

NEW

INSIDE GAMING'S MOST MYTHICAL GENRE

# THE ULTIMATE JRPG HANDBOOK



Digital  
Edition



FIRST  
EDITION

**FEATURING** 特集

DRAGON QUEST • FINAL FANTASY • YS • PHANTASY STAR • EARTHBOUND • SAGA • PERSONA  
FIRE EMBLEM • SECRETS OF MANA • CHRONO TRIGGER • SUIKODEN • POKÉMON & MORE







# Welcome

ようこそ!

Once a type of videogame for hardcore importers, with releases confined to the shores of Japan, JRPGs have risen in popularity over the last 40 years. Starting as a cult genre, they have risen to become an essential million-selling part of gaming.

In this grimoire, we celebrate the world of this remarkable phenomenon. We'll delve into the history of its greatest series, spotlight deep-cut curios like *Ys* and *SaGa*, pay tribute to iconic titles such as *Chrono Trigger* and *Persona*, and more.

So, grab your High Potions, a tuft of Phoenix Down, a trusty oversized sword, and prepare to embark on an XP-charged journey into the world of JRPGs!



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# THE A-Z OF JRPGs

Despite a storied history, it's amazing how many people don't realise how much more there is to Japanese role-playing games. Genre expert Luke Albigés runs down 26 need-to-know things

## ARC THE LAD

FIRST RELEASE: **ARC THE LAD (PLAYSTATION, 1995)**

■ Almost spinning the near-inevitable gaps between Japanese and Western releases as a positive, *Arc The Lad* is a curious case indeed. This great strategy-RPG series, published by Sony in Japan, managed to hit three releases and a spin-off before it was picked up for a Western release, although its treatment there was outstanding... well, so long as you didn't live in Europe. SCEA localised all four games, releasing the whole lot as *Arc The Lad Collection* in the PlayStation's twilight years. The package served to highlight both the impressive strides made by each game, both in terms of content and presentation, as well as how well the games



flowed into one another and offered genuine continuity. Europe finally saw *Arc* for the first time with the middling PS2 release *Twilight Of The Spirits*, although versions of earlier games eventually made their way to PlayStation 3.

A  
IS FOR...

Amnesia  
Attack  
Auto

## BREATH OF FIRE

FIRST RELEASE: **BREATH OF FIRE (SNES, 1993)**

■ Dragons tend to be the enemy in RPGs, so Capcom's decision to grant the lead character in this popular franchise the ability to turn into one was a smart way to give the series a true USP. Sadly, this never truly helped it emerge from the shadow of genre leaders like *Final Fantasy*, with Capcom's games always unfortunate enough to be just downwind of other, bigger-budget classics. While *BOF III* and *BOF IV* can duke it out for the title of 'series high point', even they couldn't help but draw unfavourable comparisons to the full-3D

*FF* games that launched just before them. Still, *Breath Of Fire* cemented its status as a cult favourite, and we'd argue that the fifth game, *Dragon Quarter*, was ahead of its time in how it handled Ryu's transformations – abusing this power would result in the game ending early, placing greater emphasis on using it only as a last resort rather than a crutch.

B  
IS FOR...

Battle  
Boss  
Buff







# CHRONO TRIGGER

FIRST RELEASE: CHRONO TRIGGER (SNES, 1995)

The product of Square assembling a team comprising three of the most important people in shaping the genre – *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*'s creators Hironobu Sakaguchi and Yuji Horii, respectively, plus renowned manga artist Akira Toriyama, famed for both his work on *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Quest* – *Chrono Trigger* was always going to be something special. While it employed a similar Active Time Battle system to *Final Fantasy* games of the time, a twist on the norm meant that battles weren't entered into at random. Enemies could be seen in the overworld with combat initiated by making contact, with foes and played out where it was triggered, rather than cutting away to a separate, standalone battle scene.

As if that wasn't enough of a leap for the genre, *Chrono Trigger* also had another up its sleeve – a *quantum* leap, if you will. To this day, the game sits among the elite few videogames to actually employ time travel well, rather than just using it as an excuse or workaround. Square presented a single world across seven very different time periods, affording players the luxury of skipping between these pretty much at will and enabling decisions and events from the past to affect how things played out in the future. This freedom offered a number of ways to reach and confront the final boss, resulting in no fewer than 13 possible endings and promoting replayability better than any other example of the genre at the time. To this end, Square also pioneered another new feature, New Game+, to allow players to dive back into the game for another run without giving up the experience or items they had accrued.

As was par for the course for Square at the time, however, glowing reviews and commercial success did nothing to open the RPG superpower's eyes to the fact that Europe existed, and it was a case of import or go without for many of us. It did see the light of day on our shores, albeit not until 14 years after its release and only on DS. Its sequel, *Chrono Cross*, meanwhile, took 22 years when it was released in 2022 as *The Radical Dreamers Edition*.



## OUTTATIME

Four other JRPGs that wear their Flux Capacitors on their sleeves



### FINAL FANTASY XIII-2

YEAR: 2011

■ A response to criticisms that the original was too linear, *Final Fantasy XIII-2* featured a time-hopping structure where Noel and Serah could visit various locations in different eras and even break time itself to cause paradox endings.



### STAR OCEAN (SERIES)

YEAR: 1996-PRESENT

■ While not technically time travel, the series revolves around using space travel to visit planets which are in varying states of technological advancement, with some feeling almost medieval while others are suitably sci-fi.



### DARK CHRONICLE

YEAR: 2002

■ The two protagonists in the excellent sequel to Level-5's PS2 debut *Dark Cloud* come from completely different time periods, with the duo eventually working together to complete the Ixion, a time-travelling train.



### EARTHBOUND

YEAR: 1994

■ It opens with a visit from a time traveller and features elements of time travel later on, so it'd be rude not to extend love to this cult classic. Europe was once again screwed over at launch, but a Virtual Console release followed years later.



# DRAGON QUEST

FIRST RELEASE: **DRAGON QUEST (NES, 1986)**

**Widely regarded as the bedrock upon which the modern JRPG template was built, Enix's seminal *Dragon Quest* series would become the publisher's biggest brand.**

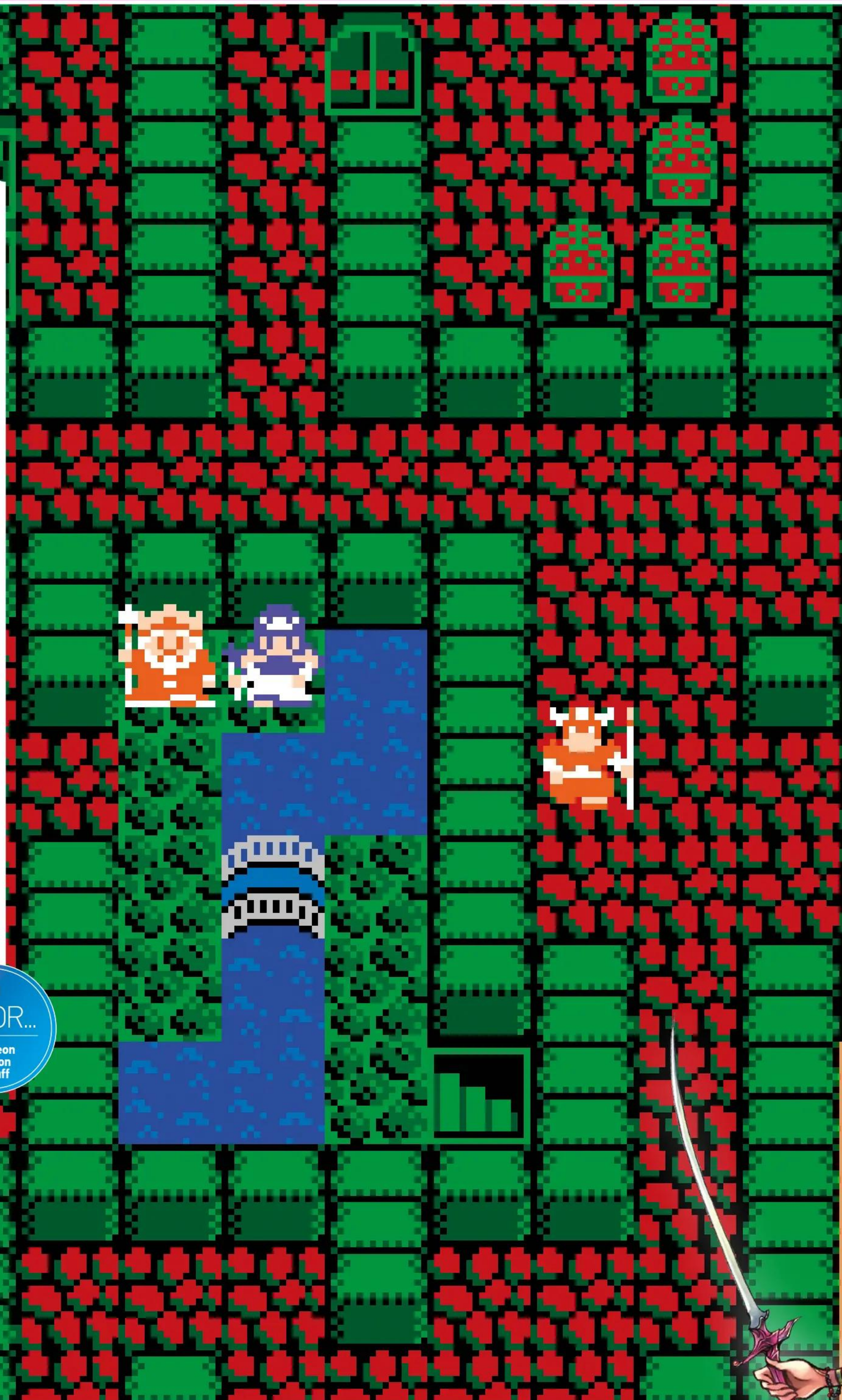
Creator Yuji Horii struck gold by fusing the storytelling template he had laid out in PC murder-mystery title *The Portopia Serial Murder Case* with more 'traditional' role-playing game elements. The concept was nothing new, technically, but Horii's vision to bring this style of gaming to an unaware console audience really brought this series off the ground.

By today's standards, the first few *Dragon Quest* games seem primitive, but it's important to remember that these games were innovators. Freedom of exploration meant that only enemy difficulty served as an indicator that you might have wandered a little too far from the correct path. With only a single party member taking on one enemy at a time, a heavy hit could wipe out an unprepared hero. Thankfully, this wasn't as ruthless as some of its peers in terms of punishment for death – rather than being thrown back to the title screen, you'd simply be revived in town at the cost of half your gold. Interestingly, the original release didn't even have the ability to save your game, instead relying on passwords. This was updated when the game was released in the US as *Dragon Warrior*.

This name change was due to an existing Western trademark of *DragonQuest* (an established tabletop RPG series), a situation that wasn't rectified until 2002, ahead of the release of *Dragon Quest VIII* – not only the first to carry the original name globally, but also the franchise's European debut.



D  
IS FOR...  
Dungeon  
Dragon  
Debuff



E  
IS FOR...  
Equipment  
Encounter  
Ellipses

ENIX

FIRST RELEASE: **LOVE MATCH TENNIS (PC, 1985)**

■ The crucial difference between Enix and its Golden Age rival Squaresoft is a surprisingly simple one – Square was always both a publisher *and* a developer, while Enix was purely a publisher. This explains a lot, when you think about it – how Enix was able to beat Square to the punch with *Dragon Quest* (publishers are always looking for the next big thing, and dedicated ones have more time to do so), why Square was better able to tailor its games for and deliver them to a global audience via closer communication between publishing and development teams and, more recently,

why the merger was such a solid idea. Not only did this bring many of the major brands in the genre under the same umbrella, it was also a chance for the unique skills of each side to shine... the best of both worlds, if you will. It wasn't just *Dragon Quest* that Enix had going for it, either. *Star Ocean* and *Valkyrie Profile* both helped form a bond with developer tri-Ace (which continued to work with the publisher, among others), plus there were classics like *ActRaiser*, *Soul Blazer*, *Terranigma* and *Illusion Of Time* that sadly wouldn't really make it out of the 16-bit era.





# FINAL FANTASY

FIRST RELEASE: FINAL FANTASY (NES, 1987)

The most successful global RPG brand outside of Nintendo's more recent pocket-sized monster, Square's series is also among the most prolific.

On top of 16 mainline games, there are entire subsets within the genre – *Crystal Chronicles*, *Tactics*, *Chocobo*, *Theatrhythm*, *Dissidia* and a whole bunch of one-offs, direct sequels, remakes and oddities to boot. The key hook here is that, for the core games, at least, there's rarely any continuity between releases outside of genre. Characters, worlds, scenarios, battle systems... it all changes completely every time, effectively meaning that the core fanbase knows roughly what they'll be getting each time and buys in, while those unaware of the series or disenfranchised by the last release can jump in the next time around and see how they get on with the new chapter.

While Square's formula for the series stuck fairly rigidly to the tried-and-tested for the first ten mainline entries, it was here that the team, like others heavily invested in the genre, started looking for ways to change things up in order to avoid stagnation when other types of game were clearly and rapidly evolving.

In turn, these attempts, to varying degrees of success, saw the famed franchise veer all over the place – we saw a direct sequel for the first time (*FFX-2*), a bold stride into the online MMORPG field (*FFXI*), a logic-driven massively single-player RPG (*FFXII*) before Square managed to try three very different things in the space of a single trilogy (*FFXIII*, *FFXIII-2* and *Lightning Returns*). Even *FFXIV* saw changes made within the lifespan of a single game – the initial release was panned, leading the team to rethink and reinvent it for relaunch as *A Realm Reborn*, today one of the leading subscription MMOs on the market. *Final Fantasy XV* took a leap even further into action-RPG territory than *Lightning Returns* was willing to take. The *Final Fantasy VII* remakes have taken that action focus and arguably perfected the hybrid gameplay, while the latest mainline title, *FFXVI*, went full-on action to the extent of hiring a *Devil May Cry* combat director.

Fans of turn-based brawling have two options – replay the older games or enjoy the wave of titles like *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* that have emerged in the wake of the former regent abdicating its ATB throne.



## FINAL FANTASY'S GREATEST HEROES

Meet the stars from the series' golden age

**TERRA**  
Final Fantasy VI  
1994

**CLOUD**  
Final Fantasy VII  
1997

**SQUALL**  
Final Fantasy VIII  
1999

**ZIDANE**  
Final Fantasy IX  
2000

**TIDUS**  
Final Fantasy X  
2001

F  
IS FOR...

Fetch-quest  
Family  
Farm

G  
IS FOR...

Game Over  
Grind  
Gold



## GRANDIA

FIRST RELEASE: GRANDIA (SATURN, 1997)

The major innovation of Game Arts' beloved RPG comes in its battle system, greater visibility of attack timings for both enemies and allies, bringing with it a whole new level of depth and strategy. Landing a hit while an enemy is charging their own might delay or outright cancel the incoming blow, and manipulating this skillfully is key in the game's tougher fights. We saw an evolved version of this system in the sequel, as well as in other titles – many have riffed on this idea over the years, with various degrees of depth and success. That said, even Game Arts itself didn't have much luck after that one great sequel – *Grandia Xtreme* and *Grandia III* never made it to Europe and failed to live up to previous games, and the company was acquired by GungHo during production of an ill-fated *Grandia* MMO, now working on all kinds of odds and sods rather than the franchise it shot to fame with.

**FURTHER READING**  
GOLDEN SUN, GROWLANSER

## HYDLIDE

FIRST RELEASE: HYDLIDE (PC, 1984)

Perhaps the earliest example of what we now know as a JRPG, albeit one that falls more on the action side of things than the turn-based classics that truly established the genre. Even this early in the development of the Eastern RPG, late localisation was already causing issues. *Hydlide* first arrived in the US with a NES port five years after its original PC release, inevitably falling into *The Legend Of Zelda*'s shadow as a result and seeming dated by comparison because... well, it was. As such, the series was never really all that well-received outside of Japan, and only a couple of its sequels were localised after.



H  
IS FOR...

Healer  
Hero  
HP



I  
IS FOR...

Invasion  
Items  
Inn



## IGA

FIRST RELEASE: **DETANA!! TWINBEE**  
(ARCADE, 1991)

■ Having joined Konami several years earlier, Koji 'IGA' Igarashi is best known for being a key figure in turning *Castlevania* from a traditional action game into a free-roaming 2D RPG with the sensational *Symphony Of The Night*, on which his credits included assistant director, scenario writer and programmer. He would later rise to a producer role on the GBA and DS titles that built on *SOTN*'s RPG fundamentals, making him a key figure in the evolution of the genre. Recently, having parted ways with Konami, IGA delivered a Kickstarter-funded spiritual successor entitled *Bloodstained: Ritual Of The Night* – a modern *Castlevania* follow-up in all but name – and its funding goal was smashed 11 times over, releasing in 2019 with a prequel in the works.

**FURTHER READING**  
ILLUSION OF TIME, INFINITE  
UNDISCOVERY, IZUNA



## JADE COCOON

FIRST RELEASE: **JADE COCOON: STORY OF THE TAMAMAYU**  
(PLAYSTATION, 1998)

■ Nobody was especially surprised to see the explosive success of *Pokémon* lead to an onslaught of similar titles, and this was the best of the 32-bit era. Whereas Nintendo's game (which actually belatedly released the same year outside of Japan) had a clearly defined roster of possible monsters, however, Genki's more rustic offering allowed players to fuse beasts to create powerful new ones and inherit abilities they may not otherwise be able to use. Combat admittedly lacked the complexity and depth of *Pokémon* – it had just three elements working as a rock/paper/scissors triangle of strength and weakness compared to the 15 types present in Game Freak's title – but this was offset by how cool it was to breed and improve generations of your own creations, something that has actually since found its way into the *Pokémon* series as well.

J  
IS FOR...

Jokes  
Jobs  
Jail

K  
IS FOR...

Key Item  
Kefka  
King



## KINGDOM HEARTS

FIRST RELEASE: **KINGDOM HEARTS (PLAYSTATION 2, 2002)**

Dropping an assortment of original characters and *Final Fantasy* stars into a collection of different Disney worlds could have been a complete disaster, but somehow, Square was able to marry these disparate elements with an incredible degree of finesse.

Each themed world you visit is a loving recreation of the source material, and there's a great level of diversity both in terms of style and gameplay. This is evolved even further in the sequels, where the likes of *Tron* and *Pirates Of The Caribbean* worlds sit neatly alongside more traditional cartoon-themed areas and other worlds are tapped for the unique breaks from usual gameplay they offer, such as the musical silliness of *The Little Mermaid*'s Atlantis or Hercules' gladiatorial arena.

As you may expect from a series that pulls together content from across nearly 100 years of a prolific studio's work, though, *Kingdom Hearts*' overarching plot has grown so convoluted as to be almost impenetrable to newcomers. In truth, the intricacies don't matter all that much – you can make sense of each game's path from start to finish even if the deeper relationships between and origins of the original cast do elude you. Moreover, it's a blast purely from a fan service perspective. Combat is tight, plus there are a few games out there where you can be talking to a JRPG legend one minute, then fighting off hordes of enemies alongside Aladdin the next. A guilty pleasure, almost, but a pleasure nonetheless.

## RPG'S GREATEST CROSSOVERS



### NAMCO X CAPCOM

■ Only released in Japan, this twin-studio mash-up took the form of a tactical RPG akin to *Fire Emblem*, only with battles played out as action-based 2D showdowns with some cool team moves on display.



### PROJECT X ZONE

■ Effectively a sequel of sorts to *Namco X Capcom*, this globally-released 3DS SRPG added even more fan service by bringing Sega characters to the party and pushing the crazy combat even further.



### TRINITY UNIVERSE

■ Bringing together characters from the *Disgaea* and *Atelier* franchises alongside an original cast, this three-developer curio had great potential but sadly didn't manage to live up to it.

## LUNAR

FIRST RELEASE: **LUNAR: THE SILVER STAR (MEGA-CD, 1992)**

■ Few games truly took full advantage of the potential offered by Sega's Mega-CD, but *Lunar*'s status as the bestselling game for the platform in Japan (and second best globally, just behind *Sonic CD*) is a testament to how well it did just that. CD audio, anime-style cutscenes and voiced characters were all fresh and exciting for a console RPG; these beautiful distractions drew eyes away from the fact that it was actually fairly typical in terms of gameplay and setting. Saturn and PlayStation updates to the game improved both presentation and content, and such remakes and re-releases are a prominent feature of the series – there have been 11 *Lunar* games released, yet only four are original games.



L  
IS FOR...

Limit Break  
Legend  
Loot







# MARIO

FIRST RELEASE: **SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS (SNES, 1996)**

Over the years, we've seen that Mario can do just about whatever he likes and generally be pretty good at everything. But back at the end of the SNES era, the idea of letting teams outside of Nintendo handle Mario games didn't inspire confidence thanks to a slew of ill-conceived spin-offs. Still, there were few safer sets of hands than those of Square when it came to role-playing games, and Mario's RPG debut turned out as well as anyone could have hoped.

Isometric visuals and pre-rendered 3D characters both did their part to set *Super Mario RPG* apart from his more traditional platforming adventures, but it was the novel battle system that won the day. Bringing the constant action of core Mario games into battle worked out surprisingly well, with attacking, defending, and skills and items use all requiring timed inputs to enhance performance. Blindly mashing through menus simply wasn't possible, and the introduction of skill elements to turn-based battles remains a staple of Mario's RPG spin-offs to this day.

While there's been no direct sequel to *Legend Of The Seven Stars*, Mario's RPG adventures have forked off into two distinct franchises – *Paper Mario* and *Mario & Luigi*. Each has its own flavour, with *Paper Mario* incorporating many elements that riff on its papercraft world and *Mario & Luigi* feeling like a more direct follow-on from the SNES original, albeit with a different art style and a quirky sense of humour. Quality remains high throughout and a few stumbles aside (looking at you, *Sticker Star*), this once-unexpected new direction for Mario is now another feather in his iconic cap.



## OTHER UNLIKELY RPG HEROES



### CHARLES BARKLEY

BARKLEY, SHUT UP AND JAM: GAIDEN

■ A freeware RPG sequel to a 16-bit sports game (and *Space Jam*, apparently), this tasks former NBA star Charles Barkley with saving the world with the power of mad dunks.



### PECO

BREATH OF FIRE III

■ Since we can't think of another game with a playable onion, Peco's inclusion here is justified. He's sort of a comic relief character but even all these years later, he still creeps us out a little.



### KOROMARU

PERSONA 3

■ The odd thing about Koromaru isn't just that he acts almost human-like a lot of the time – it's that others also seem to treat him as such as well, despite the fact that he's a dog.



### QUINA QUEN

FINAL FANTASY IX

■ Just as *FFVII* had a cat riding a toy, *FFIX* has its own curveball: a genderless Qu in a chef's outfit with a limited grasp of language and a taste for frogs, Quina will eat just about anything.

M  
IS FOR...

Mini-games  
Monsters  
Magic

# NIHON FALCOM

FIRST RELEASE: **GALACTIC WARS (PC, 1982)**

■ Founded in 1981, Nihon Falcom specialised in PC development and even before it effectively defined the genre with *Dragon Slayer* and *Xanadu*, it had started incorporating many elements of RPGs into its games. But while its more well-known peers built their franchises on consoles, Falcom's growth was hindered by the fact that PC didn't offer the level of uniformity or the captive audiences of console development, though this didn't stop it from developing something of a cult following in the Western world. Audio is also a major factor in the studio's reverence, importance, and popularity,

with a young Yuzo Koshiro responsible for scoring the early *Ys* games before going off to do his legendary work on *Streets Of Rage*, *ActRaiser* and so many other classics.



N  
IS FOR...

New Game+  
Narrative  
NPC

# ORESHIKA

FIRST RELEASE: **ORE NO SHIKABANE O KOETE YUKE (PLAYSTATION, 1999)**

■ Most RPGs do everything in their power to form a bond between player and cast, the hope being that the person holding the controller will eventually feel like they're part of the story. The *Oreshika* games, of which there are only two, spit in the face of this convention – its heroes all have an extremely limited lifespan, meaning you need to pair them off with gods to produce offspring who can take their place. These younglings, who inherit not just abilities but appearance as well from their parents, need to keep this cycle going until their clan's mission of vengeance is done. That sense of attachment



O  
IS FOR...

Overworld  
Optional  
Overkill

isn't lost, though, rather enhanced – to lose a character in battle can actually be to lose an entire bloodline, so the stakes are always incredibly high.



# PHANTASY STAR

FIRST RELEASE: PHANTASY STAR (MASTER SYSTEM, 1987)

*Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* led to all kinds of fantasy-themed imitations, which only helped Sega's sci-fi series carve a niche for itself. Between a smart title that conveyed its space-age take on traditional fantasy fare and generally solid mechanics, the franchise quickly built a strong fanbase. But after it moved on from Master System to Mega Drive, a steady procession of other sci-fi-inspired games would bruise its novelty value and leave the Mega Drive trio, while still great, feeling less and less exciting each time around. As a result, *Phantasy Star* skipped the Saturn (barring a Japan-only compilation); however, its comeback on Dreamcast was a revelation – a trailblazer in the online scene, *Phantasy Star Online* laid out the template for console-scale MMO-style player interactions still used to this day by games like *Monster Hunter*, *White Knight Chronicles* and even newer franchises such as *Destiny*.



P  
IS FOR...

Protagonist  
Potion  
Party



# POKÉMON

FIRST RELEASE: POCKET MONSTERS RED & GREEN (GAME BOY, 1996)

*Phantasy Star's* two-time major innovation meant it had to make it onto this list but at the same time, we can't exactly ignore what has become the most successful RPG in the world and one of the best-selling gaming franchises of all time. Wrapped up as it was in a garish blanket of anime and cheap toys in the early years, you'd be forgiven for falling into the trap of assuming *Pokémon* is a game for kids. Sure, that's the

target audience, but for older players, digging into the series' deep mechanics reveals the true nature of *Pokémon*, showcasing one of the most complex, personal and near-limitless RPG systems in gaming history. Its ability to be enjoyed at both extremes of this spectrum – inviting players to tackle as much complexity as they're comfortable with – is largely responsible for its success, although its adorable cast and merchandise certainly don't hurt, either.

## FURTHER READING

PERSONA, PARASITE EVE, POPFUL MAIL, PANZER DRAGON SAGA



# QUEST 64

FIRST RELEASE: QUEST 64 (N64, 1998)

■ Despite being almost exactly as good as you'd expect a game where the main character is called Brian to be, *Quest 64* is interesting and notable for several reasons. For one, it was the first RPG to be released on the N64, and one of only a handful of similar games to grace the system at all. Secondly, at a time when most Japanese games were localised and released much later outside of their home territory, *Quest 64* was notable for flipping this trend on its head – it released in Japan almost a year after its launch in the rest of the world, oddly. *Quest 64* does some interesting things (such as the novel way it handles magic), but other than that, it's a generic and really quite ugly RPG designed around players new to the genre.



# RESONANCE OF FATE

FIRST RELEASE: RESONANCE OF FATE (PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360, 2010)

■ Not all JRPGs follow the sword-swinging stereotype, though few deviate from genre conventions quite so violently as tri-Ace's superb effort. While technically sci-fi, its depiction of a future Earth wracked by pollution and general reliance on realistic or believable tech allows it to stand out from the aliens and lasers that so often populate the subgenre. An interesting concept (where humanity is forced to live on towers, with social standing dictated by how high up people live) and smart map and exploration solution (a hex-based grid must be filled in to allow passage between locations) work in its favour, but the battles are the highlight, with the three heroes using all kinds of firearms and making leaping, bullet-spraying runs in strategic encounters that bring the excitement of sequences from *The Matrix*, *Max Payne* or any John Woo movie you might care to name to a genre that had never seen their like, and probably never will again.

R  
IS FOR...

Random Encounters  
Revive  
RNG





2%

### SOUL BLAZER

QUINTET, SNES, 1992



12%

### SKIES OF ARCADIA

OVERWORKS, DREAMCAST, 2000



10%

### STAR OCEAN

TRI-ACE, SUPER FAMICOM, 1996



3%

### SWORD OF VERMILLION

AM2, MEGA DRIVE, 1989



2%

### SAGA

SQUARE, GAME BOY, 1989



23%

### SECRET OF MANA

SQUARESOFT, SNES, 1993

■ This ARPG slayed the competition, and it's easy to see why. *Mana* boasts interesting characters, it has an excellent inventory system, some fantastic-looking locations and one of the best soundtracks around. It even caters for three-player co-operative play – a rarity for the time.



7%

### SHINING

CLIMAX ENTERTAINMENT/  
CAMELOT SOFTWARE  
PLANNING, MEGA DRIVE, 1991



4%

### SWORD ART ONLINE

AQURIA, VITA, 2014



9%

### SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI

ATLUS, 1992

S  
IS FOR...

Spiky Hair  
Summon  
Status



12%

### SUIKODEN

KONAMI, PLAYSTATION, 1995



10%

### SOULS

FROMSOFTWARE, PS3, 2009



## THE BATTLE FOR S

While most other categories offered a clear frontrunner for us to focus on, the letter S presents so broad a selection of options – all important for very different reasons – that it proved impossible to narrow it down. Here's how readers voted.



# TALES OF...



FIRST RELEASE: TALES OF PHANTASIA (SUPER FAMICOM, 1995)

■ Taken at face value, Bandai Namco's long-running franchise is about as typical as JRPGs come – it's all anime heroes, spiky hair, ellipses, world-saving quests and the rest of the cliché cabinet as well. Despite this, the series delivers a respectable message of equality between races and cultures, all packaged up as one of the leading action-RPGs in its home territory, and a popular one around the world to boot. Just like genre leaders *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*, each game visits new worlds and recruits new heroes along the way, though themes and

gameplay remain at least similar across the board, typically employing a battle system that plays like a hyperactive 2D fighter. Recent games have moved into full-3D, although the constant is that, despite elements that riff on turn-based RPG staples, you always have complete control over character movement and actions. Probably third in the popularity stakes behind the big two – *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* – in Japan, although after years of the West only seeing select titles, Bandai Namco has made more of a push in recent years to turn *Tales* into a global brand.



**FURTHER READING**  
TERRANIGMA, TEARS TO TIARA,  
THE GUIDED FATE PARADOX

# UEMATSU

FIRST RELEASE: CRUISE CHASER BLASSTY (PC, 1986)

■ Legendary *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu is rightly revered as one of the most important contributors to videogame music. After joining Square in 1985 and cutting his scoring teeth on a number of well-received titles, his big break came in the form of the 1987 NES debut of *Final Fantasy*, following which he would score the entirety of mainline titles up to and including *FFIX*, later calling in assistance before stepping back from the role almost entirely and contributing only single tracks. Uematsu left Square in 2004 but continued to write for the company in a freelance capacity, as well as working with others, including former colleague Hironobu

Sakaguchi at Mistwalker for *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*.

So why is Uematsu such a big deal? Well, just listen to his work, for one – tracks like *Terra's Theme* (used throughout *FFVI*), *Fight On!* (*FFVII*'s rousing boss theme) and that Chocobo theme in its many forms are all perfect. In fact, Square has been able to release music games based largely on Uematsu's compositions, plus the man himself had a band – The Black Mages – that specialised in arrangements of *FF* tracks, and orchestral concerts like *Distant Worlds* continue to this day. It's unlikely that any other gaming composer will quite match Uematsu's portfolio.



V IS FOR...

Vehicles  
Victory  
Versus

# VAGRANT STORY

FIRST RELEASE: VAGRANT STORY (PLAYSTATION, 2000)

Yasumi Matsuno's next project after finishing work on *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Vagrant Story* stands as one of Square's most interesting and original RPGs, and few games push the PlayStation harder.

The unique painterly art style, immaculate detail and classical writing and themes give it a feel that's almost theatrical, although its rich combat system – effectively that of a complex tabletop RPG, albeit with dice kept behind a screen at all times – and simple puzzle and platforming elements ensure player interaction is always the main

priority. By granting different enemies extreme resistances to damage types and elements, Square made it crucial for the hero, Ashley Riot, to lug around and switch between a host of different weapons, either those looted from fallen enemies or treasure chests, or those he has pieced together himself from various scattered components. As such, combat is kept fresh, helped by the fact that it doesn't outstay its welcome – the game can be beaten in less than ten hours, leaving plenty of time to jump back in for the real challenge that is New Game+.



## FIVE THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW

### IT'S SECRETLY FRENCH

■ Much of the game's design and architecture is informed by the Saint-Émilion region of France – after being tipped off about the area, famous for its vineyards, by a colleague, Matsuno and the team visited the area while settling on the artistic style.

### IT'S NOT SHAKESPEARE

■ While their names are taken from *Hamlet*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bear no resemblance to their namesakes. Their first names are nods to The Bard, however – Romeo (obvious) and Jan, a reference to scholar and Shakespeare

### NO DEMOS FOR EU

■ The game came bundled with a second disc in Japan and America, featuring seven demos for upcoming Square games. As four of these (*Chrono Cross*, *Threads Of Fate*, *Chocobo's Dungeon 2* and *Legend Of Mana*) weren't planned for European release, the extra disc was dropped.

### TOME SWEET TOME

■ Weighing in at just shy of 500 pages, the *Ultimania* book – a hybrid of strategy guide, art book and behind-the-scenes access – is a gorgeous beast. It's a pity, then, that it fails to cover the game's optional NG+ dungeon, the Iron Maiden.

### WHICH WAY NOW?

■ The notoriously horrible maze area Snowfly Forest seems like something that can be blitzed through once you know the way through it, but it really isn't. Of the 26 total confusingly similar areas, only eight of them are skipped if you take the quickest possible route.





## WILD ARMS

FIRST RELEASE: **WILD ARMS (PLAYSTATION, 1996)**



W  
IS FOR...

"...Whatever"  
World Map  
Warrior

■ Notable as one of the precious few RPG series to use a Western theme rather than traditional fantasy or sci-fi settings, *Wild Arms* showed that the power of PlayStation could be used not just to throw polygons around and dazzle with fancy 3D effects, but to deliver more interesting and colourful worlds as well. The early games, despite forging new ground thematically, played out somewhat traditionally for the genre, but it later evolved its mechanics to innovate in all fields – the hex-based structure of later games sets the series apart from its peers, while the tool system allows for combat items to be used during exploration and traversal in order to overcome obstacles. Also, it's one of the few RPG series from the era where the majority of the games have been treated to a global release.



X  
IS FOR...

X-Potion  
Xanadu  
XP



## XENO SERIES

FIRST RELEASE: **XENOGears (PLAYSTATION, 1998)**

■ Tetsuya Takahashi originally pitched what would become *Xenogears* as an early concept for *Final Fantasy VII*, but, after being written off as too great a tonal shift for Square's flagship series, it was instead greenlit as its own project. An interesting fusion of sci-fi themes and surprisingly deep philosophical discussion referencing the likes of Freud, Jung and Nietzsche (whose works lend subtitles to the PS2 *Xenosaga* trilogy), it also mixed things

up with its combat systems. Traditional combat isn't dissimilar to *Final Fantasy*'s ATB system, but it also allows for jumping into huge mechs for spectacular robotic showdowns that feel far more weighty and empowering than you might think turn-based battles could be. The series runs the spiritual successor model rather than purely relying on direct sequels, leaping from *Xenogears* to *Xenosaga* to *Xenoblade* with similar themes running through each.

## Ys

FIRST RELEASE: **YS: THE VANISHED OMENS (VARIOUS, 1987)**

One of the founding fathers of the genre, Falcom's action-RPG series was, like *Hydlide* before it, offering computer players similar adventuring experiences to those Square and Enix were creating on console. Accessibility was key here, so while *Dragon Quest* was busy laying out the foundations of the genre as we know it today, Falcom managed to find a way to retain the amassing of treasure and trinkets and the character interactions of traditional role-playing games while simplifying combat just about as far as it could go – attacking enemies was as simple as walking into them, not even requiring a single button press, a system established by earlier Falcom games, yet clearly refined for *Ys* and its sequels. This would go on to become a defining feature of the series, although it's something that has

since been phased out as controls and options in battle grew more complex, plus the wider uptake and understanding of gaming meant that the old mechanic would probably make less sense to players at the height of the 16-bit era than hitting a button to attack.

The series' popularity outside of Japan has always been limited yet devout, a hardcore following doing great work on fan translations for the games that weren't localised. More recently, there's been no need for those developers to do their thing: publisher XSEED purchased a fan translation of *The Oath In Felghana* to give the game a western release on PSP five years after the PC version launched in Japan, and the team continues to help popularity grow outside of its home territory with re-releases and new titles.

Y  
IS FOR...

"YOU DEFEATED"  
Younglings  
Yggdrasil



Z  
IS FOR...

Zantetsuken  
Zodiac  
Zenny

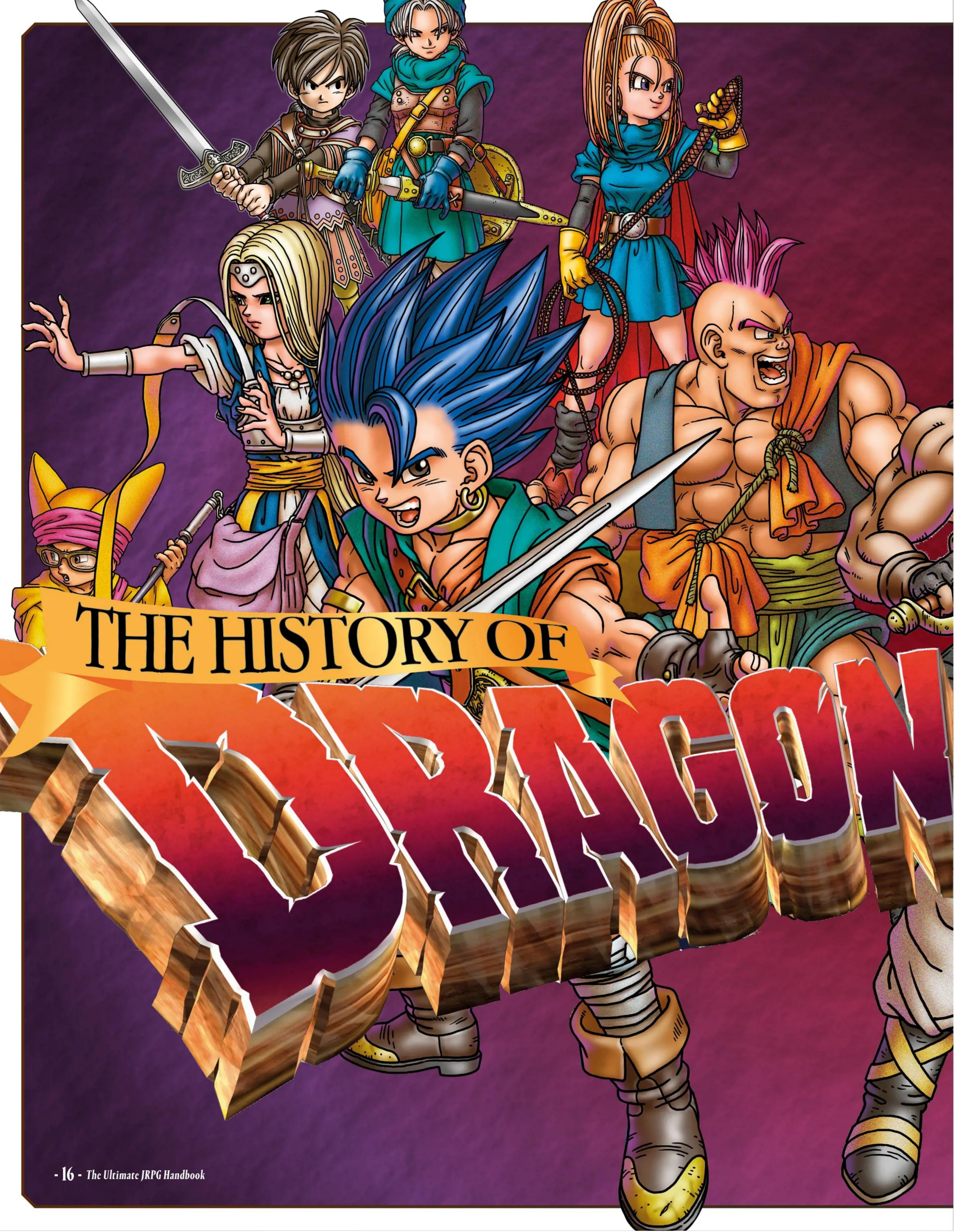
## ZELDA: THE GREAT DEBATE

FIRST RELEASE: **THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (NES, 1986)**

■ Is it, or is it not, an RPG? Players have been bickering about this old chestnut for the best part of three decades, and it isn't hard to see why. With its fantasy themes, arsenal of tools and powers and upgradable health, mana and attack power, it's not too much of a stretch to count Nintendo's oh-so-popular franchise under the RPG banner. The argument against that is that it's purely an action-adventure game brushed with light RPG mechanics, with similarities in setting and tone to genre keystones, misleading people into categorising it incorrectly.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter how you personally choose to define this (or indeed any other) series – while it clearly doesn't have the in-depth stats of your usual JRPG, it's certainly closer to the pen-and-paper definition of an RPG, placing players in the shoes of a hero and sending them off on epic quests against stacked odds, so there are solid cases to be made both ways of the argument. ✱

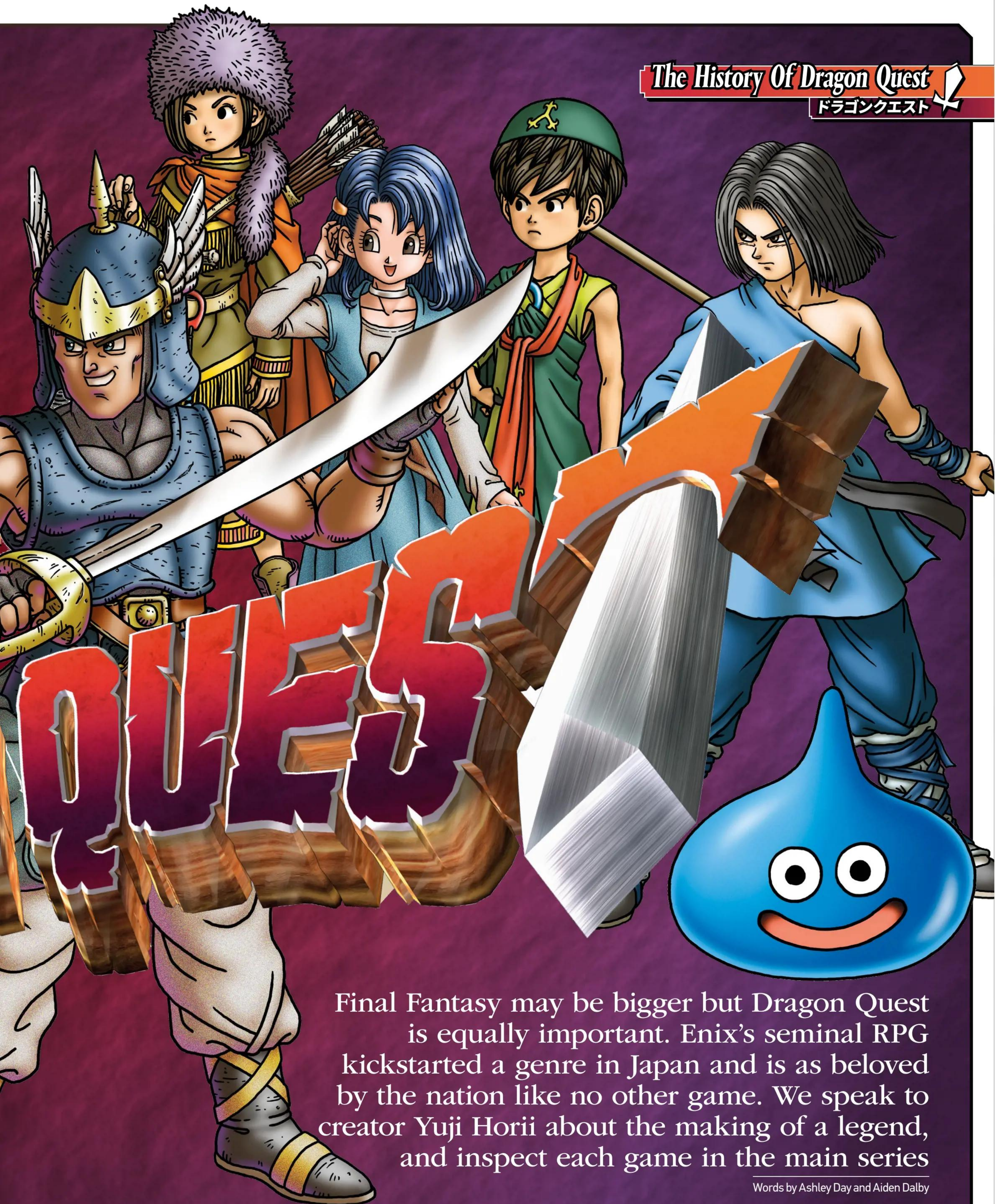




# THE HISTORY OF

# DRAGON





Final Fantasy may be bigger but Dragon Quest is equally important. Enix's seminal RPG kickstarted a genre in Japan and is as beloved by the nation like no other game. We speak to creator Yuji Horii about the making of a legend, and inspect each game in the main series

Words by Ashley Day and Aiden Dalby



# Dragon Quest

Format: NES

Released: 1986 (Japan), 1989 (US)

Developed by: Chunsoft

Both the epitome of the great Japanese RPG and perhaps also the most important JRPG, *Dragon Quest* laid many of the foundations for the genre, a blueprint that would be followed for decades to come. But like all role-playing games, *Dragon Quest*'s origins can be traced back to the West, to computer role-playing games and to *D&D*.

"I had been a great fan of Apple PC games, RPGs in particular, even before I was involved with the development of *Dragon Quest*," reveals Yuji Horii. "I found it fascinating to be able to improve your capabilities while you are having a good time playing the game. However, although the RPG was such fun to play, RPG titles for PC back then were very challenging for ordinary gamers, as they often required complex game controls. This motivated me to create *Dragon Quest* because I wanted those ordinary gamers to discover how much fun RPGs could be. In order to make *Dragon Quest* more accessible, I made the game controls as intuitive as possible and created a story that would help the player immerse himself into the in-game world."

*Dragon Quest* certainly was simple. It featured a typical 'rescue the princess' plot and an interface with commands so straightforward that they even included one to climb stairs. Yet this simplicity, plus *Dragon Quest*'s home on the most popular Japanese console of its time, the Famicom, endeared it to an audience that had no previous idea of what an RPG even was. The thrill of the epic, open world, the pulse-quickenning threat of random battles, and the weeks-long pacing, totally in contrast to the arcade-style games of the day, opened gamers' eyes to a whole new interactive experience and secured *Dragon Quest*'s place in the story of videogames.

But this achievement wasn't Horii's alone. *Dragon Quest* was created and overseen by a team of three individuals who remained together

» [NES] It's difficult to believe that the first *Dragon Quest* featured a party of just one. But it did, to keep things simple, says Horii.



“Dragon Quest opened gamers’ eyes to a new experience and secured its place in the story of videogames”

throughout the series. The two other men were Akira Toriyama, one of Japan's most loved comic artists and the creator of *Dragon Ball*, and Koichi Sugiyama, a long-established videogame composer. Horii explains how the team came together. "I was introduced to Mr Toriyama by [Kazuhiko Torishima], whom I had worked for before. He was an editor of *Weekly Boys' Jump* when I was writing photo-articles for the magazine. Mr Toriyama was already a household name, then famous for comics like *Dr Slump*, and Mr Torishima was the editor in charge of them. So it was sheer luck that I was linked to Mr Toriyama.

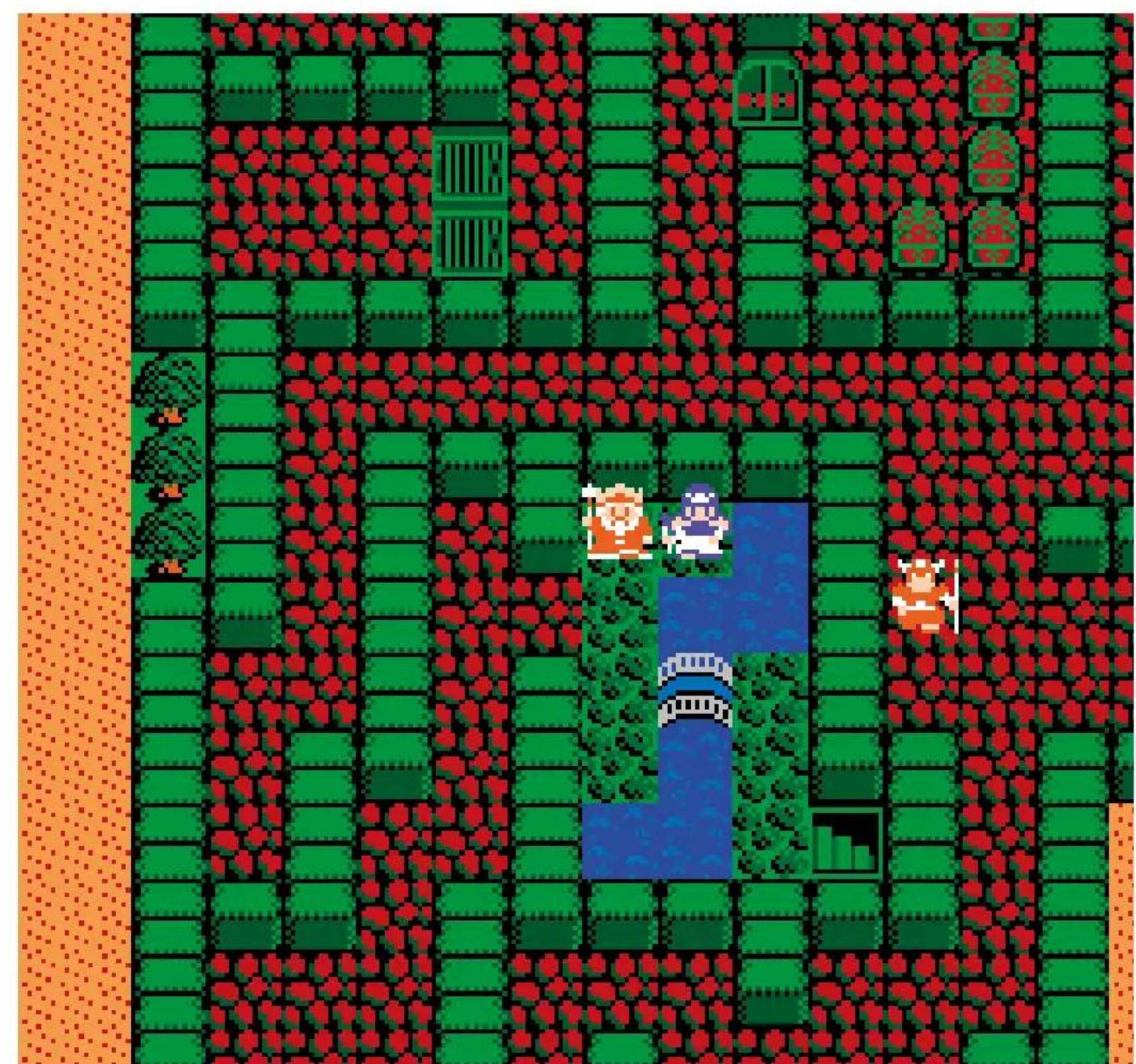
"As for Mr Sugiyama, he had been composing for games by Enix even before he began to write *Dragon Quest* music. He was a game enthusiast and, apparently, he initially started working for Enix after sending in a questionnaire postcard, which had been attached to an Enix game he had bought. We asked Mr Sugiyama to provide music for the project, and it was a decision made by [Yukinobu Chida], the producer of *Dragon Quest*.

"Mr Toriyama and Mr Sugiyama made amazing contributions to *Dragon Quest*; great character designs and music, respectively. One of the reasons why we worked together successfully for such an extended length of time may be that the games we make together are invariably very approachable with a few small 'hooks' – something you will never feel tired of. This concept is also in *Dragon Quest* itself, of course."

The original *Dragon Quest* never came to Europe, leaving many to discover the game years later through emulation and a 2019 Switch release. But it did arrive in America, three years after its Japanese debut. Despite featuring improved visuals, in line with the then-released *Dragon Quest II* and *Dragon Quest III*, the game sold poorly until Nintendo stepped in to give 'Dragon Warrior' away to every new subscriber to its official Nintendo



» [NES] There's a certain charm to the first four games' visuals, but we have to say they were basic even by the standards of the NES.





Power magazine. This giveaway put *Dragon Quest* into the hands of every loyal NES owner in the country and established the genre just in time for Square's *Final Fantasy* to arrive the next year. It also marked the beginning of a relationship with Nintendo that, while not constant, has helped *DQ* reach new audiences many times since.

## Dragon Quest II: The Pantheon Of Evil Spirits

Format: NES

Released: 1987 (Japan), 1990 (US)

Developed by: Chunsoft

As important and influential as the original *Dragon Quest* was, it certainly didn't do everything. "Although there were so many things we wanted to achieve with *Dragon Quest*, as far as the first title is concerned, we had to trim them off one after another because we only had a limited amount of memory to work with," Horii explains. "We had to contrive ways to squeeze in the scenario, graphics and music within the memory limit, which was 64KB in those days."

One of the most unbelievable omissions from the first *Dragon Quest* was multi-member parties: a staple of the RPG going all the way back even to those games that inspired Horii. But he was determined to include them in the sequel, except, of course, with the mantra of accessibility at the forefront of everything he did. "We managed to include party gameplay for *Dragon Quest II*, which I would mention as the most important thing we achieved with the game. I expected that our fans would find it too much of a performance to play all three members of the party from the start. That is why the story was revealed in such a way to introduce the player gradually to the multi-member party system, where the number of party members increases by one at a time."

*Dragon Quest II*'s innovations didn't end there. One of its most interesting aspects is that the princess, once rescued, joins your party. She may be underpowered, but this active role was a huge step beyond the more traditional characters of the first game, while the fixed personalities and well-written characters of the party were a world away from the unscripted, user-defined characters of Western role-playing adventures.

## Dragon Quest III: Into The Legend

Format: NES

Released: 1988 (Japan), 1992 (US)

Developed by: Chunsoft

If *Dragon Quest* and *Dragon Quest II* were the defining entries in Yuji Horii's founding series, then *Dragon Quest III* was the main event. It was a culmination of everything the team had been working toward. ►

## ROGUES' GALLERY



### LOTO

The mythical hero of ancient times, referred to in legends throughout the events of the first two *Dragon Quest* games. At the end of *Dragon Quest III*, it's revealed that you've been playing as Loto all along. An extremely popular character, Loto – also called Erdrick in the US games – is referenced throughout the series.



