

WIDE EYES

SHORT NECK

OPPOSABLE DIGITS

Appearances: Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon 1 and 2, Chocobo Racing, Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales and Chocobo's Dungeon
Territories: Dungeons, Race Tracks
Colours: Yellow

TACTICAL CHOCOBO

■ Appearing as enemies, the Chocobo can be mounted and used in battle by any character in *FF T*. In *FF TA2*, only a Moogle with the job title of Chocobo Knight may mount a battle-weakened bird. The colour of each Chocobo affects movement abilities and combat skills as well as the type of magic attacks they are able to use.

FLAT BEAK

MOUNTABLE BACK

CHOCOBO KNIGHT

Appearances: *Final Fantasy Tactics, Final Fantasy Tactics A2*
Territories: *Ivalice, Jylland*
Colours: *Yellow, black, red, green, brown, white*

FAT CHOCOBO

■ In the earlier games, Fat Chocobo can be summoned with a carrot or Gysahl Greens and can be used to store excess items in his belly. In later games, however, he takes a more active role and can be used as a Summon that falls from the sky and crushes anyone he lands on.

FEATHERY CHEST

REGAL ATTIRE

FAT BELLY

Appearances: *Final Fantasy III, IV, V, VII, VIII, IX, Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo's Dungeon*
Territories: *Chocobo Forests, Chocobo Towns*
Colours: *Yellow*

VANA'DIEL CHOCOBO

■ Originally used as a mode of transport, the role of the MMO Chocobo increased greatly with subsequent expansion packs, which added the ability to breed Chocobo and, later, race them against other players. The most interesting thing about Vana'diel's Chocobo is that breeds significantly differ in size and shape depending on the race they serve.

TRANSPORT TYPE

COURIER TYPE

KNIGHT TYPE
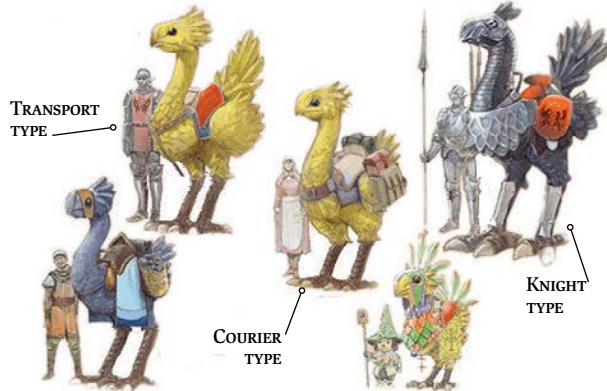
Appearances: *Final Fantasy XI*
Territories: *Vana'diel, La Theine Plateau*
Colours: *Yellow, red, black, purple, green, gold, blue, brown*

SPIRA CHOCOBO

■ Arguably the most intelligent and skilled of all Chocobo, the birds of Spira are capable of leaping high into the air and have developed the ability to open treasure chests with their feet. The very rare 'Amazing Chocobo' is even capable of flight. Spira's Chocobo are the only variant that are known to have a natural predator appropriately known as the Chocobo Eater.

INTELLIGENT EYES

ARMOUR PLATING

CHOCOBO EATER

Appearances: *Final Fantasy X, X-2*
Territories: *Mi'ihen Highroad, Spira*
Colours: *Yellow, white, gold, brown*