### TORNEKO

One of the playable characters in *Dragon Quest IV*, Torneko is a humble shopkeeper who sets out on a quest once he hears of the existence of a magical item that undoes that *DQ* tradition of losing half your cash upon death. Torneko later appeared as the main character in the first three *Mystery Dungeon* games.



### NERA

A gentle mage from a wealthy background, Nera is the second potential bride in *Dragon Quest V* and meets the hero when he rescues her dog. If the player opts not to choose her then Nera later marries her childhood friend, Crispin.



### HERO

*Dragon Quest*'s original 'Dragon Warrior', the Hero set the template for all *DQ* protagonists to come. Distinguished by his horned helmet, the silent protagonist was conceived as a conduit between player and game world, his lack of personality helping players to put themselves into the game.



### HERO (DQV)

One of the best *DQ* characters in terms of the emotional bond he forms with the player, *Dragon Quest V*'s Hero goes through the pleasure of picking a wife from two lovely women and the sheer anguish of being turned to stone, unable to aid in the quest of his adult children.



### BIANCA

One of the two women the player can marry in *Dragon Quest V*, Bianca is a herbalist and the homelier of the two spouses. Though the player is free to choose either bride, Bianca is the one the game encourages you to bond with.



### GABO

One of the most interesting characters in *DQVII*, Gabo is a wolf turned into a boy. Retaining many of his animal qualities, he struggles to relate to the other characters, is always hungry, and benefits from some great skills, including heightened agility and a paralyzing bite.



### KING TRODE

The character referred to in the title of *Dragon Quest VIII: Journey Of The Cursed King*. King Trode has been turned into a goblin-like creature and is trying to reclaim his humanity along with his daughter, who has been turned into a horse.



### MELVIN

*DQVII*'s Melvin once fought alongside God in a battle with the devil. He's a noble warrior, fascinated with the peaceful world. But his old-fashioned attitude to women sometimes gets the better of him.



### YANGUS

A brash bandit trying to go straight, Yangus lends his strength to the party of *Dragon Quest VIII*. Voiced in a comical, almost cockney fashion, Yangus repeatedly refers to the hero as 'guy' and is one of the most-liked characters in the series.





» [Switch] *Dragon Quest III* was remade beautifully in 2024 with a 'HD-2D' version which blends 3D environs with sprite art.



## SPIN-OFFS

Dragon Quest has quite a few spin-off games, and some of them are actually quite good



### MYSTERY DUNGEON

This long-running series of roguelike RPGs from Chunsoft has adopted many famous videogame brands over the years, including *Chocobo* and *Pokémon*, but its first three entries were based on *Dragon Quest* and starred *DQIV*'s Torneko.

### DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS

Often thought of as a *Pokémon* clone, *Dragon Quest Monsters* grew out of the series' ability to recruit enemy monsters and has, since 1998, grown into a popular series in its own right. *DQM* is a handheld-only series.



### ROCKET SLIME

*Dragon Quest*'s most basic enemy, and a favourite *DQ* mascot with fans, got his own GBA game in 2003 and two sequels on the DS and 3DS. The game largely involves using the slime as a weapon by stretching and firing him across the stage.

► "More or less, everything we originally wanted to achieve with *Dragon Quest* was achieved with *Dragon Quest III*," remembers Horii. "You can form your party as you wish, change your job and so forth. In that sense, the story of *Dragon Quest III* was smoothly linked to that of the first title, and I should imagine that is why *Dragon Quest III* left such a strong impression in the hearts of many fans."

'Strong impression'. That's quite the understatement if ever there was one. During many years of **Retro Gamer** meeting and interviewing Japanese game creators, the one title that's mentioned time and time again as a personal favourite is *Dragon Quest III*. The sheer affection for this title may come from the technological advancements, such as the day/night cycle, the jump to a four-character party system, or the new job system, as Horii suggests – but we're willing to bet that it has just as much to do with the innovative story. While *Dragon Quest II* was a direct sequel to its forebear, the events of *Dragon Quest III* seemed unrelated to the previous two, right up until the end when the hero was revealed to be the 'Hero Of Legend', heard of only in the mythological stories told by the humble townsfolk of the first two games.

Gameplay enhancements, a memorable story, and the addition of battery backup – a first for the Japanese releases in the series – made *DQIII* a firm favourite in its homeland and saw people take to the streets in their millions to buy the game, causing so much retail chaos that Enix was forced to release all future editions of *Dragon Quest* on a weekend. Horii remembers the moment he saw the madness for himself: "On the day *Dragon Quest III* was released, I took a train journey to witness the big queue while hiding myself from the fans. The frenzy was astonishing, and yet I remember watching the queue as though it had nothing to do with me."

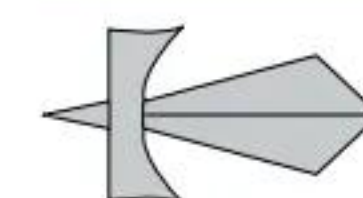
*Dragon Quest* had become a phenomenon.

## Dragon Quest IV: Chapters Of The Chosen

**Format:** NES

**Released:** 1990 (Japan), 1992 (US), 2008 (Europe)

**Developed by:** Chunsoft



By 1990, the NES, and by extension the Famicom, was beginning to look a little long in the tooth. Major Japanese series like *Super Mario*, *Castlevania* and even *Final Fantasy* had moved on to Nintendo's successor, the Super Famicom/SNES. But not *Dragon Quest*.

"I had already had some ideas for *Dragon Quest IV* before completing the development of *DQIII*," says Horii. "It was still the heyday of the NES, and so I did not really think I had other platforms to consider for the new project."

Yet with technological advancements a no-go, and *Dragon Quest*'s systems finely tuned by *DQIII*, Horii had little choice but to innovate with storytelling. *Chapters Of The Chosen* was broken down into vignettes, which put the player in control of a different party in each before uniting them all with the true hero for the finale. It was just the breath of fresh air the series needed, or any series would have needed, by its third sequel.

"When *DQIII* came out, I felt as though I had already done everything I ever wanted to do and had to think hard to work out what I should do next," Horii recalls. "I opted for the structure of different chapters because I wanted to tell individual stories of other party members as well as the main character. You travel with other members in the party in *DQIII*, and my thoughts started with the notion that every one of them would have a personal life."

Such a revolutionary story system didn't come without its hardships, however. "In the





## The History Of Dragon Quest

### ドラゴンクエスト



last chapter, an AI system was in place so that other party members can take part in battles. I thought it would be more interesting if the player cannot control these characters because they would have their own personality, different from the protagonist's. I must confess that the AI system needed a lot of adjustments, but thanks to it, some of the characters were more distinctively identified, such as Kyril, who casts Thwack all the time."

The technical difficulties were definitely worth it. *Dragon Quest IV*'s unique structure allows it to stand out from the crowd, and in the years since its release, following a particularly good remake on the DS that finally brought the game to Europe, *Chapters Of The Chosen* has taken its place as one of the most interesting and popular instalments in the series.

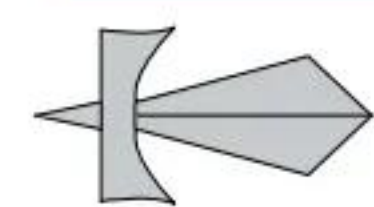
“When Dragon Quest III was released, I witnessed the big queue while hiding from the fans”



» [SNES] As hardware increased in complexity, it allowed Horii and his team to tell more emotionally engaging tales in *Dragon Quest V* and *VI*.

## Dragon Quest V: Hand Of The Heavenly Bride

**Format:** Super Famicom  
**Released:** 1992 (Japan), 2009 (US, Europe)  
**Developed by:** Chunsoft



By the mid-Nineties, a struggling Enix had closed its US office, and the fifth *Dragon Quest* went unreleased in the West for over a decade, until its DS remake. It was a

shame, because the first 16-bit instalment was a revelation, excelling in both gameplay and storytelling. Horii prefers to credit such advancements to good design rather than the technological advantage offered by a new console, however: "The ample memory capacity and improved graphical performance made a lot of things easier. For example, we could create more elaborate town maps, while you no longer have to reduce the size of the scenario and so forth. However, I do not necessarily take much notice of platform specs. Whatever ideas you may have, at the end of the day, you will have to develop your game to be able to comply with the given specs. That is how I make games."

Among those advancements was a greatly enhanced monster-recruitment system. Though monster recruitment was introduced in *Dragon Quest IV*, the system truly came into its own in *Dragon Quest V*, with a vast roster of monsters that provoked a 'gotta catch 'em all' mentality in the player. But, much like *Dragon Quest IV*, it's the innovative story that makes *Dragon Quest V* so interesting. "With *DQV*, I wanted to tell a story where three generations of characters defeat Satan," says Horii. And that's exactly what he did. Nearly 20 years before BioWare's *Dragon Age II* attempted to tell a story that spanned decades, *Dragon Quest* got there first with a powerful tale that allowed an unprecedented level of emotional involvement on the part of the player.

Being able to choose your wife from two – later three, in the remake – women made the player much more invested in the life of the main protagonist and had an effect on the characteristics of his children, who you later play as. The story's most affecting note, however, is the fate of that initial main character, who finds himself cursed to live out the rest of his days as a motionless statue, ever watching the struggles of his children but powerless to help them. The tale is a classical tragedy that could have easily descended into trite sentimentality, but treads

### ITADAKI STREET/BOOM STREET

*Itadaki Street* is a virtual board game that was created by Yuji Horii in the Famicom days. The most interesting is the PS2 edition, which featured characters from both *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*. The series headed to Europe with the Wii game, *Boom Street*, which featured characters from both the *Mario* and *Dragon Quest* series.



### DRAGON QUEST SWORDS

First released as a TV game with a plastic sword controller, *Dragon Quest Kenshin* later inspired this Wii game, which saw the player explore Horii's world in first-person, slashing the Remote at any monsters they crossed paths with. Sadly, it's not very good.

### DRAGON QUEST HEROES

Partnering up with *Dynasty Warriors* developer Omega Force, *Dragon Quest* entered full-on action hack-and-slash territory with this celebratory sub-series. Featuring party members from the series past, this is some good old action-packed fun.



### DRAGON QUEST BUILDERS

Capitalising on the runaway popularity of *Minecraft*, this unique spin-off captures the lighthearted adventure tone of *Dragon Quest* and marries it to game design focused on constructing buildings and settlements. It sounds strange, but it works extremely well.

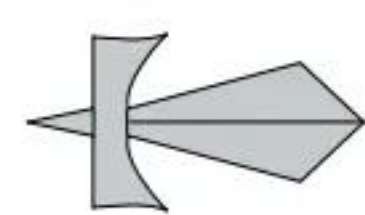


► a relatively delicate path throughout *Hand Of The Heavenly Bride*.

This maturity may have been a sign that Japan's gaming audience was growing up – and *Dragon Quest* is known for its ability to appeal to generations that wouldn't normally play games – but Horii denies any suggestion that *Hand Of The Heavenly Bride* was created with older players in mind: "I did not pay much attention to the age of the demographic. I always make games with the belief that what I find interesting will be found interesting by other people."

## Dragon Quest VI: Realms Of Revelation

**Format:** Super Famicom  
**Released:** 1995 (Japan), 2011 (US, Europe)  
**Developed by:** Heartbeat



After the spiralling innovation of its three direct predecessors, *Dragon Quest VI* is the closest the series has come to a 'safe sequel'. It cherry picks some of the most popular elements from previous games, such as *Dragon Quest III*'s job system and dual worlds, then spruces it up with the series' most impressive graphics and largest world to date.

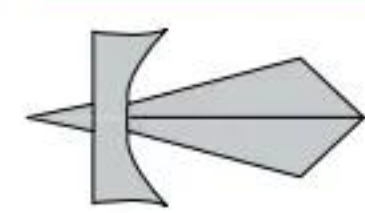
It didn't really feel underwhelming but it didn't quite feel as inventive as it could have been. We put it to Horii that he may have been overworked on *DQVI*, which was developed around the same time as *Chrono Trigger* – Horii and Toriyama's collaboration with *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, and a work potentially superior to any of their individual works.

"I contributed to *Chrono Trigger* by providing ideas for the story, as well as writing the first part of the scenario," he says. "I also supervised the development sometimes, but the project was basically in the hands of the Square staff. So I did not find as much difficulty as I would have expected in making sure that my schedule was manageable. With that said, it was extremely stressful that I had to keep two projects going simultaneously."

Perhaps that's why Horii took five years to complete the next *Dragon Quest*.

## Dragon Quest VII: Warriors Of Eden

**Format:** PlayStation  
**Released:** 2000 (Japan), 2001 (US)  
**Developed by:** Heartbeat



In the first five years of *Dragon Quest* development, Yuji Horii and friends were able to create four individual and brilliant entries in the series, but between 1995 and 2000 the team made only one. Was this just a natural byproduct of developing for ever more complicated hardware as *Dragon Quest VII* made

## DEVELOPER PROFILES

More developers than you might think have been involved in the making of *Dragon Quest*. Here's the lot of them...

### ARMOR PROJECT

Technically the main developer of every *Dragon Quest*, Armor Project is a holding name for the partnership of Yuji Horii, Koichi Sugiyama and Akira Toriyama.

### ENIX

The publisher of the first seven *Dragon Quest* games, Enix was a major player in the 8-bit, 16-bit and 32-bit eras, until it merged with Square in 2003 to become Square Enix.

### SPIKE CHUNSOFT

Founded by Koichi Nakamura of Enix, Chunsoft started in 1984 and developed the first five *Dragon Quest* titles, as well as the *Mystery Dungeon* series. It is still operating after a merger with Spike in 2012.

### HEARTBEAT

A relatively obscure developer responsible for *Dragon Quest VI* and *Dragon Quest VII*, as well as a couple of remakes. Heartbeat ceased game development in 2002, but some of its staff went on to form Genius Sonority, which has worked on some *DQ* spin-offs.

### ARTEPIAZZA

Originally recruited to create the story scenes for the Super Famicom remake of *Dragon Quest III*, ArtePiazza eventually became the

go-to developer for *Dragon Quest* remakes as a whole and has handled almost all of them since 2001.

### LEVEL-5

A huge Japanese powerhouse, thanks largely to the success of its own *Professor Layton* series, Level-5 so impressed Square Enix with its *Dark Cloud* and *Dark Chronicle* PS2 games that it was then trusted to develop both *Dragon Quest VIII* and *Dragon Quest IX*.

### SQUARE ENIX

The publisher and producer of every *Dragon Quest* since *VIII*, following the 2003 merger with Enix. Square Enix took over development duties for *Dragon Quest X*, and continued with them for *Dragon Quest XI*.

### NINTENDO

Though it has never made a *Dragon Quest* game, Nintendo's support for the series has been very important to its success, particularly in the West. Nintendo Of America helped the first game get off the ground by giving it away to *Nintendo Power* subscribers, while Nintendo UK helped the launch of *Dragon Quest IX* by publishing the DS game and recruiting Irish pop duo Jedward, of all people, to advertise it.





the jump from the Super Famicom to the PlayStation, or was there more to it than that?

"For the first time in the franchise, *Dragon Quest VII* used CD-ROM as the medium," Horii explains. "So I automatically assumed that I would never be hindered by memory capacity shortage again and that I would be able to do anything I wanted! However, I was bound by storage limitations after all, this time due to the restricted amount of available memory on the console itself. Meanwhile, the scenario ended up being as big as 10,000 pages and gave us a lot of hard work before we finally managed to squeeze it into a single game."

Horii's ambitious design caused *Dragon Quest VII* to be delayed numerous times and, when it eventually arrived, the PlayStation was in its final years and had been graced by three equally brilliant *Final Fantasy* games, allowing SquareSoft's primary RPG franchise to capture the world's attention while *Dragon Quest* slept.

Those hardcore fans who stayed faithful, even as the PlayStation 2 was released, were more than rewarded for their loyalty, however. The epic design of *Dragon Quest VII* produced a game that took well over 100 hours to complete, so it was

days – to always put *Dragon Quest* where it will attract the highest possible user base at that moment in time. *Dragon Quest VIII* represented a number of firsts. Most notably, it was the first to be made following the historic merger of Enix and Square, a move that Horii was largely unaffected by due to being an independent contractor rather than an Enix employee. "I was really surprised when the merger was announced," he remembers. "Although *Dragon Quest VIII* had already been in development, the new company, Square Enix, continued to give full support to our traditional way of making *Dragon Quest* titles. So, as I looked from a *Dragon Quest* creator's standpoint, I did not notice any particular changes in the direction we took after the merger."

*Dragon Quest VIII*'s other firsts include being the first developed by Level-5, of *Professor Layton* fame; the first to be released in Europe; and, in the West at least, the first to feature full recorded voice acting. If *Dragon Quest VII* flew under the radar then *Dragon Quest VIII*, by comparison, shouted loud and proud from the rooftops. It was impossible to overlook, thanks mainly to some of the most attractive visuals on the PS2 – cartoon-quality graphics that felt perfectly suited to the



» [PlayStation] *Dragon Quest*'s profile suffered in the PlayStation era, thanks to delays and cancellations, as well as the popularity of *Final Fantasy*.

## “If *Dragon Quest VII* flew under the radar, *Dragon Quest VIII* shouted loud and proud from the rooftops”

well worth the wait. Meanwhile, the design of the world, which saw continents periodically rise from beneath the sea, gradually expanding the scope of the world and broadening the player's horizons, returned a little bit of the magic, imagination and invention that felt missing from *DQVI*.

And rightly so. If Horii was unaware of maturing audience expectations around the release of *Dragon Quest V*, he certainly felt it in the post-*Final Fantasy VII* age. "We always feel considerable pressure each time we make a new *Dragon Quest*; not only *DQVII*," he says. "Our fans expect a new game to be twice as interesting as the previous one. If it fails to meet the expectation, they will moan, 'DQ is not interesting anymore!' *DQVII* featured a big story, which comprised many sub-stories of different tastes. I was happy to see that each of those components and characters attracted different groups of fans."

series' roots while also emphasising the size, scale and sheer beauty of *DQ*'s biggest game world yet.

It's the addition of voice acting that Horii is most keen to talk about. "We had been receiving requests from Western publishers who wanted to have voiceover included in their versions," he reveals. "This finally materialised simply due to our new development process. I have always had a habit of making repeated changes on spoken lines for the characters until the last minute of development. However, the script for *Dragon Quest VIII* was already locked for the overseas

» [PS2] *Dragon Quest VIII* was the first to be released in Europe, and loads more have followed since, including the DS remakes of *IV*, *V* and *VI*.

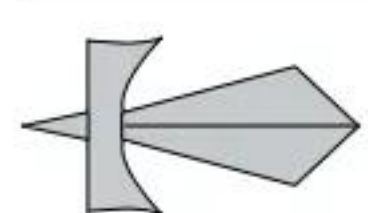


## Dragon Quest VIII: Journey Of The Cursed King

Format: PlayStation 2

Released: 2004 (Japan), 2005 (US), 2006 (Europe)

Developed by: Level-5



As the PlayStation 2 took hold of the global videogames market, Horii and company wasted no time in bringing *Dragon Quest* to Sony's chart-topping console. The goal behind this decision was the same since the NES



バトルックスAに 387 のダメージ!  
バトルックスAを たおした!





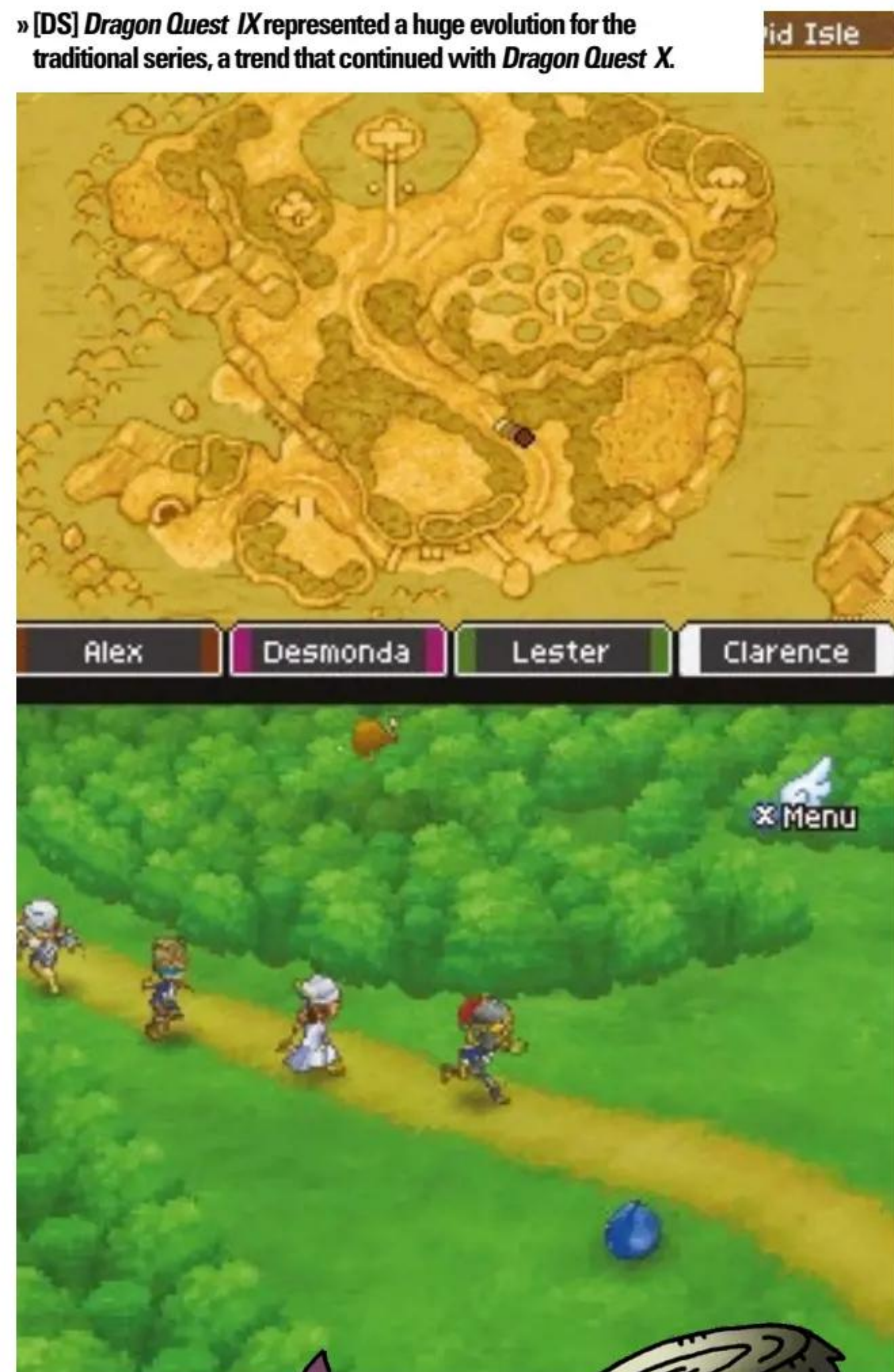
► versions, and this made it possible for us to implement voices.

"As far as *Dragon Quest* is concerned, I do not think voiceover is really a must. However, I understand that Western consumers welcome voices in their games. It would appear to me that the voice, rather than written words, plays a greater role in conveying subtle nuances in European languages, whereas, in Japanese, most of such nuances can be communicated by displaying words on the screen."

Horii is correct in this assumption. The use of voice acting is important to *Dragon Quest VIII*, the plot for which revolves around the quest to help an unfortunate monarch who has been cursed to the point where he is transformed into a goblin-like creature and his daughter shapeshifted into a horse. The plot plays out like a Saturday-morning cartoon comedy, and the brilliantly judged voice performances only add to that feeling.

“It turned out to be as hard as I would have thought to tell such a voluminous story with a handheld”

» [DS] *Dragon Quest IX* represented a huge evolution for the traditional series, a trend that continued with *Dragon Quest X*.



## Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels Of The Starry Skies

Format: DS

Released: 2009 (Japan), 2010 (US, Europe)

Developed by: Level-5

Despite its own quiet innovations, there are a number of things the *Dragon Quest* series has always done, and both its fans and detractors would readily acknowledge that its staunch traditionalism has been key to the series' success. So when *Dragon Quest IX* was first revealed, it came with three big shocks: this was to be the first *Dragon Quest* designed for a handheld console, the first built around co-op and the first to dispense with menus in favour of a real-time battle system. By the time it was released in 2009, however, only two of these innovations remained, as the game reverted to a turn-based menu system.

"What we showed at the initial rollout for *Dragon Quest IX* was only a prototype," says Horii by way of explanation. "It was meant to demonstrate how enjoyable *DQ* multiplayer could be, and we had not fixed our ideas at the stage. Throughout the development period, we were seeking the most player-friendly battle system, until we settled with the one we have now."

*Dragon Quest IX* suffered numerous delays, not least because of the difficulties involved in creating such a different type of RPG... and on a handheld to boot. "*DQIX* was originally not meant to be for handheld consoles," Horii tells us. "But I thought that the Nintendo DS had paved

a new path to many gameplay possibilities with its use of wireless communications, and our plan originated from a desire to make use of those functions to create some interesting features for a *Dragon Quest* side-project. While developing the idea further, we came to a point where we felt determined to make it really special to be worth our effort. And it was followed by our decision to develop it as a numbered *DQ* title. On the other hand, we were aware that our fans would expect a story on a big scale from a numbered *DQ* title. It turned out to be as hard as I would have thought to tell such a voluminous story within the capacity of a handheld machine."

Horii and his team pulled it off, of course. *Dragon Quest IX* is a true epic, featuring a mammoth world to explore and a series of self-contained stories in each location and the return of that old favourite, the job system, which add up to make another 100+ hour quest. Except this one was way more fun and innovative than the one found in *Dragon Quest VII*.

The multiplayer of *DQIX* is among its finest innovations, of course, but it's the other uses of the DS's connectivity that make this game special. Players could connect to the Wi-Fi service each week to download quests, shop items and even visits from favourite characters from *Dragon Quest* games past, and the game's Tag mode was used fantastically to silently trade items and rare treasure maps with any other *Dragon Quest IX* owner you happened to pass in the street.

Had the RPG, one of the most famously solitary of game genres, finally gone social? "I would say that *Dragon Quest* always had elements of social gaming," Horii answers to our surprise. "*Dragon Quest* fans would never keep their gaming experiences to themselves. Instead, they would ask other *DQ* players in their circle of friends to find out how much progress they have made and share information among them like, 'Where on earth can I find the key?' The Tag mode brought about a situation where *DQ* players go out to town with their DS and walk about in search of a player to get treasure maps from. It was almost like reality being invaded by the virtual world, which I found quite amusing."

» [DS] *Dragon Quest IX* featured completely user-created characters but still somehow retained that identifiable Toriyama illustration style.







# The History Of Dragon Quest

## ドラゴンクエスト



## Dragon Quest X: Rise Of The Five Tribes

**Format:** Wii, Nintendo Switch  
**Release:** 2012, 2023 (Switch)  
**Developed by:** Square Enix

◀ If the announcements surrounding *Dragon Quest IX* were a shock, then the reveal of *Dragon Quest X* must have been enough to send some hardcore fans to an early grave. Not only was *Rise Of The Five Tribes* set to arrive on the Wii – a console nearing the end of its lifespan, as the PlayStation was during the release of *Dragon Quest VII* – but it was also being developed for the Wii U, an then-unproven console, and was a completely online RPG, much like *Phantasy Star Online*. And just to add to the risk, this was the first *Dragon Quest* to be developed internally at Square Enix, a company that, in 2012, had a wavering track record when it came to fully online RPGs.

As *Dragon Quest X* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), dramatic changes had to be made to the game design, but the developers were conscious to keep the familiar elements that players expect from the series. Due to the nature of MMORPGs, this meant that for the first time in the series, players could have a completely customisable character. In every prior *Dragon Quest*, the player's character was set, but now gamers could adventure across the land as someone that wasn't human, and there was a range of classes to choose from. Perhaps the biggest change to the *Dragon Quest* formula was the removal of turn-based combat. Players instead could move around freely and use abilities to interrupt enemies from performing



their actions. As with most massively multiplayer games, *Dragon Quest X* required a subscription fee to play; however, there was a two-hour window where players could play for free.

You start as a human when your village is attacked by Nelgel, the Lord Of Hell. Your soul is sent to a shrine far away and transferred to a new being (the player-defined avatar), and you set out on your adventure to stop Nelgel. As of the time of writing, *Dragon Quest X* is the only game in the main series that hasn't seen a release in the West. More salt was rubbed into the wound when, during a *Dragon Quest* 35th anniversary event, it was announced the game was coming to Nintendo Switch... but only in Japan.

## Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

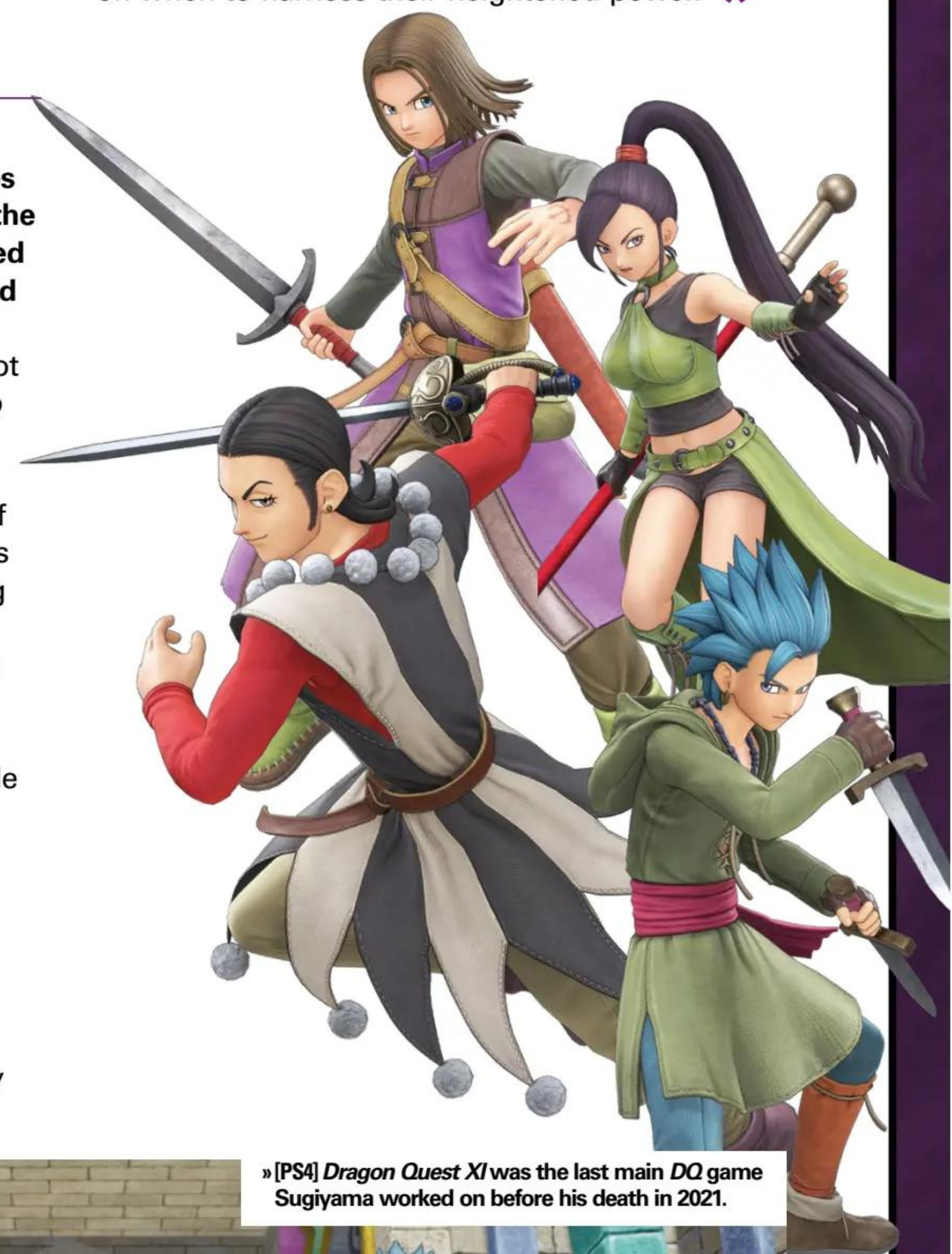
**Format:** 3DS, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch  
**Release:** 2017, 2019 (Switch)  
**Developed by:** Square Enix

◀ Keeping what is seemingly now a tradition for the *Dragon Quest* series of having a surprise announcement alongside the reveal of a new game, in 2015, it was announced that the next game in the mainline series would be released in two versions. *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age* would be released not only on the Nintendo 3DS, but there would also be a separate version for the PlayStation 4 and the Nintendo Switch, a console which people knew very little about at the time. The stories of the two games would be identical, but elements such as environments would change depending on which version you played.

The 3DS version featured some retro-looking 2D sprites on one screen, reminiscent of the Super Nintendo entries, while on the other screen, the game is displayed in 3D. The console releases contained just the 3D version of the game with enhanced graphics. Westerners wanting to experience the 3DS version would need to import the game, as it has never been released outside of Japan. However, in 2019, *Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes Of An Elusive Age Definitive Edition* was released, which allowed players to switch between 2D and 3D gameplay

by visiting a church, as well as introducing other quality-of-life improvements.

In *DQXI*, players control a young man who discovers that he is the reincarnation of a hero from the past known as the Luminary. As the hero, you must find and defeat an evil looming over the land while also being hunted by the King Of Dundrasil, believing the Luminary to be the Darkspawn coming to destroy the land. *Dragon Quest XI* was released in 2017 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the series, and the game contained several references and nods for lifelong fans – some small and others not so. Combat kept the turn-based system from earlier entries, but players could freely run around the combat area like in *DQX* – however, in this entry, your movement didn't benefit combat. The Pep system added a new twist to combat. When a character becomes Pepped Up, their stats would increase and have access to unique attacks or abilities. When two or more characters were Pepped, they could use combo abilities. The twist is you're not told how long Pep lasts, so players must gamble on when to harness their heightened power. ★



» [PS4] *Dragon Quest XI* was the last main *DQ* game Sugiyama worked on before his death in 2021.





# THE HIS FINAL FANTASY



## FIRION

### FINAL FANTASY II

■ Our very first named hero is the archetypical holder of the role: loyal to his family and country, with a strong desire to do what is necessary to protect them. Supposedly, he's got a bit of a weakness for women.

## CECIL HARVEY

### FINAL FANTASY IV

■ This former dark knight is neither arrogant nor outspoken, despite his role as one of the king's elite soldiers. He's a much better fit for his role once he questions his loyalties and becomes a paladin.

## BARTZ KLAUSER

### FINAL FANTASY V

■ Without much purpose other than wandering the world, Bartz is an easygoing soul whose life changes after his encounter with a crashed meteor. This multitasking hero has a notable fear of heights due to a childhood fall.

## TERRA BRANFORD

### FINAL FANTASY VI

■ *Final Fantasy's* first female protagonist is a powerful esper whose abilities are hijacked for harm by the Empire. During her quest, she struggles to regain her memories and reconcile her humanity with her magical abilities.

## CLOUD STRIFE

### FINAL FANTASY VII

■ This mercenary isn't interested in much other than getting paid, until he hooks up with the environmentalist resistance group AVALANCHE and discovers that his past might not be what he thought it was.

## SQUALL LEONHART

### FINAL FANTASY VIII

■ A loner at heart, Squall finds leadership thrust upon him as part of his duties in the SeeD military academy. Thanks to his rival, Seifer, he bears a rather distinctive facial scar.

## HISTORY OF HEROES



# TORY OF ANTASY



## ZIDANE TRIBAL

### FINAL FANTASY IX

■ This diminutive thief is a real ladies' man who sets out to kidnap a princess. Confident and competent the majority of the time, any insecurities that he holds are generally things that he tries to deal with himself.

## TIDUS

### FINAL FANTASY X

■ As a Blitzball star, Tidus is athletic and upbeat to a fault, but he's got some rather severe daddy issues. He's also a pretty handy swordsman, and has a laugh that has made him famous all over the world.

## VAA

### FINAL FANTASY XII

■ Being the self-appointed guardian of a group of orphans, Vaan is a natural leader. A life of poverty hasn't ground him down, and he's a bit of a dreamer, constantly thinking of the day he'll own an airship.

## LIGHTNING

### FINAL FANTASY XIII

■ This determined, fierce hero is bound up in a quest to save her sister, Serah. She's a rollercoaster of emotions, too – initially cold and distant, she opens up in the second game of the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy only to lose her emotions again.

## NOCTIS LUCIS CAELUM

### FINAL FANTASY XV

■ Heir to the kingdom of Lucis, Noctis is the son of King Regis, and has to deal with the aftermath of a coup. He's aloof and prickly, but his heart is in the right place. He's supported and constantly propped-up by his three good friends.

## CLIVE ROSFIELD

### FINAL FANTASY XVI

■ The most hard-done-by *Final Fantasy* hero, we follow Clive's journey across 20 years. He's a prince of Rosaria, but is deposed and is led to think he's killed his beloved brother, and then is thrown into slavery for good measure.





## FANTASY ON FILM

**There's more to Final Fantasy than videogames – check out these excursions into the world of cinema**

With *Final Fantasy* games offering more plot depth than the typical videogame, particularly during the early years of the series' history, there's some sense to adapting them to film – but straight adaptations have actually been few and far between.

*Final Fantasy's* first foray into the movie market came with the 1994 release of *Final Fantasy: Legend Of The Crystals*, a four-part anime video series that followed the events of *Final Fantasy V*, albeit 200 years in the future with mostly new characters. This one's not very easy to find anymore – the only English language release was a North American VHS run back in the late Nineties. An even more tenuous connection is found in the anime series *Final Fantasy Unlimited*, a 2001 series that borrows some elements, such as Moogles, without relating to any particular game.



*Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* wasn't based on a game, and was far more ambitious. Directed by Hironobu Sakaguchi and released by in-house group Square Pictures, the tale of a future Earth ravaged by aliens was one of the first films to attempt photorealistic CGI depiction of humans. Despite impressive scenes and an A-list voice cast, it only made \$85 million at the box office in 2001 – not nearly enough to recoup the film's production budget of \$137 million.

A more modest CGI effort followed in the form of *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, a direct follow-up to the videogame that arrived in 2005. Released straight to DVD, this features many of the characters from the original in a world now ravaged by the mysterious Geostigma. This was a big seller, leading to a special extended Blu-ray edition in 2010. In 2016, another CG movie titled *Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV* and a free anime series titled *Brotherhood: Final Fantasy XV* served to expand the universe of the 15th game.

## WITH OVER 100 MILLION GAMES SOLD, FINAL FANTASY IS A PILLAR OF THE JAPANESE RPG SCENE. NICK THORPE LOOKS BACK OVER THREE DECADES OF THE ICONIC SERIES WITH SHINJI HASHIMOTO

**T**here are few series of games that are unavoidably big but *Final Fantasy* is definitely one of them. Even if you've somehow missed all of the main entries in the series, there are the spin-offs, the cameos and even films to talk about. With over 100 million games sold, discussing Japanese RPGs without including *Final Fantasy* is like excluding *Mario* from a conversation about platform games, or ignoring *Street Fighter* in a chat about fighting games.

In 1987, Squaresoft was anything but unavoidably big. It was struggling to make headway as a publisher on Nintendo's market-conquering Famicom, during a time when the platform was at its most lucrative. With little money, the company was in a jam – but then, so was game designer Hironobu Sakaguchi. His previous games hadn't hit major commercial success, and he was contemplating leaving the games industry to return to university. He had wanted to create a role-playing game, and met resistance from management. External events would break down barriers for Sakaguchi, as the success of Enix's Famicom RPG *Dragon Quest* proved that the market for a console RPG existed.

Even then, putting the game together was no simple task. Sakaguchi has confided that his internal reputation hampered his initial attempts to form a team for the '*Fighting Fantasy*' project – he was considered a rough boss, and as his games struggled to sell, staff opted for other teams. Just three people joined his team initially, and he had to put out feelers before gaining key members of



» [NES] The Warriors Of Light do battle against a sparse backdrop in the very first *Final Fantasy*.

“FINAL FANTASY DOES NOT SIMPLY TRY TO EMULATE AND BUILD ON THE PREVIOUS TITLES IN THE SERIES”

SHINJI HASHIMOTO

the team, such as game designers Koichi Ishii and Akitoshi Kawazu. Programming was handled by new hire Nasir Gebelli, who had taken the Apple II scene by storm with his action games. Yoshitaka Amano, who provided character designs, had been a freelancer before joining Square for *Final Fantasy*; Sakaguchi has said that he had dismissed Ishii's suggestion to use Amano due to failing to recognise the name, only to be told that the magazine clippings he'd been using for inspiration were Amano's work.

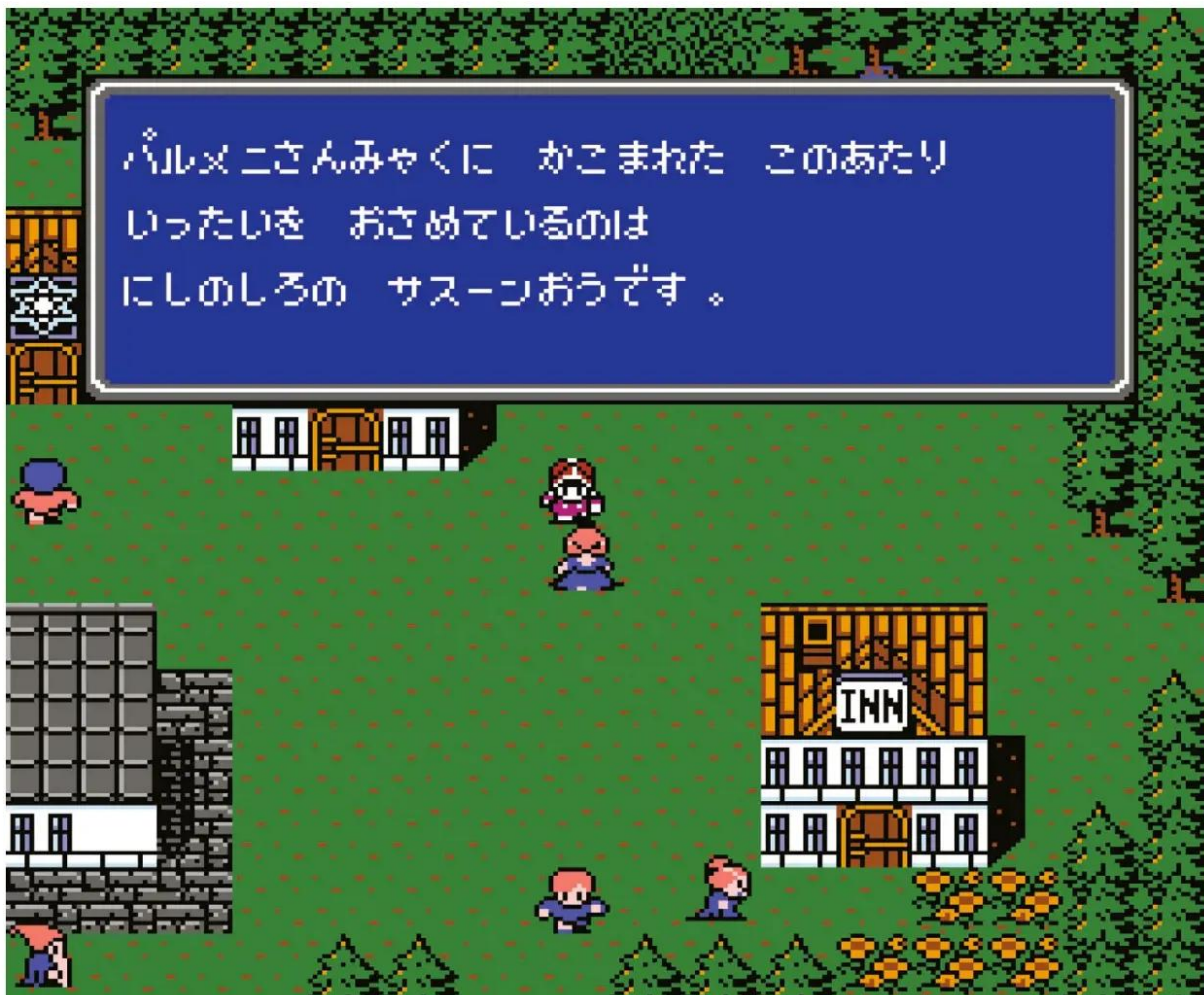
When the resulting game finally made it to market in December 1987, it was known as *Final Fantasy* – a name change necessitated by the existence of the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks, with the word 'Final' chosen due to the precarious position of both Sakaguchi and Squaresoft. However, the market was ready for a new RPG, and *Final Fantasy* had key advantages over the likes of *Dragon Quest*, particularly when it came to its more elaborately told plot, which involved the Warriors Of Light banding together to battle the evil knight Garland. Instead of playing as a single hero, *Final Fantasy* allowed the player to form a four-character party from six character classes with unique attributes and abilities – Warrior, Thief, Monk, Black Mage, White Mage and Red Mage. The game was a swift success, selling 400,000 copies on the Famicom, paving the way for an MSX2 conversion in 1989 and an English translation for the NES in 1990.

When the time came for a sequel, Squaresoft took some unusual steps that would come to be recognised as part of the *Final Fantasy* design philosophy.



» [Famicom] Work started on a translation of *Final Fantasy II*, but was abandoned due to concerns over release timing.





» [Famicom] *Final Fantasy III* holds the record for longest time between release and English translation, at 16 years.

"*Final Fantasy* does not simply try to emulate and build on the previous titles in the series, but to exceed and reach beyond them with every possible effort, so in that sense, developing each and every game in the series is a very big challenge in itself," explains Shinji Hashimoto, *Final Fantasy* brand manager at Square Enix at the time of our interview. The first major change was that the game did away with the experience points system from the original. Instead, characters developed attributes through practical use – a character could increase their magic stat by casting many spells, for example.

**The more radical change was the decision to omit all of the characters and settings from the original game, in favour of a new setting in which the characters were named and had defined histories.** This followed Firion and his party, who find themselves attacked by the forces of Palamecia. This decision would set a precedent for the series – each subsequent game would also start afresh, leading to a series of disconnected stories bound together by an evolving role-playing game design. This would turn out to be one of the series' greatest strengths, as the designers have had the freedom to adapt to changing market trends with their characters and settings.

This disconnect between the games has also given rise to an interesting phenomenon – while most other series of games include their fan favourites and black sheep, *Final Fantasy* fans are



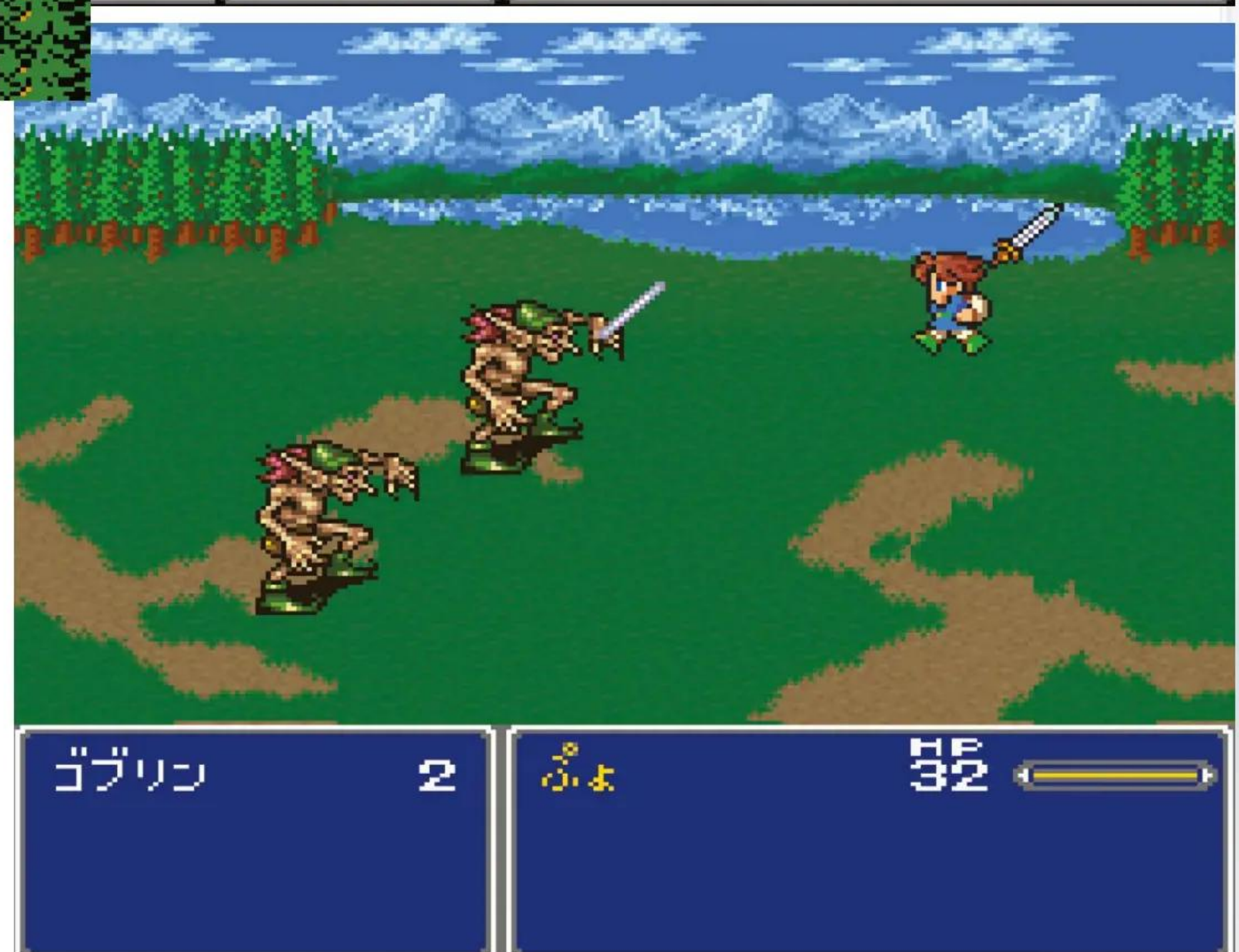
» [Famicom] Your entire party starts off as Onion Knights in *Final Fantasy III*, but can soon change jobs.

incredibly passionate about their particular favourites within the series. In fact, this is something that Hashimoto agrees with. When asked about the series' key rivals, he responds: "I think it is very difficult to compare *Final Fantasy* to other games. If I had to give one, then I would say that the other numbered *Final Fantasy* games are all each other's rivals!"

*Final Fantasy II* was an even bigger hit than its predecessor in Japan, shifting 800,000 copies following its December 1988 release. Unfortunately, *Final Fantasy II* didn't make it to the West. Though Square Enix had started work on a translation following the success of the original game, the late start ultimately doomed it. Progress was slow, the game was ageing, and the SNES was on the horizon, so it was ultimately scrapped. Western players would finally get to play it as part of the PlayStation compilation *Final Fantasy Origins* in 2003.

The same fate befell the next game, *Final Fantasy III*. This game centred on four orphans who are tasked with restoring balance to the world, which they seek to do by defeating Xande, ►

» [SNES] Mid-battle dialogue can turn what seems to be a hostile encounter into a gut-wrenching moment.



» [SNES] Bartz and Lenna find an old Galuf passed out by the meteor impact site.



▶ a warlock whose goal is to gain crystals of light and unleash chaos upon the world. Unusually, each of your characters in *Final Fantasy III* begins the game as an Onion Knight, but can switch jobs freely during the course of the game, allowing a wide range of character and class combinations.

Despite a disruption caused by the expiration of Nasir Gebelli's work visa, which forced the team to relocate to the USA to finish the game, *Final Fantasy III* was the most advanced game in the series so far, shipping on a four-megabit cartridge when it released in April 1990. The series was still growing, with 500,000 copies sold in the first week and 1.4 million copies sold in total. Despite being one of the most popular entries in the series among Japanese fans, remake projects faltered until a full

3D Nintendo DS remake in 2006, which opened the game to Western players a mere 16 years after its initial release.

Another crucial part of the *Final Fantasy* identity is the constant push for bigger and better technology. "We have always tried to be at the cutting edge of gaming in each era, going from 2D pixel sprites to 3D, and from pre-rendering to real-time," explains Hashimoto. "The media our games are on has also followed the trends in hardware, going from ROM cassettes through CD-ROM to DVD-ROM, Blu-ray and even branching into smartphones." This drive would define *Final Fantasy IV*, which became the first entry in the series to debut on the SNES.

**F**inal Fantasy IV featured characters with fixed classes, and focuses on Cecil Harvey, who begins the game as a member of the Kingdom Of Baron's elite Red Wings air force unit. The battle system in this game received an overhaul, with turn-based combat giving way to a system that Square termed 'Active Time Battle' – menu-driven combat taking place in real time, with enemies capable of launching attacks even as you decide on your next move. This exciting system would carry forward to many of Square's other RPGs, including *Final Fantasy* games. Technologically, the game took advantage of the enhanced colour palette of the SNES, and used Mode 7 effects to create spectacular battle animations and spice up airship sequences.

» [PlayStation] Some people weren't used to emotional content in gaming – Aeris and her fate served as a sudden introduction.



» [SNES] *Final Fantasy VI* was a visual upgrade over its predecessors, with more detailed background work.

Despite having to adjust to working with brand-new technology, Square's team was able to complete *Final Fantasy IV* in just one year, meaning that the game arrived in July 1991, during the Super Famicom's launch year. 1.44 million copies were sold, reviews were highly positive, and it has retained a great deal of popularity over time, with *Famitsu* readers voting it the sixth best game of all time in 2006. *Final Fantasy IV* was also the game that marked *Final Fantasy*'s return to the West – however, it was named *Final Fantasy II* so as not to confuse American audiences, which had missed the previous two games. Unfortunately, the game was also simplified due to Square's concerns that it would be too large of a leap in complexity. A number of spells, items

I heard Duncan's son, Vargas, is missing as well. I have a bad feeling about this...



» [SNES] The US SNES version of *Final Fantasy VI* was the last to use Western numbering – everyone synchronised at VII.

## A LITTLE DISTRACTION

Though the heroes of the *Final Fantasy* series are busy saving the world, they can always find time for minigames. Here are five of the best



### G-BIKE

FINAL FANTASY VII

■ To be fair to Cloud and co, the initial G-Bike segment of *Final Fantasy VII* is a genuine life-or-death escape from Shinra HQ. Playing it again in the Gold Saucer is pretty frivolous though. It returns in the remake games, and is the basis of a boss fight.



### TRIPLE TRIAD

FINAL FANTASY VIII

■ It's not exactly *Magic: The Gathering*, but *Final Fantasy VIII* has its own well-loved collectible card game that shines pretty brightly. Players take turns to place cards on a three-by-three grid, with directional attack statistics causing cards to be won and lost.



### BLITZBALL

FINAL FANTASY X

■ If you're going to make your protagonist a fictional sports star, you might as well let the players play that fictional sport while you're at it. While Blitzball gameplay isn't the all-action affair you'd expect from its FMV depiction, it's a fun diversion all the same.



# The History Of Final Fantasy

ファイナルファンタジー



and abilities were removed – including the consolidation of various status healing items into one catch-all remedy – items were made cheaper, and secret passages were made visible. Fans should seek out one of the more recent re-releases instead.

*Final Fantasy V* followed the story of Bartz Klauser, a wanderer who becomes wrapped up in a royal family's quest after happening upon a meteorite that had struck the planet. Mechanically, the biggest thing about *Final Fantasy V* is its incredibly expansive job system – you can assign one of 22 classes to any member of your party, giving you more choice than any other game in the series thus far.

When it was released in December 1992, *Final Fantasy V* became the series' bestselling game in Japan by selling 2.45 million copies. Unfortunately, *Final Fantasy V* was the third game not to receive a timely English translation. Though it was being worked on, Square once again felt that difficulty was an issue – translator Ted Woolsey told *Super Play* that "although the more experienced

gamers loved the complex character building, it's just not accessible enough to the average gamer".

**F**inal Fantasy V was also the first game in the series to spawn a direct spin-off story, in the form of an anime video series titled *Final Fantasy: Legend Of The Crystals*. However, this was another major step in establishing the identity of the *Final Fantasy* series – spin-offs have become as big a deal as the main games themselves, and they've proven incredibly versatile. "That is probably because the series has such a strong foundation in the first place, and fans have such positive memories of the worlds and characters in them that they always want to spend more time there," Hashimoto assures us. Indeed, the number of non-crossover spin-offs lends weight to his argument – many characters and stories have even returned for their own individual follow-up projects, including the likes of the episodic game *Final Fantasy IV: The After Years*, the handheld sequel *Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings* and the CGI movie *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*.

*Final Fantasy VI* was the final game of the SNES era and one that started to shift the series away from traditional high-fantasy settings towards more sci-fi-influenced worlds – technological advances on display in the game's world

include trains and drills, as well as coal mining. The story follows Terra Branford, a human-esper rescued from her Imperial captors by a resistance group. Technical advances over the previous SNES games were limited, and character customisation was once again simplified, allowing for characters to add equipment rather than going through job changes. Still, the game was exceptionally well-crafted, with amazing music, a lengthy main quest and memorable characters, particularly the main villain, Kefka Palazzo. 2.62 million copies shifted in Japan following the game's April 1994 release, and a further 860,000 were sold in North America.

Though the first six games were obviously successful, *Final Fantasy* had been primarily a Japanese phenomenon for the first decade of its life. North America had received patchy support, and Europe hadn't been let in on the fun at all. This would all change with the introduction of *Final Fantasy VII*. It was an important game in many respects – it introduced 3D models and full-motion video to the *Final Fantasy* series, and marked the series' proper debut in Europe. Perhaps most significantly, ▶



» [PlayStation] *Final Fantasy IX* was the last of the highly stylised games, and used humour liberally.

» [PlayStation] Custom scenes like this were only possible with the adoption of 3D character models.



## CHOCOBO RACING

FINAL FANTASY XIV

■ The MMORPG isn't the first game to allow players to race the iconic birds of the *Final Fantasy* series, but unlike previous incarnations, it allows you to beat other players with your expertly trained Chocobo – that's worth the price of admission alone.



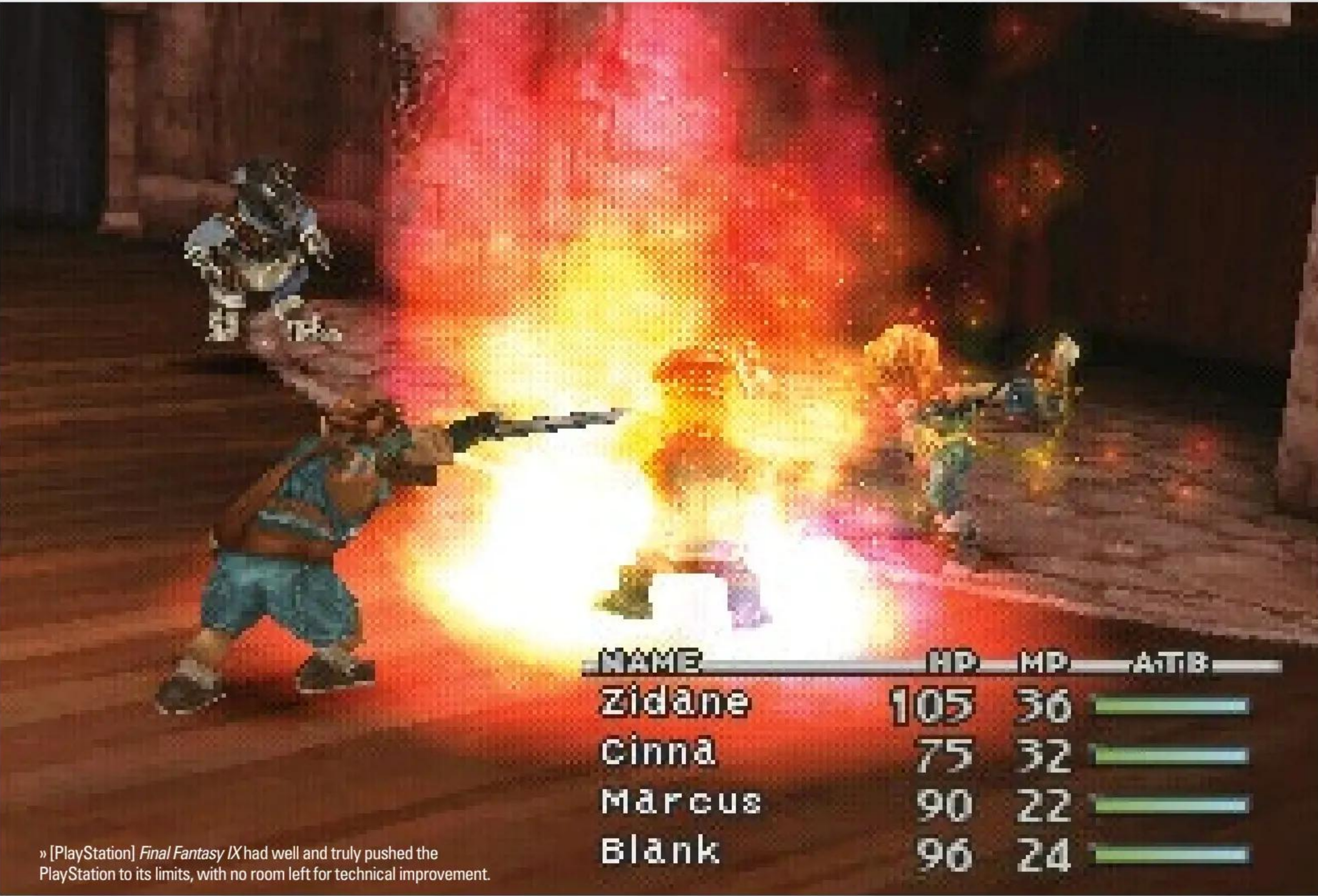
## FISHING

FINAL FANTASY XV

■ In a game where 'hanging out with the guys' seems to be a major driving factor, fishing is an obvious inclusion. Strangely, this minigame spun off into a standalone production: *Monster Of The Deep: Final Fantasy XV* for PlayStation VR.







» [PlayStation] *Final Fantasy IX* had well and truly pushed the PlayStation to its limits, with no room left for technical improvement.



» [PS2] Rikku and Yuna took the lead in *Final Fantasy X-2*, the first direct videogame sequel to a *Final Fantasy* game.



» [PC] The first *Final Fantasy* MMO introduced drastic changes to everything, from the combat system to the storytelling.

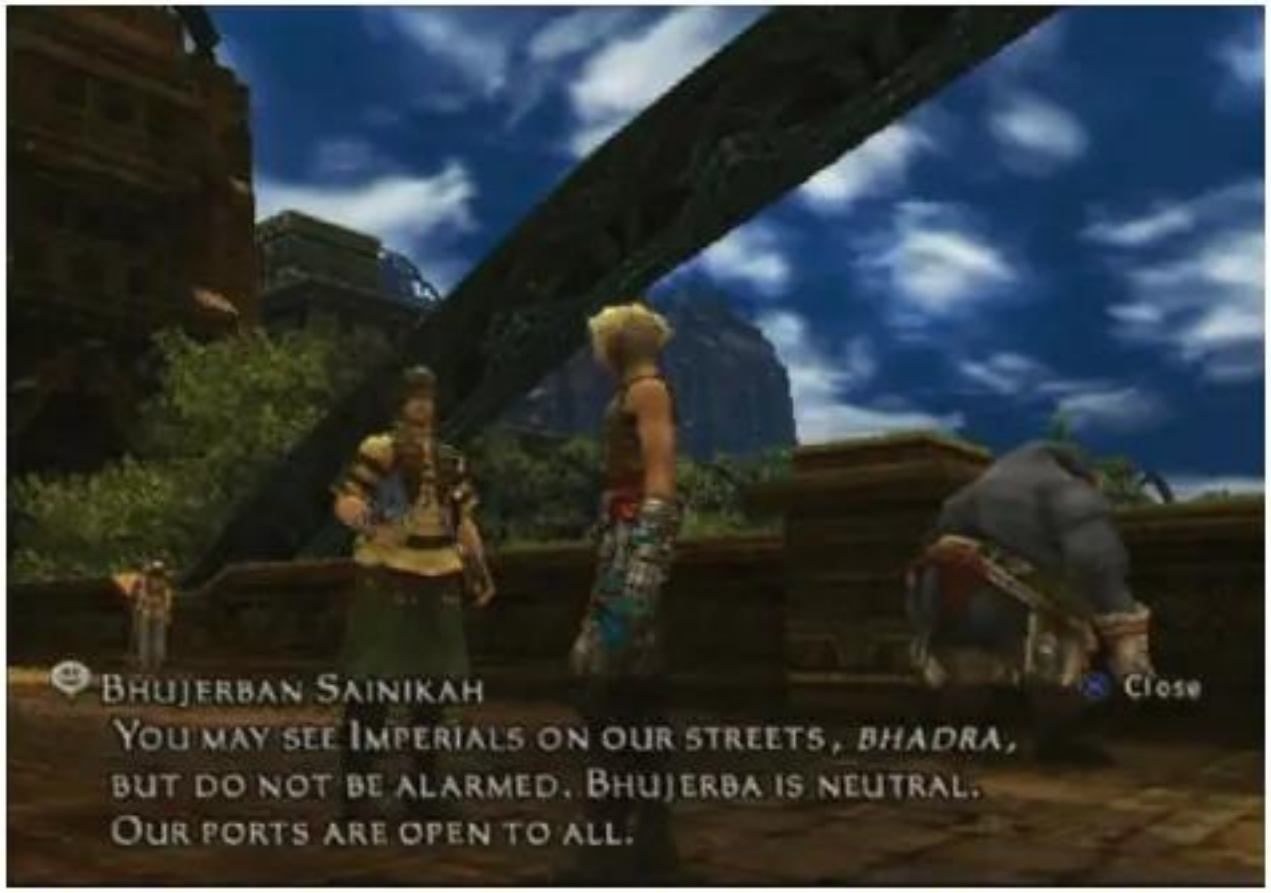


Gessho : Ah, I must introduce myself.  
My name is Gessho, and I have also arrived from the western continent.  
Gessho : I am a Yagudo.  
Gessho : Do not be alarmed.  
I am merely a wandering monk who seeks to find a master in this foreign nation.  
Gessho : Just like you, I have entered the service of one "Naja Salaheem"...

it marked the end of SquareSoft's historic link with Nintendo and the start of a strong relationship with Sony. *Final Fantasy VII* was set to be an epic and needed the massive storage afforded by CD-ROMs, a requirement at odds with Nintendo's decision to doggedly stick with cartridges for the Nintendo 64.

It's fair to say that *Final Fantasy VII* revolutionised RPG production values. The basic elements of adventure, swords and sorcery remained, but where previous games had expressed this through small sprites and top-down or isometric viewpoints, *Final Fantasy VII* added previously unseen cinematic ambition. The use of polygonal characters on pre-rendered backdrops allowed for stunning wide shots of industrial facilities, claustrophobic close-ups in tight corridors, and even sequences overlaid on FMV. In the West, *Final Fantasy VII* blew away the stereotypical view of Japanese RPGs with an attractive sci-fi narrative. Critical acclaim followed, along with 10 million sales, making it the most popular game in the series.

For Hashimoto, it was a formative first experience with the series. "I have attachments to all the *Final Fantasy* games but the first one that I was actually involved in developing was *Final Fantasy VII*. *Final Fantasy VII* has some very strong memories for me. As well as the game itself, I was also involved



» [PS2] Vaan certainly wouldn't want to see Imperials – he kind of hates them after they killed his brother.





with the movie, and it was a very happy experience being able to take that to the Venice International Film festival."

With a brand-new audience captured, *Final Fantasy VIII* became the most highly anticipated entry in the series so far. The game signified some major changes for the *Final Fantasy* series, particularly in terms of artistic direction. Instead of the highly stylised character designs in past games, *Final Fantasy VIII* used realistic depictions of humans in all scenes. The game's plot followed Squall Leonhart and his fellow cadets from the SeeD military force, who start out by turning back advances from the hostile Republic of Galbadia.

**M**agic points were dropped from the battle system, with characters instead required to 'draw' spells from points around the world, as well as enemies. Magic could also be tied to your statistics via the Junction system, allowing you to stockpile spells to raise your stats. This ultimately proved to be somewhat broken, allowing players to build extraordinarily powerful characters too quickly.

Though critics loved it, *Final Fantasy VIII* can be a polarising game. Some of the millions who bought it in 1999 found themselves alienated by the new visual style and changes to the battle system. However, the game's fans will point to its incredible cinematic sequences, compelling (if convoluted) plot, and strong customisation elements as key qualities. 3.7 million copies were sold in Japan and 4.45 million elsewhere, which suggests that those fans might just be onto something.

The next three games in the series were all announced simultaneously, and were drastically different. *Final Fantasy IX* was a celebration of the past, offering one last set of stylised character designs in a classic kingdom setting – a merging of the old style of games with the latest production values. As the



» [PC] Since its relaunch, *FFXIV* has become a sprawling epic with success after success under its belt.

“THE FIRST [FINAL FANTASY GAME] THAT I WAS ACTUALLY INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING WAS FINAL FANTASY VII”

SHINJI HASHIMOTO

thief Zidane Tribal, you end up taking in Alexandria's princess Garnet after attempting to kidnap her, only to find that she's worried by Queen Brahne and will join you willingly. Classic character classes return and characters can gain permanent skills from equipment.

With 5.3 million copies sold worldwide, *Final Fantasy IX* is less popular than its PlayStation predecessors, despite critical consensus holding it as arguably the best *Final Fantasy* game overall. Part of this can be attributed to the series falling behind technological progress for the first time, because it arrived during the peak of PlayStation 2 hype, and people were already looking ahead towards the game's successor.

*Final Fantasy X* was an exploitation of increased power in the present. While the game was very much a traditionally structured entry in the *Final Fantasy* series, the arrival of the PlayStation 2 gave Square access to sufficient graphical power to move away from pre-rendered backgrounds, replacing them with real-time 3D environments. Additionally, the large capacity of DVDs allowed for the introduction of voice acting. The game follows Tidus, a Blitzball star in his native Zanarkand, who finds himself stranded in a place called Spira following the appearance of a destructive beast known as Sin. *Final Fantasy X* sold an enormous 6.6 million copies worldwide following its July 2001 release, and in 2006 *Famitsu* readers voted it the best game of all time.

*Final Fantasy XI* took the series in a whole new direction, as the first massively multiplayer online RPG in the series. Players are allowed to create their



» [PS3] *Final Fantasy XIII* polarised fans with its streamlined first act and reinvented battle system.

own characters and wander freely around the world of Vana'diel, banding together with others to complete missions and advance the story. The initial antagonist was the resurrected Shadow Lord, who needed to be defeated, but years of expansions and add-on content have shifted the focus of the storyline. The game was primarily developed for the PC and released in 2002, but gained cross-platform support with the PlayStation 2, and then an Xbox 360 version followed in 2006.

**N**umbering *Final Fantasy XI* as part of the main series was a bold move, but one that showed confidence in the game and ultimately paid off handsomely. The game

reached break-even at 200,000 monthly subscribers, and had up to 300,000 daily players during 2003. In 2012, Square Enix announced that the game was the most profitable *Final Fantasy* title of all, and although the PS2 and Xbox 360 servers have been closed, the PC servers are still active, ensuring its status as one of the longest-running MMORPGs.

In the modern era, Square Enix has spent more time exploring the universes it has established. *Final Fantasy XII* was followed up very quickly with a handheld sequel, *Revenant Wings*,



» [PS2] *Final Fantasy XII*'s battle system was controversial, with some fans accusing the game of playing itself.



# FLIGHTS OF FANTASY

We investigate the many spinoffs of the Final Fantasy universe



## CRYSTAL CHRONICLES

FIRST RELEASE: 2003

■ First released on the GameCube and developed by The Game Designers Studio, *Crystal Chronicles* not only boasted extensive GBA compatibility, but it also featured real-time fighting that instantly made it stand apart from the core *Final Fantasy* games.

The series has continued to evolve with subsequent releases, such as *My Life As A King*, which introduced city building, and *My Life As A Darklord*, which was a well-regarded tower defence game. The 2007 *Ring Of Fates* was a standalone release for the Nintendo DS, while the 2009 Wii exclusive, *The Crystal Bearers*, was the last current game in the series to be released outside a 2020 remaster.

## CHOCOBO GAMES

FIRST RELEASE: 1997

■ Although the series has received more games than any other *Final Fantasy* spin-off, only a handful were released outside of Japan. The first game in the series, *Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon*, never arrived in the West, although we did get to enjoy the 1999 sequel, *Chocobo's Dungeon 2*. *Chocobo Racing* was a decent-ish stab at a Mario Kart racer, while *Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales* for the DS was a card-based RPG that received a Japanese-exclusive sequel.

*Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo's Dungeon* improved on the original *Chocobo Dungeon* formula by adding new mechanics, like a job system, while *Chocobo Panic* was a bizarre variant on the old electronic game, *Simon*.



## MANA SERIES

FIRST RELEASE: 1991

■ This is an odd inclusion but we're including it due to its origins. Known as *Seiken Densetsu: Final Fantasy Gaiden* in Japan, this Game Boy spin-off was called *Final Fantasy Adventure* in the states and *Mystic Quest* in Europe. Highly regarded as one of the best action games on Nintendo's portable, it eventually led to the critically acclaimed *Secret Of Mana* in 1993. The series continued to move away from the *Final Fantasy* elements found in the original game, and is now considered a franchise in its own right.

While it hasn't captured the glory of its Super Nintendo days, the *Secret Of Mana* series still endures, and you can read more about it when you reach page 66..

## FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

FIRST RELEASE: 1997

■ Unlike other *Final Fantasy* games, those in the *Tactics* series are strategy RPGs and very good ones at that. The original game was released on PlayStation in 1997 and was critically acclaimed at the time. It was eventually updated in the form of *Final Fantasy Tactics: The War Of The Lions* for PSP, and *The Ivalice Chronicles* in 2025.

*Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* followed on Game Boy Advance in 2003. It's not an actual sequel and is set in a dream world alternative of Ivalice. Its DS sequel, *Grimoire Of The Rift*, is actually set in the real version of Ivalice. The last game in the series, *Final Fantasy Tactics S*, was released in 2013 for iOS and Android, but closed its servers the following year.



## CRYSTAL DEFENDERS

FIRST RELEASE: 2008

■ Originally known as *Crystal Guardians*, this interesting tower defence series started off life by being released on three separate mobile services in Japan, before eventually being consolidated and released on iOS (and later, Xbox 360 and PS3) as *Crystal Defenders*. As with *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* and its DS sequel, *Crystal Defenders* is set in *Final Fantasy XII*'s world of Ivalice, and features extremely distinctive artwork. A sequel, *Crystal Defenders: Vanguard Storm*, followed in 2009, which was specifically designed to work with a touchscreen, and introduced new mechanics, including a fun take on 'rock-paper-scissors'. No additional games are currently planned.

## DISSIDIA FINAL FANTASY

FIRST RELEASE: 2008

■ *Dissidia* settles one of *Final Fantasy*'s biggest arguments: who would win in a fight between Cloud Strife and Squall Leonheart? It also answers many other hypothetical matches, as it allows a huge number of popular characters from the first ten games in the series (with one additional hero from *FFXI* and *FFXII*) to battle each other in arena-based combat.

*Dissidia 012 Final Fantasy* followed in 2011 and acted as both a prequel and a remake and introduced nine additional characters and tweaked many of the existing abilities of existing heroes. The most recent game, *Dissidia Final Fantasy*, was released in arcades in 2015 and appeared on PS4 later as *Dissidia NT*.



## KINGDOM HEARTS

FIRST RELEASE: 2002

■ A chance meeting in an elevator led to one of the most popular crossovers of recent memory. Joining Disney characters with those from the worlds of *Final Fantasy* seems an odd decision, but it works well. The original game sets the scene, introducing new characters – Sora, Riku and Kairi – and having them interact with some of Disney's biggest movies, from *The Little Mermaid* to *Tarzan*.

A sequel, *Kingdom Hearts II*, was released in 2005 and *Kingdom Hearts III* followed in 2018, but there are also countless mini-sequels and prequels as well as several HD remakes that can make it a little bewildering to those who haven't followed the series.

## SAGA SERIES

FIRST RELEASE: 1989

■ This is another series that started off as a *Final Fantasy* spin-off before forming into its own standalone series. The two Game Boy sequels were eventually remade for the Nintendo DS, but were exclusive to Japan. The next three games were exclusive to the Super Famicom and were known as *Romancing SaGa 1-3*. *SaGa Frontier 1* and 2 were exclusive to PlayStation, while *Unlimited SaGa* and *Romancing SaGa: Minstrel Song* (an enhanced remake) debuted on the PS2. *Emperors SaGa* followed in 2012, which was exclusively for the GREE platform, while *Imperial SaGa* was exclusive to PC. The most recent game, *SaGa: Emerald Beyond*, was released for modern systems in 2024.







## THEATRHYTHM

FIRST RELEASE: 2012

■ Considering how famed the *Final Fantasy* series is for its music, we're surprised it took so long for a rhythm-action game to receive a release. Developed by indieszero, it works as a brilliant slice of fan service, delivering some of the franchise's biggest tunes and marrying them to a number of entertaining game modes. A quasi-sequel, *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call*, was released in 2014, and enhanced the base game and introduced a new mode called Medley Quests. It also featured 221 songs and 60 characters, with additional ones being available in the form of DLC. A third title, *Final Bar Line*, can be enjoyed today.



## WORLD OF FINAL FANTASY

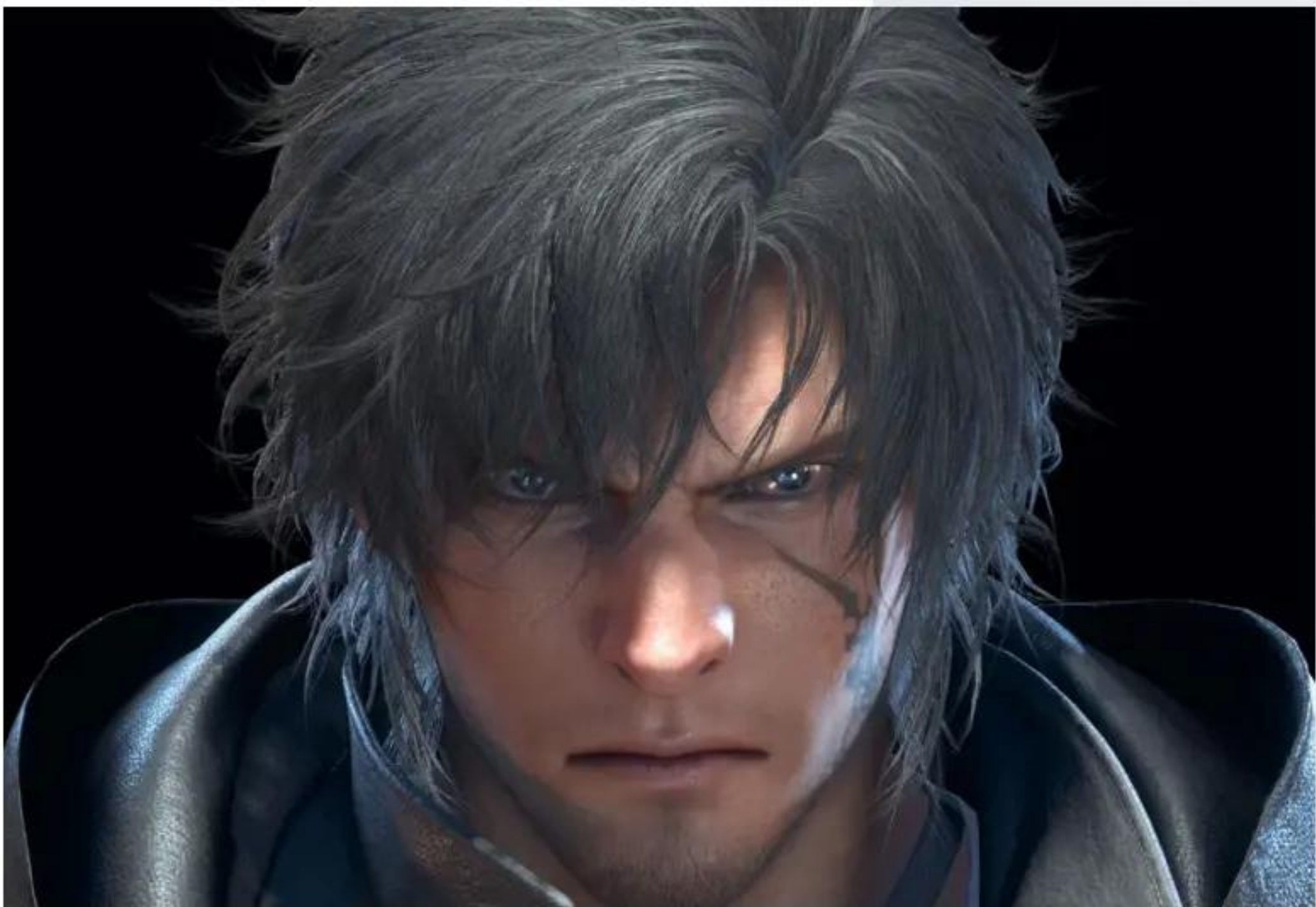
FIRST RELEASE: 2016

■ Tose, Division 3 and Square Enix Business worked together on *World Of Final Fantasy* as a celebration of the franchise's 30th anniversary. As with the *Kingdom Hearts* series, it features new protagonists (Lann and Reynn) but has them interact with a large number of classic *Final Fantasy* characters and monsters from throughout the franchise's history. Set in the world of Grymoire, it features a distinctive chibi-like style, which some may find a little too cute for their tastes. It works well, however, ensuring the likes of Cloud Strife and Lightning are instantly recognisable. It's notable for having a long development period, so the localisation could be as close to the original Japanese dialogue as possible.

► and Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 owners were catered to with the *Final Fantasy XIII* series, a trilogy of games released between 2009 and 2014 with Lightning as the heroic figurehead.

**T**he *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy was particularly interesting to watch, as the gameplay changed quite a lot between each instalment. While *Final Fantasy XIII* did well with critics, it was roundly criticised for its linearity and Lightning's cold personality. "We do take on board the opinions of our fans, but at the same time we balance that with the unique personality and vision of each episode's director and make full use of those as well," notes Hashimoto. The results of that listening process were *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, a less linear game with a reduced emphasis on Lightning, and *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*, an open-world game that gives the player full choice over the quests they take and a real-time combat system. Despite these changes, neither game did quite as well as the original with critics.

Another game that came in for criticism was *Final Fantasy XIV*, the second MMORPG entry in the series set in the world of Eorzea. The initial response to the game in 2010 was incredibly poor, based on its gameplay and interface. Square Enix responded by dropping the game's fees completely and making improvements, but it wasn't enough – eventually, the servers were shuttered in 2012, and the game was replaced in 2013 with *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*, a supremely better version which has surpassed even *World Of Warcraft* in active users. That's a non-traditional solution to a bad game, but it's fair to say that after 35 years, it's clear that *Final Fantasy* can forge its own path without being beholden to history. 2016's *Final Fantasy XV* is a great example of that – if you brought a *Final Fantasy* fan from



» [PS5] *Final Fantasy XVI* marked a paradigm shift into the world of action and away from classic RPG battling.

# The History Of Final Fantasy

ファイナルファンタジー



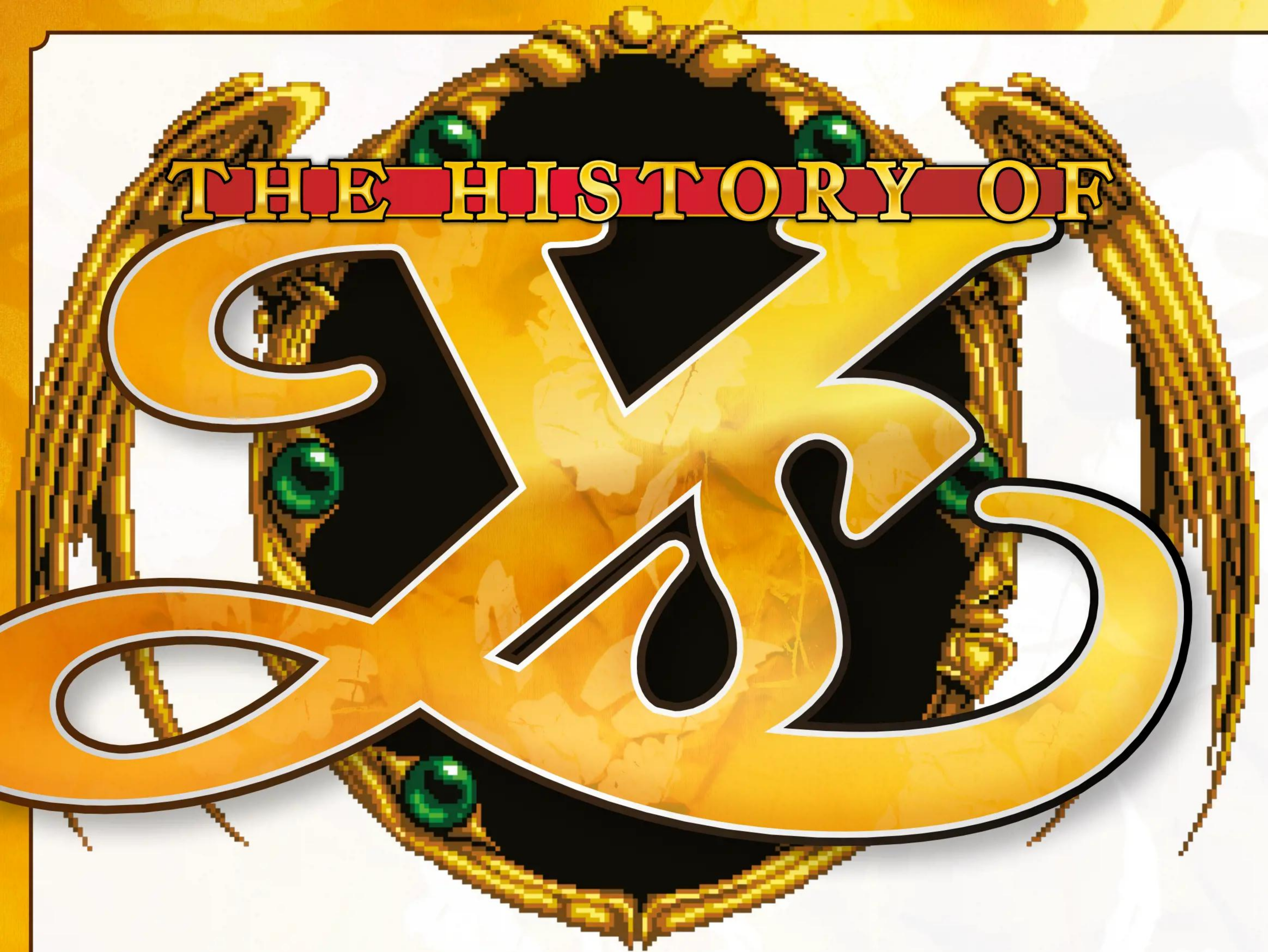
» [PS4] The camaraderie you build with your comrades in *Final Fantasy XIV* is its distinct highlight.

“WE DO TAKE ON BOARD THE OPINIONS OF OUR FANS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME WE BALANCE THAT WITH THE UNIQUE PERSONALITY AND VISION OF EACH EPISODE'S DIRECTOR”

SHINJI HASHIMOTO

the late Eighties to the present day, the Xbox One and PS4 game would be practically unrecognisable to them, given that the common image is a bunch of guys driving around in a car. Yet the open structure, contemporary clothing styles and real-time combat all make sense when you look at how the series has developed over the last three decades. And it doesn't mean the series has doggedly left fantasy behind. Look towards *Final Fantasy XVI* and its gorgeous *Game Of Thrones* meets classic *Final Fantasy* trappings to see the original ethos alive and well – albeit in a *Devil May Cry*-style action game. So, how does Hashimoto see the series now it has flown past its 35th anniversary? "I really could not even begin to talk about the series without mentioning the sheer passion and ability of all the talented creators that have worked on *Final Fantasy* over its lifetime," he says, crediting the developers. Although it can be debated which elements have most heavily driven the success of the series, for Hashimoto there's no individual unique selling point. "I think that one of *Final Fantasy*'s biggest strengths is that sheer energy that comes through when you combine all the different elements together: the characters, the story, CG and music etc." Indeed, while *Final Fantasy* has adapted to changing tastes over the years, the desire for it to be at the forefront of the Japanese RPG market has never wavered. "The *Final Fantasy* series will continue to be a hungry contender, always taking on new challenges and pushing for the top. Nobody knows what the future holds but I think that the series will continue to produce unique and imaginative games," Hashimoto concludes. Given the experiences that philosophy has produced over the last 35 years, we'll definitely be keeping our eyes on *Final Fantasy* over the years to come. ★





With almost 40 years of history behind it, Ys is an elder statesman of the Japanese RPG scene – but it's not nearly as well-known as some of its contemporaries. Nick Thorpe speaks to Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo to discover its complete history...

**W**e occasionally have a problem with RPGs here on Retro Gamer, and we're sure many of our readers can relate to it. As adults, sometimes

it's just hard to juggle work, life and the latest epic adventure. We don't want to avoid them, but we do sometimes find ourselves wondering if we'll see them through to the end, such is the trend towards large and complex games in the genre. Thankfully, we're not the only ones who have struggled like this, and it's not a new problem – and that's why Nihon Falcom chose to develop Ys, a different kind of RPG.

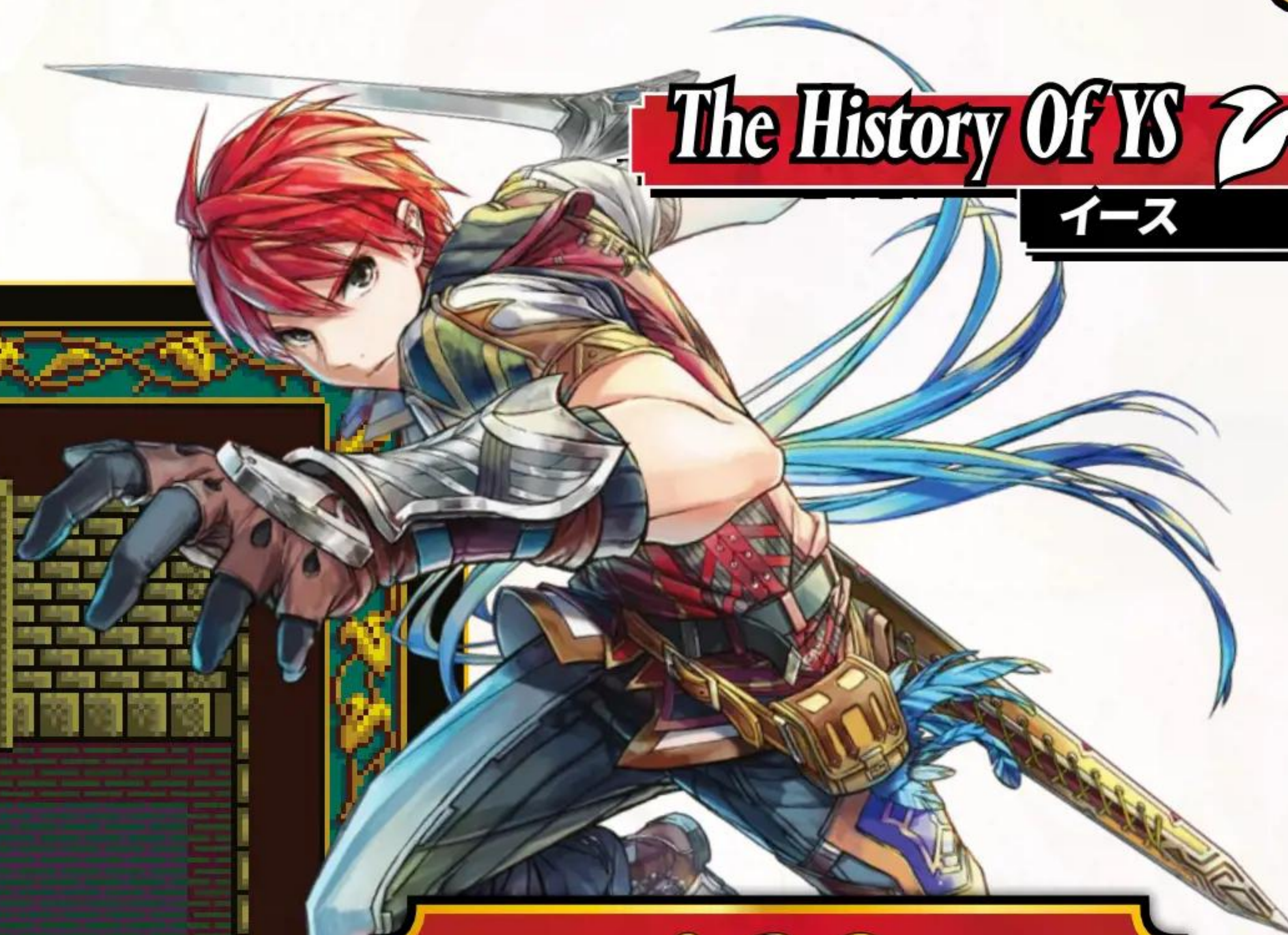
Falcom had already had a major RPG hit in Japan in 1984 with *Dragon Slayer*, an action-RPG for a variety of Japanese computer systems. The following years saw the company follow up with *Dragon Slayer II: Xanadu*, *Xanadu Scenario II: The Resurrection Of Dragon* and *Dragon Slayer Jr: Romancia*. *Romancia* is particularly interesting, as it was an attempt at simplifying the genre,

featuring just one attack button, no customisation and very few statistics.

This philosophy of simplifying the RPG carried forward to Ys. In an interview for the book *Challenge!! Personal Computer AVG & RPG III*, programmer Masaya Hashimoto explained that Ys was created with a desire to make an accessible game that wasn't aimed at hardcore RPG fans. There was a conscious effort to avoid lengthy level grinding processes, and players were allowed to save anywhere to avoid losing progress. However, the biggest simplification was the use of the 'bump' combat system. When playing Ys, you never need to hit an attack button – you simply run your character into an enemy to deal damage, preferably slightly to the left or right rather than head-on.

The bump system was a huge key to the early appeal of the series, as we're told by Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo. "You can blow through enemies really quickly, and it's really fun," he begins. "Practically





## WHO IS ADOL CHRISTIN?

Toshihiro Kondo explains how Falcom develops the hero at the heart of Ys

The first rule of writing for Adol Christin is that you don't write for Adol Christin. The character has a number of key traits – his red hair, his friendship with Dogi, and his terrible luck with boats – but the most important one is that he doesn't speak, and that's a conscious choice. "Just so you know, within the company there have been many times when people have said, 'Let's drop this and have him talk,'" says Kondo. "When I first started taking over the Ys series, what I was told is that the reason Adol doesn't speak is because he is an avatar for the player. The instant Adol talks, the player takes on a very passive role because the player is essentially being spoken to."

"The difficult part is that we don't necessarily know who Adol is either," Kondo continues. Where the creators behind other such long-lived characters might have a wealth of dialogue to refer to when looking to confirm a character's values or motivations, Falcom has no such luxury. "Sometimes when we're creating the game we have to think, 'What is he thinking?' or, 'How would he respond to this situation?' because we don't necessarily know." However, there are some basic traits that Adol has – or at least, that he's expected to have. "Even though Adol might not speak, he definitely has a personality or characteristics that make him Adol," Kondo confirms. "For one thing, we know that he's a nice person. We know that he has pretty good luck with the ladies, as it were! But the interesting thing about these characteristics is that they're things that the fans have attributed to Adol, not something that Falcom put into him."

As a result, Adol's character is something of a collaborative work – even though his portrayals all come from a single source, he's subject to many interpretations. "Something I often say about the character of Adol is that he's similar to historical public domain characters," Kondo muses, "in that there's these characters that exist in history that we look at from our perspective and have an idea of who they were and what they did, that might be at odds with what actually happened from a historical perspective. Adol is similar to that in that people have attributed things to Adol that might not necessarily have happened or been intended. That's a really special thing – not every character is able to have that kind of background."



H.P 060/070 EXP 01130/01300 GOLD 0981  
PLAYER



H.P 085/085 EXP 00820/00400 GOLD 00268  
PLAYER  
ENEMY

» [PC-8801] Ys took advantage of the high-resolution modes of early Japanese computers to simulate a high colour palette.

everybody who plays the game brings that up and says how much fun it is to blast through enemies. The people who came before me at Falcom told me, when I first started working on the Ys games, 'You know the feeling of popping bubble wrap? It feels really good and you can't stop. That's the way Ys should be.'" Indeed, that's a lot of what players will do until they discover the main thrust of the game – guiding hero Adol Christin to gather the six books of Ys, following a doomsday prophecy from Esteria's local seer, Sara.

Of course, the team also had challenges to contend with. One of the biggest was the small size of the characters – Hashimoto found that he was unable to enhance storytelling with the use of facial expressions and designer Ayano Koshiro had wanted to make them larger, but it wasn't possible within the framework that had been built. Map design also proved problematic, as the perspective that had been adopted meant that it was impossible to display doors leading to the east or west. Somehow, all of these were overcome and the game was completed in just five months.

Ys: Ancient Ys Vanished launched for the NEC PC-8801 in June 1987, and ports for other popular Japanese computers followed throughout 1987. The game was a hit and made its way to the Famicom and Sega Mark III in 1988, and the latter version was translated for English-speaking Master System owners, giving Ys its first exposure outside of Japan. The game then appeared on computers in North America thanks

to the Kyodai publishing partnership. Critical reception was positive – *Computer & Video Games* awarded the Master System version 92%, with Julian Rignall describing it as "massive and thoroughly engrossing", while *The Games Machine* compared it favourably to *The Legend Of Zelda* in a 90% review.

Ys II quickly followed in 1988, and was a direct sequel to the first game which used much of the same technology, though it did offer improved graphics. The plot followed immediately from the ending of the original game and followed Adol's journey to the floating land of Ys. The big change in this game was the addition of a magic system, with a number of spells available, including a fire spell which was essential to defeating most bosses. Despite the critical acclaim received by the first game, *Ys II: Ancient Ys Vanished – The Final Chapter* didn't receive an international release in its standalone form. It was instead introduced to English-speaking audiences as part of the PC Engine game *Ys I & II*, a key driver of TurboGrafx CD sales in North America and the first release to adopt the now-common practice of combining the first two Ys games. The two games are now so closely linked that they even placed as a single entry in *Famitsu* readers' top 100 games ranking in 2006.



» [PC Engine] Ys III: Wanderers From Ys switched to the side-scrolling perspective you see here, and brought more complex combat with it.



# TRANSLATING THE BOOK OF YS

Let's take a look at the many formats that the first book of Ys was translated for...



## NEC PC-8801 1987

■ This is the original version of Ys, and the one most other Japanese computer versions are based on. The game makes use of a high-resolution 640x200 screen mode and somewhat jerky character-based scrolling. The soundtrack is a thing of beauty, and it set the bar high until the CD versions arrived.

## SHARP X1 1987

■ This is visually identical to the PC-88 version, save for slightly smaller numbers in the HUD. The main compromise here is the soundtrack, which has been pared back to just a few PSG channels. Falcom was accused of laziness by fans, but it was very clearly limited by the hardware.



## FUJITSU FM-7 1987

■ If nothing else, the Fujitsu FM-7 version of Ys shows off Falcom's incredible porting prowess – it looks like the other Japanese computer versions and runs just as well. The music is a step above the Sharp X1 version, but it doesn't quite reach the heights of the FM-enabled NEC versions.

## NEC PC-98 1987

■ This is basically identical to the PC-88 version... if you have the expansion sound board. If you don't, you'll lose a lot of the amazing soundtrack – beeper renditions of just two tracks are included, and to be honest, they probably shouldn't have been, because they are pretty weak.



## MSX2 1987

■ The graphics have been redrawn for this version of the game as the MSX2 offered superior colour handling, alongside a lower resolution, than the Japanese computers it was competing with. The PSG soundtrack is serviceable, but not as rich as the NEC, FM-77AV or Apple IIGS versions.

## FAMICOM 1988

■ The first home console version of Ys makes some pretty substantial changes to the game's overall design, revising a number of maps, adding a whole extra quest and increasing the overall speed. There's also smooth scrolling here, which isn't featured in any of the home computer versions.



## MASTER SYSTEM 1988

■ The first English-language version of Ys to be released is pretty good. It features smooth scrolling and a decent pace of play. Some weird renaming of characters has gone on, though – in particular: why is Adol suddenly called Aron? The Japanese version also supports the FM sound module.

## PC (DOS) 1989

■ This version was re-translated by the trans-Pacific publishing outfit Kyodai. It offers graphics that have been redrawn at a lower resolution than the Japanese computer releases, and there's a beeper rendition of the soundtrack. It's still enjoyable, but poor compared to other versions.



## SHARP X68000 1991

■ This version of Ys received a full overhaul, with all-new graphics (including some decidedly odd realistic character portraits) and revised maps. The town of Minea is now much bigger than the original, and a lot busier, but the field is considerably smaller. The soundtrack is well represented here.



## SATURN 1997

■ Appearing as part of the *Falcom Classics* compilation, this version features redrawn graphics and a new arrangement of the soundtrack. Better yet, Adol can finally dash and move diagonally. This one depends on your tastes – the sprite work is nice but the colours are drab compared to other releases.

## PC (WINDOWS) 1997

■ *Ys Eternal* is a full remake, featuring new and expanded areas, greater story depth, and the ability to choose a difficulty mode. Very attractive high-resolution sprites replace the old artwork, and there's a newly arranged soundtrack alongside the original. This version forms the basis of all subsequent releases.



## PC ENGINE 1989

■ This particular version was the first to include both *Ys I* and *Ys II* as part of the same package, and was considered a real killer app at the time. The game has been rebalanced and some nice new character portraits are shown on the screen, but it's the voice acting and CD sound that steal the show here.



## PS2 2003

■ *Ys Eternal Story* takes the PC game *Ys Complete* as a base, however it adds a combo system to combat, granting progressive bonuses as long as Adol doesn't take damage. Voice acting is added to the game, and you can choose to play *Ys* and *Ys II* together as a single experience.

## DS 2008

■ In *Legacy Of Ys: Books I & II*, 2D sprites are used against 3D backgrounds (all of which are still based on *Ys Complete*), and Adol must attack manually by pressing a button unless you're using the new stylus controls. There's also an extra area included in this version, with a new boss and equipment.



## PSP 2009

■ Owners of Sony's portable system were treated to another updated version of *Ys I & II Eternal* in the form of *Ys I & II Chronicles*. This revision enhanced things with some new character artwork and another new arrangement of the soundtrack, but the older versions can still be selected.

## PC (WINDOWS) 2013

■ *Ys I & II Chronicles+* is the most current version available on PC, which has all of the lovely features of the PSP version and adds a variety of achievements. If you own one of the prior versions based on *Ys I & II Eternal*, it's an almost inconsequential upgrade. Still, it's the easiest way to play *Ys* today.







## FUJITSU FM-77AV 1987

■ The FM-77AV version of Ys is completely identical to the FM-7 version, with the exception of improved audio that brings the game to parity with the NEC versions. If you can't find this particular version, the computer will, of course, run the standard Fujitsu FM-7 version of the game just fine, too.



## APPLE IIGS 1989

■ Apple owners get a massive one over on their PC-owning cousins when it comes to Ys. The Apple IIGS version looks practically identical to the DOS version and it runs just as well, but the sound is absolutely worlds apart, making this version of Ys easily the better choice of these two versions.



## PC (WINDOWS) 2001

■ Ys Complete is a relatively small revision which adds an FMV intro, some revisions to the graphics and wholly rewritten dialogue. All characters now have names and biographies, too. When you complete the game, a Time Attack mode is unlocked.

» [SNES] Ys V doesn't carry the characteristic Ys style, looking much like any other SNES RPG. The desert setting is new, though.

**“When I first started, I died really early, and I can remember thinking, ‘Man, this game is hard’”**

Toshihiro Kondo

► If the first two Ys games are notable for their similarity, the third is notable for how it departs from the initial games. “Ys III, unlike Ys I & II, is a side-scrolling game. When I first started, I died really early, and I can remember thinking, ‘Man, this game is hard!’ I’d been told that the Ys games were friendly to newcomers and beginners, but I didn’t end up feeling that way at all,” recalls Kondo. Indeed, Ys III: Wanderers From Ys took the game mechanics from the previous games wholesale, and simply translated them into a platformer-style format akin to the Wonder Boy games and Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link. This necessitated the inclusion of an attack button for the first time, as ‘bump’ combat was no longer possible.

Having resolved the problems of Esteria in the first two games, Adol chose to travel with his new friend Dogi in Ys III. The pair went to Dogi’s homeland of Felghana, where the townspeople were being threatened by soldiers from Valestein Castle. Lord MacGuire was scheming to acquire a set of mysterious statues, and would seemingly stop at nothing to get them – so naturally, Adol felt the need to step in.

Ys III: Wanderers From Ys appeared on NEC computers in 1989, and soon followed to a wide variety of console formats including English versions for the PC Engine CD, Mega Drive and SNES. While it isn’t a terrible game, Ys III is considered to be something of a black sheep of the series, largely due to the move away from the top-down perspective. However, Mieko Ishikawa’s soundtrack is considered to be one of the very best in a series renowned for great soundtracks. A faithful side-scrolling remake with rebalanced gameplay and high-resolution 2D graphics was released for PS2 in 2005, but sadly only in Japan. That isn’t the end of the story for Ys III, as we’ll discover later, but the game did mark the point at which the series took an extended leave of absence from Western markets.

Ys IV appeared on the PC Engine CD and SNES, and was a confusing project, as Kondo can attest: “One thing I remember vividly from this time is wondering, ‘Why are there two versions of this game?’ What I learned when I entered the company is that Falcom is not a large company. We only had the resources to



» [SNES] Every version of Ys IV is very different, but Mask Of The Sun was the one closest to Falcom’s original intentions.

come up with the game design document, then give that to somebody else.” Hudson Soft took charge of Ys IV: The Dawn Of Ys on PC Engine, and Tonkin House developed Ys IV: Mask Of The Sun for the SNES.

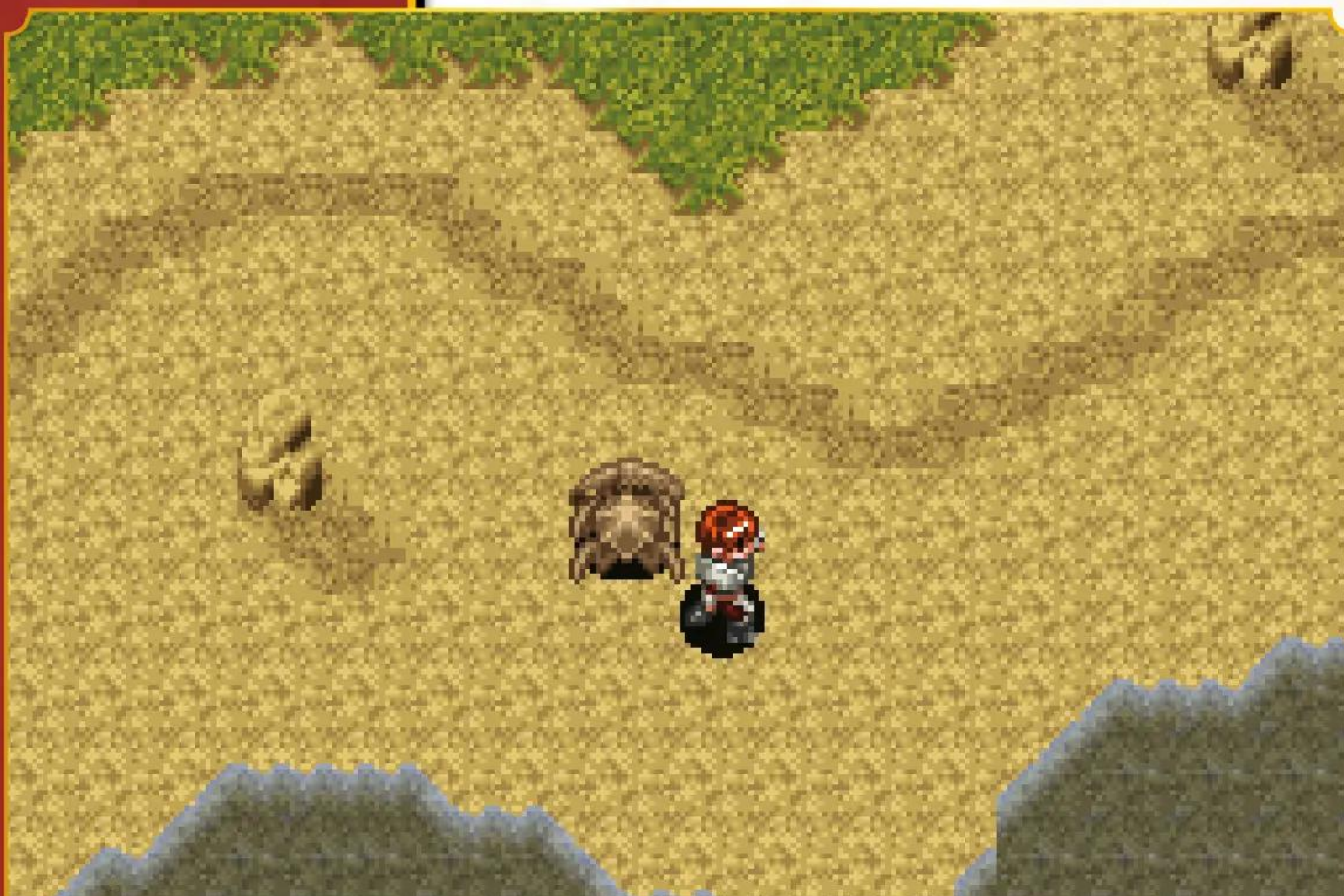
The two games turned out to be quite different, but they did both return to the top-down perspective. “[With Ys III] people were happy that a new Ys came out, but by that point they associated Ys with the ‘bump’ system. The fact that we returned to that perspective was something that fans were really happy about,” says Kondo. The Dawn Of Ys reverted to the system used in Ys II, while Mask Of The Sun revised the magic system by including the likes of harnessing elemental swords as a means of casting spells.

**The two games also shared a plot and setting, with Adol making a journey to Celceta, where he first encounters the deadly forces of the Romun Empire.**

However, the two games differ on a number of key points, and fans have their own views on which is better – fans of The Dawn Of Ys contend that it is more enjoyable to play, while those who champion Mask Of The Sun note that the plot was closer to Falcom’s design document. However, the two were able to exist side by side. “One of the cool things about having multiple versions of the same game is the fan reaction, in that all of the Ys games are purported to be Adol’s journals, and we as the players are reading through them,” Kondo explains. “The fan theory was, ‘Maybe they’re just different translations of the source material?’ So the fans took care of it, creating a solution.”

The final Ys game of the Nineties was Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand. Ys V chronicled Adol’s first adventure on the continent of Afroca, where he searched the Xandria region for the mythical lost city of Kefin. This was Falcom’s first attempt at developing a Ys game for home consoles, and a game which sought to add more involvement to the combat element of the game. The ‘bump’ system was abandoned for good in favour of a more traditional setup – attacks required the player to press an action button, and you could also jump and even actively defend with your shield. The traditional visuals were also abandoned, with characters given more realistic proportions compared to the cartoonish characters of earlier games.

The transition to console development might not have gone as smoothly as Falcom had hoped, as





## BONUS CHAPTERS

Ys has given birth to a few spin-offs over the years – let's take a look at them



### YS STRATEGY 2006

Released exclusively for the Nintendo DS in Japan and Europe, this game brings real-time strategy to the Ys series. On the surface, this isn't a bad idea, but problems soon arise – the touchscreen interface works well in place of a mouse, but the hardware struggles with large battle scenes, and the game generally lacks the pace required of a portable game. It's a decent RTS game for the format, but that's largely due to lack of competition.



### YS ONLINE 2007

This relatively standard MMORPG was launched at a time when every RPG franchise with any heritage was being snapped up for the MMO treatment. Korean developer CJ Internet tackled development and turned in a game rich in Ys lore but short on distinguishing features. The game never made it out of beta in Europe, and by 2012 the last remaining servers in Taiwan were shut down for good, making this a dead game.



### YS VS SORA NO KISEKI: ALTERNATIVE SAGA 2010

This spin-off pits the heroes of Ys Seven (and older characters, as assistants) against the characters of Falcom's popular Trails series of RPGs. Combat is based on Ys Seven and though it's often described as being similar to Super Smash Bros, it's closer in style to Capcom's Power Stone series. This is the best of the Ys spin-offs, but it was only released in Japan.



Ys V was quickly succeeded by Ys V Expert in early 1996, just a few months after the original was released in December 1995. The game had been criticised for its lack of difficulty, resulting in this second release. Neither game is amongst the top tier of action RPG games for the SNES, and at present, Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand remains the only chapter of the story without an official English translation. It was also the last brand-new Ys game for eight years.

What was it that stopped the flow of new games after Ys V? "This is only speculation, but I believe that there was nobody at Falcom championing the game, to say, 'I want to make the next Ys,'" Kondo reveals to us. But by that point, Ys was already considered to be a heritage series in its home of Japan, and even a lack of new games couldn't keep the series off the shelves. "The thing about Ys is that it's a milestone in Japanese game development history and it's a game series that nobody doesn't know about," the president explains. "For the people that entered the company around the same time I did, all of them probably entered with an affection towards the series. When I first entered the company, what I did for a while was to create remakes of the old Ys games."

When the Ys series reached its tenth birthday in 1997, the first two games were remade in the form of Ys I & II Eternal. This kicked off a major project of remaking and updating the older Ys games for modern platforms – not only would Ys I & II Eternal be continuously updated and revised, but external developers gave Ys III an enhanced 2D remake, and both Ys IV: Mask Of The Sun and Ys V: Lost Kefin, Kingdom Of Sand received full 3D remakes. The third and fourth games have since been internally remade again, resulting in Ys: The Oath In Felghana and Ys: Memories Of Celceta.

While most companies have embraced making their back catalogues available in some form, few have shown such commitment to modernising their classic releases. "The thing I was told is that a great movie is a great movie, no matter when it was made, and you can do the same thing with games," responds Kondo when asked about the philosophy behind this approach. "The content of these games, the core of what made them good, is still there. Because of that, we can remake

## TIMELINE

All the main games, major remakes and spin-offs in one handy list



YS I: ANCIENT YS VANISHED

1987



YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS

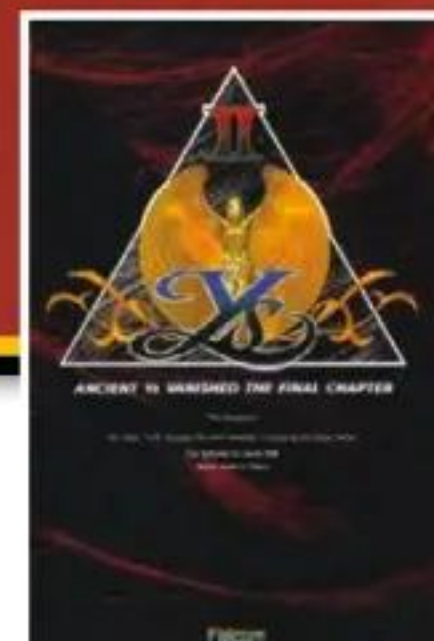
1988



YS IV: MASK OF THE SUN

1993

YS II: ANCIENT YS VANISHED – THE FINAL CHAPTER



YS I & II



YS IV: THE DAWN OF YS





**“I was told is that a great movie is a great movie, no matter when it was made, and you can do the same thing with games”**

Toshihiro Kondo



» [PC] Moving into 3D with *Ys VI: The Ark Of Napishtim* put an end to the bump system, but combat remained simple and satisfying.

them. That way the person who wants to play again can do it, but because it's modernised and updated for new hardware, that allows new fans to get into the series – and that's also important.”

According to Kondo, it was tackling these remakes that gave the team the sense of ownership needed to finally push the *Ys* series into the future. “As a matter of course, during making these remakes, the team gained a feeling that, ‘We want to make a new one too, we want to see what Adol's next adventure is,’” he explains. “We'd just made *Ys I & II Eternal*, and we were told, ‘Okay, it's time to make *Ys III Eternal*!’ And we said, ‘No, we've accumulated a lot of knowledge of game development and design – let us make *Ys VI*, please.’ We were finally able to convince the founder to allow us to do that, and that's where *Ys VI* came from. So this was a natural progression of working on the series, and my team was the one which took on *Ys VI*.”

*Ys VI: The Ark Of Napishtim* took Adol to the furthest reaches of the *Ys* universe seen so far, the Canaan Islands, where he awakens after being attacked by Romun ships. It also introduced a new graphical style, featuring 3D environments and pre-rendered 2D sprites, and retained the more involved combat of *Ys V*. The game was initially released for PC in 2003, and Konami picked it up for a PS2 release in 2005 – bringing the series back outside of Japan in the process. Reception to the game was mixed, but broadly positive. Eurogamer offered it 6/10, noting that it had “really quite nice graphics, lovely artwork in parts and fantastic music”, but complaining that “it's hard to escape just how old-fashioned some of the game mechanics seem to be”. This didn't matter, as the return of *Ys* quickly picked up into overdrive.

By the mid-Noughties, the *Ys* series was as active as it had been at its peak in the late Eighties. This led

to the first ever prequel in the series, 2006's *Ys Origin*. As it was set centuries before the events of the original game, Adol doesn't star in the game – instead, you can choose between three characters with their own combat styles. The plot concerned the original battle between the land of *Ys* and demonic forces. The twin goddesses Reah and Feena had disappeared from *Ys* and returned to the surface, having seemingly gone to Darm Tower. Convinced that *Ys* would not survive without the goddesses, the six priests of *Ys* organised a search party to find them, and that's where the player comes in. The game was a PC exclusive for over a decade before coming to PlayStation Vita and PS4 in 2017, and the game received a better critical reception than its predecessor.

**H**owever, it's unlikely that we'll see a game like *Ys Origin* any time soon. “*Ys I & II* are iconic games and *Ys Origin* was a love letter to them, so I'd like to make *Ys Origin II* and continue that story because I really like exploring that aspect of the lore,” Kondo admits. “However, the general consensus in the company is ‘let's do something new’ so I don't know if or when I'll have time to do it again. Of course, the setting of the *Ys* lore is that there are over 100 of Adol's journals, and we're only at eight, so we need to get going!”

Indeed, the next Falcom-developed game in the series was the next numbered instalment, simply titled *Ys Seven*. This was the first game in the series to be

developed primarily for a handheld system, as it made its debut on the PSP in 2009. Adol and Dogi travel together once more, this time visiting Altago, where earthquakes have been disturbing the population. However, the fact that Adol wasn't travelling alone would become significant beyond plot points for the first time, as he is accompanied by other party members. “When developing for consumer systems, we needed to keep the whole screen lively, and that's what led to the party system,” Kondo explains. “Adol is obviously the focal point, but you have other characters on the screen doing other things as well to create this really vibrant, interesting look.” *Ys Seven* was well-liked by the press thanks to its addictive combat, with an 8/10 score from *games™* broadly representative of its reception.

*Ys VIII: Lacrimosa Of Dana*, released for PlayStation Vita in 2016 in Japan, and worldwide for Vita and PS4 in 2017 placed a broader emphasis on other characters than any *Ys* game before, in particular thanks to a new character called Dana, a mysterious girl who appears in Adol's dreams. “Adol has been the main character, and for 30 years we've been seeing things from his perspective,” explains Kondo. “The big focal point when developing *Ys VIII* was how to overcome this problem, if you can call it a problem. So the solution



» [PSP] Many of Adol's adventures begin with some kind of accident at sea, leading to Dogi's playful jab here.



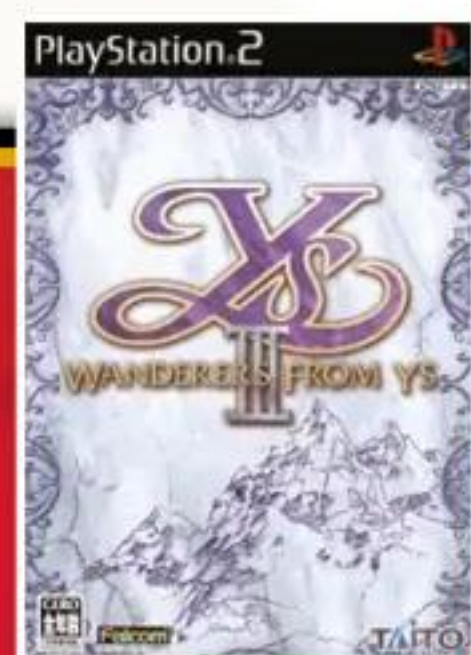
**YS V: LOST KEFIN, KINGDOM OF SAND**

1995



**YS VI: THE ARK OF NAPISTIM**

1997



**YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS (PS2)**

2003



**YS STRATEGY**

2005



**YS V: LOST KEFIN, KINGDOM OF SAND (PS2)**

2006



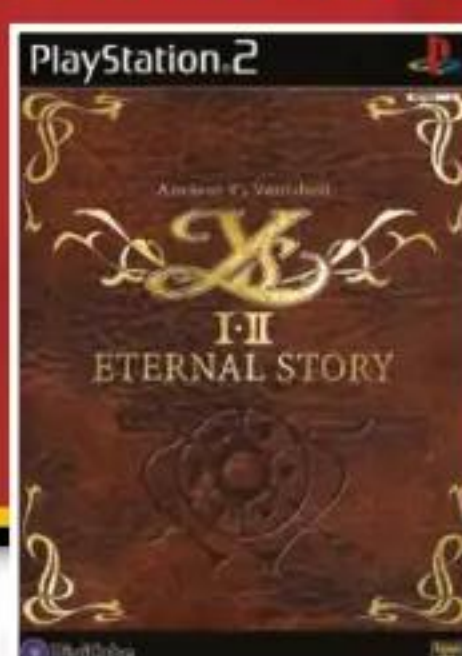
**YS SEVEN**

2007



**YS IX: MONSTRUM NOX**

2009



**YS I & II ETERNAL**

2016



**YS: THE OATH IN FELGHANA**

2017



**YS IV: MASK OF THE SUN – A NEW THEORY**

2018



**YS ORIGIN**

2019



**YS ONLINE: THE CALL OF SOLUM**

2020



**YS VIII: LACRIMOSA OF DANA**

2021



**YS X: NORDICS**

2023





**“We needed to keep the whole screen lively, and that’s what led to the party system”**

Toshihiro Kondo

► was to have sequences in the game where Adol is dreaming, and seeing the world through somebody else’s eyes. That allows us to do something new with the perspective while still being faithful to the idea that this is Adol’s story.”

**B**ut Dana isn’t the only other character who matters in *Ys VIII*. “Up until now, it’s been Adol’s tale by himself,” says Kondo. “In *Ys VIII*, you’re on a passenger liner that sinks, and Adol has to find the rest of the passengers so you get to see all of them and their stories. The amount of people that are involved in the story and have their own arcs through it is much greater than in previous *Ys* games.” This plays into the game design in the form of side quests too, according to Kondo. “Because you’re searching for companions who were with you on the boat, in addition you’re on a deserted island that you’re mapping, so when you find these people, they come together and build a village, and you’re able to grow that village throughout the course of the game.”

Two more mainline *Ys* games followed in *Lacrimosa Of Dana’s* wake, signalling to the world that Adol’s journalling is far from over. *Ys IX: Monstrum Nox* arrived in 2019 with a larger focus on exploration and introduced traversal enhancements in the form of Monstrum Gifts. The latest title, *Ys X: Nordics*, meanwhile, paired Adol with a seafaring Norman, Karja Balta, and added sailing and ship combat.

Despite the ups and downs of Falcom itself and a lengthy period outside of the international spotlight, the *Ys* series has endured because it maintains its status as an approachable entry point to the Japanese RPG scene. With easy-to-learn combat and self-contained stories, it’s not hard to jump into a *Ys* game – yet for the long-term fan there’s plenty of interesting lore to discover, and depth to the combat systems that ensures that they remain satisfying over the whole course of the game. That satisfying feeling of popping bubble wrap has never gone away – and so long as it remains a fixture of the *Ys* series, the *Ys* series will remain a fixture of videogaming. ★



## THE WORLD OF YS

Adol’s adventurous nature means that he rarely stays in one place for too long – just check out the locations he’s explored



### VORTEX OF CANAAN

#### YS VI: THE ARK OF NAPISTIM

■ Within this dangerous storm lies the Canaan Islands, a civilisation cut off from the rest of the world. Pirates have long been interested in rumours of treasure here.



### YS

#### YS II: ANCIENT YS VANISHED – THE FINAL CHAPTER, YS I & II

■ The floating land is the setting for the second game. According to *Ys Origin*, it was raised from the ground to guard against demonic attacks.



*The Vortex of Canaan*



### CELCETA

#### YS IV: MASK OF THE SUN, YS IV: THE DAWN OF YS, YS: MEMORIES OF CELCETA

■ Dense forests cover this land, which is officially claimed by the Romun Empire. Most of the settlements in Celceta are so isolated that there is no de facto Romun control.

» [PS4] Later games allow you to partner with other characters, and even experience their unique combat styles for yourself.





H.P. 035/035 EXP 00205/00250 GOLD 00320

PLAYER

ENEMY

## ESTERIA

YS I: ANCIENT YS VANISHED, YS I & II

■ Located in the French-inspired region of Gllia, access to Esteria by sea is blocked by a permanent storm, which Adol miraculously survives at the beginning of the game.



PLAYER

ENEMY

HP 020 EXP 00000 RING 000 GOLD 00100

## FELGHANA

YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS, YS: THE OATH IN FELGHANA

■ Dogi's home is much like the man himself: mountainous. Because of this, it's an area that is isolated from much of the continent.

# The Cnesia Continent



## ALTAGO

YS SEVEN

■ Though rich and varied in its geography, Altago's unique distinction is having 'Dragon Energy' flowing through everything that's living and non-living.

## SEIREN ISLAND

YS VIII: LACRIMOSA OF DANA

■ Located off the coast of Greek, these islands are said to be a place where ships go missing. Adol winds up shipwrecked here after an all-too-predictable mishap at sea.

## XANDRIA

YS V: LOST KEFIN, KINGDOM OF SAND

■ Drought blights this formerly prosperous land, with much of the formerly verdant area turning to desert. Rumour has it that a lost city was once here too...

# The Afroca Continent



# PHANTAS





# PHANTASY STAR

Sega's sci-fi epic was many things – a pioneer of the JRPG, a key release for the genre's popularity in the West and a key reason to own a Master System. Nick Thorpe talks to Yuji Naka to learn how it all came together...



## IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** SEGA  
 » **DEVELOPER:** SEGA  
 » **RELEASED:** 1987  
 » **PLATFORM:**  
 MASTER SYSTEM  
 » **GENRE:** JRPG

**I**t's funny to think that there was a time when the JRPG wasn't a particularly well-defined type of game, but 1987 definitely qualifies.

Most Japanese game designers were still taking their inspiration from Western games such as *Wizardry* and *Ultima*, but Enix's *Dragon Quest* had achieved enormous success on the Famicom – and in doing so, it spurred the development of rival console RPGs and laid the groundwork for the genre as we know it today. On computers, Falcom was developing the first game in the seminal *Ys* series, and the Famicom was to benefit from Square's decision to throw resources behind a project called *Final Fantasy*. Sega couldn't rely on third-party support to ensure that its own Master System console had an RPG though, so it began to put together a team of talented designers to create such a game.

The overall game design was coordinated by Kotaro Hayashida, who had achieved prominence for his work on *Alex Kidd In Miracle World*. He was joined by other

key members of that game's team, too – Rieko Kodama served as the lead artist, while Tokuhiko Uwabo composed the music. Other key staff included Chieko Aoki, who contributed much of the story, and Miki Morimoto who worked on the game design. Kazuyuki Shibata handled monster design, and other graphics were drawn by Koki Sadamori, Takako Kawaguchi, Hitoshi Yoneda and Naoto Ohshima.

In a 1993 interview for the *World Of Phantasy Star* book, Rieko Kodama explained that the programmers were struggling to implement 3D dungeons, and it was this that drove the project's main programmer to join the team. Yuji Naka had built a reputation on handling difficult 8-bit conversions of state-of-the-art arcade games such as *Space Harrier* and *Out Run*, and set about making a 3D wireframe imaging system.

Like many designers in Japan at that time, Naka's RPG experience was defined by Western games. "I'm not sure if it was on the Commodore 64 or the Amiga, but there was a 3D dungeon RPG at the time. The dungeon was shown in a smaller box on the screen, so it wasn't the full screen," remembers the programmer. "I was inspired by that, so I started experimenting on my own with the vision of trying to make a full-screen dungeon, rather than running it in a box. It wasn't necessarily like an RPG, strictly speaking. I wanted it to be a speedy, action-like game. That vision was the beginning of *Phantasy Star*."

The attempt to make a fast game shouldn't be a surprise, given that Naka is famous for both *Sonic The Hedgehog* and his love of Ferraris. However, the initial attempt to do this went wrong in a variety of ways. "The vision was to have a 3D dungeon in full



» [Master System] Towns usually have a variety of shops as well as inhabitants to learn information from.





## A NEW GENERATION

How Sega revitalised its classic for the PlayStation 2 era



During the early Noughties, Sega got particularly serious about revamping its own back catalogue for the PlayStation 2, to the point of setting up a new joint venture with D3 Publisher (named 3D AGES) and a budget label called Sega Ages 2500. The game chosen to launch this new range of games was a remake of *Phantasy Star*, titled *Phantasy Star Generation: 1*, released on 28th August 2003 in Japan only.

The game has been given a facelift, featuring high-resolution (albeit low-budget) 2D visuals and real-time 3D dungeons, as well as depicting multiple monsters and the player characters in battle. The music has also been updated, but the biggest change comes in terms of storytelling. Not only were the characters given more expressive dialogue, but additional illustrated cutscenes gave a greater dramatic flair to proceedings.

The remade game was due to be released in North America by Conspiracy Entertainment as part of the confusingly named *Phantasy Star Trilogy* pack, which was set to contain remakes of *Phantasy Star*, *Phantasy Star II* and *Phantasy Star IV* (the third game was conspicuously absent from Sega's plans). However, the series of remakes finished prematurely with *Phantasy Star Generation: 2* and the compilation was quietly canned. Japanese players instead got to enjoy *Phantasy Star Complete Collection*, an emulated collection of all the Master System, Mega Drive and Game Gear games in the series.

Fortunately for those of us who don't speak Japanese, an English patch for *Phantasy Star Generation: 1* was eventually released via the Phantasy Star Cave website, and there's also a translation for *Phantasy Star Generation: 2*.



► screen rather than in a little box, and I managed to get it running at the speed I had intended. But at the time, I was experimenting. I wasn't mindful about hardware limitations – I was just doing an experimental build," he explains. "I was able to smoothly go down the corridors and do quick turns, but then I experienced motion sickness. This was the first time I'd ever experienced motion sickness." Naka wasn't the only one affected; in *World Of Phantasy Star*, Miki Morimoto compared the dizziness to being drunk.

**Ironically, it was having to be mindful of hardware limitations that fixed the issue.**

"At the time, the limitation was four megs, that was all we could get on a Master System cartridge, and I'd used all of that space to run this thing that I'd built," remembers Naka. "To fit the content in, we had to slow it down, compress and optimise. That fixed the motion sickness, but the game you experienced on release was slower than what the original intention was."

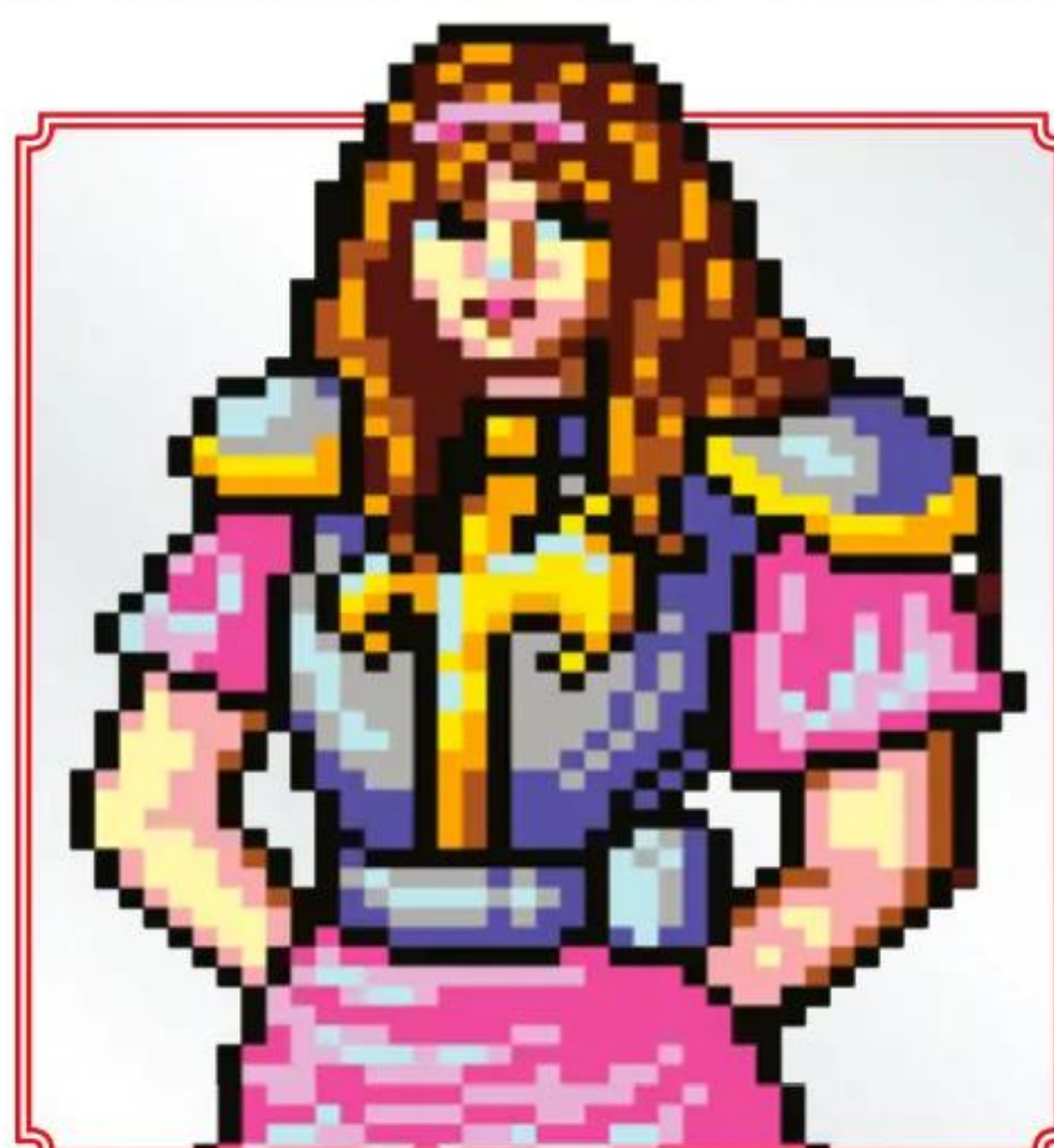
Beyond the incredible full-screen 3D dungeons, the adjustment to a completely different genre wasn't a tough transition for Naka. "RPGs at the time really weren't that hard to make," explains the veteran programmer. "Really, I think action games were a lot harder to make, to make sure that you got the proper feel of the game, and you didn't want the frame rate dropping too much, so to be able



» [Master System] The differing climates of each planet ensure that you're always sure of your location.

## MEET THE STARS

Learn about the heroes and villains of this RPG



### Alis

■ Our heroine, whose brother was cruelly slain by King Lassic's forces. She's headstrong and determined to carry out her brother Nero's dying wish – that she force Lassic from power by killing him. Her quest becomes a prominent part of the series mythology.



### Myau

■ This cat-like chap is not only pretty talkative, in spite of his appearance, he is a surprisingly skilled fighter who sticks by Odin through thick and thin. Of course, this particular trait can land both of them in more hot water than they'd like.



### Odin

■ Odin is your standard issue big muscular warrior, and a long-standing enemy of the tyrannical King Lassic. He and Myau travelled together until Odin tried to fight Medusa, resulting in the hulking warrior being turned completely to stone.



### Noah

■ This somewhat frail and androgynous wizard isn't the easiest guy to get along with, flat-out refusing to provide you with any help until the governor of his home planet Motavia requests it. However, he's worth having around as he's a very powerful magic user.



## “At the time, we didn’t have a lot of games with a female character as the lead”

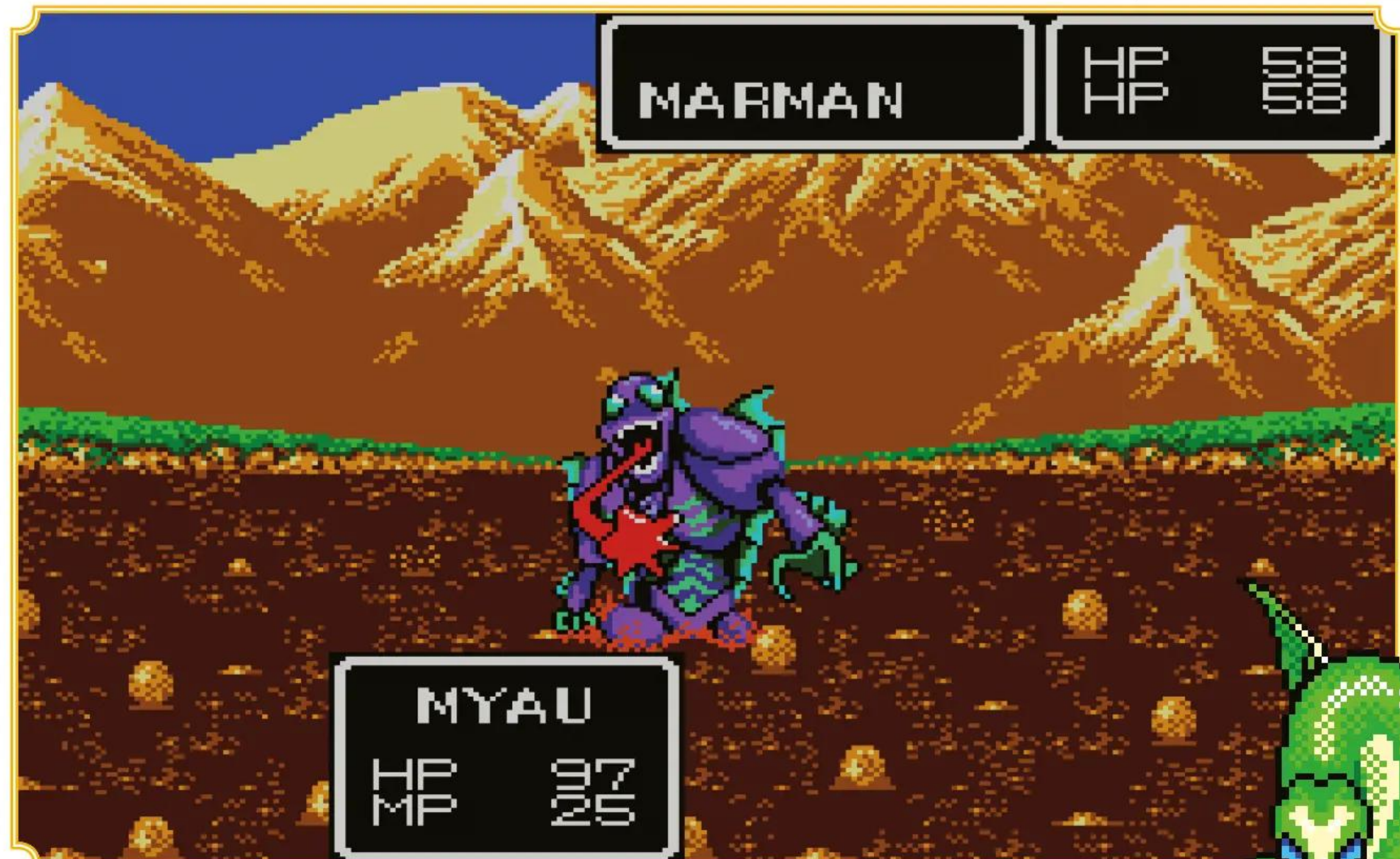
Yuji Naka

to maintain that was a challenge. With action games, I really focused on how the user experience was. With RPGs, there wasn’t such an issue in that sense, so my focus was really on the technical side.” It makes sense – with simple movement around world maps and turn-based, menu-driven combat, having limited hardware wouldn’t prove too much of an issue.

The technical issues proved much more of a headache, with the most notable concerning a problem with the cartridge’s battery-backed RAM save system. “There’s a game called *Dragon Quest* that was popular in Japan at the time. The RAM was broken, and in our game it also was,” recalls Naka. “Due to the hardware noise, the data often got corrupted – when you powered the machine on or off, it caused some kind of interference.” In early previews, it seemed that Sega would get around the problem by offering both battery and password saves, but this feature was scrapped. A far more elegant solution was put into place instead.

“What I did was create a backup of the backup, so you’d get an error message that told you that your data had been corrupted, and after a couple of prompts, you’d get a message saying that your data had been restored,” Naka explains. “I can’t say for certain that it fixed everyone’s problems. But with *Dragon Quest*, because they didn’t have a backup feature, if you’d spent 30 hours plus in the game and for whatever reason the save data was corrupted, that was it. Seeing a message saying that your data had been repaired was a massive relief, and the core fans appreciated it.”

While Naka developed the technology, the story of the game was being derived from Chieko Aoki’s initial ideas. In *World Of Phantasy Star*, Aoki’s former colleagues described her as having a great attachment to the world



» [Master System] Multiple enemies are denoted by the presence of multiple HP bars, but only one is shown.

and story of the game, which she had been working on prior to the call to develop an RPG. As a result of that passion, almost all of the dialogue was already written when the original story draft was put together. Because the whole team shared a single office, Naka remembers the creation of the story well.

**I**t was all done on a huge scale. What we were trying to do was to create something on such a scale in a sci-fi setting, and it was heavily inspired by *Star Wars*,” Naka recalls. Indeed, one of the game’s distinctive features was the decision to mix sci-fi elements with the high fantasy tropes that had been a staple of the genre since *Dungeons & Dragons*. The main cast was clad in traditional armour and used traditional close-quarters weapons, as well as magic. However, the story took place on an interplanetary scale – initially planned for four planets before being cut down to three due to memory constraints – with dome-shaped buildings, advanced vehicles and

futuristic police clearly inspired by the stormtroopers of *Star Wars*.

Despite any external influences, *Phantasy Star* had a distinct identity of its own. “I’m proud that we managed to keep it very original,” says Naka. One of the key differentiating features was the choice of protagonist. “With the first game the main character was a female – at the time, we didn’t have a lot of games with a female character as the main character, which makes it a unique experience.” There was no ambiguity to Alis’ status. She was front and centre on the cover art and it was her quest to avenge her brother Nero’s death that drove the plot of the game, which initially centred on bringing down the tyrannical King Lassic until you learn who or what is actually pulling the strings behind the scenes. Using a female protagonist wasn’t the only unusual choice the team made. While the warrior Odin and wizard Noah are fairly common character designs, Myau represents a major departure from the norm – he’s



### Dr Mad

■ This aptly-named scientist is no friend of PETA – he’s heavily into performing experiments on animals, and he doesn’t mind whether they live or die at the end. With that in mind, you’d be wise not to let him anywhere near Myau.



### Medusa

■ This fearsome creature guards the powerful Laconian Axe, a strong weapon which would be invaluable in your fight against Lassic. Unfortunately, like the Greek legend, Medusa also has a gaze that will turn you to stone, as she did to Odin.



### King Lassic

■ The ruler of the Algol system was once a kind and benevolent leader, but in recent years he has transformed into a cruel and ruthless dictator, crushing all resistance with his signature robotic cops. His change of attitude is unexplained, making him your first target.



### Dark Falz

■ The embodiment of pure evil itself, Dark Falz rarely reveals itself outright, preferring to blend into society by possessing the powerful in order to do its bidding. This abominable creature would become the primary antagonist throughout the *Phantasy Star* series.





# HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO ALGOL

Key places to visit as you travel around Phantasy Star's galaxy

## Palma

■ Alis' home planet is much like Earth, with vast bodies of water and distinct island continents. It's highly developed by the standards of Algol, with many towns to visit and relatively little obstructive terrain.

## Medusa's Tower

■ This is where to head if you want to take revenge on the beast for turning poor Odin to stone, just don't forget your Mirror Shield – it's essential!

## Naula Cave

■ This cave is home to the world's least conveniently located cake shop – it's many floors down and you've got to survive countless monster attacks to reach it.

## Camineet

■ This is Alis' home town, and the scene of Nero's murder. Friendly faces here will aid you, including Suelo, who offers essential free healing at her house.

## Maharu Cave

■ Noah has exiled himself here to train his magical powers, and it's where you'll recruit him – but only if you can prove the governor's interest in your quest.

## Antlion Fields

■ If you try to cross these places by foot, you'll be attacked. In order to access the rest of the planet, you'll need the Land Master vehicle to drive over them.

## Paseo

■ The largest town on Motavia is home to the governor, and it's where you'll meet Myau – your first party member, who you trade for some pottery (really).

## Motavia

■ This desert planet isn't tremendously hospitable to humans, being home to enormous antlion colonies that make travel difficult, although native Motavians are friendly. Settlements are clustered around the few fertile areas of the planet.

## Ice Plains

■ Enormous formations of ice make the tower here completely inaccessible until you've obtained the awesome Ice Digger vehicle.

## Dezoris

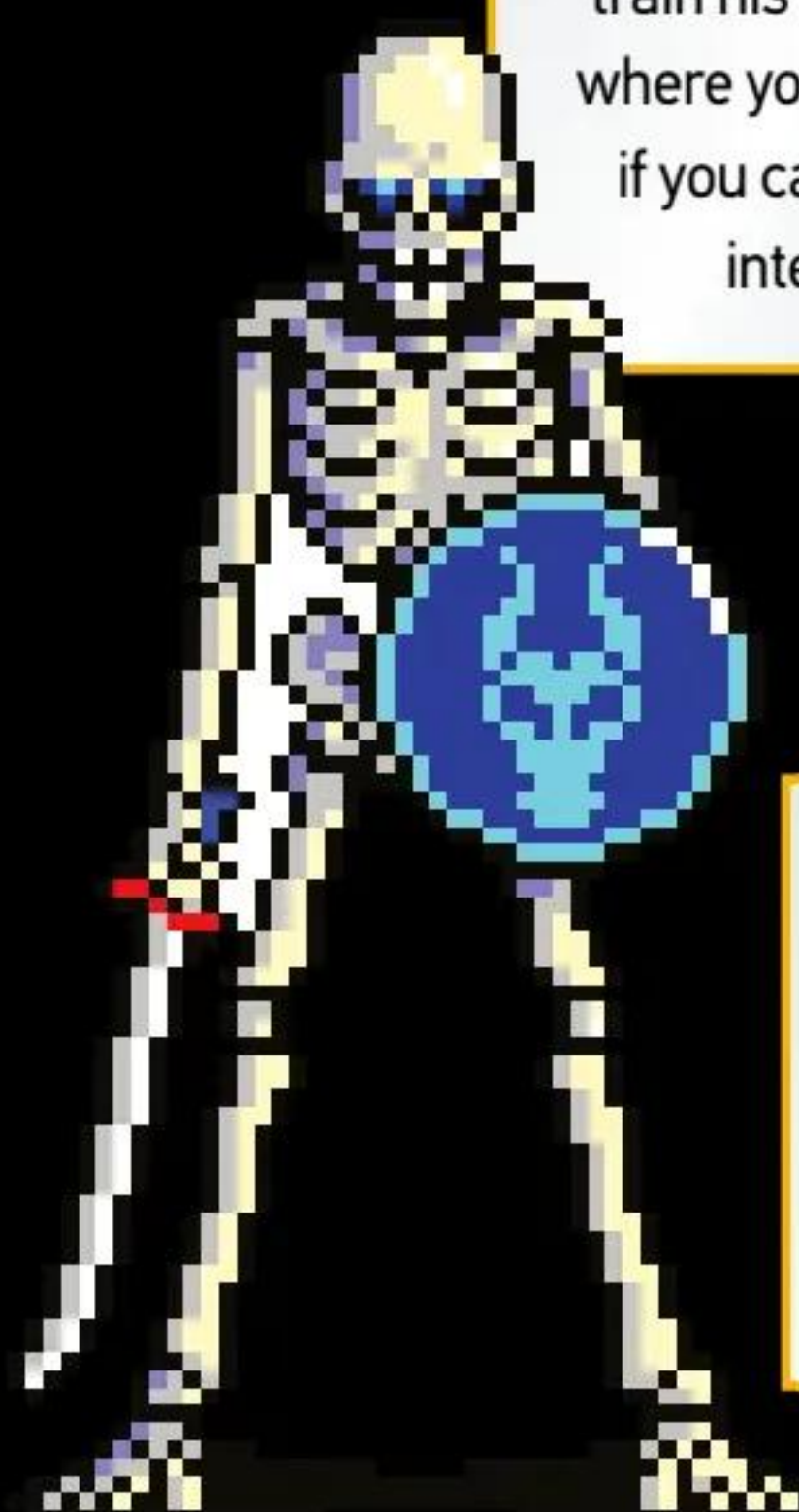
■ If you're planning a visit here, be sure to wrap up warm and bring a lot of money. Mountains and forests make travel a chore, and you'll need to buy an Ice Digger to smash through to the planet's furthest reaches.

## Twintown

■ Everyone on the left half of town claims that the right are liars, and vice versa. It's up to you to learn which Dezorians are peddling alternative facts!

## Skure

■ The only Palman immigrant town on Dezoris is worth visiting for both the Wand and the Laser Gun, two very useful pieces of equipment.







## LOST IN TRANSLATION

Why did fans translate this game into English a second time?

As the first Japanese RPG to gain prominence in the West, *Phantasy Star*'s localisation was pioneering, but far from perfect. Part of the problem was that the game was designed to display Japanese characters, and rather than reprogramming the game to allow for the greater number of characters that an English translation would ideally require, the localisation programmers truncated the script to fit the engine. You can see this in menu items like 'ATTK' – a word for which four characters are sufficient in Japanese but not English.

As a result, a team of programmers from SMS Power got together to retranslate the original game into English, and released their efforts in 2008. The engine was modified to better suit English text, featuring more lines of dialogue per screen for a more nuanced translation. Additionally, the re-translation undoes some localisation changes (Odin and Noah are known as Tylon and Lutz here), and restores the enhanced FM soundtrack that was cut from the Western game.



» [Master System] A stern warning is given in the original translation of the game.



and the team did achieve. "With *Phantasy Star*, it's a project that's dear to my heart but we were always so busy with other projects – for example, *Sonic The Hedgehog*. I feel like looking back now, had I spent more time creating *Phantasy Star* content, maybe it would be bigger than it is now. Of course, the *Phantasy Star Online* series is out there now and still doing really well."

It's a typical response from a developer who'd prefer to strive for success rather than rest on his laurels, but there's much to celebrate about *Phantasy Star*. It's a game that challenged the existing conventions of RPGs by featuring unusual settings and characters, and it introduced a generation of Western players to the emerging JRPG scene. Add to that the fact that it's not just one of the best Master System games, but one of the very best games of its era, and it's easy to see why the game has remained relevant for decades. ★



» [Master System] Dragons are amongst the game's toughest enemies, but usually attack alone.

▶ a talking cat-like creature capable of learning strong defensive magic.

*Phantasy Star* was released in Japan on 20 December 1987, just two days after Square released *Final Fantasy* on the Famicom. Reception to the game was near universally positive, not least because Sega got a translation out to Western audiences in November 1988, well before the likes of *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* had been localised for NES owners. US magazine *Electronic Games* awarded the game a "Direct Hit" in its review, opining that it "may usher in a new era in home videogaming". *Computer & Video Games* was a rare dissenting voice, and the sticking point wasn't the game itself. In a 75% review, Paul Glancey explained that his problem laid with the game's pricing: "My only reservation about recommending it is its monumental price tag – 40 quid seems a lot to pay."

It was a fair comment – the console itself was only £79.99 at the time. However, this high price point wasn't unique to the UK market, as the game was also the most expensive game for the console in Japan at ¥6,000, and in the US at \$69.99. The high price was driven by three key factors: first, the four-megabit cartridge was unusually large by Master System standards, with *Phantasy Star* only the second game to use that much memory (the first being *After Burner*). Secondly, there was the added cost of battery-backed RAM – an extra that had thus far only been used on games of two megabits or below. Lastly, a chip shortage in Japan affected both Nintendo and Sega during 1988, preventing the price from being lowered.



» [Master System] Gaining your own spaceship allows you to visit all three planets of Algol freely.

“It's a project that's dear to my heart but we were always so busy with other projects”

Yuji Naka

The price tag didn't prevent *Phantasy Star* from becoming a beloved game, and the first of many of sequels quickly went into production for the Master System.

However, *Phantasy Star II* ended up being repositioned as a key title to drive sales of the brand-new 16-bit Mega Drive hardware. This would retain the sci-fi themes and many of the same staff, but lost the 3D dungeons and focused on a new cast. The team would drift apart through the Mega Drive years, as Yuji Naka, Naoto Ohshima and Rieko Kodama were pulled away by the success of *Sonic The Hedgehog*. Kodama would return to co-direct the final Mega Drive instalment, *Phantasy Star IV*, but the series fell dormant after that. In 2000, Naka served as the producer for *Phantasy Star Online*, a revival which leaned more on the sci-fi elements of the series and shifted to an action-based combat system, as well as pioneering online RPGs on consoles. This would become the template for modern games in the series, and *Phantasy Star Online 2* is still active today.

As for the original, demand has kept the price high over the years – you'll be lucky to find it for less than its original asking price. However, Sega has kept it available over the years as a result of that high demand. A special Mega Drive re-release of the original was issued in Japan in 1994, and *Phantasy Star* compilations were released for the Saturn, Game Boy Advance and PlayStation 2, although only the GBA version saw a Western release. The game was also released for the Wii Virtual Console worldwide, and appeared as a bonus game on the *Sega Mega Drive Ultimate Collection* compilation for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.

However, when we ask Naka how he feels about having created such a beloved game, his response is focused on unrealised potential rather than what he



## THE HISTORY OF

# EARTHBOUND

KNOWN AS MOTHER IN JAPAN, THE EARTHBOUND TRILOGY HAS INSPIRED FERVENT FANDOM, COMMUNITY TRANSLATIONS AND A DOCUMENTARY FILM. A CELEBRATED PART OF NINTENDO HISTORY, THE TIMELINE OF THE SERIES HAS SOME EXTRAORDINARY TWISTS AND TURNS, JUST AS THE GAMES DO

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY

**S**higeru Miyamoto is famous for making gamers happy, but the Nintendo creative caused tears when the concept for *Mother* landed on his desk. In a public discussion between the two men published on the *Hobonichi* website, *Mother* creator Shigesato Itoi remembers welling up on a bullet train ride home after making an unsuccessful initial pitch to Miyamoto. Fortunately, Itoi was soon able to dry his eyes when Miyamoto changed his mind, giving the green light for the NES game and becoming its producer. Miyamoto would later fondly recall playing the game to completion, even despite the frustration of needing to restart his playthrough when his save file failed.

Itoi had begun his career as an advertising copywriter before having the idea to make a role-playing game that swapped typical fantasy tropes for a real-life, suburban setting. The result was *Mother*: a joyously

eccentric adventure that casts you as a young boy in a world modelled on small-town America. You fight turn-based battles against everything from your bedroom lamp to local hippies as you uncover a paranormal plot to wipe out humanity.

For Amelia Bone, co-director of the *Mother To Earth* documentary film and a former moderator of the *Starmen.net* fan website, the setting of the games is a big part of the appeal. "I think the thing that I love about the *Mother* series is how it breaks so far away from the fantasy RPG setting," Amelia explains to us. "A lot of people talk up the surrealism, but the thing that caught me was how mundane it all starts out." Amelia draws parallels with what she calls "monster-of-the-week" shows like *The X-Files*, in the sense that, "The characters are just normal people in an extraordinary set of circumstances. They're imbued with power as they go, but they gain deeper interest and context for what's happening alongside the player."

While *Mother* proved popular and sold well in Japan after its release in 1989, an English-language US localisation, which was fully ready to publish, was quietly cancelled. Amelia and her fellow filmmakers explored the mystery of this English version, and the surprise emergence of a prototype cartridge containing the game, in their documentary film, which we'll come back to later. Before that though, we should turn our focus to the better-known Super Nintendo sequel to *Mother*, which wouldn't be realised until six years after the first game.

Itoi and his team at Ape Inc had already been developing the game that would become *EarthBound* for four years when, feeling it just wasn't coming together, they asked for help from Satoru Iwata and his team at HAL Laboratory. Iwata, best known for his later role as global president of Nintendo, became the lead programmer for the game and managed to turn the project around. Despite playing this important role, in his book, *Ask Iwata*, Iwata credited Itoi and others at Ape Inc for giving the

**"THE THING THAT I LOVE ABOUT THE MOTHER SERIES IS HOW IT BREAKS SO FAR AWAY FROM THE FANTASY RPG"**

**AMELIA BONE**

game its magic. Iwata wrote, "It may appear as if everything happened in the one year I was involved, but we were only able to get *EarthBound* that far in a year's time because of the four years of work that had already been completed. A game like that, with such a variety of interesting detail

and character, could never result from a year-long sprint."

One aspect of the amazing work that went into *EarthBound* was carefully adapting it for a North American audience. The title *EarthBound* was the same one that had been planned for the cancelled English translation of *Mother*; it was resurfaced here in place of the Japanese title *Mother 2: Gygis Strikes Back*. The man largely responsible for the much-loved US localisation that followed was then-Nintendo Of America employee Marcus Lindblom. Having lived in Japan for four years before working on the localisation of *Wario's Woods*, Marcus was well-placed to understand Japanese culture and the original intent of Itoi's writing. "I was thankfully given quite a bit of leeway," Marcus tells us. ►



**MARCUS LINDBLOM**

■ Marcus was Nintendo's localisation director on *EarthBound*. He's since worked at companies including Electronic Arts and 2K.



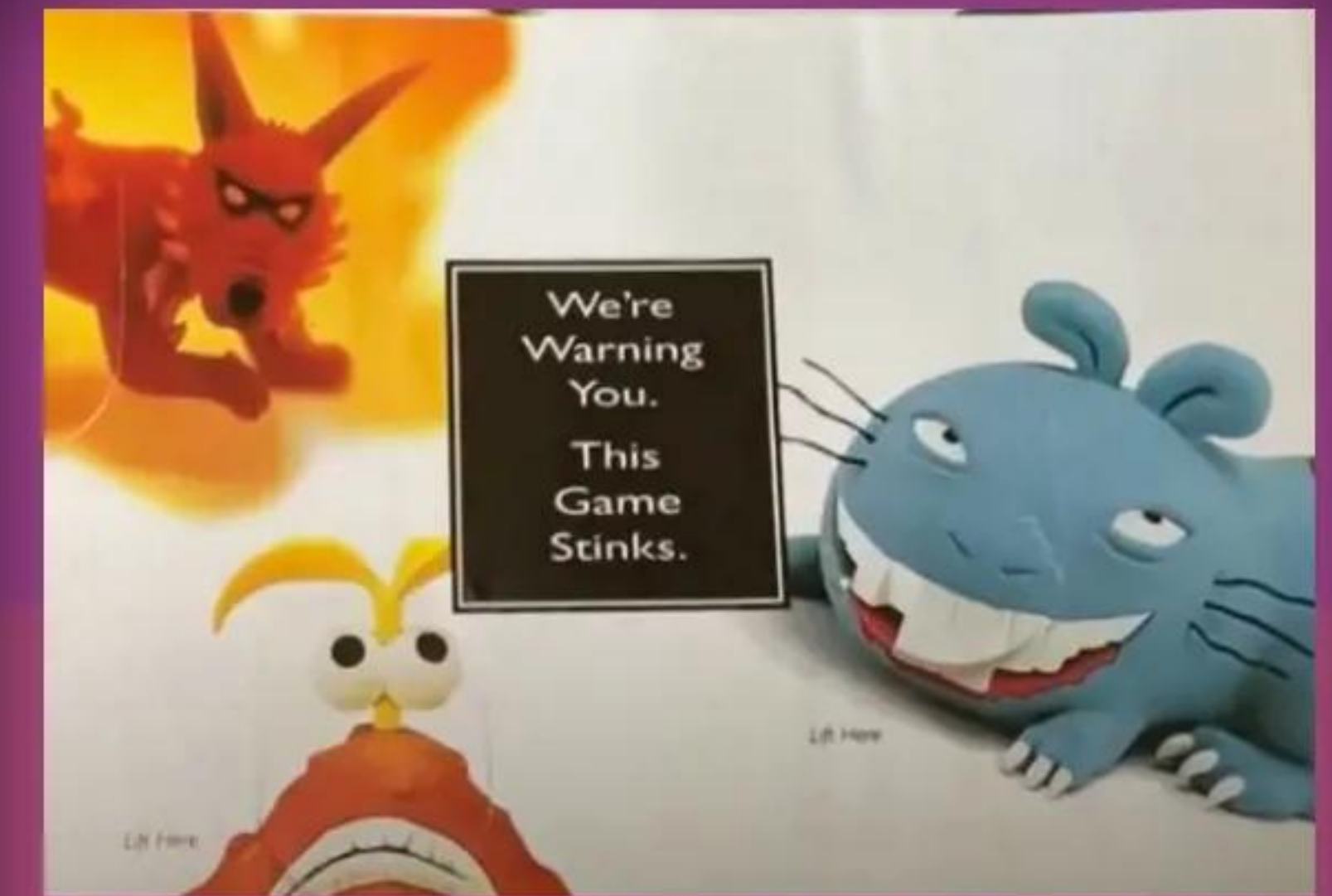
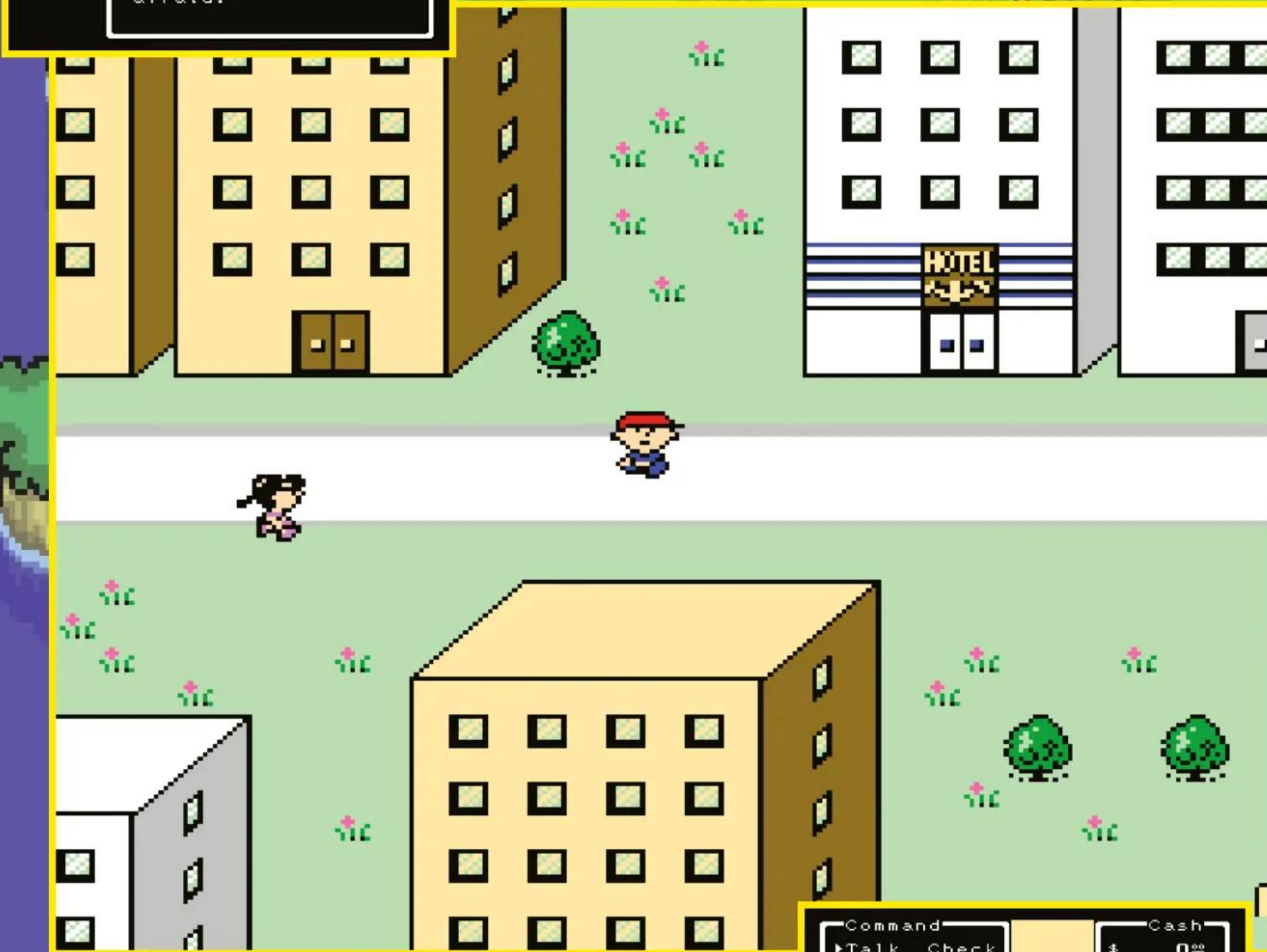
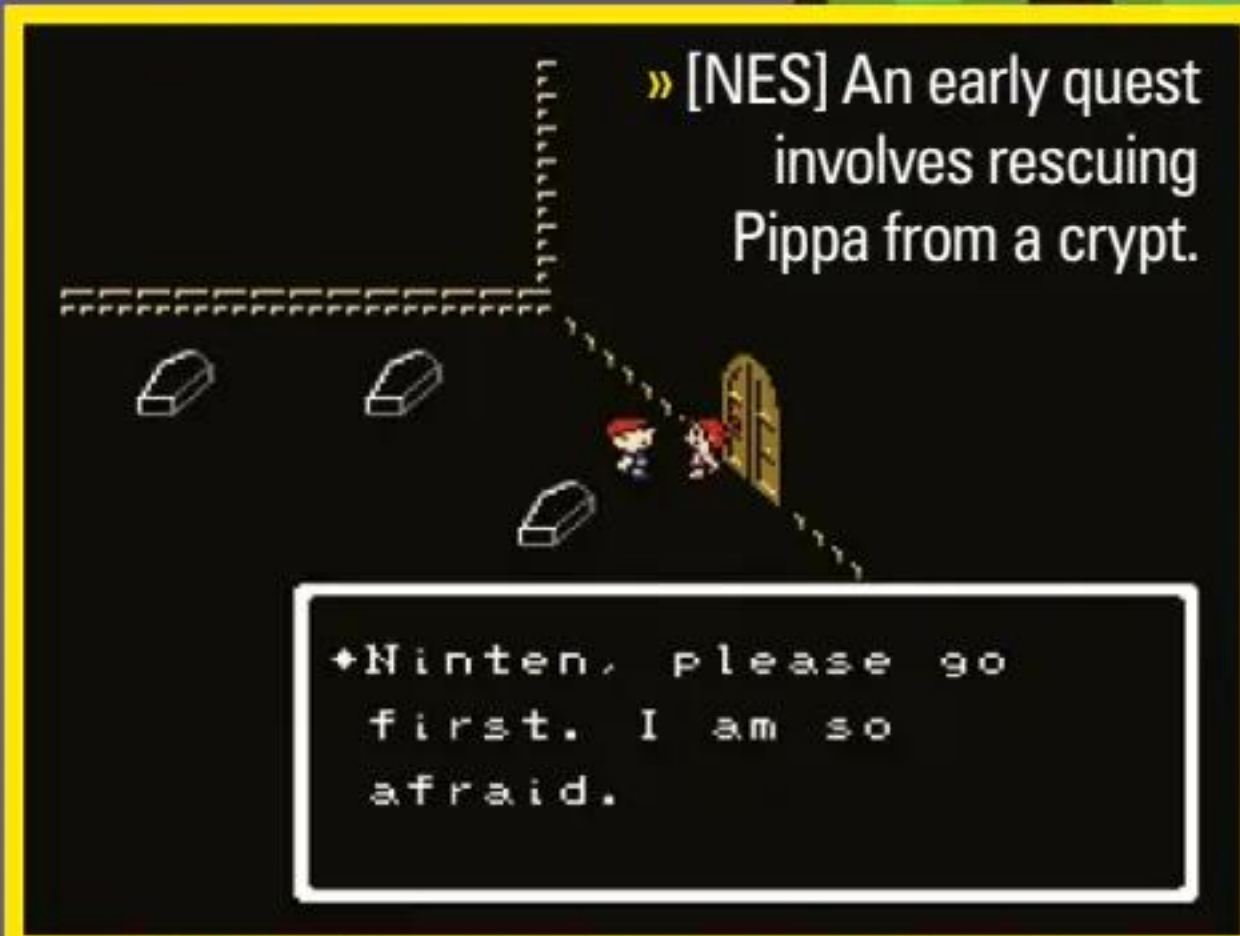
**AMELIA BONE**

■ Amelia co-directed the crowdfunded documentary film *Mother To Earth: The Untold Story Of EarthBound*.





» [NES] Your first foe in *Mother* is your bedroom lamp.

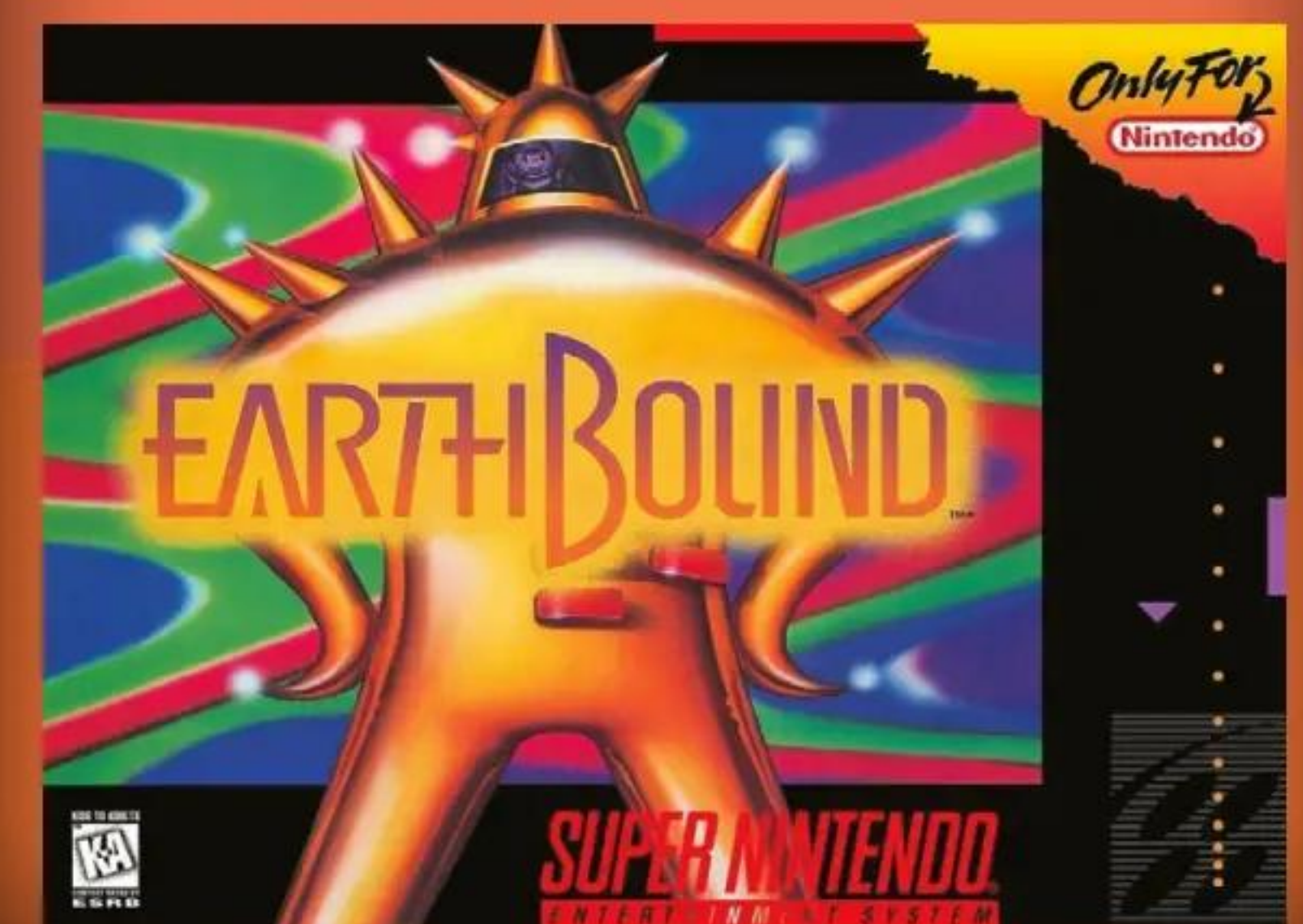


## THIS GAME STINKS

UNPICKING THE UNUSUAL ADVERTISING OF EARTHBOUND

■ Nintendo deployed a strange US marketing campaign for *EarthBound* in 1995. A scratch-and-sniff magazine advert ran the headline, "This game stinks," and an explanation that, "You've never seen or smelled a role-playing game like this!" Fart jokes abounded in an advert that didn't quite match the subtle humour of the game. TV adverts were also commissioned, and the game was packaged in a huge box containing a 135-page strategy guide, which pushed the price up.

"Right out of the gate the price point was above almost every other game," Marcus reflects. "I was glad to have the strategy guide in there because I think it was a good tool for people and it was well done. But the expense was a lot for people. And when you have two games to choose between and one is \$60 and the other is \$80, a lot of families are going to go for the \$60 game." He adds on the subsequent sales flop, "It sucked to see a game you spent a bunch of time on in Best Buy in a bin with a \$10 price point on it." Nowadays, though, this big box edition is highly coveted. Copies have sold for around £1,000 in recent auctions.





# THE LOST MOTHER 3

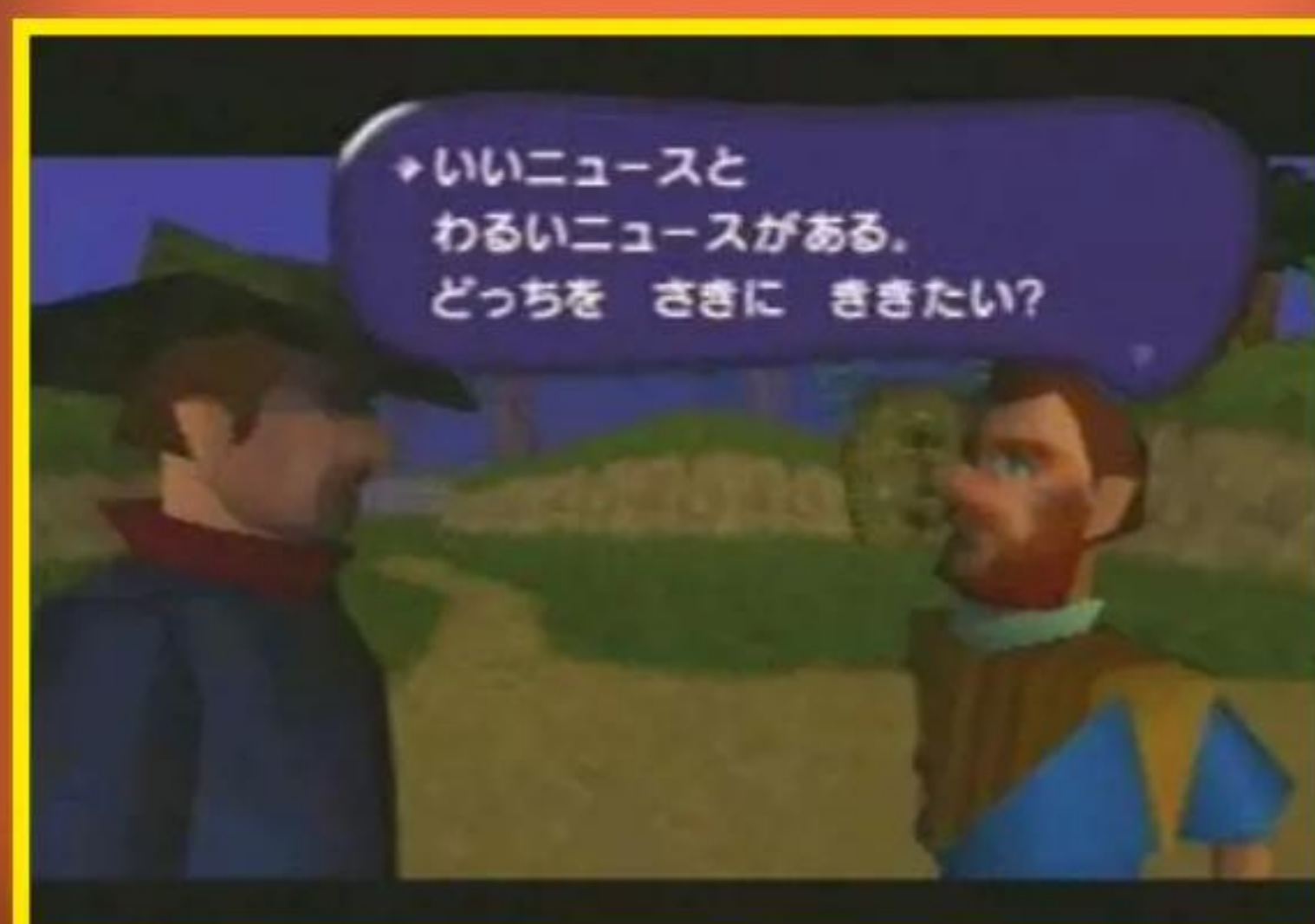
REMEMBERING THE ABANDONED N64 GAME

■ Development of *Mother 3* began on the SNES, before Ape Inc moved its sights to the N64 and its 64DD floppy disk drive extension. Taking inspiration from *Super Mario 64*, the ambition was to bring the series into polygonal 3D and push the boundaries of what was possible on the hardware. The game would have been released as *EarthBound 64* in North America.

The extra power afforded by the 64DD allowed the team to dream big about what they could achieve, but when that peripheral flopped, the planned format reverted to cartridge. A playable version was then showcased at Nintendo's Space World 1999 trade show, with *IGN* reporting after getting hands-on with the prototype that it was "very far along" and seemingly "nearing its final stages of completion". But then in August 2000, the project was formally cancelled.

Itoi, Shigeru Miyamoto and Satoru Iwata (the latter pair being producers on the game) released a lengthy, apologetic cancellation interview. Iwata alluded to the challenge of "all the time and power it would take" to finish the game, while Miyamoto mentioned how "it would have had far too much an impact on other projects like Project Dolphin", a reference to the GameCube. Itoi meanwhile said the amount of complex programming work required to get the 12-chapter, elaborate plan over the finishing line was simply too much. Among other complex elements, Itoi had planned to include branching narratives, with your choices at certain points of the game having consequences.

Nonetheless, the core storyline of the game was carried into the Game Boy Advance version of *Mother 3* that finally released to rave reviews in 2006. Magazine scans and screenshots can be found online showing what would have been on the N64, including some darker-looking scenes than the bright pixel art backdrops of the Game Boy Advance version.



"I WANTED IT TO BE GOOFY AND FUN, SOMETHING THAT COULD BE PLAYED AMONGST PEOPLE OF ALL AGES AND ALSO FOR A LONG TIME"

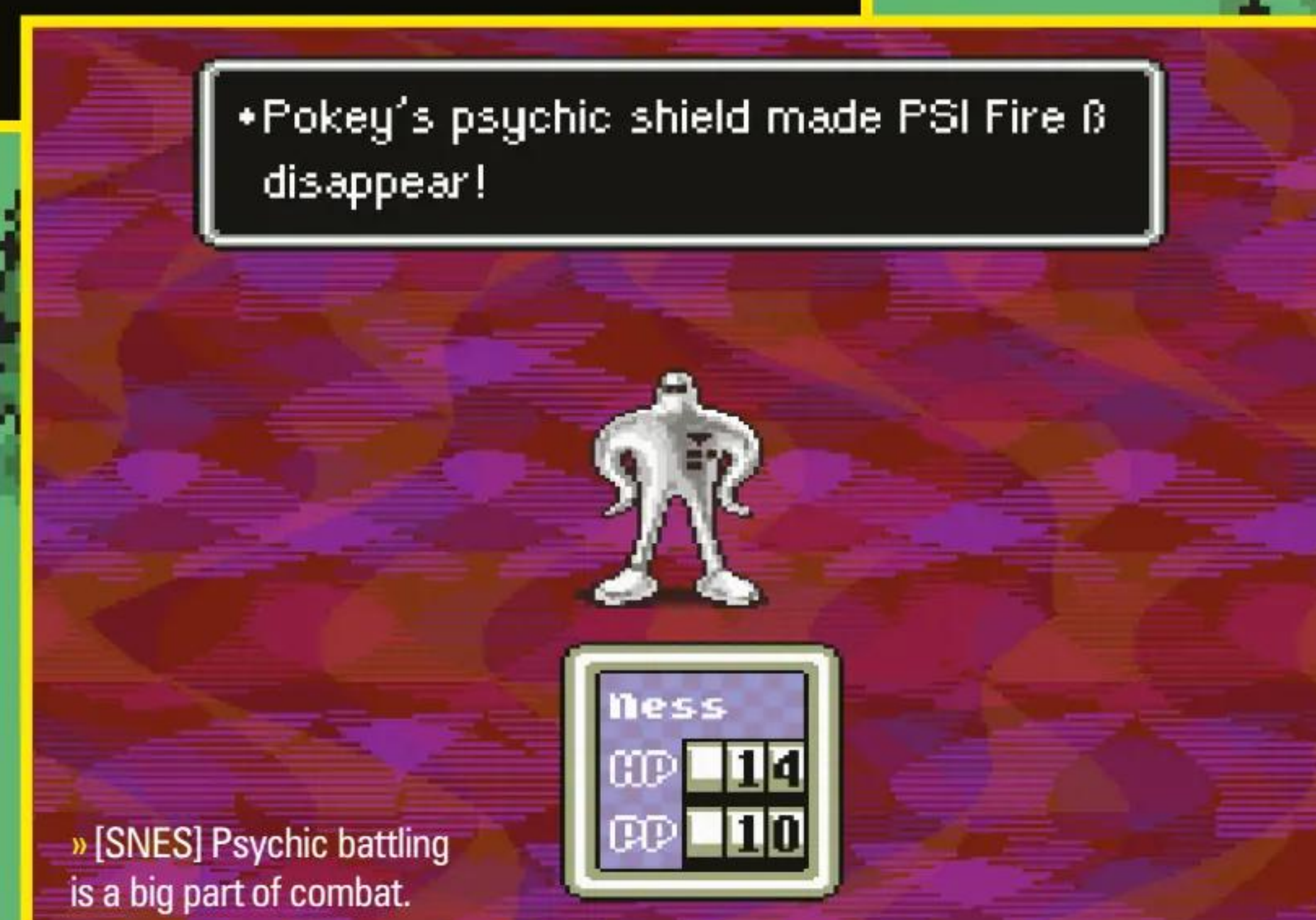
MARCUS LINDBLOM



» [SNES] The first task in *EarthBound* is to investigate a meteorite.



» [SNES] The witty dialogue sometimes breaks the fourth wall.



» [SNES] Psychic battling is a big part of combat.



► “You know, putting in stuff that I hoped would fit with the tone that Itoi had put into the game. Because his original stuff was really fantastic with its irreverent feel. I’ve always thought *EarthBound* has a tone that is a bit anti-society almost, and it does things that are very subtle. There are just lots of little nuances in its text.” Marcus was paired with Ape Inc’s Masayuki Miura, whom Marcus greatly credits for helping him to understand the wider context of the game and the story. “Miura-san was really invaluable for getting the localisation to where it needed to be,” Marcus stresses. The pair went through the huge volume of dialogue and descriptions from the heavily text-based game, both on printed sheets of paper and a coded text file, adjusting words as they went.

**H**aving grown up in what he describes as “a very Christian home” Marcus was able to produce text that trod a brilliant line between homeliness and just enough spiky, unruly attitude.

“I think kids that grow up in a church family in America go through a phase where you learn to dance with what’s OK or not to say. That helped me with the idea of softening things. I could have come out with something a lot more crass, but it didn’t feel like the right thing to do with the way Itoi wrote. And we also wanted to fit in with the values that Nintendo espoused,” Marcus continues. “We had to make certain changes to the game because there were certain things in North

America that we couldn’t do that they could in Japan, like having religious symbology. We took all that kind of stuff out. I tried to be probably over-cautious with a number of things in the game that felt a little too close to legal stuff, like a logo that looked too close to Coca Cola to me. They didn’t actually say ‘Cola’, they said ‘Come’, and I was like, ‘We’re not gonna put a game out with that on the side of a truck.’”

It added to the quirkiness of the end result that Japanese text sometimes came to Marcus and Miura out of context. “When you looked at the text file, things weren’t always sequential in the conversation, so I wasn’t always aware of the line that came before,” Marcus says. “I think the goofy tone comes a bit from that.” Other bits of goofiness were down to Marcus though, as he explains. “One of the lines in the game came directly from a guy working with us. He’d used the words ‘spankety spankety spankety’ in the office goofing around. It came to fill in that line for Pokey at the end of the game, and I had to put it in. I’m really glad I did because I think it fits perfectly into that whole character.” The outcome of all this work was a wonderfully charming, off-kilter localisation. “I wanted it to be goofy and fun, something that could be played amongst people of all ages and also for a long time,” Marcus summarises.

*EarthBound* would indeed achieve the longevity Marcus and Itoi had intended. But in the short term, it was a commercial

disappointment in America and met mixed reviews. Marcus believes sales were partly down to an expensive price tag – the game came packaged in a special over-sized box with a strategy guide – but also graphics that clashed with a changing SNES game market. “*Donkey Kong Country* was coming out and we were right on the verge of hitting that 3D stuff, *Star Fox* and things like that, pulling in 3D environments,” Marcus points out. “For lack of a better term, *EarthBound* was sort of a retro game even back then. It was a throwback to an NES style of art in a way. Every review I was reading brought up the graphics.”

There would be one more *Mother* game to follow, but it would take 12 years of development and several console generations to get there. *Mother 3* began life as a SNES game, before getting far into production as an N64 title that was eventually completely scrapped. It was finally released in 2006 for the Game Boy Advance, but only in Japan, with Nintendo Of America later explaining this as being related to “business needs” and the Game Boy Advance being late in its life cycle. Despite having very similar gameplay at its core to the two preceding games, *Mother 3* packs some lovely iterations on that concept, including a musical combat mechanic where you can combo-attack enemies in time to a background beat. In the lead-up to *Mother 3* being released, Game Boy Advance players in



» [SNES] Maps show you where to eat, sleep and shop in each town.



» [SNES] Mingling with cult members in the eerie Happy Happy Village.



» [SNES] The charming pixel art graphics hold up well.





» [Game Boy Advance] Flint is a tough father figure and a key character in the third game.



» [Game Boy Advance] *Mother 3* introduced combos where you attack in time with music.



» [Game Boy Advance] Like in the second game, you start *Mother 3* in your pyjamas.



- Japan were also treated to a *Mother 1+2* compilation cartridge in 2003.

By the point *Mother 3* launched, the series had built up an intensely passionate online community in the West, partly centred around the *Starmen.net* fan website that had been founded in the late-Nineties. Some younger fans had become aware of the series thanks to the *Super Smash Bros* games, which have featured Ness (the main hero of *EarthBound*) as a playable character from the first N64 entry of the series onwards. Intense fandom for the series, according to Shigesato Itoi, was one of the catalysts for something special happening in 2015 when Nintendo released *EarthBound Beginnings* for the Wii U Virtual Console. This was the lost English translation of the original *Mother* for the NES from 1989, released with a new title.

Before the official release of *EarthBound Beginnings*, the English translation of the first game in the series had only been playable through emulation. That was possible due to an online ROM dump, sourced from a prototype cartridge that made it into the hands of collectors and caused a buzz online in 1998 (this emulated prototype version became known as *EarthBound Zero*, a name that was hacked into the title screen of the shared ROM). This prototype story is forensically examined by Amelia and her co-director Evan Butler in their crowdfunded film *Mother To Earth*. "Honestly, I kind of stumbled into making the film," Amelia

concedes. "When I was a staff member on *Starmen.net*, I was always keen to learn as much as I could about the translation process for *EarthBound Beginnings* in my off time. I was a junior or senior in high school with access to Google, so I just looked up everything I could. I tracked down prototypes, sifted through old web pages, and met head localiser Phil Sandhop in a coffee shop."

**T**he film also sees the crew travel to Japan for a moving interview with rock star and composer Keiichi Suzuki, who wrote the music for the first two games of the series.

Amelia looks back on the project fondly. "It's admittedly a little weird to see my old self on camera after having come out as a trans woman, but that's easy to push past. I'm still proud of how it turned out." She does have one request for Nintendo, though. "The only question I still have about this process is what happened to the original box art and other print assets for the NES release. I know that they existed at some point, because I literally made mock-ups of them based on Phil's description. Show me the box art, cowards!"

*EarthBound Beginnings* and *EarthBound* would both make it to the Nintendo Switch eventually, which is an easy way to play them today. *EarthBound* was also included on the SNES Mini console, in another sign of Nintendo valuing the legacy of the series. What is it that's kept the love for the trilogy so strong? "I think it's two-fold," reasons Amelia. "First off, the series is centred around themes

of love and strength in community. That part's easy. The second part, though, the explosion? Genuinely, if *EarthBound Beginnings* had come out when it was supposed to, or if *Mother 3* had gotten an English release, the fandom wouldn't have gotten so dedicated. Fandom yearns to fill any possible gap with fan creation or collaborative action, and the more enticing the gap the more devoted the following." Marcus is also in awe of the legacy of the series and the community that has built around it. "Couples have come out of the community and they've got families now, they've got kids," he says proudly. "It's satisfying to me on a personal level. I've had people tell me over the years that *EarthBound* has helped them through tough times."

The late, great Iwata also summed up the unique appeal of the series nicely in his book *Iwata Asks*. He wrote, "*Mother* takes the large-scale format typical of Japanese RPGs, so in that sense it isn't necessarily special. Still, the overall effect is a game unlike almost any other. I think this is the cumulative result of all the aspects of the gaming experience – the fun parts, sad parts, outlandish parts, and goofy parts that Shigesato Itoi packed into the game. There really isn't anything else like it out there." ★





» [Game Boy Advance] You'll meet many quirky characters throughout the game's story.



» [Game Boy Advance] Regular cutscenes keep the intriguing story moving along.



» [Wii U] Ness is a playable character in the *Super Smash Bros* games.



"I'VE HAD PEOPLE TELL ME OVER THE YEARS THAT EARTHBOUND HAS HELPED THEM THROUGH TOUGH TIMES"  
MARCUS LINDBLOM

## FOUND IN TRANSLATION

HOW COMMUNITY MEMBERS RALLIED TO TRANSLATE MOTHER 3

■ Appetite for an English translation of *Mother 3* was strong enough after its Game Boy Advance launch that a petition of 31,000 signatures was delivered to Nintendo. When it became clear that no official localisation was forthcoming, fans took things into their own hands. The US *EarthBound* community rallied around the development of a fan translation, with professional translator Clyde Mandelin, known online as Tomato, leading the charge.

In 2008, after two years of work, version 1.0 of the *Mother 3* fan translation patch was launched. According to the official website of the project ([Mother3.fobby.net](http://Mother3.fobby.net)) the patch was downloaded well over 100,000 times in the following months.

On his *Legends Of Localisation* website, Mandelin sheds some light on the process. "I started by doing a first draft translation of the script, which took about a month," he writes. "After that, fellow *Starmen.net* member Jeff (online name: Jeffman) and I worked hard to learn how to program for the Game Boy Advance, then we applied that knowledge to 'hack' (reprogram, in other words) large parts of the game's programming to accommodate the English text." He describes the project as, "An epic quest of its own with lots of party members coming and going, NPCs on the sidelines, and evil bosses to defeat."

### THE MOTHER 3 FAN TRANSLATION



THIS IS A FREE, UNOFFICIAL TRANSLATION MADE ENTIRELY BY DEDICATED MOTHER / EARTHBOUND FANS. PLEASE SUPPORT THIS SERIES BY PURCHASING OFFICIAL MERCHANDISE, INCLUDING THE OFFICIAL TRANSLATION IF ONE IS EVER RELEASED.

English  
v1.1

THE TRANSLATION TEAM  
MOTHER3.FOBBY.NET



Mike

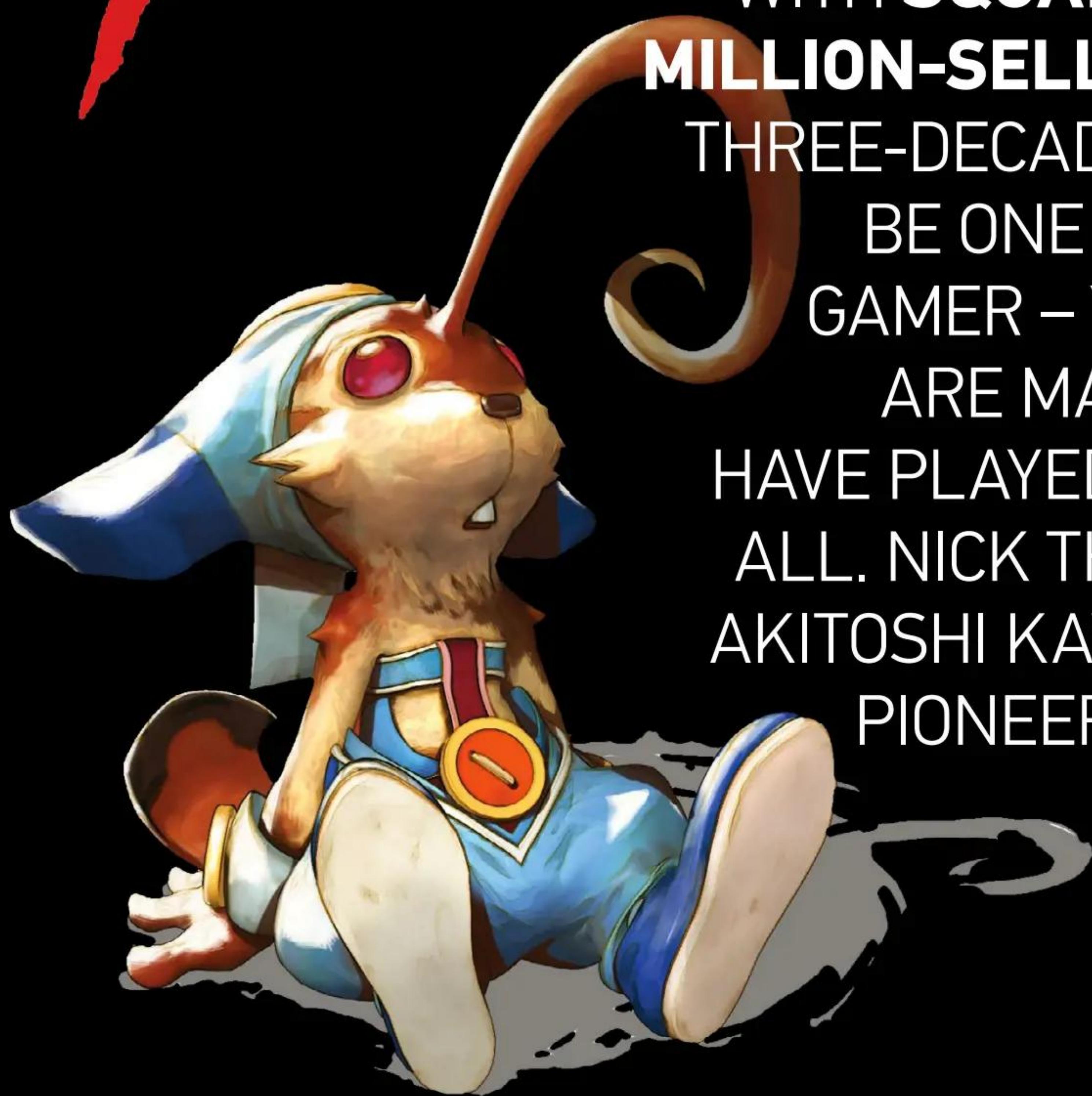
Let this slightly unclean and not very tasty cookie be of use.



# THE HISTORY OF

# FINAL FANTASY

YOU'D EXPECT THAT A SERIES WITH **SQUARE'S FIRST EVER MILLION-SELLING GAME** AND A THREE-DECADE LEGACY WOULD BE ONE KNOWN TO EVERY GAMER – YET THE CHANCES ARE MANY OF YOU WON'T HAVE PLAYED A SAGA GAME AT ALL. NICK THORPE SPEAKS TO AKITOSHI KAWAZU ABOUT THIS PIONEERING RPG SERIES...



*The  
Saga so  
far...*

THE FINAL  
FANTASY  
LEGEND

1989, GAME BOY

FINAL FANTASY  
LEGEND II

1990, GAME BOY

FINAL FANTASY  
LEGEND III

1991, GAME BOY

ROMANCING  
SAGA

1992, SUPER FAMICOM

ROMANCING  
SAGA 2

1993, SUPER FAMICOM

ROMANCING  
SAGA 3

1995, SUPER FAMICOM

SAGA FRONTIER

1997, PLAYSTATION

SAGA  
FRONTIER 2

1999, PLAYSTATION

UNLIMITED  
SAGA

2002, PLAYSTATION 2

EMPERORS  
SAGA

2012, BROWSER

IMPERIAL SAGA

2015, PC

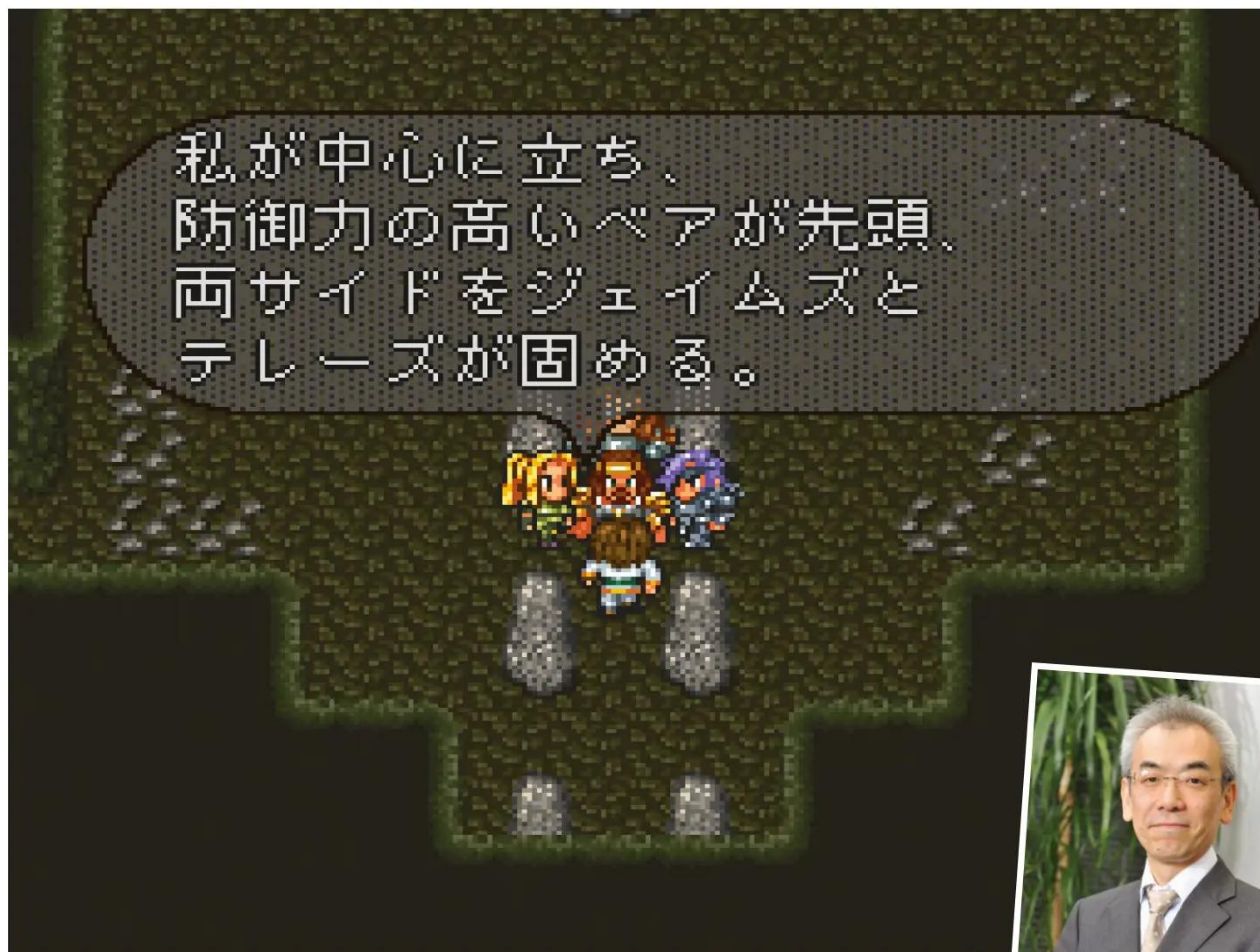
SAGA: SCARLET  
GRACE

2016, PS VITA

SAGA: EMERALD  
BEYOND

2024, VARIOUS





» [SNES] Unlike *Romancing SaGa*, the sequel starts every player off from a common point.

**I**f we were the sorts of people who wrote retro gaming quizzes, there are a number of questions we'd throw in to catch people out – and one of them would be, “What was Square’s first game to sell a million copies?” We’d be genuinely surprised to hear anyone deliver the correct answer or *The Final Fantasy Legend*, or *Makai Toushi SaGa* in Japan. It’s par for the course – what should be one of Square Enix’s most celebrated series is far better known in Japan because of the games that were exported, half of them were renamed. Of course, that’s if you’re lucky enough to live in North America – in Europe, the series has barely made an impact at all.

The first game in the series, *Makai Toushi SaGa*, was a Game Boy project. “There was a new console coming from Nintendo and we wanted to put a game out for that. *Tetris* was a very popular game at the time, so in the back of our heads we were thinking, ‘Are we going

to make a game similar to that?’” recalls Akitoshi Kawazu, a long-term Square employee who served as director of the game. At the time, he was part of the *Final Fantasy* team. “Nintendo requested that we go for the combination of a handheld console with an RPG, and that’s how the project started.”

Handheld development was a new challenge not just for Square, but for the entire industry. The new hardware meant that adaptations had to be made. “There were two main differences when working on the home consoles and handhelds. Firstly, the handheld is run by batteries,” explains Kawazu. “With an RPG, you’re used to long hours of gameplay, but that’s something we had to have in mind – the batteries run out, so we had to adjust the amount of gameplay hours.” The other difference was a product of Nintendo’s design choices. “Home consoles at the time showed colour, but the Game Boy was monochrome, so we had to make sure there was nothing in the game that had to be expressed using colour.”

In many respects, the original *SaGa* game was a standard RPG – your goal is to climb a tower that serves as a link between worlds, defeating enemies and developing your characters on the way to a final showdown. But one unique aspect of the game was how characters would develop – if you chose to be a human, you’d just get items that permanently boosted statistics, while mutants would develop randomly.

But monsters had a unique system in which they could eat meat dropped



» Akitoshi Kawazu has worked on the *SaGa* series since the beginning.

“AT THE TIME, FINAL FANTASY III HAD JUST COME OUT AND WE WANTED TO MAKE SOMETHING DIFFERENT”

AKITOSHI KAWAZU



» [Game Boy] Battle scenes in the first game were very simplistic due to the system’s limited display.



» [SNES] *Romancing SaGa* began the series’ 16-bit era, and was the first game not to be localised into English.

in battles, which would have different effects depending on a combination of the source of the meat and your character’s status. “At the time, *Final Fantasy III* had just come out and we wanted to make something different,” recalls Kawazu.

*Makai Toushi SaGa* was a smash hit for Square on its December 1989 debut, becoming its first ever million-selling game and scoring 35/40 from *Famitsu*. For North American audiences, the game was renamed *The Final Fantasy Legend* to tie in with the popularity of the NES RPG. The game received a 3.7/5 score from *Nintendo Power*, and sold over 200,000 copies. “At the time, we didn’t expect it to do so well,” confesses Kawazu, “but we were being told from people higher up, ‘*Tetris* is selling 3 million, so if you want to just aim from 3 million, that would be great!’”

While the game never hit the same sales as *Tetris*, it was clearly a



► success and a sequel went into production. “We didn’t originally have any intention to make a second one,” Kawazu explains. “In my view, the first one was done, it was complete and it was fine as it was. But we were told it had done so well that we were going to make a sequel.” With that in mind, the goal was to refine what was already there rather than reinvent the wheel. “The elements we changed were character development possibilities, as well as expanding the story – we just added a general sense of completion to the game,” says Kawazu.

The plot of *SaGa 2: Hihou Densetsu* saw the players recovering the 77 Magi, fragments of the shattered statue of the goddess Isis. After the surprising end of the original game, in which the player’s party fights God, *SaGa 2* goes crazy and lets you fight a whole bunch of deities. Odin, who revives you if you fail in battle, is one of the gods that must eventually be fought, and once defeated he will no longer revive you. “We wanted a system that would let you retry the battles, but we didn’t want to just have a pop-up screen. We wanted something with a bit more flavour to it,” says Kawazu. “We thought, ‘What’s the best kind of deity for that?’ We decided on Odin coming from Valhalla – and then we built that into the story, ‘Wouldn’t it be great if we got to fight him?’ For that bit where he can’t bring you back, it was a realistic way to add a bit more difficulty.”

*SaGa 2: Hihou Densetsu* was a successful sequel when it arrived in December 1990, selling around 850,000 copies in Japan and garnering



» [Game Boy] They’re probably on a stratospheric sugar high from the pumpkin spice syrup.

a 33/40 score from *Famitsu*. In 2006, *Famitsu* readers voted the game 94th in the magazine’s top 100 games poll. Renamed *Final Fantasy Legend II* for North American continuity, the game also received 3.9/5 from *Nintendo Power*.

**S**aGa 3: *Jikuu No Hasha* was handled by the new Osaka development team at Square, as Kawazu and his staff had their priorities elsewhere.

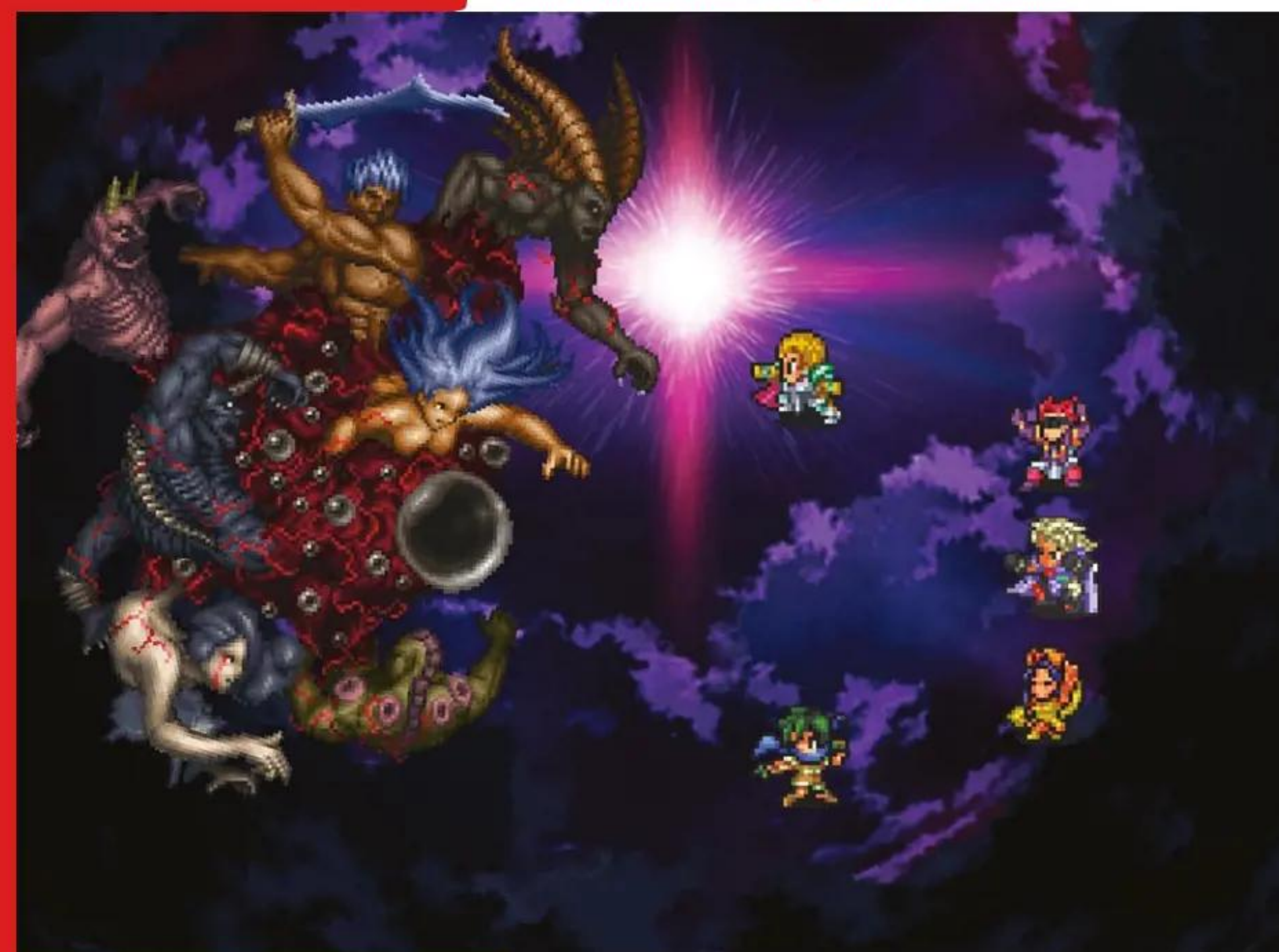
The game represented a shift, as it moved from a stricter fantasy theme to one incorporating some sci-fi elements, including time travel, airships and robotics. The plot follows the destruction caused by the Pureland Water Entity, a creature which floods the world across time, bringing monsters onto land.

As well as the existing meat-eating mechanics, *SaGa 3* adds robotic parts to the mix, allowing you to transform your character. Eating meat will turn you into a primal monster and robotic parts will make you a cyborg, but you can reset classes by eating meat or installing parts, depending on which is the opposite of what you have done.



» [SNES] Graphically, *Romancing SaGa 2* was a major step up from its predecessor.

» [PC] Even when you’re not fighting actual gods, the scale of battles in *Romancing SaGa 2* can be biblical.



“WE WANTED A SYSTEM THAT WOULD LET YOU RETRY THE BATTLES, BUT WE DIDN’T WANT TO JUST HAVE A POP-UP SCREEN”

Akitoshi Kawazu

## Romance Revival

*Romancing SaGa 2* was remastered in December 2017 for PC, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch and Vita. This marked the first time that the game had been officially released in English on any platform and represented a return for the series after over a decade of absence from the European and American markets.

The timing of the release may have seemed strange, but the reasoning was sound. A remaster project had been undertaken in Japan, and English speakers didn’t want to miss the game a second time. “Many core fans appealed to Kawazu-san directly,” says Masanori Ichikawa. “They wanted to know why we weren’t releasing the Vita version. I wanted to produce these for the Western retro gamers.”

“The base system is very similar, almost the same,” says Ichikawa. “The graphics are completely changed, except that the character pixels are the same. In addition to the original content, there is also a new dungeon, and the game now has New Game Plus. If you want to play the original version, though, you can do that.”

Kawazu believes that the different character development will go down well with Western players experiencing the game for the first time. “Also, the progression of the town itself getting bigger, it’s a different way of seeing progress compared to how RPGs are looked at in the West. That will definitely bring something new to the market. I hope players enjoy it!”







SaGa 3 arrived in 1991 in Japan as *Final Fantasy Legend III*, it received middling to good reviews from the US press in 1993 – 32/40 from *EGM* and 3.35/5 from *Nintendo Power*. It would be the series' last export for five years.

The reason that the Osaka team was developing SaGa 3 is that Kawazu's team was busy working on *Romancing SaGa* – a Super Famicom game, and therefore the first game in the series not to be designed for a portable console. "It was down to a request from Nintendo," says Kawazu. "It was the previous situation in reverse – 'You've made lots of games for a handheld, please can you make one for a console?' We were a lot more happy with that request! Finally, we could use a home console to make a better game than what we were used to."

*Romancing SaGa* took a different approach to storytelling compared to its predecessors. Instead of having one very flexible party to follow through one story, now you'd follow eight characters through their own parts of a larger plot. "At the core, we wanted to make sure that this was a different kind of adventure to *Final Fantasy*," Kawazu explains. "There was a real question as to how we were going to achieve this. Within our team, people were asking, 'You're not going to have a linear storyline, is that possible?' It took a lot of consideration to build a game that doesn't follow a linear storyline, but to still have an ending."

*Romancing SaGa* was a major hit. Arriving in 1992, it sold 1.3 million copies in Japan, and earned a *Famitsu* score of 31/40. But *Romancing SaGa* was the first game in the series not to be translated, and this trend would continue throughout the Super Famicom

» [SNES] Battle scenes retained the traditional side-on view as late as *Romancing SaGa 3*.

## Chronicle of the God Slayers

The SaGa series isn't the only set of games that allow you to commit acts of decide – here are five more examples

### LUFIA II: RISE OF THE SINISTRALS

1995

■ The Sinistrals claim to be gods, and they're pretty powerful, so you probably want to take them at their word. They also just so happen to be evil gods, so in this case it's okay to track down the dual blade and slay the almighty.



### GOD OF WAR

2005

■ Kratos is a pretty angry chap, but you would be if you had to serve the ancient Greek gods for a decade – they're a fickle bunch, after all. In this first game he decides to have it out with Ares, the titular God Of War, and that's just the start...



### GUARDIAN HEROES

1996

■ One of the game's endings can take you down this path. After finding out that they have been groomed as ultimate warriors, your characters swiftly turn on the almighty being that decided to do this and declare that they won't serve it.



### SCRIBBLENAUTS

2009

■ Now here's a strange example – in this game, you can summon a god. You can also kill it. There's no good reason for this, as the character is a perfectly friendly NPC, unlike the tyrannical overbeings that meddle with the fate of man in the other games here.



### LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII

2013

■ This game's rather dour protagonist finds herself in a similar predicament to Kratos – she's serving a god, only to find out that Bhunivelze's plans aren't exactly what they seem. So she walks him to the valley of shadow and death, and ensures that he stays there.



# Returning Saga

Many of the SaGa games have been remade over the years

## ROMANCING SAGA

2001, WONDERSWAN COLOR

■ This update was released for Bandai's handheld rather than the competing GBA due to Square's non-relationship with Nintendo at the time. The game features an additional scenario and the ability to collect all ten Destiny Stones, features planned for the original Super Famicom game but dropped for space.



## ROMANCING SAGA: MINSTREL SONG

2005, PS2

■ Here's a full 3D remake of the series' first SNES game, complete with an English translation – albeit only for North American audiences, with Europe once again shut out. The game wasn't well received by the press, and holds a Metacritic score of 58.



## SAGA 3: JIKUU NO HASHA – SHADOW OR LIGHT

2011, NINTENDO DS

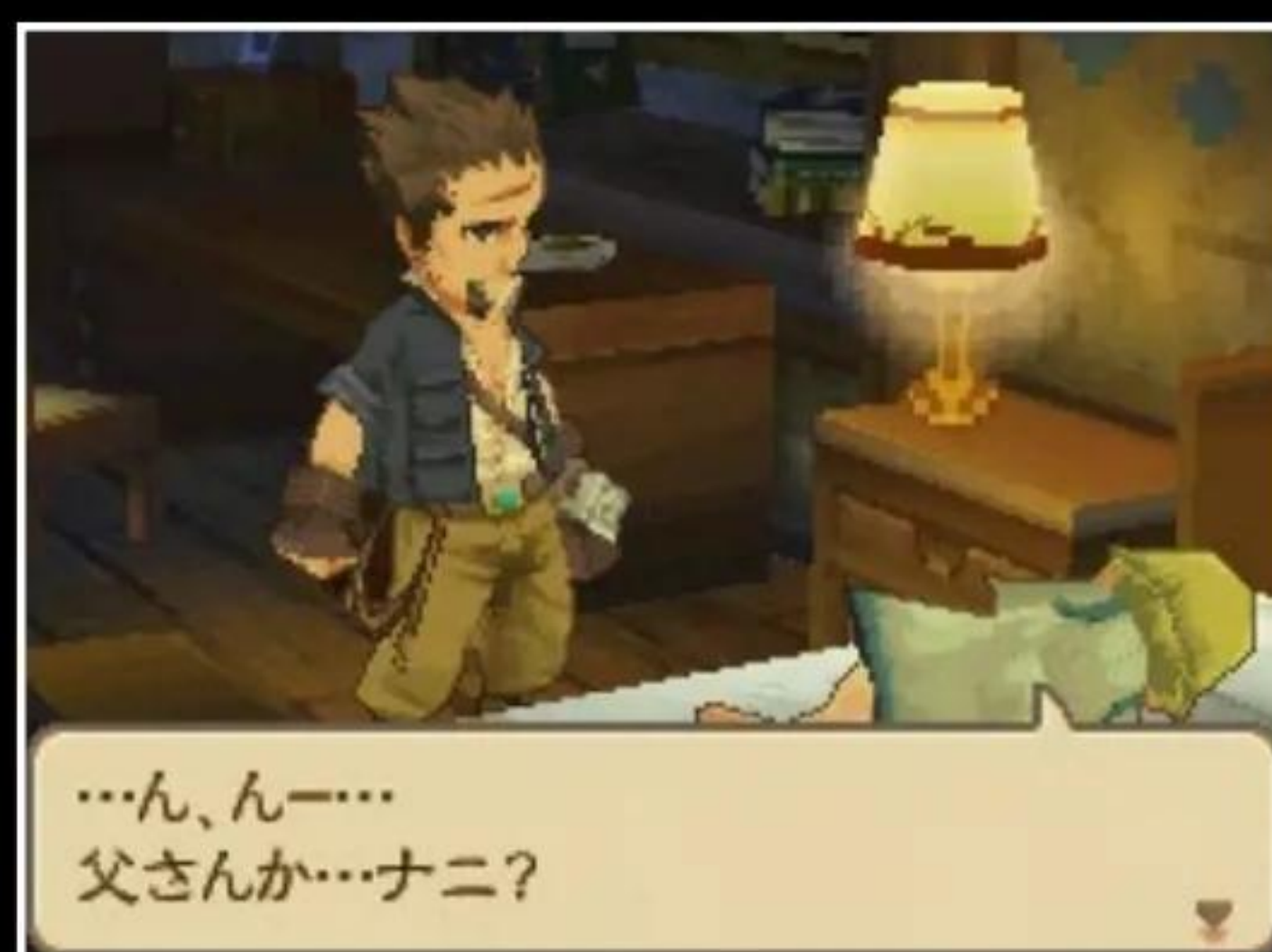
■ Much like the SaGa 2 remake, this remake features brand-new cel-shaded 3D graphics, new artwork and an arranged soundtrack – and similarly, it was only released in Japan. Like most of the Japan-only SaGa releases, the fanbase have stepped in to provide an unofficial translation in the absence of an official alternative.



## MAKAI TOUSHI SAGA

2002, WONDERSWAN COLOR

■ Rather than being a slightly enhanced port, this is a full remake featuring significantly upgraded graphics, new cutscenes and a variety of pleasant gameplay tweaks. If you want to play the original Game Boy version, that's fine, too, as it's also included. This version was the basis for a later mobile phone version.



## SAGA 2: HIHOU DENSETSU – GODDESS OF DESTINY

2009, NINTENDO DS

■ This remake was designed to retain the short length of the original game, while adding new features. Character growth is easier to grasp and monster encounters have been altered, so that they're seen and encountered in the field rather than random ambushes.



» [PlayStation] SaGa Frontier introduced a more dynamic battle screen, with shifting camera angles.

► years. Fortunately, the 2005 PS2 version is the only one of the SaGa remakes to have received an English release prior to the 2017 version of Romancing SaGa 2.

Romancing SaGa 2 took another different path, this time focusing on the ruling dynasty of Avalon over many generations. The initial emperors are fixed, but you can choose your successors. "In the first Romancing SaGa, we had the eight protagonists. For the second one, we thought about how we could make it different, but keep the variety that we wanted to continue," Kawazu explains.

Despite being the most popular SaGa game to date, selling 1.5 million copies, Romancing SaGa 2 was the least well-liked by Famitsu, scoring 26/40. The game was remastered in 2017, with Metacritic scores of 71 for PS4, 70 for Switch and 62 for Xbox One.

The final game of the Super Famicom era was Romancing SaGa 3, released in 1995. It returned to the first game's system of choosing a protagonist from a roster of eight characters, and this time followed the 'Death Eclipse' – an event occurring once every 300 years which kills all newborn life on the planet. In the past two instances, a single baby has survived and obtained enormous power – one choosing to follow a path of tyranny, the other heroism. The game was another hit, shifting 1.3 million copies, and a 34/40 score from Famitsu.



» [PS2] With no overworld traversal, Unlimited SaGa played encounters in static map screens.





» [PS2] The 'Sketch Motion' technique of *Unlimited SaGa* allowed for some beautiful battle scenes.

The series got a full makeover for its PlayStation debut, *SaGa Frontier*. The game adopted 3D technology for the first time, with pre-rendered sprites, adventure areas, and real-time battle areas. However, this game is notable for its abundance of deleted content. Kawazu remembers that ambitious scope well. "There were some things that we created, but we never quite found the right places to use them, like music tracks. So we just left those there! Then there were other things where we couldn't make the implementation in time for the master submission."

*SaGa Frontier* was the first game in the series to retain the *SaGa* name outside of Japan, and released in 1997. The game sold a million copies and scored 31/40 in *Famitsu*. The US press was also fond of the game, with *EGM* awarding it 8/10 and *GamePro* 5/5, but websites weren't as happy, *IGN* giving 7/10 and *GameSpot* offering 6.9/10.

**For *SaGa Frontier 2*, the number of plots to follow was significantly reduced.**

Players could choose Gustave XIII, an exiled heir in waiting, or Wil Knights, a digger who seeks the truth about the death of his parents. These would intertwine and follow the descendants of the main protagonists, as had now become traditional in the series. Another graphical style change was made for this game. Some real-time 3D areas remained, but the bulk of the game was illustrated in a beautiful watercolour style.

"It actually was hand-painted!" Kawazu explains, before breaking into a rare English answer. "First hand drawing and scanning, and then digital effects." Returning to speaking through the translator, he says, "We did it because the technology could allow for that hand-drawn style. So we said, 'It's going to be really tough, it's going to be a lot of work, but it will come out beautiful.'"

*SaGa Frontier 2* released in 1999 and sold over 675,000 copies, a strong number that doesn't quite live up to that of its predecessors. *Famitsu* gave it 35/40. *EGM* gave it 31.5/40 and *GamePro* handed down a 4/5, while



» [PlayStation] *SaGa Frontier 2*'s unique watercolour art style is lovely.

*IGN* gave 7/10. *SaGa Frontier 2* was also notable as it marked the series' European debut, a decade after the first game.

2002's *Unlimited SaGa* took the series to PlayStation 2. Another set of seven characters were introduced, searching for the 'Seven Wonders' that legends claim will bring a new era of peace upon discovery. The game took the unusual approach of making things more abstract – environmental traversal was almost board game style, with the player simply choosing directions at each new piece of terrain. Likewise, randomisation was added to battles through the use of slot machine-style reels, which determined whether your attacks and actions would have good outcomes or bad.

*Unlimited SaGa* was a polarising game. In Japan, it was well received. Scores included 31/40 from *Famitsu*, 21/30 from *The PlayStation 2*, 30/40 from *Dorimaga* and an A grade from *Dengeki PlayStation*. In the English-speaking world, the game was panned. *Edge*'s 6/10 score looks high next to a 4/10 from the *Official US PlayStation Magazine* and 28% from *GameSpy*. *GamesRadar* even went as far as to name it one of the 25 worst games of all time.

Since *Unlimited SaGa*, the series has been mostly confined to Japan. *Emperor's SaGa* was a mobile game featuring storyline elements from *Romancing SaGa 2* and *Romancing SaGa 3*, launched in September 2012. *Imperial SaGa* is a more traditional *SaGa* experience which launched for web browsers in 2015. As an Emperor or



» [PS5] *Emerald Beyond* features turn-based battling with the order displayed so you can plan accordingly.

Empress, your goal is to win turn-based battles to gain territory, with more land awarding new story events. This game is also free to play, and in operation today.

*SaGa: Scarlet Grace* was the first new *SaGa* game to be developed primarily for a handheld platform since the Game Boy years. The Vita game was well-received by *Famitsu*, scoring 32/40, but it hasn't quite lived up to its predecessors in terms of sales, getting through 94,000 copies in the six weeks following its December 2016 release. The most recent game in the series, *SaGa: Emerald Beyond*, debuted in 2024 with a multi-platform release. Similarly to *Scarlet Grace*, it too suffered from poor sales, in addition to a lukewarm critical reception.

That's where the story of new games ends. But with Square Enix having a 3D remake of *Romancing SaGa 2* in 2024, there's new material for any fan to get into. With luck, the next time we talk about the *SaGa* series, it will be better known on these shores. ★

WE SAID,  
'IT'S GOING TO  
BE REALLY  
TOUGH, IT'S  
GOING  
TO BE A LOT OF  
WORK, BUT IT  
WILL COME OUT  
BEAUTIFUL'

Akitoshi Kawazu



# FIRE EMBLEM

**Y**ou might not think of *Fire Emblem* as a household name for Nintendo in the same way as *Mario* and *Zelda*. But this turn-based tactical RPG's popularity is undeniable. Besides, there aren't many others who can boast of having two mainline titles and two action-based spin-offs released in the Nintendo Switch's lifetime, while a new entry is also confirmed for the Switch 2. It's also no mean feat that eight of its heroes make up the fighting roster of *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*.

It's quite the achievement considering its origins were so much more niche. Despite having been around since the 8-bit era, you likely wouldn't have heard of *Fire Emblem* back in the Nineties because it wasn't released outside of Japan. *Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon And The Blade Of Light* was its debut in 1990, developed

## FROM JAPAN-ONLY OBSCURITY TO LATENT RENEWAL, HOW FIRE EMBLEM BECAME A BELOVED JRPG SERIES FOR NINTENDO TACTICIANS

Words by Alan Wen

by Intelligent Systems, originally a support studio for Nintendo. It, however, grew to the point where it could develop its own games in full and decided to create a game that combined elements from its turn-based strategy game *Famicom Wars* with the characters and storytelling of a fantasy JRPG. Taking each turn to move your units across a grid to attack was a bit like Chess, but where each unit was also a character that you could emotionally invest in, compared to a nameless grunt.

If countless JRPGs have never made it outside of Japan, then *Fire Emblem*'s fortunes weren't exactly glowing back home to start with, either, as its turn-based tactics were also different from the turn-based moment-to-moment dungeon-crawling battles of *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Phantasy Star*. But strong word of mouth eventually made the game a success, leading to more games over the years, including a remake of the first game on the Super Famicom. It would still take half a dozen more releases before Nintendo gamers on this side of the world would even learn about this obscure series. Of all places, it came from *Super Smash Bros Melee*.

While its N64 predecessor had introduced a crossover of Nintendo characters fighting one another,

its 2001 GameCube sequel saw the roster doubling in size, and so included characters that came from lesser known franchises, such as a personified version of Nintendo's first handheld, the Game & Watch, and Ness from *Earthbound* (also unknown at the time to players outside of Japan and the US). Among the additional characters you could unlock was Marth, the hero of the first *Fire Emblem*, and Roy, essentially there as free advertising, as he was a new protagonist for the upcoming *Fire Emblem: The Blinding Blade*. The presence of these mysterious sword-wielding heroes clearly made an impression though, as did Intelligent System's pedigree, as its previously Japan-only *Wars* series also made the worldwide leap with 2001's critically acclaimed *Advance Wars*. 13 years after its Japanese debut, the tactical JRPG was finally ready for prime time as *Fire Emblem: The Blazing Blade* became the first title in the series to be released internationally in 2003, going simply by *Fire Emblem*.

Developed with a new audience in mind, *The Blazing Blade* served as a prequel to *The Blinding Blade*, as one of your main characters, Eliwood, was actually the father of Roy from 20 years ago; meanwhile, its first ten missions are essentially tutorials to ease in



» [Famicom] The robust core game design of the original has sustained the series for 35 years.





The things I'll do for gold...  
Ah, well. Time to die, darlin'!



» [GBA] Usually, you start each game by teaching bandits that they've picked on the wrong warrior.



» [GBA] Units have a hit stat, which determines accuracy. A missed strike at a critical moment can be devastating.





» [GameCube] Pegasus knights have insane movement, but they're perilously weak to archers.



» [GameCube] *Path Of Radiance's* rarity and high price marks it as a holy grail of GameCube collections.

► newcomers, even if that might have been a gripe for veterans. Another new addition is a character that inserts the player into the game by way of role-playing as an unseen tactician, though it went against the nature of playing as authored characters that you form emotional connections with (future games with customisable protagonists were wisely represented in person and controllable on the battlefield).

Otherwise, all the core fundamentals of *Fire Emblem* were there. There was the weapon triangle system that gave a rock-paper-scissors strategy to battle, where swords beat axes, axes beat lances, and lances beat swords, aided by a easy-to-read map clearly indicating where units can move and their attack range, with snappy transitions to battle sequences. Although these animations weren't quite as detailed as in *Advance Wars*, the characters themselves were still expressively represented during dialogue sequences, and that personality extended to the merchants and other minor characters.

What made these characters even more special was that they didn't just stay the same. Besides levelling up, you could also promote them to higher classes, and having units fighting near each other would also unlock support conversations as their relationship bonds ranked up, providing stat boosts when these units fight alongside each other. It's

this kind of personal investment that then raised the emotional stakes as a unit that fell in battle would also be lost forever, making *Fire Emblem* one of the first games to introduce the concept of permadeath.

No doubt this fear also prompted many players to hold the A, B, Start and Select buttons together to quickly soft-reset the GBA before a fatal mistake played out, although the game's autosave meant you would still return to the moment before your doomed move unless you chose to restart that chapter and battle again if you didn't want to lose a precious unit.

While its international debut on the GBA may have factored into why the series often felt most suited to a handheld, Nintendo nonetheless continued to bring *Fire Emblem* to its home consoles. 2005's *Path Of Radiance*, in particular, took advantage of the GameCube's hardware to upgrade the presentation. Not everyone took to the 3D graphics, especially

considering that character models still relied on accompanying illustrated portraits to identify each unit, though it also clashed with the game's pre-rendered computer-generated cutscenes.

**A**lthough having mercenary Ike as a protagonist was a departure from the high-born royalty that takes on the hero role, and you also had the novelty of enemies that could shapeshift into tougher animal forms, there wasn't really a huge change to the turn-based tactical gameplay. 2007's *Radiant Dawn*, a direct sequel, also didn't do much to move the series forward. In fact, its punishing gameplay felt at odds on the Wii, which was attracting a much wider and more casual audience. It was then only upon returning to handheld that *Fire Emblem's* renaissance truly arrived.

*Awakening* on the 3DS was actually intended to be the last *Fire Emblem* game if it didn't meet sales expectations, which was arguably what lit a fire in the team to make it the best game they could, incorporating ideas from across the series' history. Many would agree that it is the best one, and it's certainly the entry that saw widespread success not just in Japan when it launched in 2012 but worldwide the following year, ensuring it would continue to have a future.

You could point to several things that made *Awakening* special. On a basic level, the decision to include a 'Casual' difficulty mode, which removed the hardcore permadeath mechanic, helped open up the series to a wider audience. Its presentation, meanwhile, nailed a balance of past and present, with its clear



» [3DS] *Awakening* marked a make-or-break point for the series: if it didn't sell, *Fire Emblem* was to be canned.



» [3DS] Knights are good scouts, but don't fall into the trap of sending them into a flurry of enemy units.

## FIVE TO PLAY The best FE games that made it to the West



### FIRE EMBLEM (GBA)

■ Also known by the subtitle *The Blazing Blade*, keeping it simple for the first internationally released entry in the series seemed the smart choice when it came to introducing hardcore turn-based tactics and the fear of permadeath to newcomers.



### FIRE EMBLEM: PATH OF RADIANCE (GAMECUBE)

■ The first entry to be presented in 3D, along with cinematic cutscenes and voice acting. Its story also takes on a more serious tone, though the difficulty was toned down for the Western release.



### FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING (3DS)

■ An option to turn off permadeath may have divided purists, but it helped the series reach a wider audience. More appealing was how bonds between allies could also turn into marriages and offspring.



### FIRE EMBLEM FATES (3DS)

■ Set in a conflict between two kingdoms, you play as a character who must choose between their birthplace and adopted home, which splits the story into two games (*Conquest* being much tougher than *Birthright*). Meanwhile, there's also a third 'true' path.



### FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES (SWITCH)

■ Continuing the ability to take different allegiances leading to a significantly different campaign, you're not just a tactician but also a teacher, as the series becomes as much a school social sim as a tactical RPG.





» [3DS] A helpful forecast screen highlights what's likely to happen... but it might not pan out that way.

## “AWAKENING ON THE 3DS WAS ACTUALLY INTENDED TO BE THE LAST FIRE EMBLEM GAME”

and readable chibi sprites on the square-grid map complementing units that were wonderfully represented in dynamic 3D battle sequences on the top screen.

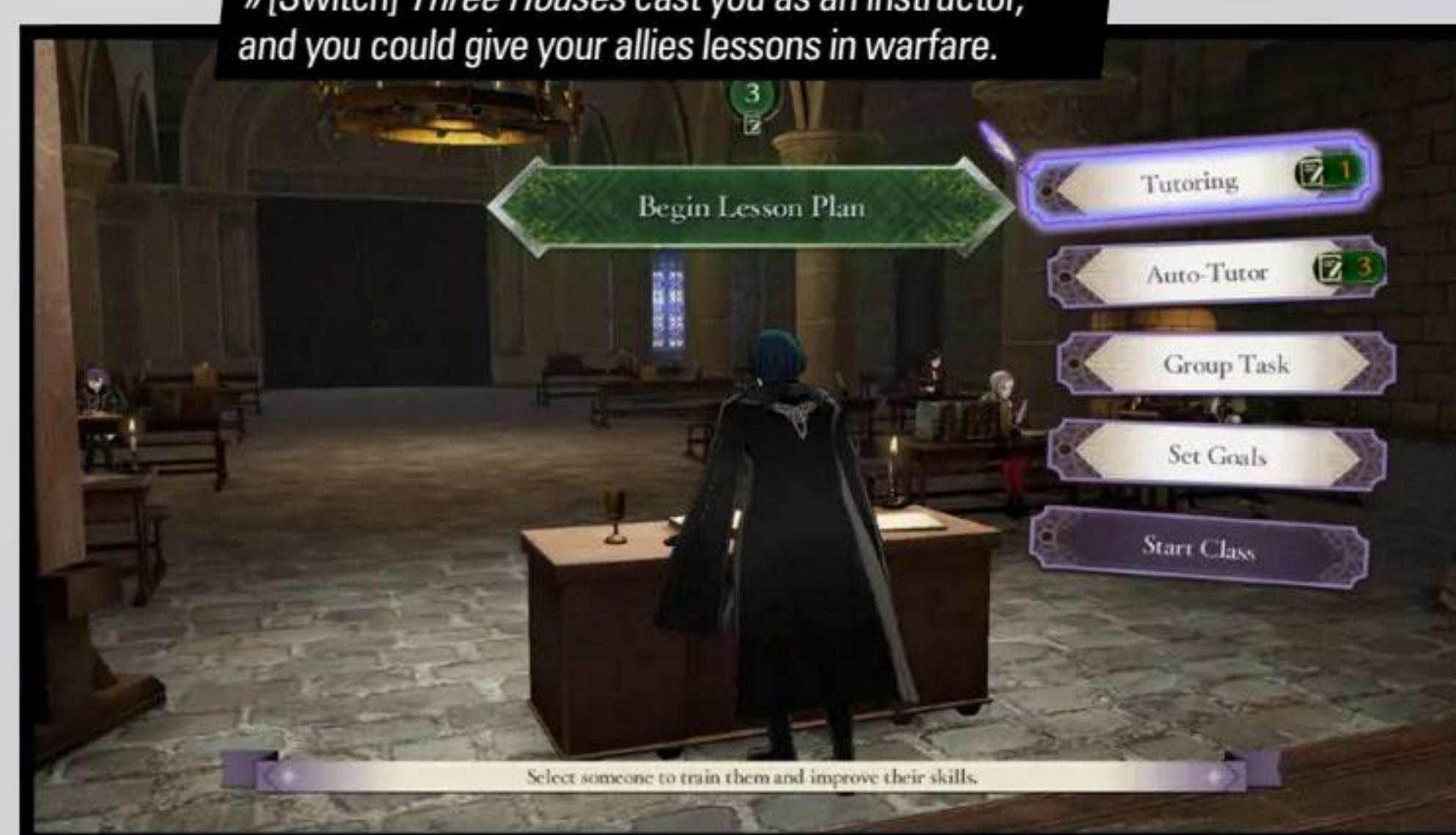
The characters are perhaps also among some of the most beloved in the series (three out of eight *Fire Emblem* playable fighters in *Smash Ultimate* are from *Awakening*), while also honouring the past, such as a character disguised as original hero Marth, and recurring character Anna even graduates from merchant to a recruitable unit. These memorable units also lean into the biggest appeal of the game: romance. This wasn't strictly a new mechanic, having existed in the Japan-only Super Famicom title, *Genealogy Of The Holy War*, but its return was well-timed with the trend of other popular modern RPGs that included romancing party members, such as in *Mass Effect* and *Persona*. But *Awakening* took this further, as romances could happen between units and not just the protagonist, culminating not only in marriage but even offspring. Due to a bizarre time-travel twist, it also meant you'd actually be able to recruit their grown-up children (with their parents' inherited stats) to your army.

**F**uture *Fire Emblem* titles would double down on its approach to difficulty and relationships, if somewhat controversially.

For instance, 2017's *Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows Of Valentia* (a remake of *Fire Emblem Gaiden*, previously only released for Famicom in Japan) made it possible to rewind a limited number of times, but by the time it got to 2023's *Engage*, this mechanic became unlimited on the standard difficulty, undermining the series' hardcore roots. Some might also take issue with how romance devolved into creepy fan service – the Japanese version of *Fates* infamously let you use the 3DS touchscreen to interact with party members. On the other hand, *Three Houses* not only dialled romance back to just the main protagonist but also had more inclusive options when it came to same-sex relationships.

Still, if there are complaints from purists that the latest *Fire Emblem* games have become stuffed with unnecessary distractions, it's important to remember the series was described by Intelligent Systems as an RPG simulation. It's then not that surprising for there to be social simulation alongside tactical simulation, which still remained enthralling. Since its comeback with *Awakening*, *Fire Emblem* has also broadened its definitions, spinning off into action in Koei Tecmo's *Warriors* games, part of a crossover RPG in Atlus's contemporary JRPG *Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE*, as well as a free-to-play mobile spin-off in *Fire Emblem Heroes*, which has been Nintendo's most lucrative on the platform. In other words, *Fire Emblem* is far from just a tactical JRPG niche, but a mega Nintendo franchise. ★

» [Switch] *Three Houses* cast you as an instructor, and you could give your allies lessons in warfare.



» [Switch] Avatar characters are usually a blank slate for the player to insert themselves into the story.



» [Switch 2] The newest game, *Fortune's Weave*, looks to be set in the same world as *Three Houses*.



» [Switch] *Three Houses* lets you zoom in on the action, giving battles breathtaking scope.



# THE SECRETS

This verdant and lush series brought us a more action-oriented approach to JRPGs. Here, we delve into the roots and branches of the series





# OF MANA

## MYSTIC QUEST

For such a highly regarded RPG franchise, the *Mana* series hardly had the most auspicious of beginnings. In fact, it didn't even carry the *Mana* name. First released in Japan as *Seiken Densetsu: Final Fantasy Gaiden* in 1991, the Game Boy title literally translates as *Legend Of The Holy Sword: A Final Fantasy Side Story* and was clearly intended to cash in on the success of Square's flagship Famicom RPG.

Rather than stick with *Final Fantasy*'s traditional turn-based battles, however, *Seiken Densetsu* used an action-RPG combat system that recalled Nintendo's *Legend Of Zelda*, except with RPG systems like experience points, stat-changing equipment and magical spells thrown into the mix. The big twist in the combat came from the power gauge at the bottom of the screen that

Dark Lord: You say  
the Mana Tree is  
above the Falls..?



would gradually fill up whenever the player wasn't attacking. Allow it to fill to the top and you'll be able to perform a MAX attack with special properties, including, of course, greater damage. The rewards for allowing the gauge to fill up were great but did include some risk, since you obviously couldn't fight for some time while gathering power.

Levelling up in *Seiken Densetsu* was a simple affair, basically asking you to assign points to just four different categories: Power, for damage; Stamina, for defence; Wisdom, for magic points; and Will, which increased the speed with which the power gauge would fill. Though simplistic, there was just enough variety here to ensure that the player could level up their character in a personalised way, defining their statistics in a way that complemented their own combat strategies. ►

» [Game Boy] *Mystic Quest* doesn't fit with its *Final Fantasy* branding, but it's worth checking out in its own right.





## “Secret Of Mana introduced many European gamers to the joys of the JRPG”

► Though an enjoyable enough action-RPG, *Seiken Densetsu* was far from a huge success. Even now it is rarely afforded much attention, either as the first in a very popular series or in the context of the Game Boy's best RPGs. This may be because it was released at a time when RPGs were still an obscure genre in the West, or may simply be because of the confused heritage of the title. When it was first released in the UK, *Seiken Densetsu* went by the name of *Mystic Quest* and may have been confused with the 1993 SNES release *Mystic Quest Legend*, another *Final Fantasy* spin-off title that was otherwise unrelated to the Game Boy game. And to make matters worse, *Mystic Quest* was re-released in 1998 by Sunsoft as *Final Fantasy Adventure*, presumably to cash in on the success of *Final Fantasy VII*. In reality, however, this only confused audiences, who found *Final Fantasy Adventure* to be a primitive action game that had nothing in common with the luxurious PlayStation RPG with which they'd fallen in love the year before.



### SECRET OF MANA

One of the lesser-known facts about *Seiken Densetsu* is that it actually began life as a very different game. Originally intended for the Famicom Disk System, it was supposed to be an epic adventure, called *Seiken Densetsu: The Emergence Of Excalibur*, which would span five separate disks. But management at Square deemed the project too ambitious and expensive, and cancelled development during pre-production. The game was therefore heavily redesigned and resurrected as a Game Boy project a few years later.

This downgrade of ambition is a fate also suffered by the sequel. *Seiken Densetsu 2* was originally designed for the Super Famicom's proposed PlayStation add-on, a CD-ROM drive for the Japanese console, which was,



» [SNES] Even with its downgraded scope, *Secret Of Mana* stands tall among SNES RPGs.

infamously, abandoned by Nintendo, prompting Sony to develop and launch the PlayStation into the console market that changed the games industry overnight. No one could have predicted the eventual success of the PlayStation, however, so instead of following Sony, Square stayed with Nintendo – for the time being, at least – and shifted *Seiken Densetsu 2* to cartridge format. Consequently, a significant amount of content had to be removed from the game in order to fit it into the much smaller ROM space on the cartridge, and first to go was the plan to have multiple routes through the adventure, culminating in several possible endings.

Despite these changes, *Seiken Densetsu 2*, or *Secret Of Mana* as it was renamed for the West, still went on to become one of the most

## MASTERS OF MANA

### KOICHI ISHII

Koichi Ishii is the creator of *Seiken Densetsu* and has worked on every game in the series to date. He first joined Square in 1987 and worked on many of its earliest RPGs, including the first three *Final Fantasy* titles and the original *SaGa*. Ishii designed and oversaw all of the *Mana* games while also contributing to other Square titles like *SaGa Frontier* and *Final Fantasy XI*, before leaving the company in 2007 to set up his own studio called Grezzo, where he produced a string of successful titles working with Nintendo, including the remake of *The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening*. He returned to *Mana* for *Visions*, supervising the monster design.

### YOSHINORI KITASE

Another Square veteran, Kitase's contribution to the *Mana* series begins and ends with the scenario writing on *Mystic Quest*. Since then, however, Kitase has gone on to become one of the most important individuals at Square Enix. He's produced and directed a string of hits over the years and quickly rose to the head of the publisher's main development teams.



» The Rabite has been used for loads of *Mana* merchandise.



## MASTERS OF MANA

### HIROMICHI TANAKA

One of the founding members of Square, going all the way back to 1983. Tanaka programmed Square's first game, *The Death Trap*, then designed the first three *Final Fantasy* games, and later went on to design both *Secret Of Mana* and *Seiken Densetsu 3* before moving on to big PlayStation games like *Chrono Cross* and *Xenogears*. He left Square Enix in 2012 and now works as a freelance advisor.

### NASIR GEBELLI

The videogame programmer that other videogame programmers hold in high esteem, Nasir Gebelli made his name on the Apple II before moving to Japan to join Square. Gebelli worked on all of the developer's major Famicom games and was the main programmer on *Secret Of Mana*, his final Square game before leaving to found his own company.

accomplished and popular RPGs of the 16-bit generation. Building on the template of the original Game Boy game, it featured greatly enhanced graphics and sound, but it's the evolution of the gameplay that made it a truly excellent sequel. Take the combat, for example: the power gauge remained from the first game, but it was much more important to the flow of battles. Instead of waiting for the gauge to fill before striking, you now had to hold down the attack button and let go to strike when the power had reached the desired strength. And instead of levelling up the speed of the gauge, you now levelled up your weapons, each level adding an extra bar to the gauge and making the MAX attack extremely powerful but also increasing the amount of time it takes to charge up. You're still free to move your character around while charging, so you can still avoid enemy attacks, although you do move a little slower, and this creates an interesting flow that feels halfway between turn-based and real-time combat.

*Secret Of Mana* is remembered for a number of its qualities but none more so, perhaps, than its multiplayer functionality. In the original game, you would occasionally recruit partner characters who would tag along behind you, but in *Secret Of Mana* you had two permanent party members, constant companions who would help out in combat and could call upon their own special abilities. As the player, you could leave these characters to AI control, or you could switch between them to take more direct command over their actions. If you had a multi-tap and a couple of friends, however, you could all play the game together, the three of you taking control of a character each



and working your way through the adventure as a real-life party of warriors. This was a truly unique selling point at the time and remains fairly unusual even today, which is strange because it actually worked incredibly well. There was something deeply enriching about playing through an epic RPG with your friends by your side. It added a tactical element to combat as you vocally shared strategies or called upon each other for help during difficult situations and, in the long term, it felt like a true journey that you shared together. Played in the pre-internet days, it became a shared obsession over a number of weeks as you and your friends would meet up during evenings and weekends to conquer the game, much in the same way that the previous generation of gamers would have banded together to play pen-and-paper RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons*.

A deep, strategic RPG system, the innovative multiplayer component and the undeniably attractive game world of *Secret Of Mana* all came together to make it one of the greatest RPGs of the era, and it is rightfully remembered today as a stone-cold classic, especially in Europe where it was responsible for introducing many console owners to the joys of Japanese role-playing games in the absence of local releases of any *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest* titles. ►





# MASTERS OF MANA

## HIROKI KIKUTA

Originally an anime composer, Hiroki Kikuta was hired by Square when a mutual love of prog rock led *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu to warm to him in an interview. Kikuta's first job at Square was on *Romancing SaGa* and subsequently moved on to scoring duties on both *Secret Of Mana* and *Seiken Densetsu 3*. And a fine job he did, too. Kikuta left Square in 1998 to found his own development studio where he designed, produced, wrote and scored PlayStation RPG *Koudelka*, before leaving to become a freelance composer. He returned to the series to lend his musical nous to *Visions Of Mana*.

## AKITOSHI KAWAZU

A veteran of Square Enix who was around since the early days, Kawazu has several credits on classic games. He was game designer for the first two *Final Fantasy* titles, before switching gears and working on the *SaGa* series, which you can read more about elsewhere in this bookazine. From the Noughties onwards, Kawazu took a higher-level role as a producer within the company and helped get games like *Final Fantasy XII*, *The Last Remnant* and many *Crystal Chronicles* instalments out the door. His most recent work has been with *SaGa* titles, and in a more hands-on way: he wrote and co-designed *SaGa: Scarlet Grace* in 2016, and directed *SaGa: Emerald Beyond* in 2024.

## ► SEIKEN DENSETSU 3

With *Secret Of Mana* celebrated for introducing many European gamers to the console role-playing game, then its even better sequel can be considered one of the most heartbreaking releases in videogame history, since stayed confined to the shores of Japan. One of the most wildly ambitious games of its time, *Seiken Densetsu 3* was so complicated that it would have cost Square a fortune to localise it into English, and in 1995, with the 32-bit PlayStation and Saturn firmly established across the world, it's easy to see why the publisher decided not to take the risk on the dwindling Super Nintendo market.

All good things come to those who wait, however, and distraught *Secret Of Mana* fans finally got their taste of its sequel in 2000 when the game was unofficially translated by a hacker called Neill Corlett. What those fans found in the translated version was no less than RPG brilliance, way ahead of its time, even five years after the fact. Though the number of players was reduced from three to two, *Seiken Densetsu 3* is, by all other measures, a much more ambitious game. Rather than three set characters, it offers a pool of six from which you must select three at the start. Each has their own personal story, and your choice of who to make the main character will influence the direction of the game, including encounters that happen throughout the adventure and how the story ends. It's an impressive system that adds a personal touch to the flow of the game's plot, as well as creating

significant replay value. And much like Square's *Chrono Trigger*, released in the same year, it proves that Japanese RPGs are nowhere near as rigid and stale as some detractors would have you believe.

The innovations don't stop with the story, either. *Seiken Densetsu 3* also boasts an unusual calendar system that not only stands as an early example of a day-to-night simulation but also moves through a weekly calendar in which each day offers stat bonuses for certain types of magic, should you use the right kind on the correct day. There's also a complex class system that enabled the player to promote their characters to different classes at certain junctures and also offered a branching path that governed whether the characters became good, evil or something in between. Take that, BioWare!

If *Seiken Densetsu 3* had ever been released outside Japan in the Nineties it would surely be recognised as a classic equally as brilliant as *Secret Of Mana*. Instead it merely became a footnote in

the history of the series. Today, fans can play an official translated version of it today on Nintendo Switch via *Collection Of Mana*, released in 2019.

## LEGEND OF MANA

The years following the release of *Seiken Densetsu 3* saw Square transform into a games industry goliath on the back of the success of 1997's *Final Fantasy VII*, and while this period saw the *Mana* series go quiet for a couple of years, it soon returned as the affluent Square entered its most prolific age, churning out PlayStation games like they were going out of fashion. By the time *Legend Of Mana* was created, however, some of the original development team had moved on to other projects. Therefore, a new producer stepped in Akitoshi Kawazu, a Square veteran known for his punishingly difficult, obtusely designed games like *Final Fantasy II* and the offbeat *SaGa* series. And while the true creator of the *Mana* series, Koichi Ishii, remained as director, Kawazu's influence on *Legend Of Mana* is unmistakable.

Rather than take the player on a journey through an epic, scripted adventure across a huge, open game



» [SNES] *Seiken Densetsu 3* is full of impressive bosses, including Dolan here.



» [PlayStation] For all the game's flaws, the hand-drawn watercolour art of *Legend Of Mana* can look gorgeous.



world, *Legend Of Mana* went with an altogether different and somewhat bizarre form of progression. Start the game afresh and you're presented with an empty overworld of slots, into which you must plant artefacts in order to grow a randomly generated location containing towns and dungeons. A neat idea in theory, particularly for the way it increased the sense of personalisation and replay value established in *Seiken Densetsu 3*, but this system ultimately disappointed by making the player feel like they were playing through a series of unconnected mini-quests rather than one huge adventure. And while the resolutely 2D visuals were undeniably attractive in the era of pre-rendered backgrounds and blocky polygon characters, their random nature pushed the art direction to a point where the locations naturally lacked a sense of personality or identity, making the world feel a little stale after a while.

*Legend Of Mana* tried to innovate in other areas, such as the multiplayer. A second player could take control of the AI partners that would occasionally team up with the main character, or they could take the character from their own save data, copy it to a PlayStation memory card, and import it into their friend's game, taking all their stats and equipment with them and retaining any progress they made during their friend's adventure. Another neat idea, this too fell flat because two players controlling the same character, no matter how differently they might have been levelled up, only increased the disconnected feeling between the player and the game's fiction.

*Legend Of Mana* can be considered a brave attempt by Square to reinvent the *Seiken Densetsu* series in a prolific period of its history but, unfortunately, it did so in a way that detracted from the main strengths of the previous games while also failing to excel in its own right. In retrospect, this is the exact point where the cracks started to show in the series as a whole.

» [GBA] Don't let its development by an outside team fool you: *Sword Of Mana* has undeniable series heritage.



## SWORD OF MANA

After *Legend Of Mana*, a number of the key *Seiken Densetsu* team left Square to form their own development studio called Brownie Brown. Rather than forge on without them, however, Square outsourced development of its next title to Brownie Brown. The result was *Sword Of Mana*, a Game Boy Advance remake of the Game Boy original, *Mystic Quest*.

The high-end graphic capabilities of the GBA allowed Brownie Brown to create a visual style in *Sword Of Mana* that was much closer to the

look of the other games in the series, particularly *Seiken Densetsu 3*, and the developer also took the opportunity to bring the setting more in line with the *Mana* mythology, removing some of the *Final Fantasy* elements left in from when *Seiken Densetsu* was supposed to be a spin-off title.

Much of *Mystic Quest*'s original gameplay and story remain intact, but there are also a few changes in the remake, most notably the ability to choose to play as and follow the story of the girl character, as well as the boy from the original game. The developer also tried to bring in some of the multiplayer functionality that the series is known for. Though you couldn't actually play simultaneously, you could link two GBAs together to trade items and even partner characters – a nice touch if

» [Mobile] *Mystic Quest* has actually been remade twice. Here's the mobile phone version, which is different to both the Game Boy and the Game Boy Advance versions.



“JRPGs are nowhere near as rigid and stale as some detractors would have you believe”

## SECRET OF EVERMORE

When *Seiken Densetsu 3* failed to release outside Japan, American and European SNES owners got *Secret Of Evermore* instead. The only game to ever be developed at Square USA, *Secret Of Evermore* was totally unrelated to *Secret Of Mana* but is constantly compared to it because of the similar title, genre, platform and release date. Nowhere near as bad a game as some people would have you believe, it has become something of a whipping boy among Square fans who blame it for taking the place of *Secret Of Mana 2*. *Secret Of Evermore*'s lead programmer, Brian Fehdrau, told *games™* in March 2009 that the decision not to localise *Seiken Densetsu 3* had nothing to do with the development of *Secret Of Evermore*. “The people on our team never had anything to do with translations,” he said. “That was all done by people outside the team, who had been working for the company since before we were hired. In fact, there were several translations done during the development of *Evermore*. The choice not to translate *Seiken Densetsu 3* was made overseas by the parent company in Japan, for undisclosed reasons of their own. I've made speculations as to why but, honestly, I don't have or know any official reason.” Further speculation suggests that *Seiken Densetsu 3* wasn't initially released outside of Japan because of deeply integrated bugs in the code that would have been too difficult to remove in order to satisfy Nintendo USA's quality control demands. It finally had its moment in the sun being bundled in *Collection Of Mana* in 2019, and a 3D remake followed in 2020.



► you could find someone else who owned the game.

*Sword Of Mana* is also the only game in the series to claim the accolade of its own special edition console, as Square and Nintendo got together to create the Mana Blue Game Boy Advance SP, which came packaged with a copy of the game and a special carrying case.

## CHILDREN OF MANA

It was right in the middle of *Sword Of Mana*'s development that the unthinkable happened at Square. 1 April 2003 saw the monolithic publisher officially merge with its longtime rival, *Dragon Quest* creator Enix, to form the biggest developer and publisher in Japan: Square Enix. And while the merger had little effect on the company's business practices, there were a number of trends that, perhaps coincidentally, started to emerge around this time. Encouraged by the success of *Final Fantasy X-2* and inspired by fan demand for a remake of or sequel to *Final Fantasy VII*, Square Enix began its move toward what it called 'polymorphic content'. The idea behind this was that instead of developing a hit and then creating

sequels to it, the company would plan several titles, all in the same universe, at the same time in order to strengthen the brand by offering fans a body of work over a relatively concentrated period of time. The first of these works was *Compilation Of Final Fantasy VII*, a series of different genre titles each revolving around Square's most popular work, while other examples include

*Ivalice Alliance*, a series of games set in the same world as *Final Fantasy XII* and *Vagrant Story*; and *Fabula Nova Crystallis*, three connected RPGs in the *Final Fantasy XIII* setting. In 2005, Square Enix announced *World Of Mana*, a series of *Seiken Densetsu* games that would be developed back-to-back and explore

similar themes but in different videogame genres.

The first game in the *World Of Mana* compilation was *Children Of Mana*, a 2006 Nintendo DS title developed by Nex Entertainment, perhaps best known for its work on modern *Shining* titles *Shining Soul*, *Shining Tears* and *Shining Wind*. Like those games, *Children Of Mana* was a dungeon-crawler, heavily inspired by *Diablo* and focused on randomly generated, many-floored dungeons and loot drops. The game also uses the DS's wireless



“Oyamada anticipated there would be a strong reaction from fans if a new title were to be made”

communications to enable four-player co-op, wherein the three helper players retain all experience and loot gained for their own adventures.

## FRIENDS OF MANA

This particular *Mana* game didn't see a worldwide release. This wasn't exactly a devastating loss for fans outside of Japan, however. *Friends Of Mana* was a multiplayer hack-and-slash game developed solely for Japanese mobile phones. We're not missing much, and the servers closed five years after launch in 2011, though it would be nice if Square remade the game for Android and iOS – if only for the completists.



» [PS2] The series' first 3D instalment was disappointing to many.

# THE WORLD OF MANA

Though the *Seiken Densetsu* series of games are mostly unconnected in terms of their story and characters, they do all share some common elements. Here are a few of them...



## RABITES

Every game series has its regular, recurring enemy type. *Dragon Quest* has Slimes, *Mario* has Goombas and *Seiken Densetsu* has the Rabite. These yellow, rabbit-like enemies have appeared in every game in the series and have become something of a mascot for Square, which has made sure to slap them on every bit of *Mana* merchandise going. And who wouldn't? Just look at the little fella.

## THE MANA SWORD

A recurring weapon throughout the series, the Mana Sword is often the most powerful weapon in the game and is wielded by the hero. Yes, it's very clichéd, but then the series did start off with the working title of *The Emergence Of Excalibur*, and *Seiken Densetsu* literally translates as *Legend Of The Holy Sword*. So we'll let it off.



## THE MANA TREE

Appearing in every single game in the series, the Mana Tree is the source of all the world's magic, and the plot of each game often revolves around trying to save or preserve it. The iconic cover art to *Secret Of Mana* features the Mana Tree in staggering scale against the tiny protagonists, making for one of the most iconic images in RPG history. The less said about the cartoony Mana Tree and its face, as seen from *Legend Of Mana* onwards, the better.

## RING MENU

One of the least talked about but most important parts of the *Mana* series' gameplay is the Ring Menu. It doesn't feature in all of the games, but those that use it are all the better for it. With a press of a button, the action pauses and takes you to an in-battle menu, keeping you aware of the placement of all enemies. Acquire a new item and it will be added to the ring without crowding the other items out. Genius.



## FLAMMIE

The Flammie is a sort of dragon that the player uses to get around the world in both Super Famicom games plus *Children Of Mana*. In the 16-bit games, the player summons Flammie by using a monkey drum and then flies around, in real-time, using the console's iconic Mode 7 display.





## DAWN OF MANA

Titled *Seiken Densetsu 4* in Japan, *Dawn Of Mana* was clearly intended to be the tent-pole release in the *World Of Mana* compilation as well as a return to what made the series great in its first three instalments. Sadly, however, it really failed to achieve either of these goals. The first 3D instalment in the series, *Dawn Of Mana* was rather bizarrely influenced by *Half-Life 2*, which series creator Koichi Ishii saw at a trade show in 2004. Ishii loved the Havok physics engine used in Valve's landmark FPS and decided to license it for use in his PlayStation 2 *Mana* title, building the entirety of the gameplay around it. Big mistake!

Where the classic *Mana* titles merely mixed traditional role-playing stat progression with *Zelda*-like combat to create a fun yet deep combat system, *Dawn Of Mana* went for an odd alternative. The idea was that you couldn't walk up to an enemy and hit them; you had to startle them first by whacking an object toward them. The problem with this was that the Havok engine was a bit too realistic with its results and, more often than not, you'd whack an object only to see it bounce off in a completely unintended direction.

To make matters worse, *Dawn Of Mana*'s experience system was completely bizarre. You could gain levels like any other game, but as soon as you moved to a new area the game would boot you back down to level one. The only way to permanently boost your stats was to kill enemies only after their Panic level had raised beyond 99 after you'd repeatedly scared them by smacking in-game objects in their direction. Given how difficult and frustrating this was, the prospect of permanently upgrading your character was enough to turn you off playing the game at all, which hardly makes *Dawn Of Mana* worthy of the 'true sequel' status.

## MASTERS OF MANA

## YOKO SHIMOMURA

One of the greatest videogame composers of all time, Yoko Shimomura is responsible for many classic themes and scores including *Final Fight*, *Street Fighter II*, *Breath Of Fire*, *Kingdom Hearts*, *Parasite Eve* and *Final Fantasy XV*, among many, many others. Shimomura wrote the soundtracks to both *Legend Of Mana* and *Heroes Of Mana* – two games that were, quite frankly, beneath her.

## SHINICHI KAMEOKA

Starting his videogame career on *Secret Of Mana*, Shinichi Kameoka designed the playable characters in that title, *Seiken Densetsu 3* and *Legend Of Mana* before leaving Square to form his own company, Brownie Brown, which developed *Sword Of Mana* in 2003.

[PS5] The art direction for *Visions Of Mana* has a quaint storybook feel to it, which fits the tone of the series well.



» [PS5] Like many RPGs today, the newest *Mana* game leans heavily on action gameplay, bringing the series influence full circle.

## VISIONS OF MANA

Perhaps because of the poor reception of *Dawn Of Mana*, the series entered a period of dormancy, which led many people down a path of thinking the *Mana* series has been retired. Well, for the mainline releases at least. Fans were placated with a carousel of spin-offs and remakes, some worthy of the *Mana* name and some not – as is often the case with many cult classic series.

Behind the scenes, however, things were stirring. During 2016, Masaru Oyamada was acting as the series producer and was eager to kickstart development on a new mainline *Mana* title. He anticipated there would be a strong reaction from fans if a new title were to be made, and used a string of safer remake and spin-off projects to gauge the temperature of what devoted *Mana* enthusiasts would like from a sequel. The 2020 remake of *Trials Of Mana* was what sealed the deal; bolstered by a warm reception from fans and critics, Oyamada had all the information he needed to greenlight *Visions Of Mana*, the fifth mainline title in the series.

Koichi Ishii was working for Grezzo, producing an array of successful titles for Nintendo, but he was wooed back to his series for *Visions*, acting as a supervisor

for monster design. Meanwhile, the rest of the team was filled out by series fans or veterans such as composers Hiroki Kikuta, Tsuyoshi Sekito, and Ryo Yamazaki. Fans were informed of the new sequel in a livestream celebrating the series' 30th anniversary, while a full reveal took place during The Game Awards 2023. Later, the release date was confirmed as 29 August 2024.

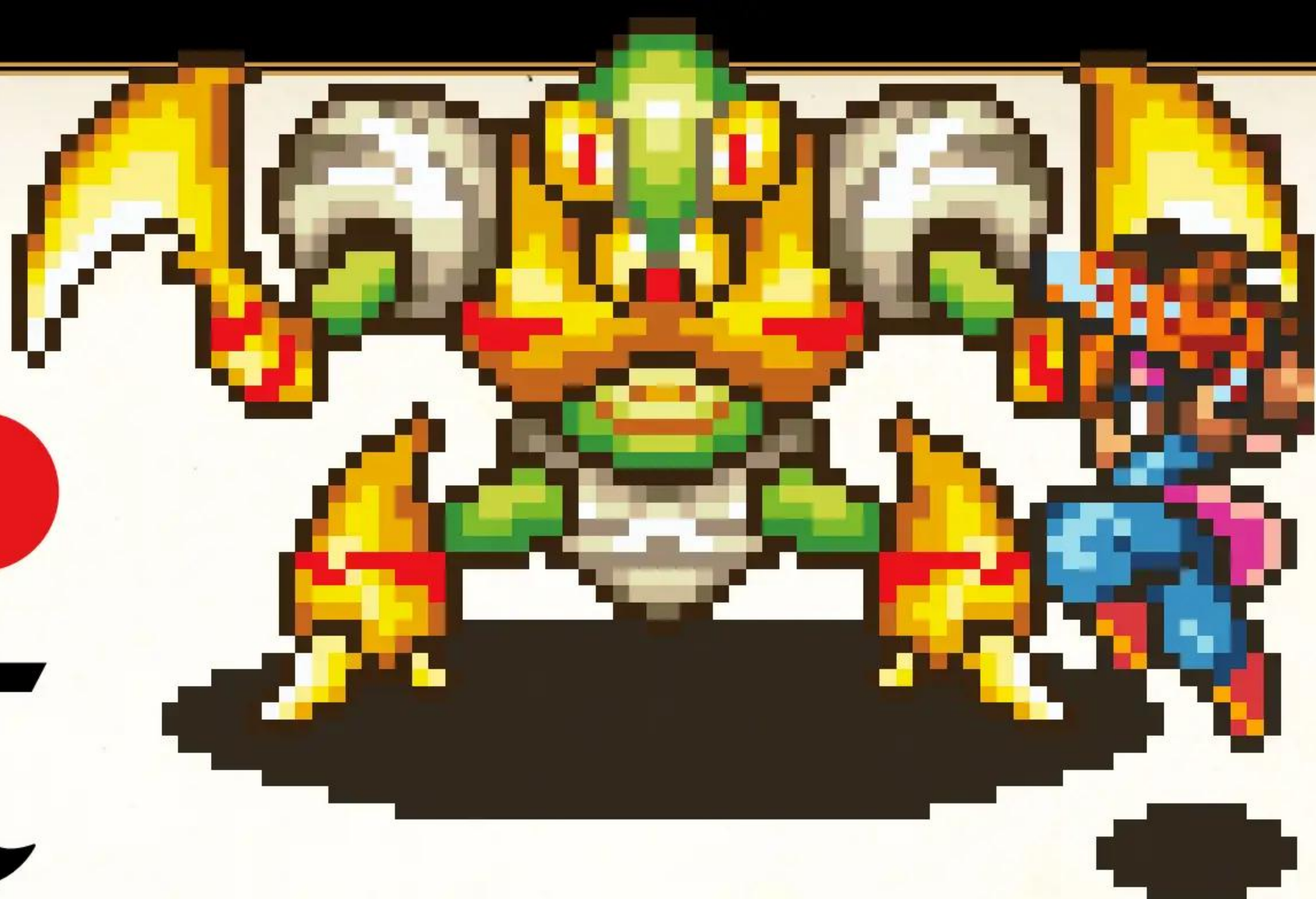
So how was it? Despite dreading another misfire like *Dawn Of Mana*, *Mana* devotees were treated to a competent, if not fully remarkable, sequel. Combat and the systems that underpin it were a clear highlight, while the story drew criticism for being on the wrong side of 'a bit generic'. If anything, *Visions Of Mana*'s biggest sin is being just fine. Everything about the game aims directly down the middle of the road. That's by no means a bad thing; after all, a standard, if well-intentioned game is way more preferable than something that's churned out to capitalise on a brand name.

*Visions* has left the series in a much better spot than *Dawn* did, and for that, we can be grateful. Who knows, under the custodianship of people who clearly love the *Mana* series like Oyamada does, we're confident this isn't the last we've seen of this special, and much-loved JRPG legend. ★





# RPG Heaven *The* Greatest SNES RPGS



The Super Nintendo has a bit of a well-deserved reputation for being THE machine for JRPG experiences. Join us as we showcase the epic adventures that made Mega Drive owners jealous

*of all time*

Words by Martin Hinson





## Terranigma

PUBLISHER: ENIX (JP) NINTENDO (PAL) DEVELOPER: QUINTET YEAR 1995

*Terranigma* is something of an oddity in the Super Nintendo RPG library. It was first released in 1995 in Japan under the title *Tenchi Sozo*, which translates as 'The Creation Of Heaven And Earth'. A year later, it was localised by Nintendo for the PAL markets but somehow never saw a release in America. This was extremely rare as most SNES RPGs made the trip to the US first and only a handful ever made it to PAL territories, a fact that explains why *Terranigma* now commands very high prices among collectors.

*Terranigma* is an action RPG that tells the story of Ark and his quest to resurrect life on Earth. It uses a top-down view and a fairly simple, but quite deep, real-time combat system. Ark has plenty of abilities such as dashing, jumping, sliding, guarding and an unusual magic system. For example, you must find Magirocks, which are taken to the magic shop to be turned into consumable spells. Once used, the spells turn back into Magirock and can be taken to the shop again. The game moves at quite a pace, even for an action-based RPG. Ark is instantly controllable and responds to commands on a whim, making him a joy to control.

The meat of *Terranigma* involves the resurrection of Earth. Once you complete the first five towers at the start of the game, the continents of the world are restored and Ark travels to the mainland in order to kickstart life. Your first task is to revive the plant life to enable nature to begin its journey. Ark can converse with the plants and they will guide you to revive the animals and then eventually mankind. This is predominantly achieved by

travelling to various parts of the world to complete dungeons, gain items and trigger the multitude of story events.

The reason *Terranigma* is so good, though, is down to expert execution of various elements by its developer, Quintet. It manages to tell a wonderfully moving story and mix in plenty of original elements within the genre. For example, once you revive mankind, you are tasked with building the economies of the continents by helping residents make discoveries and then introducing them to different cultures.

The plot is quite unique because you play a large portion of the game with no real enemy. Normally in RPGs there is a defining evil from the very beginning of the game, but not so with *Terranigma*, which unravels with a level of skill not seen in many console games of the time. It's filled with deception, regret, love, religion and science and told with excellent pacing.

*Terranigma* also features superb graphics that vary from dank, desolate landscapes to vibrant jungles. The animation is excellent, character designs are attractive and the boss fights are impressive. The music is also superb, one of the best soundtracks of the 16-bit generation for sure.

Three decades on, we are still the game gets an official reissue so it can be enjoyed by those who missed it the first time around. This is probably the one of the most anticipated classic SNES RPGs to see some reissue love. *Terranigma* is a classic that despite commanding high prices is worth a place in any SNES owner's collection.



## Soul Blazer

PUBLISHER: ENIX DEVELOPER: QUINTET YEAR: 1992

Seen as the first part of an unofficial trilogy that features both *Illusion Of Time* and *Terranigma*, *Soul Blazer* is an action RPG based around the theme of resurrection. Essentially a dungeon-crawler, the player is tasked with freeing the souls of lost humans which, once released, rebuild the towns around them on your way to defeating the evil Deathtoll. The game tells a simple but poignant story that certainly has the power to draw the player in. Combat is also rather simple but somehow it all works like a dream because it's fast-paced, with plenty of enemies and some excellent boss battles. A forgotten gem that rewards curious RPG hunters.



## Mystic Quest Legend

PUBLISHER: SQUARE (US/JP) NINTENDO (PAL) DEVELOPER: SQUARE YEAR: 1992

Developed by Square and aimed as an entry-level RPG, *Mystic Quest Legend* was notable for being the first *Final Fantasy*-themed game released in the PAL regions, although it was a spin-off rather than part of the main series. Despite being dramatically cut down, *Mystic Quest Legend* is absorbing and enjoyable mainly thanks to its fun battle system and some fantastic music. There are no random battles here, as enemies are on-screen and a battle starts when you touch them. The game is also littered with optional battle arenas for levelling. With plenty of items, weapons and enemies, it's a simple but enjoyable experience.







## Breath Of Fire II

PUBLISHER: CAPCOM (NA/JP) LAGUNA (EU) DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE YEAR: 1994

Superior in almost every way to its predecessor, Capcom's *Breath of Fire II* is another high-quality RPG for the Super Nintendo. The majority of the game is viewed from a traditional top-down perspective, but battles are viewed from a visually superb isometric viewpoint that features fantastic sprites and glorious special effects. Combat is turn-based and does feature random battles, but the pace of battles remains fast enough to avoid frustration. Centring on the series staple characters Ryu and Nina, Ryu has the ability to transform into a dragon, which is one of the most interesting parts of the game. The recurring characters, much like *The Legend Of Zelda's*, are descendants of previous characters and not the same ones. Despite a sluggish start and occasionally iffy translation, *Breath of Fire II* picks up pace to evolve into a truly great RPG.



## Front Mission

PUBLISHER: SQUARE DEVELOPER: G-CRAFT YEAR: 1995

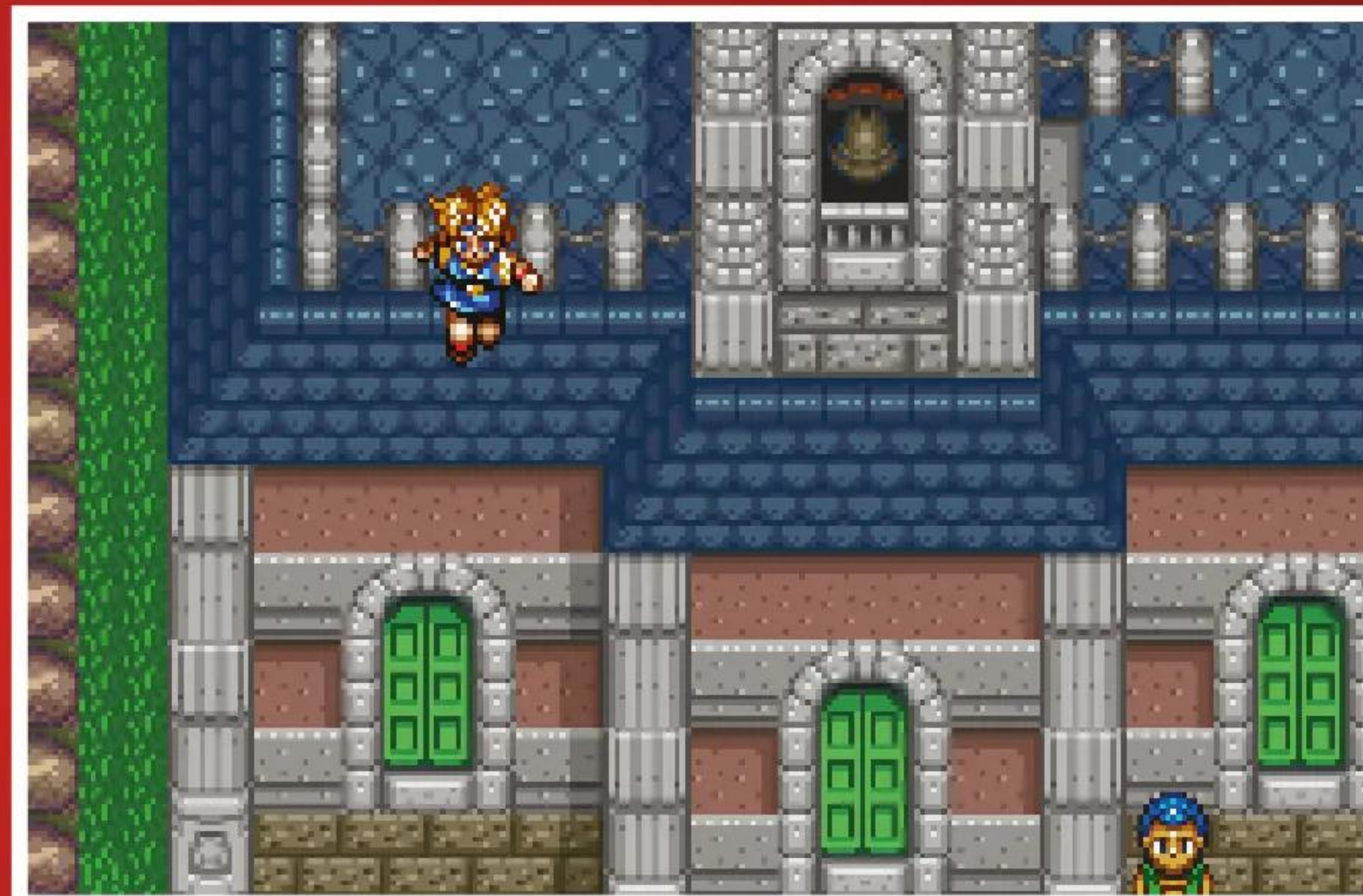
Released only in Japan in 1995, *Front Mission* still managed to gain a cult following in the West and was finally released in an officially translated form in North America during 2007 on Nintendo's DS. The game is an RPG of a tactical nature with linear game progression and a deep, entertaining plot. Set in 2090 and revolving around the colonisation of a fictitious island in the Pacific Ocean, *Front Mission* tells a tale that's as intriguing as it is fresh. The battle system is mostly in the usual tactical mould, however when attacks are performed, the game cuts to a close-up of the target in question for some spectacular visual effects. Depth comes from the customisation on offer. The majority of units are Wanzers, giant walking tanks that have four unique health bars: one each for the legs, left arm, right arm and body. Each is upgradable as the game progresses. It's different and highly recommended.



## Illusion Of Time

PUBLISHER: ENIX (JP) NINTENDO (WORLD) DEVELOPER: QUINTET YEAR: 1993

Despite being another action RPG, *Illusion Of Time* is quite a different beast to many similar games. Eschewing many staples of the genre, such as experience points, currency or equipment, *Illusion Of Time* centres around Will and his alter egos in a plot to uncover the secrets of the Tower Of Babel. Like *Terranigma*, the world is based loosely on Earth and features many locations such as The Great Wall Of China and the Egyptian Pyramids. After adventuring to the Tower Of Babel with his father, disaster strikes and Will returns to the village alone with no recollections of what happened. The game begins in earnest when Will gains the ability to make his first of two transformations. Our hero does have the ability to increase his power by collecting jewels dropped when clearing a room of enemies, but this unique skill can only be done once per room. It all makes for a highly novel adventure.





## Ogre Battle

PUBLISHER: ENIX DEVELOPER: QUEST YEAR: 1995

One of the most important things about *Ogre Battle* is that it launched one of the most successful careers in Japan, namely Yasumi Matsuno, who went on to create several mega hits, two of which scored 40/40 in *Famitsu*. The other most important thing is that it's also an excellent strategy RPG, although it plays out more like an RTS title, such as *Command & Conquer*, upon entering battle. *Ogre Battle* has plenty of depth when preparing for combat. It features a tarot card system that can be used to add certain effects at specific times. There's an alignment system that's a play on the good/evil theme, a day/night cycle that affects how certain classes or cards react in fights and more than 70 different classes of units to control. Set to a gripping, politically motivated plot and boasting some lovely visuals, *Ogre Battle* comes highly recommended to those that like a good challenge.



## Secret Of Evermore

PUBLISHER: SQUARE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE YEAR: 1995

In 1995, Super Nintendo fans were feverishly anticipating *Secret of Mana 2*. Instead they got *Secret Of Evermore*, a game developed by a team in America that Square had set up solely for creating it.

After the initial disappointment that *Mana 2* was not coming, *Secret Of Evermore* turned out to be an excellent take on the *Mana* gameplay system, but with a contemporary setting in America. The plot is based around time travel and involves an unnamed boy and his dog while featuring plenty of clever B-movie references. What we love about *Secret Of Evermore* is that it is packed with interesting ideas. Each region has a different currency, which can be converted at certain vendors and as you travel to each time zone, your dog takes on a different form relevant to that zone. Magic is based around alchemy, so you have to create your spells before you can cast them. The dog can also be used to sniff out ingredients for you, delivering another nice touch in a game that's littered with them.



## Chrono Trigger

PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE YEAR: 1995

This epic RPG was developed by SquareSoft and featured a creative team that had fans of the genre salivating. Hironobu Sakaguchi, the creator of *Final Fantasy*; Yuji Horii, creator of long-term rival Enix's *Dragon Quest*; and Akira Toriyama, artist of *Dragon Ball Z* and *Dragon Quest*, were all lead designers on the project. This led to *Chrono Trigger* being massively anticipated by Japanese and Western RPG fans alike. We're pleased to say this masterpiece delivered on all counts.

The first thing you notice about the game is the very *Dragon Ball*-style art. It's striking compared to the sombre stylings of *Final Fantasy VI*. Characters have wild spiky hair, colours are vivid but retain a realistic style that sits somewhere between other popular SquareSoft games.

On the surface, *Chrono Trigger* seems like any other Japanese RPG, however it contains several important innovations that set it apart from them. The first of these is the complete elimination of random battles and the separate battle screen. Enemies are visible at all times, so once you come into contact with one, the battle begins and plays out from the same viewpoint, rather than cutting to a

battle map. This helps to not only avoid the frustration of random encounters, but also allows the level of immersion into the world to remain high without the jarring change of scenery.

The next major innovation is its many multiple endings. *Chrono Trigger* features no fewer than 14 different endings to discover, many of them accessible through the excellent new Game Plus feature that's now standard on many of today's games.

Throughout the game, lead character Crono travels across various time zones ranging from 65000000BC to 2300AD. This gave the developers a real freedom to create very diverse and interesting locations, ranging from the dinosaur-infested forests of the past to the malfunctioning domes of the future. The story itself is excellent with intriguing enemies, genuine heartfelt moments and a great translation that still stands up today.

*Chrono Trigger* is a masterpiece of game design and it hasn't aged at all since it was first released in 1995. Anyone with even a passing interest in the genre should check it out immediately. Just be aware the SNES version is a little pricey.





## Super Mario RPG

**PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** SQUARESOFT **YEAR:** 1996 (NTSC)

*Super Mario RPG* is a landmark title in many different ways. On the one hand, it was a stunning collaboration between Nintendo and Square, but on the other, it was one of the last Square-developed titles on a Nintendo platform for some time.

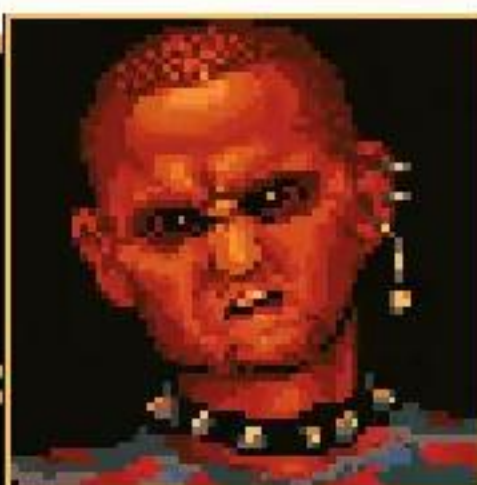
The first thing new players should do when starting the game is to watch the brilliant Attract mode. This gives players a great idea of the sheer amount of superb ideas that have been crammed into it. Featuring a mix of action platforming and turn-based combat, *Super Mario RPG* is a fast-paced, absorbing adventure, which is incredibly accessible to even the most novice of RPG fans. Visually, the game looks 32-bit, as it features similar rendering techniques to *Donkey Kong Country* and a distinctive 3D isometric viewpoint. The music is suitably twee but never annoying as expected from Yoko Shimomura.

If there is one thing that *Super Mario RPG* does so well, it's that it highlights SquareSoft in its prime and how big a deal it was when Nintendo finally lost the talented developer to Sony for *Final Fantasy VII*.

## Shadowrun

**PUBLISHER:** DATA EAST/LASER BEAM **DEVELOPER:** BEAM SOFTWARE **YEAR:** 1993

One of the most unique titles on the SNES, *Shadowrun* combines action RPG-style gameplay with elements of the point-and-click genre that was popular on computers at the time. Set in the not-too-distant future, your task as Jake Armitage is to track down your missing identity and to find the person that wants you dead. The cyberpunk setting feels very fresh on the console, the isometric visual style is nicely detailed, while the music is suitably matched and well-composed. Piecing together the plot is a hugely compelling experience, while talking to NPCs opens up new conversational opportunities to help you through this more adult of Super Nintendo RPGs.



Brain burnt. They say so  
gang geeked him.

Yeah? He don't



## Secret Of Mana

**PUBLISHER:** SQUARESOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **YEAR:** 1993

*Secret Of Mana* is a hugely popular action RPG and for good reason. SquareSoft's adventure features sumptuous graphics, incredible music and a stunning three-player mode that instantly made it stand apart from other RPGs of the time.

First released in 1993 and a follow-up to the Game Boy classic *Mystic Quest*, *Secret Of Mana* captivated audiences from the get go. It tells a simple story of a young boy who discovers a mysterious sword that he pulls, Arthur-like, from solid stone. It turns out that Mana, the lifeblood of the land, is being drained by the enemy in order to control the world; leaving the hero to energise the failing Mana Sword and hopefully restore balance to the land.

Visually, *Secret Of Mana* is stunning, with some of the best visuals to be seen on a 16-bit system at the time. Locations are diverse, ranging from desert plateaus, bustling villages and evergreen forests, with Upperland being a standout location, as you literally walk through the forest as the seasons change from one to the next. Sonically the game doesn't disappoint, either. The

music in the opening sequence is still one of the most stunning in gaming, even today. Using sampled pipes, bass and various synthesised sounds among others, *Secret Of Mana's* soundtrack is diverse, often beautiful, yet dark and dramatic when it needs to be.

At its core, it's an action-focused role-playing game featuring character levels, weapon levels and magic levels. Eight weapons are available to the player, which can be upgraded throughout the adventure. Magic, too, comes in eight forms and covers a variety of traditional elements. The biggest aspect of the game, however, is that it can be played by up to three players using a SNES multi-tap. This is something that has rarely been done since, which is disappointing, as it completely takes a usually solitary experience and livens it up immensely. On the downside, when in single-player, the AI can cause a few minor issues, although its behaviour can be adjusted. Ultimately though, *Secret Of Mana* is another classic RPG for Nintendo's 16-bit console.





# RPG Heaven: The Greatest SNES RPGS Of All Time

スーパーファミコン



## EarthBound

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: HAL/APE RELEASE: 1994

*Earthbound* is certainly one of the most interesting titles for the Super Nintendo. On the surface, it appears to be fairly simplistic, but the more time spent with it, the more you realise just how unique it actually is. In fact, there's nothing else quite like it on any 16-bit console.

Set in modern-day America, *Earthbound* is a Japanese take on the American lifestyle with often-hilarious results. It tells the story of Ness and his friends and their adventure to defeat the evil Giygas, the leader of an alien invasion on planet Earth.

The graphics have a simple but extremely charming style to them, coming across like a cute Saturday morning cartoon. The world itself is presented in a pseudo-3D style and is completely seamless from one location to the next which is very uncommon within the actual genre. The fighting system is generally standard, but the actions of characters during fights will leave players grinning from ear to ear, as they're so entertaining. Despite a fairly slow pace, *Earthbound* is an incredibly charming and wacky game that deserves to be played through. It was made available on the Wii U Virtual Console and SNES Mini, but we'd say it's due a modern reissue.

## Seiken Densetsu 3

PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE YEAR: 1995

Despite staying confined to Japan throughout the SNES era, *Seiken Densetsu 3* has built up a huge following over the years. There are many reasons for this, but the most obvious are its graphics, which are achingly beautiful and easily sit alongside some of the best 32-bit 2D RPGs.

Like its predecessor, *Secret Of Mana*, *Seiken Densetsu 3* is an action RPG with deep combat and a multiplayer option, although it only supports two players. It's packed with many unique features, however, including a branching story arc, absolutely huge bosses and a day-and-night cycle with each day based on an element that affects magic as a result. *Seiken Densetsu 3* never made it to the West in the Nineties because of a few technical problems in the game's code, but it was translated by fans and an official release finally hit Western shores as part of *Collection Of Mana*, released for the Nintendo Switch in 2017.



## Final Fantasy VI

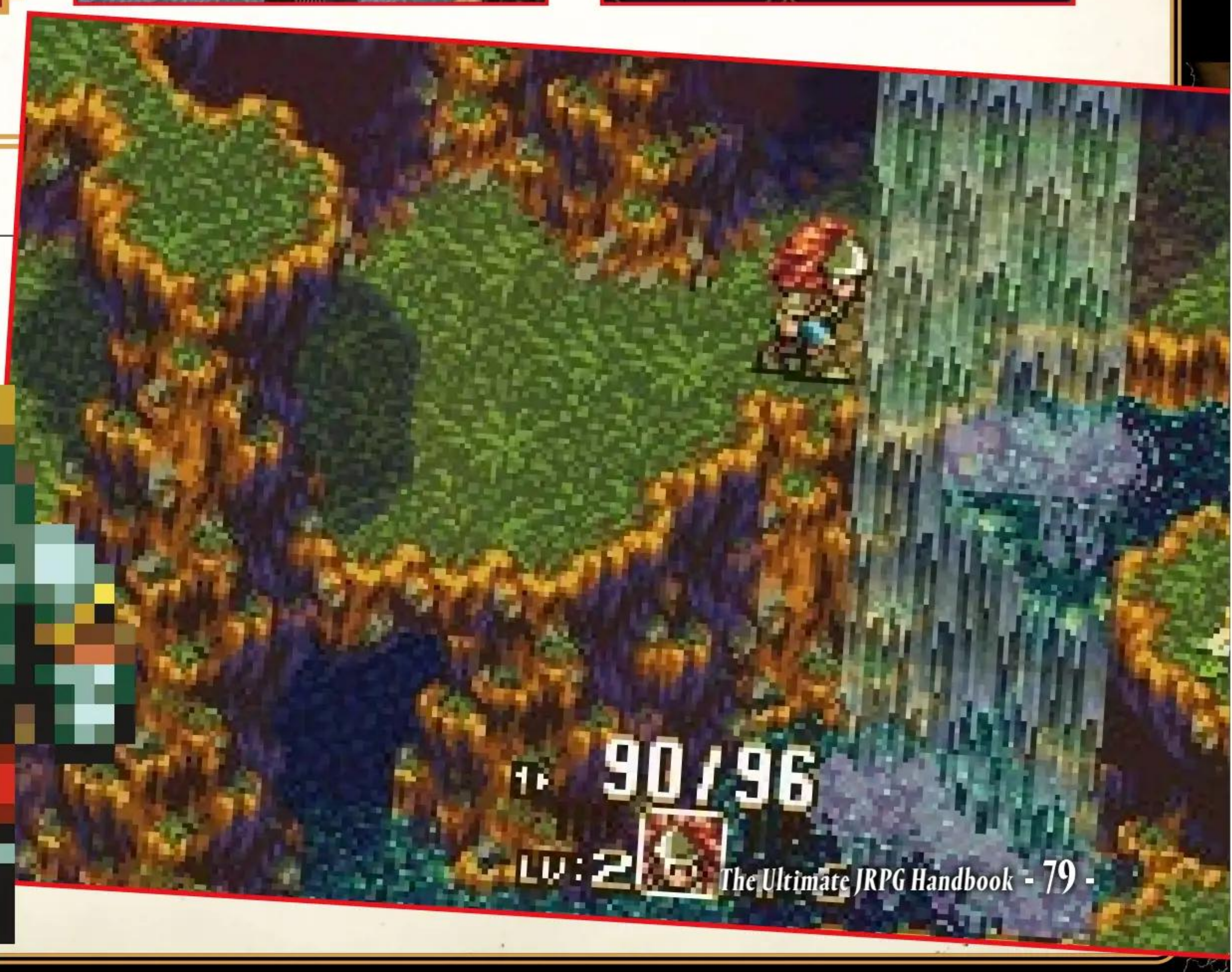
PUBLISHER: SQUARESOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE RELEASE: 1994

Leading up to the release of *Final Fantasy VI*, SquareSoft was building a massive reputation in the RPG scene. Enix, developer of *Dragon Quest*, was the most popular in Japan at the time, but *Final Fantasy VI* certainly marked a shift in Square's favour. It was simply an astonishing package, which was wonderfully ambitious with its storytelling and dark themes. Couple this with glorious visuals and a critically acclaimed soundtrack and it's no wonder *Final Fantasy VI* is often heralded as the best game in the series by American and Japanese audiences.

The plot is quite dark and at times even depressing, as you work your way through the many areas of the game, meeting hundreds of interesting characters along the way. The central character of the story is a young girl called Terra. When you first meet her she has been brainwashed by the evil empire and is being controlled in order to attack Espers (magical beings) and wipe them out. Once free of the

empire, Terra goes on a journey of discovery to find out where she is from and rediscover her forgotten memories. Along the way some absolutely magnificent characters are met: Shadow the ninja with his trusty canine sidekick Interceptor; Edgar, the King Of Figaro, who has an eye for the ladies; Ultros who is apparently octopus royalty; and Kefka, the antagonist of the game and none other than a court jester. Kefka aims to defeat the Espers to take control of the magic and indeed the world. It's the duty of the player to stop him. Along the way, themes of love, regret, isolation, desperation and many others are carefully explored. Squaresoft did an excellent job with such a deep plot and it still impresses today.

Plot aside, *Final Fantasy VI* plays out much like traditional Japanese RPG with active turn-based combat and plenty of random battles. With 14 playable characters and masses of customisation, it's an all-time classic that continues to age well.



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The Ultimate JRPG Handbook - 79 -



# HOW THE DREAM TEAM OF JRPG DEVELOPERS MADE A BELOVED TIME-BENDING ODYSSEY THAT'S STILL A TIMELESS CLASSIC

Words by Alan Wen



# CHRONO TRIGGER

**S**ome of the most beloved JRPGs tend to be series that have spanned multiple entries across decades, but the SNES era was also filled with standalone adventures that gave developers the freedom to make some huge creative swings.

It was this golden age that saw the release of *Chrono Trigger*, a JRPG released in 1995, late in the 16-bit era but would go down as the best of the genre in that generation.

Its potential for greatness was already forged with the gathering of three designers, dubbed the 'Dream Team': Hironobu Sakaguchi, creator of *Final Fantasy*; Yuji Horii, creator of *Dragon Quest*; and Akira Toriyama, creator of the *Dragon Ball* manga and the character designer for *Dragon Quest*. This was back in the early Nineties when Square and Enix were rival companies, perhaps foreshadowing their 2003 merger.

It could have been easy to have simply created a mash-up of *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*. (The project was originally developed under the name *Maru*

*Island* and intended to be part of Square's *Mana* series.) But the Dream Team had more ambitious ideas, having all met when they travelled together to America to research the latest computer graphics.

As the title suggests, *Chrono Trigger* was a JRPG centred on the concept of time travel. As a storytelling device dating back to HG Wells' 1895 novella *The Time Machine*, the theme had already been in the pop culture zeitgeist thanks to Hollywood blockbusters like *Back To The Future* and *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*. You could say that the idea had featured in other 16-bit games too, notably Square's 1994 JRPG *Live-A-Live* featuring a cast of heroes from different time periods, while 1991's *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* allows you to travel between Light and Dark worlds that some might interpret as present and future (which Nintendo would develop further in 1998's *Ocarina Of Time*).

But it was *Chrono Trigger* that truly grappled with this concept as a pillar of its game design.

Warping between time periods was a great excuse to visit different locations, from Ioka Village in prehistory with its teepee huts to the magical splendour of Kajar in Antiquity. But it also deals with the idea of time paradoxes. One of the first major plot points that happens is when Crono, Marle and Lucca travel through a teleporter from the Millennial Fair to the medieval Guardia Castle and see Marle vanish before their eyes. That is because she is really Princess Nadia

of Guardia, whose ancestor, Queen Leene, has been kidnapped. But because Marle is mistaken for her ancestor, the search is called off, so it's up to our heroes to restore history by rescuing Leene themselves.

But as you open up new time portals, the place and time that really leaves a mark is visiting the future,

**"Its potential for greatness was already forged with the gathering of three designers, dubbed the 'Dream Team'"**





reduced to apocalyptic ruins and wasteland. It's the kind of dystopian sight players would have already seen in 1994's *Final Fantasy VI* (or *Final Fantasy III*, as it was released in North America). If you have the power to go back in time to prevent it, wouldn't you? That is what makes *Chrono Trigger*'s story so tantalising.

As part of this ambitious scope, the game was planned for the CD-ROM add-on that was in development for the SNES at the time. But when Nintendo cancelled the device, causing the project to be revised, *Chrono Trigger* would still be able to flex all of the team's vision and ideas thanks to Square's decision to put the game onto a 32-megabit cartridge, an enormous boost from the usual 24 megabits that was available at the time. That extra eight megabits was essential for all the breadth of graphics, scenarios, and music that hadn't been seen in an SNES game before.

Given our heroes would be visiting different time periods, that would need to be reflected in different outfits, but also the same towns that would have

» [SNES] Locations are explored traditionally, but you also get to encounter them across different eras of time.



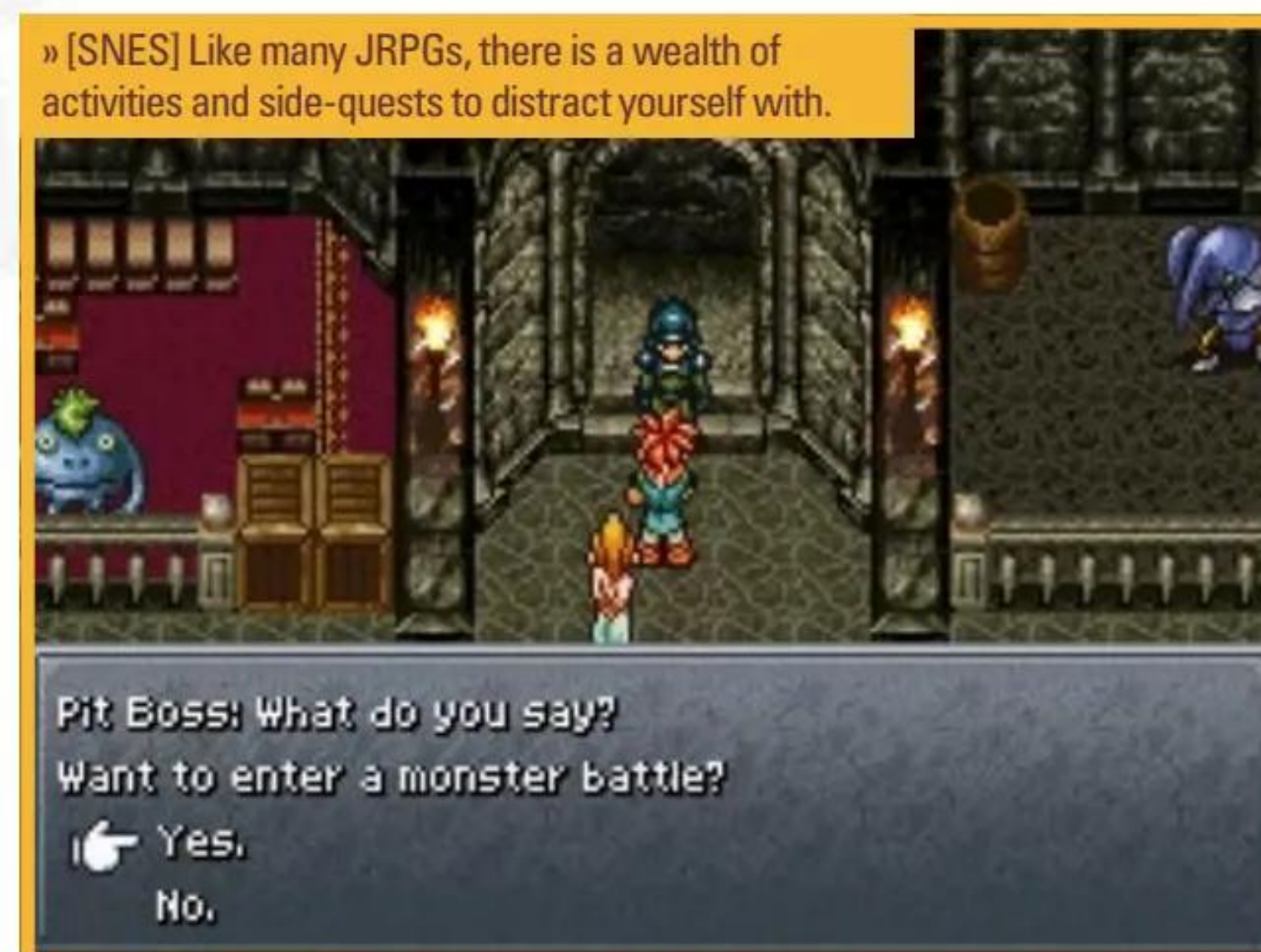




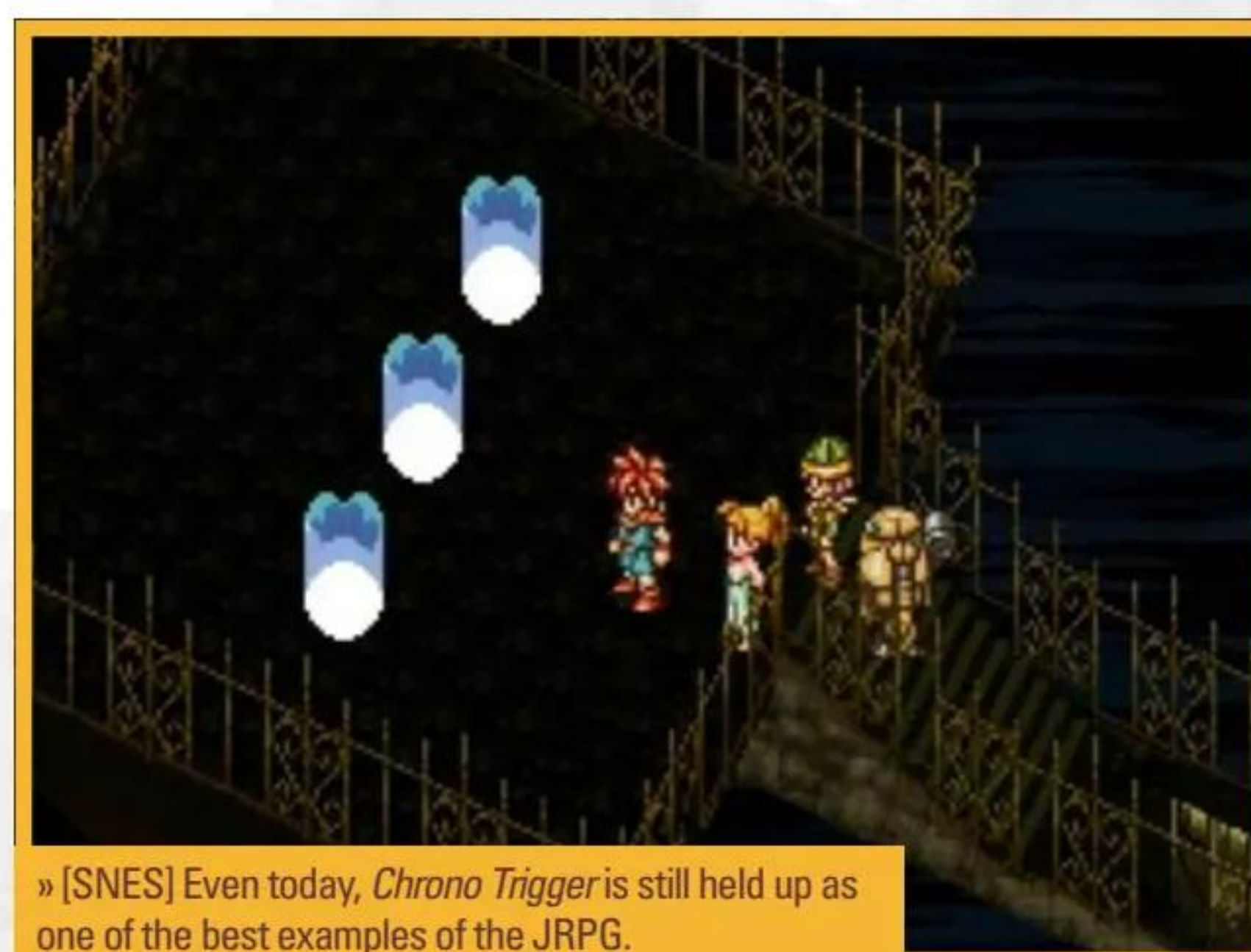
» [SNES] Many fans point to Frog as a clear highlight in the cast of colourful characters.



» [SNES] Like many JRPGs, there is a wealth of activities and side-quests to distract yourself with.



» [SNES] The opening is delightfully twee, as you explore a festival with an incognito princess, Marle.



» [SNES] Even today, *Chrono Trigger* is still held up as one of the best examples of the JRPG.

► changed or transformed between eras. The extra memory also allowed for more detailed and larger-scale locations, such as Magus's Castle. Arriving there for the first time, you get to see it in all its glory as the camera pans from the ground all the way up until you can see a dragon statue at its peak with a full moon behind it. Stunning scenes that would have wowed those who experienced it in the Nineties.

That handmade approach also allowed for one of the most refreshing aspects of *Chrono Trigger* that still makes it more fun to play today than any other turn-based JRPG of the time: no random encounters. Instead, when you explore the world, you'll see enemies visible in the field, and if you approach them, then the battle starts in that very location, rather than characters being whisked to a separate battle screen. That was another huge undertaking for the team since that meant scripting all enemy placements by hand; however, it also allowed for surprise situations, like when you walk over a vine that suddenly prompts an enemy ambush.

**T**he battle system also had its own dynamic flair. Party members can learn techniques, which, while costing magic points, actually consist of not just spells but other special abilities, and you can unlock more moves by battling and gaining tech points (TP). Where it gets even cooler is that you can perform team attacks with one other party member or all three together, so positioning and party composition also matter. These sorts of group actions have become

**“Carrying over your stats from the previous playthrough became a time-saver as you could breeze through early battles easily”**

more especially commonplace in modern JRPGs such as *Persona* and *Trails*.

What a great cast of playable party members, too, with a size that's not too overwhelming for party management when you can only have a maximum of three active members, better allowing you to invest in each of their substantial arcs and side-quests. Toriyama designed each with his trademark expressive manga style, from the strong and literally silent spiky-haired hero Crono to some of the genre's most strong-willed female characters, including prehistoric tribal warrior Ayla and genius inventor Lucca. But the fan favourite is arguably Frog, a chivalric knight who was cursed into his current form, and also one of the most powerful characters

once you reforge his legendary sword, the Masamune.

If you didn't successfully complete every character's side-story or assemble everyone together for the iconic scene when they gather around a campfire shortly before the climactic battle, then you could always play through again. Indeed, there were many more incentives to replay *Chrono Trigger* because – suiting its complex threads of time travel – the game

included 12 unique endings. To help players unlock these endings, the team introduced New Game Plus. This was unprecedented back when some games ended, and you just had to switch the console off because it wouldn't take you back to the title screen.

Carrying over your stats from the previous playthrough, of course, became a time-saver because you could breeze through early battles easily but still earn TP if you haven't yet maxed out your techs, and get back to plot points where you might decide to pursue a different path. Do you rescue a character early on, or when a major character is killed off, or go another path where you don't save them at all? That New Game Plus progression is perhaps the only way for Crono to single-handedly defeat the main antagonist, Lavos, at the game's mid-point. As the hardest ending to achieve, it also offers the most meta reward, where you can even meet the Dream Team in pixel form!

**Y**ou also can't talk about *Chrono Trigger* without its outstanding soundtrack, packed with more music tracks and sound effects than any game before it. More remarkably, it was primarily the work of first-time composer Yasunori Mitsuda. Having been a sound designer at Square for a few years already, he had threatened to quit the company unless he could write music. He worked himself so hard, however, that he often passed out and wound up hospitalised with stomach ulcers, so some of

» [SNES] Battles don't take you to a separate encounter screen, increasing player immersion.







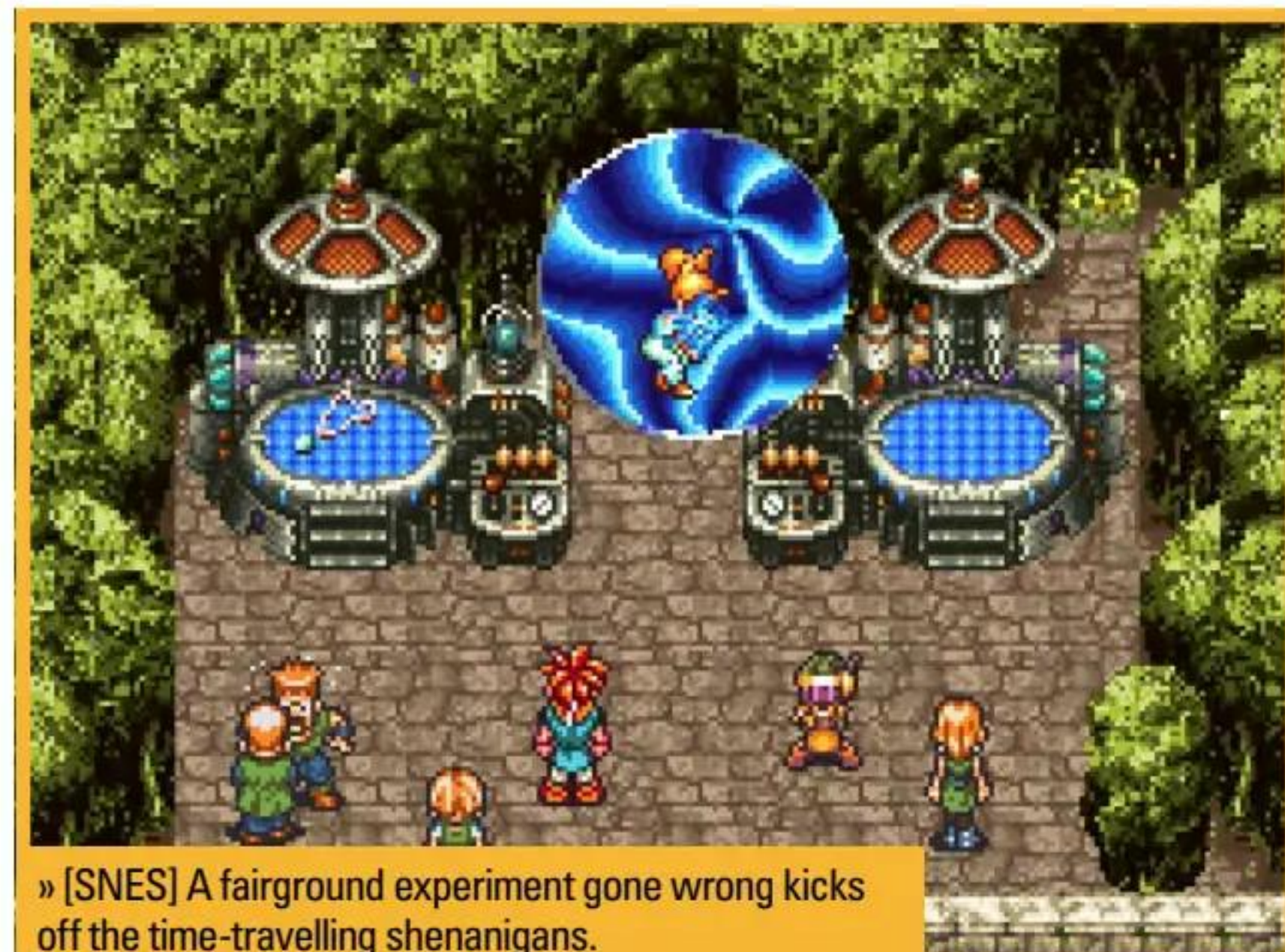
» [Nintendo DS] Positioning is a key strategy, as abilities can hit multiple enemies if they're close to one another.

the work had to be finished by veteran and *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu.

**W**ith such a pool of talent filled with forward-thinking ideas and passion, it's no wonder that *Chrono Trigger* garnered such critical acclaim and success, with many still holding it up as the best JRPG, if not the best game of all time. It's perhaps no surprise that when contemporary developers want to recapture the golden age of JRPGs that can still feel modern, *Chrono Trigger* is often a reference point.

Yet considering its unanimous masterpiece status, it's puzzling that *Chrono Trigger* isn't very accessible to replay. The SNES release was followed by a PlayStation port that included anime cutscenes from Toei Animation (also behind the anime adaptations of *Dragon Ball*), but lengthy loading times from battle and menu transitions made it far from the enhanced version it should have been. The 2008 DS port (which also saw the game released in Europe for the first time in 2009) was a significant improvement, including extra content and a more accurate translation, but was also a limited run, making it a pricey find on the secondhand market today.

The easiest way to play *Chrono Trigger* since 2018 has been on Steam, but it has also been considered the worst way due to myriad issues, from inferior graphics based on the mobile release, glitches and general lack of support for modern controllers and displays. Square Enix has at least addressed many criticisms with patches over the years, which means it's finally a more acceptable standard. But having celebrated its 30th anniversary, you also would think that it would be more widely available on modern consoles with the care it deserves. It's the least that should be expected for one of the most beloved JRPGs of all time. ★



» [SNES] A fairground experiment gone wrong kicks off the time-travelling shenanigans.

## OUT of TIME

How the Chrono saga continued, and then didn't

■ The standalone brilliance of *Chrono Trigger* is such that attempts to follow in its footsteps don't really come in the same ballpark. There was a 1996 text-based visual novel adventure, *Radical Dreamers*, intended to address 'unfinished business' from the previous game, while also having a darker tone. Given that it was released for the Japan-exclusive Satellaview peripheral, where you could download game content to the Super Famicom, there was only ever a Japanese version.

This story served as the basis for *Chrono Cross*, a game set in the same world as *Chrono Trigger*. However, instead of time travel, its main theme was on travelling between parallel universes, which, while having its own deep musings, also made for a more convoluted plot. A larger and more varied cast of party members sounded appealing, yet it couldn't compare with Crono's tight-knit party.

Square would attempt to continue the series again after trademarking 'Chrono Brake' and 'Chrono Break' in 2001, only for nothing to come of it, and the American trademark for the latter expired in 2003. Apart from a remaster of *Chrono Cross* in 2022, which included an official translation of *Radical Dreamers* for the first time, it would seem that the series is otherwise lost to time. Could a revival, or even a remake of *Chrono Trigger*, still happen? One can but radically dream.





# ULTIMATE GUIDE Suikoden

## 幻想水滸伝

A VANGUARD FOR THE FIRST ERA OF 32-BIT RPGS, YOSHITAKA MURAYAMA AND JUNKO KAWANO'S SUIKODEN PROVED THE STRONG FOUNDATION ESTABLISHED BY POPULAR 16-BIT CONSOLE RPGS AND BOLSTERED IT WITH NEW METHODS OF COMBAT, A STRIKING POLITICALLY DRIVEN NARRATIVE, AND AN ARMY'S WORTH OF RECRUITABLE CHARACTERS

WORDS BY AIDAN MOHER

**W**hen young game designer Yoshitaka Murayama walked into his boss's office at Konami in the early Nineties, he planned to pitch a game inspired by popular football manga, *Captain Tsubasa*. He loved the way that series used its huge, memorable cast of supporting characters to create depth and breadth beyond what a single character can accomplish. Murayama knew, however, that his boss disliked manga, so, instead, he conjured a more palatable comparable for the game he wanted to make: Shi Nai'an's classic Ming Dynasty novel *Water Margin*. Or, as it's known in Japanese, *Suikoden*.

Murayama charged into the meeting full of enthusiasm, but, to his chagrin, pitched the idea too well. "[My boss] asked me what kind of story it was going to be," Murayama explained in a 1999 interview featured in the *Gensou Suikoden II 108 Stars Character*

*Guide*. He explained that "it's going to have a lot of characters" and likened it to *Water Margin*. His boss replied, "Well, let's do that," to the concept of a *Suikoden* game, complete with a huge cast of outlaws and a rebellious storyline. It wasn't what Murayama had in mind, but his boss was convinced. "So we decided to make it," Murayama laughed. "It turned out to be a challenging task."

A couple years before *Suikoden*, SquareSoft's classic *Final Fantasy VI* wowed players with its 14 main party members, and a handful of other playable characters. Compared to contemporaries like *Chrono Trigger* (seven), *Final Fantasy V* (five), and *Lufia II: Rise Of The Sinistrals* (four), 14 was an impressive number that allowed for great player agency and unique multi-party dungeon designs. *Suikoden*, on the other hand, hit 14 recruitable characters before breakfast.

With a story grounded in themes of war and politics, *Suikoden* needed a vast space for its

narrative and the *Water Margin*'s 108 rebels offered the perfect canvas. While many game designers might have been inspired by that huge number of characters, Murayama took it literally, pulling no punches as he and character designer Junko Kawano filled *Suikoden* with an eye-watering 108 recruitable characters – all of whom played a role as combatants in battle or back at home at the expandable castle of protagonist Tir McDohl's Liberation Army. It's an army of soldiers, wizards, kobolds, cooks, shopkeepers and blacksmiths.

On the surface, *Suikoden* is a typical coming-of-age story about a young man who finds his destiny as rebellion sweeps the Scarlet Moon Empire. Born the rich son of a powerful general, Tir witnesses his country's fascist colonialism first-hand, as soldiers beat children, despotic officials skim tax money from starving villagers, and elvish villages are razed. Under its surface, however, *Suikoden* ▶



» [PlayStation] Tir and Flik lay the smackdown on Emperor Barbarossa baddies.



» [PlayStation] Tir explores his hometown of Gregminster. He doesn't get out much.





"SUIKODEN EXPLORES THE WAY WAR IMPACTS ALL PEOPLE – FROM THE RICHEST TO THE POOREST – AND TRAILS TRAGEDY AND HARDSHIP IN ITS WAKE"



» [PlayStation] Tir passes over a babbling brook in a magical elvish forest



» [PlayStation] Some magic attacks look very impressive.

## Fierce Fighting

UNLIKE MANY RPGS AT THE TIME, SUIKODEN HAD THREE MODES OF COMBAT



### CLOSE COMBAT

■ War is wide and sweeping, but it's also intensely personal and sometimes it comes down to individual actions and victories. In these duels, Tir McDohl (and one other surprising fighter) faces off against his rivals in a rock-paper-scissors showdown. It looks like a turn-based fighting game, and requires the player to anticipate their opponent's actions.



### GROUP COMBAT

■ These battles play out in typical console RPG fashion. With a party of up to six members facing off against a handful of baddies, *Suikoden's* group battles are fast-paced and all about juggling limited resources. This is the most common type of battle in the game, and where you'll face down *Suikoden's* bosses.



### ALL OUT WARFARE

■ If *Suikoden's* duels require a portrait lens, you're going to have to drag out the wide-angle for its major army battles. With hundreds or thousands of combatants on each side, these battles use a similar rock-paper-scissors system as the duels: Cavalry beats Ranged, Ranged beats Magic, Magic beats Cavalry.



# Meet the Cast

## KEY MOVERS AND SHAKERS IN SUIKODEN'S EPIC CAST



### TIR MCDOHL

■ With a silver spoon in hand, young Tir McDohl is the son of the famous General Teo McDohl. What starts off as a simple assignment to gather taxes from a nearby village soon launches Tir on a journey of rebellion as the leader of the Liberation Army.



### TED

■ Tir's childhood friend, Ted harbours dark secrets and even darker magic. Kidnapped and assaulted by the Scarlet Moon Empire for the rune he bears on his hand, Ted sets into motion a series of events that will fan the flames of rebellion.



### GREMIO

■ Tir McDohl's manservant and shadow, Gremio's loyalty to Teo McDohl and his family is undying. Though he bears a dramatic scar on his cheek sustained while saving a young Tir from a kidnapping, Gremio's more comfortable in the kitchen than on the battlefield.



### VIKTOR

■ Oafish Viktor may look like a shaved bear, and not smell much better, but Odessa's right-hand man is the heart and soul of the Liberation Army, and packs a mean punch in combat. What he lacks in couth, he more than makes up for in sheer determination.



» [PlayStation] Taking a moment of respite and quiet, Tir contemplates his plans from a high perch in his castle.



» [PlayStation] War is hard, but a warm bath with your best buds will ease all the tension out of your shoulders.

**"THERE'S NO RIGHT WAY TO BUILD A PARTY IN SUIKODEN, AND THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT"**

► explores the way war impacts all people – from the richest to the poorest – and trails tragedy and hardship in its wake.

**W**ith *Final Fantasy VII* and its cinematic visuals and narrative still a couple years away, *Suikoden* borrowed heavily from classic 16-bit-era RPG design. Players

explore a pixel-art world from an overhead perspective, engage in random battles – though not only random battles (see the Fierce Fighting boxout) – and manage equipment, magic and a plenty of other things through various menus. It's a tried-and-true structure, and *Suikoden* plays it safe, choosing instead to focus on finding new ways to explore the unique narrative potential of videogames with Murayama's emphasis on player expression.

*Suikoden's* most memorable contribution to RPG combat is the way it embraces its large cast by loading the game with combos (called Unite attacks) available to the player when certain characters are in random battles. Tir and his martial arts trainer Kai have a particularly deadly Unite attack that hits all enemies, the Lepant Family Attack allows mother, father and son to lay the smackdown on unsuspecting enemies, and odd couple Pahn and Gremio can team up for the Talisman Attack. While these combos are



### EMPEROR BARBAROSSA

■ A hero of the War Of Succession, Barbarossa came to power by reclaiming his father's throne after it was usurped by his uncle. His golden image faded over time as the influence of the sorceress Windy infiltrated his court and the Empire started clamping down on its citizens.



### WINDY

■ A powerful sorceress, Windy gained influence in the court of Emperor Barbarossa due to her resemblance to the ruler's late wife. Always at his side, she pulls the strings behind the curtains, and has plans that extend far beyond the borders of the Empire.



### ODESSA SILVERBERG

■ The anti-imperialist leader of the Toran Liberation Army and brother to master strategist Mathui Silverberg, Odessa is an idealistic and principled young woman determined to end the reign of Emperor Barbarossa and return liberation to the Scarlet Moon Empire.



### FLIK

■ Fiery and hungry, 'Blue Thunder' Flik followed Odessa to the Liberation Army's anti-imperialist cause after falling in love with her. Talented, but raw and edgy, Flik brings a level of unmatched passion to the fight. The only thing greater? His talent with a blade.



» [PlayStation] Gremio worries about a waterlogged elf who's washed up on the shores of Toran Castle.



» [PlayStation] The world is a big place, and we're just tiny people walking through it one step at a time.





» [PC] The HD remaster's bigger skirmishes don't look quite as nice as the original game's, but the dinky sprites still look great.



» [PC] Suikoden's Unite attacks not only inflict massive amounts of damage, they also look cool.

never essential, that they're not documented and are left to the player to discover speaks to *Suikoden's* explicit desire for experimentation. There's no right way to build a party in *Suikoden*, and that's the whole point Murayama's trying to make.

Joining Konami alongside Murayama, artist and writer Junko Kawano played a heavy role in *Suikoden's* development. Responsible for many of *Suikoden's* iconic character designs, Kawano eventually took over as director of *Suikoden IV*. From the story and worldbuilding to the series' unique visual design, Kawano's fingerprints overlap Murayama's everywhere.

**W**hile many of *Suikoden's* most impressive features – its large cast and politics-heavy plot – take a while to reveal themselves, the work of composer Miki Higashino is immediately apparent. Filled with beautiful samples of live instruments, it was a strong foil to the more typical synthetic samples used by most console games at the time, and even convinced *Final Fantasy* composer Nobuo Uematsu to up his game for *Final Fantasy VIII*.

Just like Tir McDohl, Murayama found success because he surrounded himself with great people. Key to his leadership style, it's no surprise to see themes of community and collaboration running through his videogames. ▶



» [PlayStation] Wanna get rich quick? Skip the pyramid schemes and play Chinchirorin, instead.



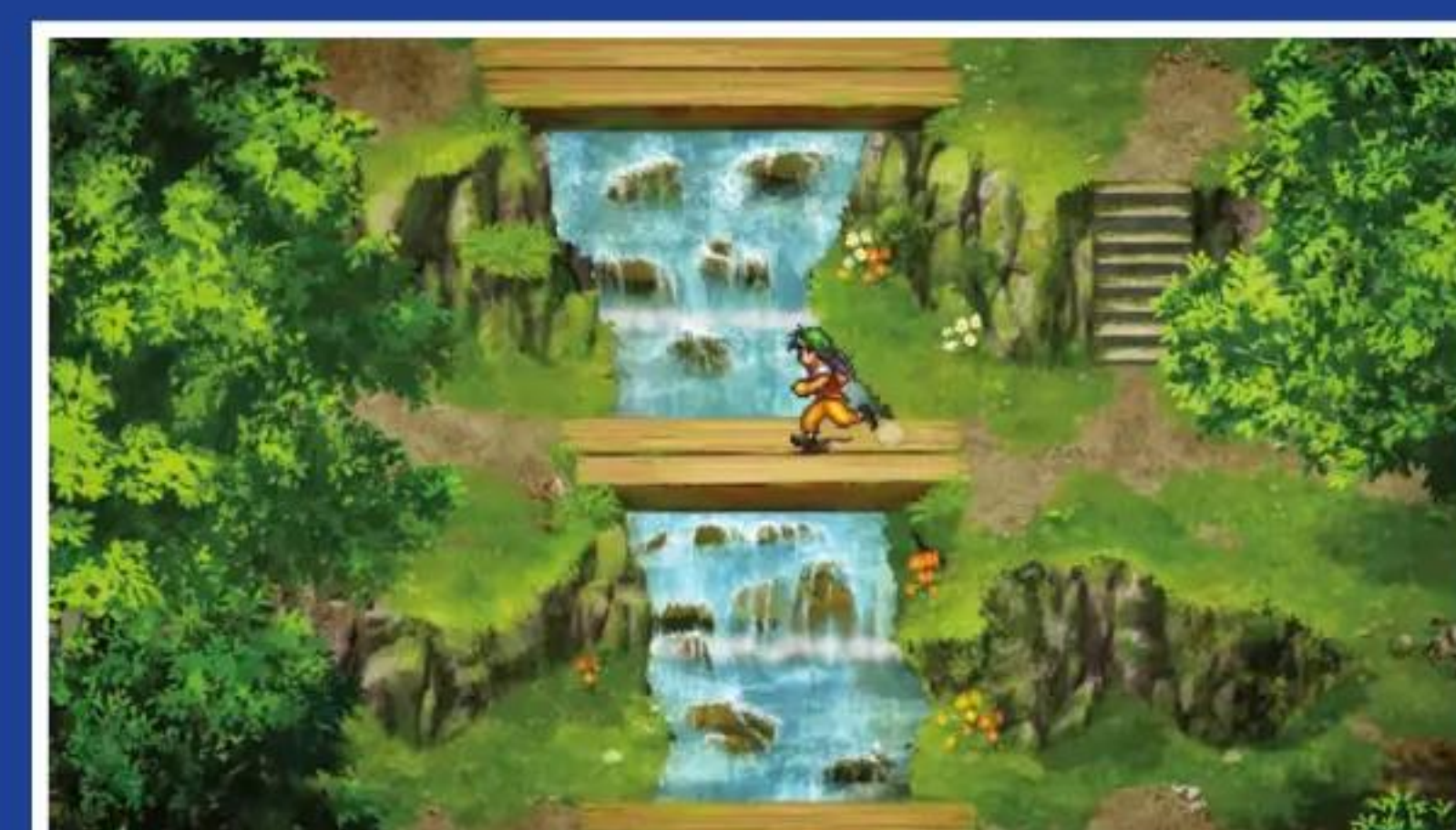
» [PlayStation] Those dwarfs sure are ahead of their time with wind-powered energy generation.

## SUIKODEN, REMASTERED

KONAMI'S GAME RETURNED WITH A FRESH COAT OF PAINT IN 2025

■ After years of laying fallow, Konami surprised fans in September 2022 by announcing a remaster of the first two games in the series – a series many presumed dead and forgotten by the publisher. Finally releasing in 2025, *Suikoden I & II HD Remaster: Gate Rune And Dunan Unification Wars* impressed fans and critics with a visual update (that worked better for the second game's more complex environments compared to *Suikoden's* tile-based world), a touched-up translation and a bunch of quality-of-life improvements (although outside of the improved visuals, many of these were also in the earlier Japan-exclusive PSP remaster).

Not only is this new collection a great way to revisit old favourites – with series founder Junko Kawano returning to redraw new *Suikoden* character portraits – but it also made the series accessible to newcomers, as the original games are now extremely expensive to buy. Joining a wave of retro-inspired RPGs and remasters like *LUNAR Remastered Collection*, *Sea Of Stars* and *Chained Echoes*, *Suikoden I & II HD Remaster: Gate Rune And Dunan Unification Wars* is further proof that 2D pixel art RPGs will always have a home with genre fans and newcomers alike.



» [PS5] A magic spell drapes these forests, so if you don't want to get lost, you'd better have an elf in your party.



» [PS5] Cleo casts a fire spell during a showdown with the Queen Ant and her minions.





» [PlayStation] Tir McDohl performing a surprise inspection of Toran Castle's inn.



» [PlayStation] Toran Castle emerges from the waters of Lake Toran.



# HOME SWEET HOME

EVERY ARMY NEEDS A CASTLE

■ With 108 characters to recruit, you need somewhere to keep them housed and fed, and what better place to do that than a monster-infested dilapidated castle in the middle of Lake Toran? Midway through *Suikoden*, as your army grows, Tir and the Liberation Army capture and restore this defensible castle, and it remains their home base for the rest of the game. Small and simple at first, the castle grows and evolves as you recruit new characters – adding things like a blacksmith, shops and even a community bathhouse that you can decorate with art.

And while there are many optional recruits in *Suikoden*, a few stand out as must-haves: Viki, an airheaded mage who lets you travel to previously visited locations; Sergei, an inventor who builds an elevator and makes it much easier to travel between castle floors; and, of course, Gaspar, an eye-patched gambler who brings the dice game Chinchirorin (and access to unlimited Potch for savvy players) with him.

In addition to just being a fun and useful place to hang out, the castle also provides *Suikoden*'s gameplay with an essential feeling of community. Unlike so many other RPGs at the time, the characters you're not actively using don't just disappear. They've got a home and purpose within the Liberation Army, and it's fun to see who they hang out with and how they spend their time off.



» [PC] The new remasters lets you speed up combat and move faster, which is something you couldn't do in the original PlayStation release.



## SWEET SUIKODEN SEQUELS

SUIKODEN LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR AN EXPANSIVE SERIES



### SUIKODEN II

■ Released a few years after *Suikoden*, its sequel took everything that was great about the first game – a huge cast, intriguing political story, castle building – and filed off the rough edges for an experience most fans consider the best in the series, which doesn't bode well for the rest of the entries.



### SUIKODEN III

■ Swapping *Suikoden* and *Suikoden II*'s sprite work for clunky 3D graphics, *Suikoden III* was an awkward step back for the series in the wake of creator Yoshitaka Murayama's departure mid-way through development. Its story, however, spread across three protagonists, is among the series' most compelling.



### SUIKODEN IV

■ For the first time in the series, *Suikoden IV* looks backwards in time, taking place 150 years before the events in the original *Suikoden*. Swapping hills and plains for islands and the open sea, *Suikoden IV* is another rocky outing for a series stumbling after Murayama's departure.





» [PlayStation] A siren sings her dangerous song.



► Yoshitaka Murayama left Konami midway through development of *Suikoden III* in 2002, citing a longtime plan to leave the company after ten years of service. This led to major upheaval, from which it can be argued *Suikoden*

never fully recovered. Though *Suikoden III* was completed and set the stage for more adventures in the world, all the subsequent mainline sequels took place in the past, suggesting a hesitancy to move Murayama's ambitions for the series forward. Eventually, after a few mediocre spin-offs on the Nintendo DS and PlayStation Portable, *Suikoden* lay dormant and seemingly forgotten by Konami, although it did release a PSP collection of the first two games, which added improvements that would be plundered at a later time.

**I**n 2020, Murayama and Junko Kawano's Rabbit & Bear Studio announced a Kickstarter for a spiritual *Suikoden* successor called *Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes* featuring many of that series' trademark gameplay systems and themes. It eventually raised over \$4.5 million, far outstripping its goal of \$500K, becoming one of the most successful videogame Kickstarters ever.

Despite the series' absence for almost a decade (the Japan-only PSP spin-off *Gensō Suikoden: Tsumugareshi Hyakunen No Toki* released in 2012), it was clear there was a hunger for *Suikoden*-style games, and Konami

"A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES BEGINS WITH A SINGLE STEP, BUT A REBELLION BEGINS WITH 108 OF YOUR BEST FRIENDS AT YOUR SIDE"

did not miss the success of Rabbit & Bear's Kickstarter. Deciding the time was right to revitalise the long-dead series, a modern remaster of the first two games in the series, *Suikoden I & II HD Remaster: Gate Rune*

And *Dunan Unification Wars* (itself based on the aforementioned PSP remakes), was announced later that year by Konami with some involvement of former staff like Junko Kawano.

Sadly, Murayama passed away just weeks before the release of *Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes*. On 6 February 2024 Murayama's company Rabbit & Bear Studios announced he had passed due to complications with an ongoing illness.

"It was always the passion from his fans that continued to drive his creative vision and motivate him to put his all into the project," Rabbit & Bear Studios said in a letter signed by Kawano, Junichi Murakami, and Osamu Komuta. "But as his co-workers and friends, it saddens us to know that he won't get to see the reactions from his fans."

With a successful remaster of his original masterpieces recapturing the imaginations of longtime series fans and newcomers alike, and a brand-new mainline game called *Suikoden STAR LEAP* announced for mobile platforms, Yoshitaka Murayama's ambitions vision for the RPG genre are more relevant and popular than ever. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, but a rebellion begins with 108 of your best friends at your side. ✪



## SUIKODEN TACTICS

■ Generally considered the worst of the mainline titles, it only made sense that *Suikoden IV* was the first, and only, *Suikoden* to get a direct sequel. Set before and after the events of *Suikoden IV*, *Suikoden Tactics* drops the usual role-playing for a *Final Fantasy Tactics*-style structure and combat system.



## SUIKODEN V

■ The fifth *Suikoden* signified a grand return to form. Another prequel, this one is set a decade or so before *Suikoden* and features a vibrant world, great returning characters and some of the best castle building in the series. It's just too bad it didn't push the series forward chronologically.



## SUIKODEN TIERKREIS

■ *Suikoden*'s first handheld title was a non-canon spin-off set in an entirely different world. Retaining the series's trademark character collectathon, *Tierkreis* scaled combat back with just four party members. It might not have been what fans wanted, but even a bad *Suikoden* is pretty good.



# SUPER MARIO RPG

## LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS

1996 marked the end of the road for the SNES, but Nintendo wasn't about to let it go down without a fight. Sorrel Tilley caught up with director Chihiro Fujioaka to get the scoop on Super Mario's super swan song



### IN THE KNOW

» PUBLISHER: NINTENDO

» DEVELOPER: SQUARE

» RELEASED: 1996

» PLATFORM: SNES

» GENRE: JRPG

**T**here's no denying it: life was sweet for the Super Nintendo owner. Within the space of just five years, the system's library was swollen with classics, and chief among them were masterpieces crafted by Square and Nintendo. The mere mention of the likes of *Final Fantasy VI*, *Chrono Trigger* and *Super Mario World* are enough to send many gamers into paroxysms of nostalgia. It is said that all good things must come to an end, but even as the sun was setting on the SNES, behind closed doors, the movers and shakers were planning something unprecedented – a collaboration between two of the biggest developers of the era.

The result of this partnership was Nintendo's moustachioed mascot's first foray in the role-playing genre. Square's own Chihiro Fujioaka recalls how it went down: "The original idea was decided in meetings at the highest level. When I was put in charge, it had already been set in stone, but I heard that the background to it was that due to the very

close relationship between Nintendo and Square in those days, working together on a project meant they would combine their respective strong suits – the Mario character and RPG development."

The basic concept was a simple one; its execution was not. Taking a beloved figurehead and throwing him headlong into a new genre without upsetting the fans requires a lot of thought, as Fujioaka explains: "The world view and the story changed completely. In the beginning, we thought Mario would be fighting using weapons and magic, but as you'd expect, we concluded that Mario was more suited to the hammer and jumping, so we modified the settings and the story. Even after development had moved on, we were still beating our heads over whether or not Mario should use weapons and magic. Mr Miyamoto also seemed to be in two minds over this. It was only when we both took to the stage at a magazine event that we finally decided.

"It was at the V-Jump Festival, an event organised by Shueisha's monthly game and hobby magazine. Readers were invited to the venue so that

publishers could introduce games that were about to be released. It was here that *Super Mario RPG* was revealed to the world for the first time – I remember how surprised the readers and the organisers were. Right at the time of this magazine event, we had to decide on Mario's fighting style – weapons and magic, or jumping and hammers? Even while we were backstage at the event, Mr Miyamoto and I were still talking it over. Then, when it became our turn to introduce our game, I said: 'Let's just decide his fighting style based on how much the



# The Making Of: Super Mario RPG: Legend Of The Seven Stars

スーパーマリオ・オールピージー



» [SNES] The eagle-eyed will spot plenty of Nintendo character cameos.

audience applauds.' Mr Miyamoto replied doubtfully, 'Is that going to be okay?' but we went along with the plan anyway.

"To tell the truth, though, there was a feeling, among the staff too, that it would be best if Mario fought with hammers and jumping. Actually asking the audience was a big gamble, but I came up with a bit of a scheme to make sure things went our way. First, I said suddenly, but in a normal, businesslike voice, 'Could you please clap if you think that because this time Mario is in an RPG, it would be good if he used weapons and magic.' Small applause. Next, in a loud voice, full of energy and excitement, 'But of course this is Mario, so it'd be way better if he fought with jumps and hammers, right?' Those people – applaud now!' Lots of applause. And that's how it turned out. Mr. Miyamoto – sorry for worrying you!"

Mario's unexpected appearance in an RPG aside, audiences were wowed by his new 3D look. The team had been hard at work on the same Silicon Graphics workstations that Nintendo had authorised Rare to purchase for its *Donkey Kong Country* series. Although a rudimentary 2D version of the game was created, it was used mainly as a testing ground for Mario's movement and abilities before plans for the switch to 3D visuals were finalised.

"At that point in time, Square was putting a lot of effort into visual presentation, and they had really pursued this up to the limits of what the Super Famicom hardware could do with 2D methods," explains Fujioka. "The big question was where to go from there. I think it was natural that things would go in the direction of 3D. When I think about it now, the whole of Square was headed that way. Of course, in the beginning, we had a traditional top-down map with a 2D Mario, but at a fairly early stage we

**“ IN THE BEGINNING, WE THOUGHT MARIO WOULD FIGHT USING MAGIC, BUT WE CONCLUDED THAT HE WAS MORE SUITED TO THE HAMMER AND JUMPING ”**

revised it to a slanted 3D perspective, so after that we also had to make the entire graphic design follow suit. Even with the SA-1 chip, the Super Famicom wasn't capable of displaying 3D in real-time, so we went with a pre-rendering technique."

This SA-1 chip was another weapon in Nintendo's arsenal of enhancements that kept SNES games evolving over time. While Sega was developing pricey add-on systems to prevent the Mega Drive from becoming stale, Nintendo opted to boost its hardware with special co-processor chips included within the game cartridges

themselves. Possibly the most famous of these was the Super FX chip, which handled the real-time 3D effects in games such as *Star Fox* and *Stunt Race FX*. The Super Accelerator 1 was less common outside Japan, with only three games seeing international release. "The SA-1 chip had four times the processing power of the Super Famicom," Fujioka elaborates. "Adding that to the console's CPU made five times the processing power possible. *Super Mario RPG* didn't use polygons, but the whole thing utilised a 3D field, so we used the extra

## MOONLIGHTING MARIO

Is there a genre that Mario hasn't dabbled in?



### Mario Paint

Mario went all arty-farty back in 1992. His music generator remains popular on YouTube.

### Dr Mario

Prescription pads at the ready for this much-loved pill-poppin' puzzler.



### Yoshi's Safari

Mario got trigger-happy in this Super Scope rail shooter that also featured his dinosaur sidekick.

### Mario No Photopi

Only the Japanese got this N64 photo-manipulation package.



### Mario & Wario

Use the mouse to save a bucket-headed Mario – from himself!



oomph for those calculations. It also allowed us to use more characters than usual.” The game was primarily a Square production, but Nintendo made sure the development team was not left floundering with Mario’s transition to a new dimension and genre – after all, Mario was their golden child and they needed to make sure he was in good hands. “It was a very close and favourable relationship. They offered us support with various new techniques, starting with the SA-1 chip, and ideas for presenting pseudo-3D on the Super Famicom,” Fujioka remembers. “From the beginning, Mr Miyamoto came in often to meet and talk, and of course, we even took



» [SNES] No wonder Bowser’s so hell-bent on crushing the Mushroom Kingdom when he’s treated like this.

to the stage together at V-Jump. I received advice from him on two main points: one was keeping an eye on handling Mario’s entry into the RPG world without destroying the *Mario* universe; the other was the actual concept of fun in the game – in the early stages of development, I proposed the gameplay that *Super Mario RPG* would revolve around, explaining, ‘I want to achieve something that everybody wants to do, but nobody has been able to.’ Mr Miyamoto approved.”

Fujioka remembers another time that Miyamoto gave him advice while writing the script for moving yellow blocks in the game. Miyamoto noticed that it was possible for the player to easily slip and fall from these blocks, and suggested that Fujioka try making them stop for a split second when Mario landed. “I revised the code immediately, and the gameplay really improved. It was a great experience

morphing program, which they made at once. However, I’ve now forgotten what his original form looked like! I did prepare two sketches for this boss, but I get the feeling they were completely altered during testing.” Unfortunately, at that time, it was necessary to trim many areas from the ROM capacity, and the morphing boss became nothing more than a phantom character.

“There were a good number of other early ideas that didn’t make it into the final game, but it would be more accurate to say that they were starting points, rather than things we couldn’t do – they changed

## “SUPER MARIO RPG’S CAST OF CHARACTERS AND LIGHTEARTED STORY AND SCRIPT WON OVER GAMERS AND CRITICS ALIKE”

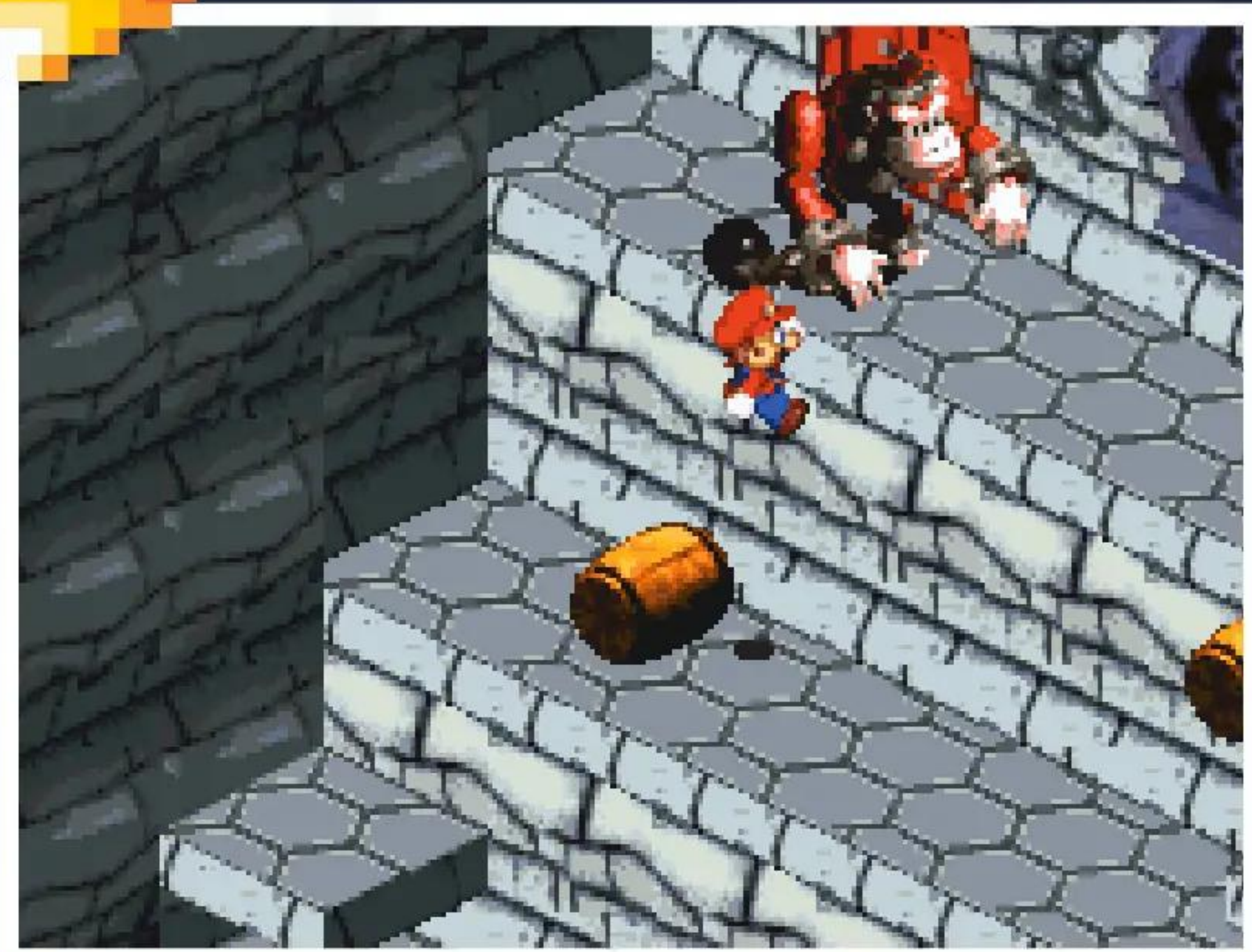
to be able to see first-hand Mr Miyamoto’s fixation on game controls.

“This was a difficult area – how much of the action aspect of Mario to represent in an RPG and, further, how to actually achieve that. With regards to programming and scripting, almost all the events in the game had some kind of interactive gameplay, and customising the code for them one by one was a big job. 3D data was also created for everything from the backgrounds to the characters and items, but it was our first experience with that, so it was a tough job.”

Even with a 4MB cartridge and the SA-1 chip, the game was bursting at the seams: “In terms of the game’s content, there’s one thing that even the development staff might have forgotten about. There were plans to include a shape-shifting boss character in the second half of the game, which would morph during battle. I persuaded the coders to put together a

throughout the course of developing the game. For example, we wanted to have Mario use devices in one part of the map that would have a domino effect on various devices in other parts of the map, so in the early days, ‘chain reaction’ was something of a keyword that we based our ideas around. Expanding from that, we got all the areas with events that focus on action.”

*Super Mario RPG* isn’t only known for its technical accomplishments, however – its cast of characters and lighthearted story and script won over gamers and critics alike. Even Mario’s long-time nemesis, Bowser, was given a comedy role. Rather than kidnapping Peach and menacing the player characters, he teams up with them and spends his time alternately weeping over his stolen castle, reciting haikus about being lonely, and trying to convince everybody that Mario has joined his gang. “Mr Miyamoto



» [SNES] Square doffs its cap to *Donkey Kong Country*’s graphical influence here.



» [SNES] As well as all-new characters and enemies, series regulars were re-imagined in new roles for *Super Mario RPG*.



## MORE MARIO RPG SPIN-OFFS

When Square got business with Sony, Mario's role-playing future looked uncertain. Fans were overjoyed, then, when they got not one but two spin-off series

### Paper Mario



**Year:** 2000 **System:** N64

With Square out of the picture, a change of title was called for, so *Super Mario RPG 2* became *Paper Mario*. Just like its forebear, this game was released late in the system's life, and showed off some striking visuals, albeit in a different way – Mario was now flat as a pancake!

### Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door



**Year:** 2004 **System:** GameCube

Intelligent Systems' second game was also critically praised. It had a greater emphasis on gameplay based around the paper theme, with Mario using curses to fold himself into aeroplanes, boats and tubes. Side-scrolling sections featuring Bowser paved the way for the Wii sequel.

### Paper Mario: The Origami King



**Year:** 2020 **System:** Switch

Following *The Thousand-Year Door*, there has been four sequels, making Paper Mario a regular series in the Super Mario canon. The latest game, *The Origami King*, is another triumph and transcends its RPG trappings by including more action oriented flourishes, as well as puzzling.

### Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga



**Year:** 2003 **System:** Game Boy Advance

Created by AlphaDream with the involvement of Fujioka, this is often regarded as the true successor to *Super Mario RPG*. Why? "Maybe because it has the same battle system, musician (Yoko Shimomura) and comical story style. It's for handhelds and features Luigi, so I think it can coexist with *Paper Mario*."

### Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time



**Year:** 2005 **System:** Nintendo DS

As you might expect, *Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time* used the dual screens to expand on Mario and Luigi's interaction from the first game. The appearance of Baby Mario and Baby Luigi allowed for puzzles requiring the co-ordination of all four characters to solve this time-travelling adventure.

### Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story



**Year:** 2009 **System:** Nintendo DS

The remarkable entry in the series took on an *Innerspace*-style dynamic, with the Italian duo being miniaturised and inhaled by Bowser. There have been subsequent *Mario & Luigi* titles since *Bowser's Inside Story*, but for our money, this represents the zenith of the series, and it's worth picking up the 2018 3DS remake.

## DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

### SECRET OF MANA

(PICTURED)  
**SYSTEMS:** SNES  
**YEAR:** 1993

### FINAL FANTASY

**SYSTEM:** NES  
**YEAR:** 1987

### XENOGEARS

**SYSTEM:** PLAYSTATION  
**YEAR:** 1998

didn't stipulate any rules; he pretty much gave us a free hand, although he did let us know which series characters he wanted to appear," remembers Fujioka. "There were a lot of staff members who were fans of comedy and stand-up, so it was only natural that it would end up that way. Bowser's various lines and facial expressions were created freely by the people in charge of each area and event. It was all fine because Mr Miyamoto didn't get angry!"

One of the most enduring characters to spring from the game was Geno. Although legal issues between Square and Nintendo have prevented a full-blown comeback for the wooden boy, he has maintained a cult following. "I only found out about Geno's popularity later, so I got him to make a reappearance in *Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga* [laughs]. I wish I

knew why he's so popular! I think people are interested in him because he's a doll that's come to life – he seems to have something of the profound about him."

*Super Mario RPG* was released just months before the N64 went on sale and was an immediate success: "It was the point at which the highest number of gamers owned a Super Famicom and, thanks to this, we sold a lot of copies. On the other hand, with the Nintendo 64 out and Square defecting to the PlayStation, we never got to make a true sequel."

On top of this, working on Mario's last game on the SNES must have been a bittersweet experience. "We had no idea!" admits Fujioka. Indeed, when Miyamoto announced at the V-Jump Festival that the game would be Mario's final 16-bit outing, Fujioka's reaction was short and comical: "What!?" ★









## EXPLOSIVELY POPULAR IN THE NINETIES, POKÉMON HAS OUTLIVED THE INITIAL FAD AND BECOME ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR SERIES OF GAMES. NICK THORPE TALKS TO THE DEVELOPERS ABOUT THE SERIES THAT CHALLENGES YOU TO CATCH 'EM ALL...



**I**t's extremely hard not to be aware of *Pokémon* – if you haven't been tempted by the urge to catch 'em all, you probably know someone who has. The videogames have sold over 368 million units, with some titles topping the 10 million mark. It's far more than just a gaming phenomenon, though – since the series launched in the UK back in 1999, Pikachu's smiling face has appeared everywhere from trading cards to cinema screens. However, it may come as a surprise to many of you that the origins of the series go all the way back to 1990.

The *Pokémon* series has always been primarily developed by Game Freak, a Japanese team which grew out of a fanzine of the same name produced by writer Satoshi Tajiri and illustrator Ken Sugimori. "When we first started, some of the readers were actually programmers and they had the skills and access to the hardware – that's how we started in producing videogames," Sugimori explained in a *games™* interview on the history of the series. The firm made its debut in 1989 with *Quinty*, a Famicom puzzle game localised for the North American NES market as *Mendel Palace*.



» [Game Boy] Battles are strategic, with type advantages and a suite of move options.

That same year, the Game Boy was released and Game Freak moved quickly to outline a vision of a new type of RPG, which would utilise the handheld's link cable and portable nature. A design document entitled '*Capsule Monsters*' was ready by 1990.

When you examine the *Pokémon* games on the most basic level, they are fairly typical Japanese RPGs with a few key twists. The first is that as a *Pokémon* Trainer, instead of gathering party members through the storyline, you recruit the monsters you encounter in the wild. This element is present in the early design documents, though the original idea involved players having a charisma stat, whereas in the final game they simply lower a wild *Pokémon*'s health until it can't resist being captured in a Poké Ball. These monsters have special types, such as Fire and Water, which make some *Pokémon* more or less effective against others. The second major twist is that the games each contain a strong multiplayer element, atypical of RPGs, in which players can trade their creatures or engage in battles. Some *Pokémon* even require trading to evolve into their stronger upgraded forms. This was also a key part of the pitch document, forming the centrepiece of Satoshi Tajiri's vision for the game.

The final twist is that each game comes in at least two versions, with a select number of *Pokémon* absent from each. The brainchild of Shigeru Miyamoto, a friend and mentor of Tajiri, this was a stroke of genius – rather than having the ability to obtain all the monsters with enough dedicated solo play, players were required to engage with the multiplayer functions of the game. Speaking to *games™*, composer, programmer and now 'Chief Creative Fellow' of The *Pokémon* Company Junichi Masuda explained, "People say that when you're playing videogames, you're usually playing on your own. So we wanted to create an experience where you can play the game but still play together with friends at the same time and all have fun."

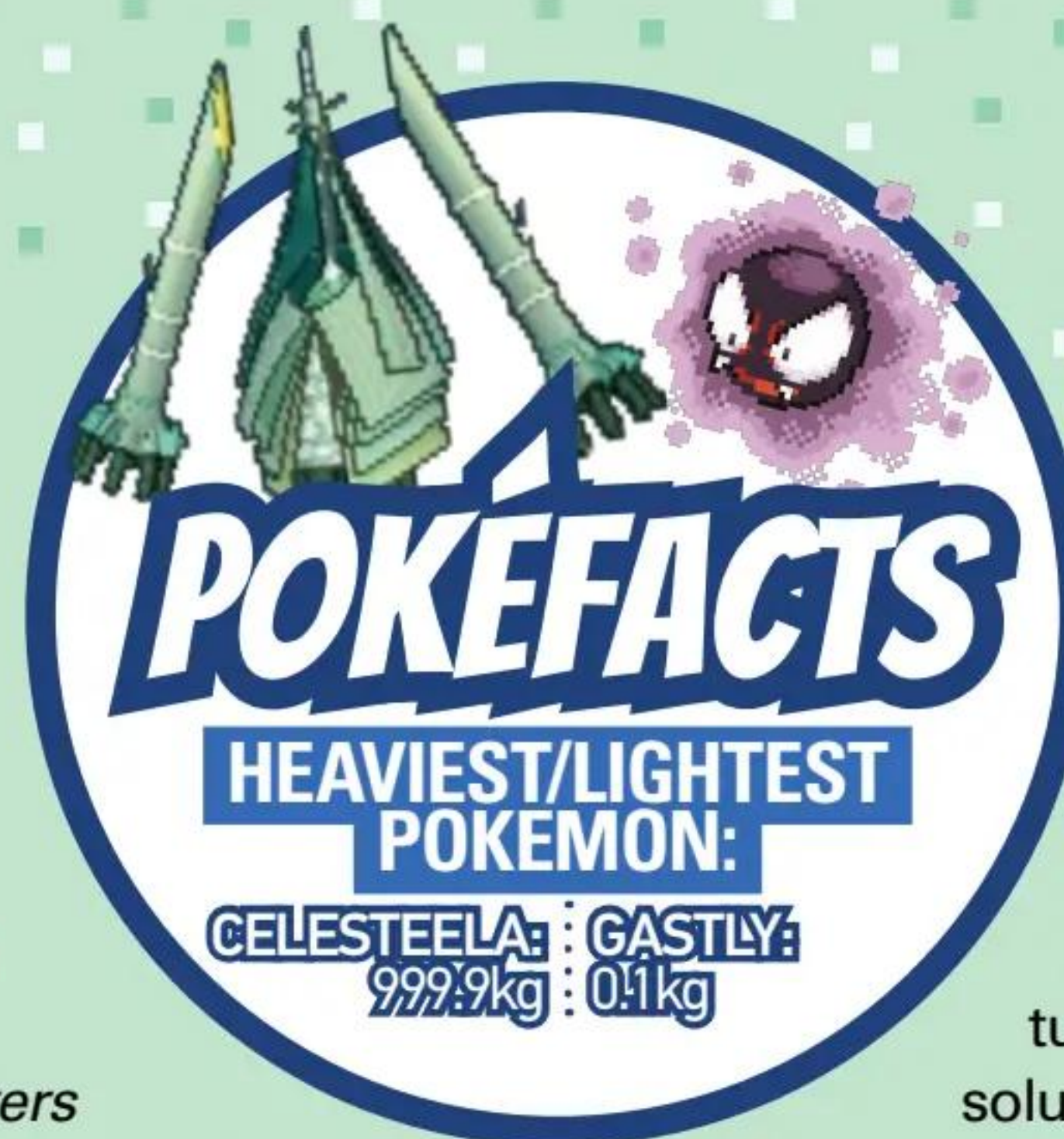
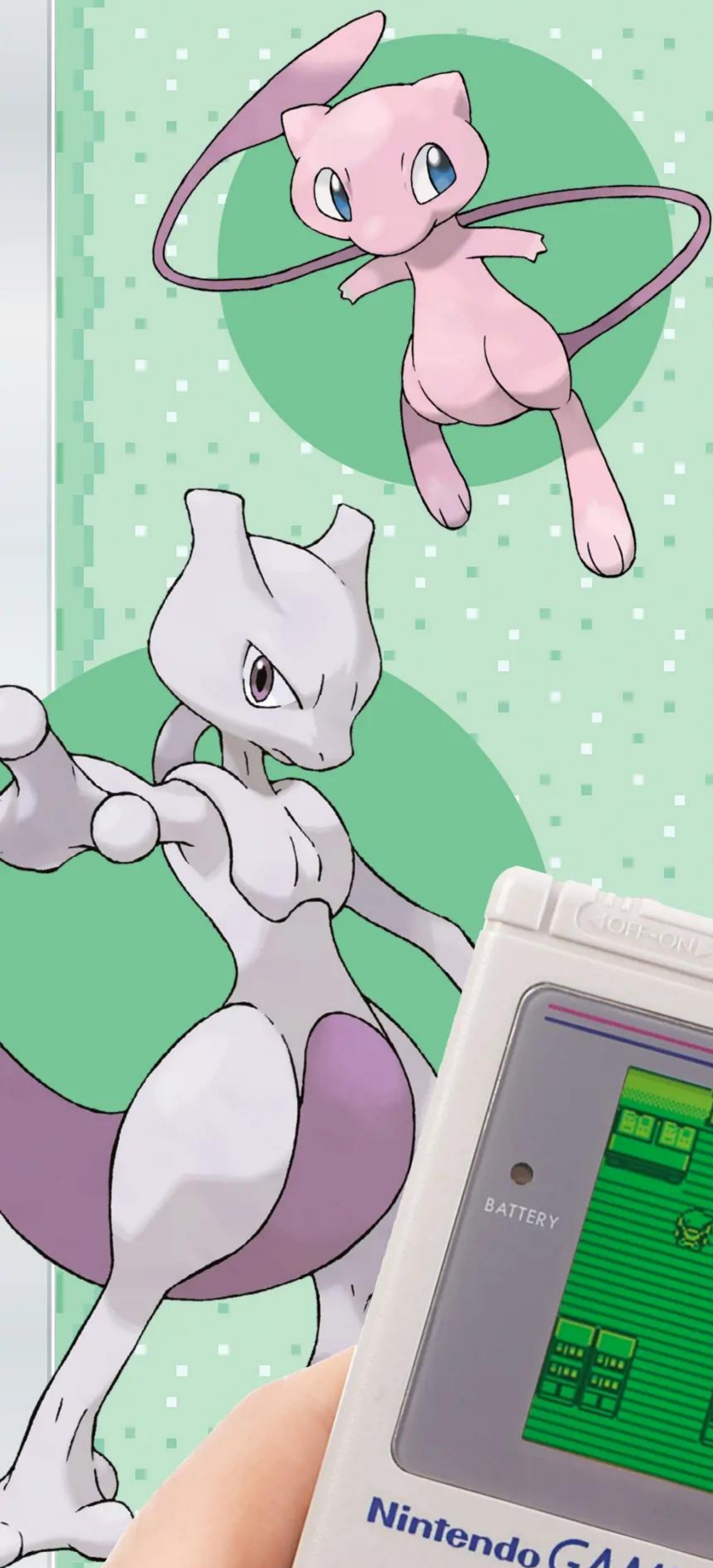


» Junichi Masuda has overseen the whole series.



» Shigeru Ohmori directed the more recent entries.





**T**he game went into development, changing its title to *Pocket Monsters* due to trademark difficulty, and stayed there for a very long time. Despite having been pitched soon after the release of the Game Boy, *Pocket Monsters* wouldn't arrive in Japan until the start of 1996 – a time when the monochrome hardware looked to be on its last legs. *Pocket Monsters Red & Green* followed the standard RPG model outlined earlier, with the key differences changing the goal of the game. The single-player quest involved gathering eight badges from battling Gym Leaders – other Trainers that served as bosses – before taking on the Elite Four and your rival, as a final boss run. Once that was done and dusted, the social aspect of the game became necessary as you sought to complete your collection of 150 Pokémon.

The wrinkle in the formula was that there was actually another creature, the 151st Pokémon, Mew. The 'Mythic' monster was

added late in development in space created after the game's debug tools were removed, an untested addition that would be unthinkable today. Luckily, Mew didn't cause problems – it turned out to be something of a solution. Unavailable during regular play, Mew did occasionally appear

via glitches and rumours of how to obtain it began to form. Mew was able to be distributed to cartridges at special events, the first of which was a competition in CoroCoro Comics which attracted 70,000 entries. Word of mouth spread and the game's initially sluggish sales turned around, later aided by additional merchandising. Though *Pocket Monsters Red & Green* were released in February 1996, they didn't hit their peak sales until the summer of 1997.

After a lengthy localisation delay, *Pocket Monsters* – now retitled *Pokémon*, and in *Red & Blue* versions – arrived in the USA in 1998, then Europe and other PAL territories in 1999. The slow build seen in Japan wouldn't be a factor in these territories, as *Pokémon* arrived with a co-ordinated marketing blitz that saw the TV series, trading card game and videogames hit almost simultaneously. A craze started almost overnight, helped along by additional special versions such as *Pokémon Yellow*, which starred Pikachu and took elements from the TV series. Ultimately, the first 'generation' of games sold over 23 million copies. But while the first games were still making waves internationally, a sequel was needed for Japan and arrived in late 1999.

*Pokémon Gold & Silver* served as the first massive overhaul to the series, providing a brand-new quest in a new region, Johto. The most immediately obvious new feature was a visual overhaul as a result of Game Boy Color support. However, the changes went far deeper. A battery-powered real-time clock was included in the cartridge, affecting what happened in-game. Certain Pokémon were more abundant during the day while others could only be found at night, and other events only took place on specific days of the week. New Pokémon could now also be acquired by breeding almost any of your acquired



» [Game Boy] The story in the games usually involves ferrying items around or beating up an evil faction.





## POKÉMON SILVER SCREEN



There's a good chance that your first exposure to the *Pokémon* franchise didn't come from the games but the animated series. It follows Ash Ketchum's adventures as a Pokémon Trainer, accompanied by his trusty Pikachu and initially Gym Leaders Brock and Misty, who were later replaced by a rotating cast of companions. Along the way they take part in Gym Battles and capture new Pokémon, and are regularly attacked by inept Team Rocket grunts Jessie and James, along with their talking Meowth.

The show has been a huge success and remains in production today, with over 1,100 episodes produced as well as an astonishing 23 animated movies. The first film grossed over \$163 million and was briefly the highest-grossing movie based on a videogame – a record later taken by the 2001 adaptation of *Tomb Raider*. In 2019 the series took bold steps into live-action cinema with *Detective Pikachu* – which now has a sequel – allegedly – in the works.

The *Pokémon* cartoon series has had five episodes removed from circulation globally, predominantly to show sensitivity following real-world disasters, along with three more removed from the English-language run due to issues such as use of weaponry. However, the biggest controversy was an episode featuring the virtual Pokémon Porygon, which sent hundreds of Japanese children to hospital in 1997 after triggering fits with flashing imagery.



**POKEFACTS**  
LONGEST/SHORTEST  
POKÉMON:  
ETERNATUS: 2,000cm JOLTIK: 10cm

**P**okémon *Gold & Silver* were massively successful worldwide, achieving 23 million sales in a much shorter period than the first generation of games due to quicker localisation. An enhanced third version followed with *Pokémon Crystal*, but new hardware was already on the horizon in the form of the Game Boy Advance. A new generation of games was already on the way, this time titled *Pokémon Ruby & Sapphire*.

These games took place in another new region, Hoenn. "With the Hoenn region I wanted to go for a feel of abundant nature," explains Masuda. "When I was younger, my grandparents lived in Kyushu and I would

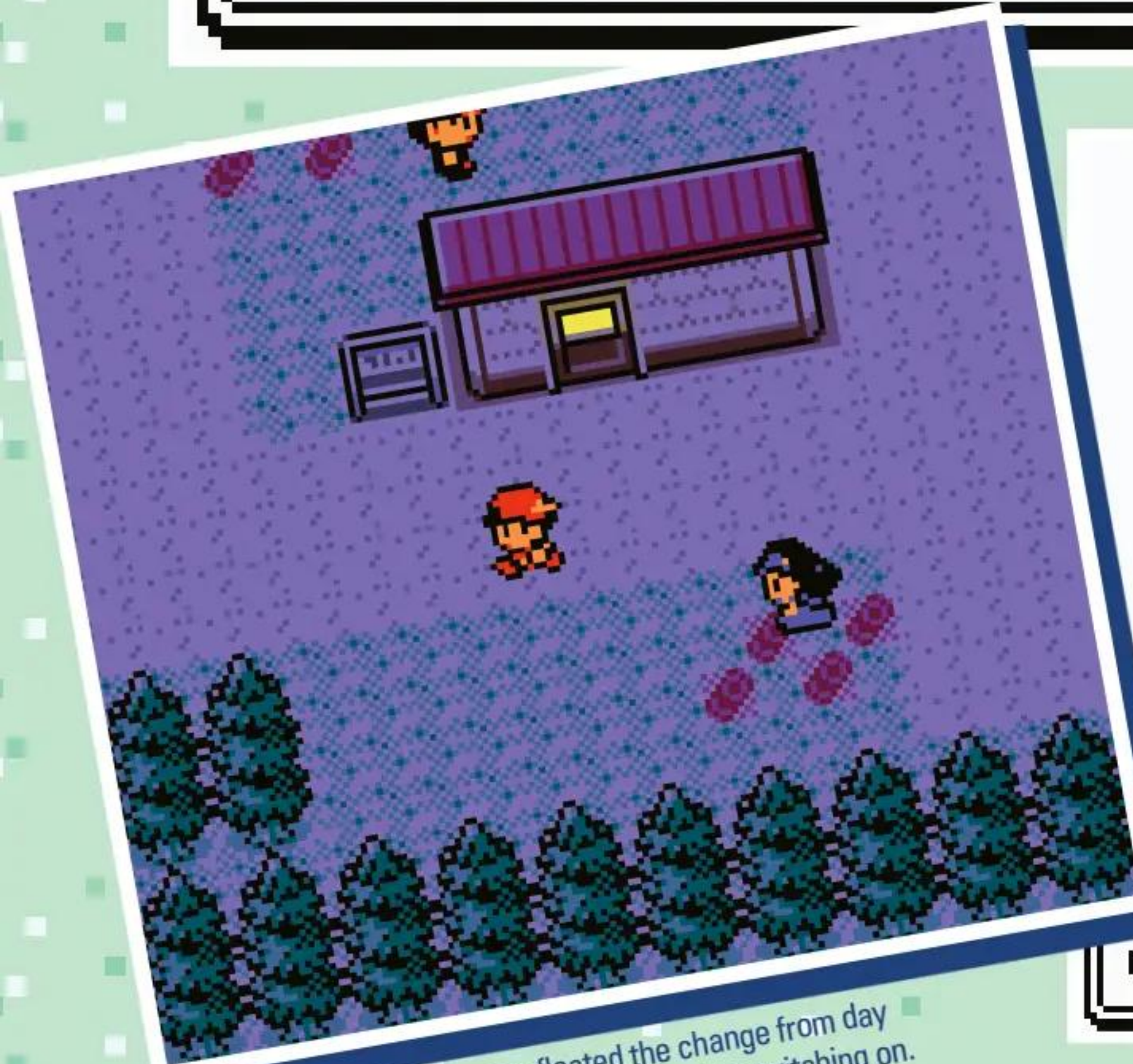
**"YOU CAN STILL  
PLAY TOGETHER  
WITH FRIENDS AT  
THE SAME TIME  
AND ALL HAVE FUN"**

Junichi Masuda

» [Game Boy Color] While *Gold & Silver* supported the GBC, both still worked on the original Game Boy.



You better visit  
the POKÉMON GYMS



» [Game Boy Color] Maps reflected the change from day to night, with towns growing dark and lights switching on.



» [Game Boy Color] *Pokémon Gold & Silver* established the convention of adding new Pokémon in sequels.

existing creatures, allowing for exclusive moves. Two brand-new types of Pokémon were also included, Dark and Steel, which were intended to address some of the balance issues with the first game – particularly the dominance of Psychic Pokémon.

However, the big new inclusion was that of 100 new Pokémon. These included extra evolutionary stages for existing Pokémon, such as Pichu, the baby form of Pikachu, and Slowking, a second stage for Slowpoke which serves as an alternative to the first game's Slowbro. Also, another special event Pokémon like Mew was included in the form of Celebi. Masuda, who would become director of the series following *Gold & Silver*, explains the philosophy behind new additions: "I always like to come up with the number first. When I'm envisioning what the world is going to be like, I think about what kind of Pokémon people are going to encounter there, and then how many are we going to need, so I come up with the number first usually."







» [Game Boy Advance] *Ruby & Sapphire* introduced rival factions of evildoers to defeat – Team Aqua and Magma.



» [Game Boy Advance] The GBA's graphics allowed designers to make towns that looked more realistic.

► visit them, and whenever I was there I'd always be catching bugs, playing in the river, catching fish and stuff like that, so I wanted to bring that feeling of nature to the games." The cohort of new Pokémon included 135 creatures, raising the total number to collect to 386. However, despite support in the code for all 386, only 202 could be caught in *Ruby & Sapphire* and trading with previous generations was impossible, creating a problem that the developers would need to solve later. Major improvements were made to the battle system, including team battles in which four Pokémon could fight and a new ability system, which gave Pokémon passive powers that affected battle.

However, the biggest change was an expansion to the non-battling play available, with the inclusion of Pokémon Contests in which your creatures would perform their moves in front of a judging panel, in competition with other Trainers. "At the time when we were

developing the games, we really wanted to think of a way to expand the appeal of the Pokémon games," reveals Masuda. "So we thought of a variety of ways that people could enjoy gameplay with Pokémon without battling them." Despite this attempt to expand the appeal of the series, *Pokémon Ruby & Sapphire* didn't sell as well as previous games. However, even a dip below par for *Pokémon* produces results that other series can only dream of – with 16 million copies sold, the games were comfortably the bestselling titles on the Game Boy Advance.

**I**n 2004, *Pokémon FireRed & LeafGreen* were released. These were the first *Pokémon* remakes, and according to Masuda were a part of the plan as soon as the series moved to the Game Boy Advance. "One of the main reasons [for developing remakes] was really more of a technological reason, as the hardware couldn't communicate with each other between the Game Boy and the Game Boy Advance. Even when we were first developing *Ruby & Sapphire* we knew we wanted to players to be able to catch all of the old Pokémon as well as the newer ones." *FireRed & LeafGreen* were faithful remakes with improved visuals and some expanded content to include *Ruby & Sapphire's*

## CARD CATCHER

Taking the battles from cartridge to cardboard

The Pokémon Trading Card Game, first introduced in October 1996 in Japan, is an unusual spin-off product in that it has taken on a life beyond that of the videogames. It depicts battles similar to those in the videogames, with a few key differences – Pokémon are able to evolve during the course of the battle, and must utilise Energy cards to attack and retreat. The game ends when either one player has no Pokémon in play, or a player has revealed their six prize cards by knocking out opposing Pokémon.

When *Magic: The Gathering* publisher Wizards Of The Coast licensed the game for English-speaking audiences in the late Nineties, many players ignored the battling gameplay and focused on trading and collecting. The popularity of the cards was such that many schools banned them, fearing problems with thefts and uneven trades. A foil Charizard was the most prized card from the first base set – a first-edition copy in good condition can still fetch a pretty penny today.

The Pokémon Company assumed worldwide control of the game in 2003 and continues to offer it both as a physical card game and a digital version (for PC, Mac and iPad). But if you're looking for a more retro way to enjoy it, the card game received its own GBC adaptations, too. Hudson Soft's 1998 *Pokémon Trading Card Game* tasked the player with beating AI opponents in an RPG-style quest. It was well-received by players and critics alike, selling over two million copies and spawning a Japan-only sequel in 2001, which eventually received a fan translation in 2012.







## A BREED APART

Lots of alternative monster-raising games are available for hipsters to enjoy...



### MONSTER RANCHER

FORMAT: PlayStation  
YEAR: 1997

■ Tecmo's spin on the genre offers similar battling gameplay to *Pokémon*, but a very different monster acquisition system. Players generate new creatures by putting music CDs into the PlayStation's disc drive!



### DRAGON WARRIOR MONSTERS

FORMAT: Game Boy Color  
YEAR: 1998

■ A spin-off of Enix's RPG series, this was the strongest *Pokémon* competitor on the Game Boy, offering 215 monsters and a deep breeding system which helped set it apart. PlayStation and 3DS remakes have followed.



### JADE COCOON

FORMAT: PlayStation  
YEAR: 1998

■ The game's unique look was created by Katsuya Kondo, an animator and character designer famed for his work on Studio Ghibli films such as *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Decent sales ensured that a PlayStation 2 sequel followed in 2001.



### DIGIMON WORLD

FORMAT: PlayStation  
YEAR: 1999

■ Bandai's rival franchise has never scaled the same heights as *Pokémon*, but the games are fondly remembered by those who grew up with them. One difference is that only one partner Digimon accompanies you throughout the main quest.



### TEMTEM

FORMAT: Various  
YEAR: 2022

■ People looking for a more direct interpretation of *Pokémon*'s creature-catching and battling formula should look towards *Temtem*. This RPG delivers a commendable alternative to *Pokémon*, with a bigger challenge.

improvements, most notably an additional post-game quest in the new Sevii Islands region. Success followed once again, with critical acclaim and around 12 million sales.

The Game Boy Advance was superseded by the Nintendo DS at the tail end of 2004, but with *Pokémon FireRed & LeafGreen* having just completed their worldwide release cycle, it was clear that all eyes were still on the older systems. While the DS received the forgettable spin-off *Pokémon Dash*, the Game Boy Advance got *Pokémon Emerald*, a substantial game which served a similar purpose to *Pokémon Crystal* by providing an enhanced third version of *Ruby & Sapphire*. Fans would have to wait until 2006 to get their hands on the fourth Generation of *Pokémon* games.

**P**okémon *Diamond & Pearl* brought a raft of changes for fans to enjoy, many of which were by now series standards. The game took place in the Sinnoh region, a large island bisected by a long mountain range. Eight new Gym Leaders and a new Elite Four were available to battle, and 107 new Pokémon were added for players to catch, bringing the complete total up to 493. The battle system was also further refined, with many attacks reclassified as physical or special based on how they operated – for example, Volt Tackle became a physical attack as it involves one Pokémon making contact with another, while Shadow Ball doesn't and therefore became special. However, the most exciting new possibilities were a direct result of the series' move to a new platform.

For a start, the DS was Nintendo's first handheld platform to be designed for 3D graphics, which had the potential to revolutionise the way the games were presented. However, *Diamond & Pearl* were tentative steps into 3D – battles received an improved set of 2D sprites so only the environments were overhauled in 3D, and they

rarely offered much functional difference to their 2D counterparts. Still, they did allow for surprising design possibilities, as Masuda recalls: "One of the great things about moving to the 3D environments with the DS games was that we could do a lot more dynamic presentation, for example moving the camera around freely. It's hard to explain, but being able to control the camera actually changes the balance of the game quite a bit." In *Diamond & Pearl*, you can see this best in the design of the Gyms – for example, a low camera angle in Eterna Gym allows Trainers to hide behind trees.

The other massive change was the addition of online connectivity. The DS was Nintendo's first real foray into online gaming, and Pokémon

"WE THOUGHT OF A VARIETY OF WAYS PEOPLE COULD ENJOY GAMEPLAY WITH POKÉMON WITHOUT BATTLING THEM"

Junichi Masuda



» [Game Boy Advance] Some moves became more useful thanks to *Ruby & Sapphire*'s team battles, since they hit all opponents.





# THE SPIN-OFFS

There are an insane number of Pokémon offshoots, so we decided to look at the best and worst examples

## POKÉMON SNAP

YEAR: 1997

■ The best *Pokémon* spin-offs are the ones that capture the essence of the original game, while keeping the gameplay fresh and exciting. *Pokémon Snap* is arguably one of the greatest, taking the 'gotta catch 'em all' concept and applying it to photography.

At its core, *Pokémon Snap* is an on-rails shooter and follows the exploits of protagonist Todd Snap. Rather than shooting Pokémon with guns, Todd instead shoots them with his camera, being rewarded points for their overall size in the final image and how well they are framed. Certain Pokémon can only be found in specific locations, while others must be coaxied out or flushed by using a number of specific items. It's a great game and it's a delight that a follow-up was released decades later in 2021.



**"WE WANTED TO GO MORE IN-DEPTH AND ACTUALLY HAVE POKÉMON APPEAR IN THE GAME WORLD"**

Shigeru Ohmori

## POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS

YEAR: 2022

■ Offering broadly the same setup as the mainline *Pokémon* games, but with a few distinct and welcome tweaks, *Pokémon Legends: Arceus* is perhaps one of the best *Pokémon* games to come out of its modern era. Set in an ancient version of Sinnoh called Hisui, your aspiring Trainer is tasked with completing the very first Pokédex. Exploration is more open-ended compared to other *Pokémon* games, and battles are made a touch more strategic with the inclusion of Agile and Strong attacks, favouring speed and power, respectively. Your Trainer is also put into the fray somewhat, meaning you have to dodge attacks, too!



## POKÉMON STADIUM

YEAR: 1999

■ When Nintendo revealed *Pokémon* was heading to the N64, we assumed an awesome 3D-based RPG. We assumed wrong.

Despite our initial disappointment, *Pokémon Stadium* proved an essential addition to any Poké-fan's collection, due to its ability to let you transfer – via the Transfer Pak – Pokémon from *Red & Blue* and battle with them in glorious 3D. Fighting takes place across four cups, with the player choosing from six available Pokémon. It's essentially just the scrapping from the original games, but made better due to the impressive-looking visuals. We'd argue the sequel is the better game, however, due to some truly brilliant minigames.



## POKÉMON PINBALL

YEAR: 1999

■ *Pokémon Pinball* was another early *Pokémon* release that proved Nintendo's Pocket Monsters were perfectly at home in other genres. It's most memorable for being one of the first Game Boy Color games to feature the underused rumble pack, resulting in an oversized cartridge. While the physics are a little off at times, the two tables – Red and Blue – are well-crafted and feature lots of interesting spinners and ramps. Best of all, however, are the 'Catch' and 'Evolution' modes that see you either trying to capture or evolve a specific Pokémon in under two minutes. And if you want that true Pokémon vibe, then use the Pokédex to catch all 151 Pokémon.







## POKÉMON CONQUEST

YEAR: 2012

■ Quite possibly the strangest *Pokémon* game we've played, but a good one to boot. *Pokémon Conquest* is a kiddie-friendly strategy game that splices the popular franchise with Tecmo Koei's *Nobunaga's Ambition* series. It works surprisingly well with the player travelling the Ransei Region, battling Pokémon, warriors and warlords in a bid to unite the region as one nation. It's a vastly different RPG compared to the usual games and offers plenty of tactical play, while its weird crossover status should ensure it becomes quite rare in later years.

## POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON

YEAR: 2005

■ The big hook of *Mystery Dungeon* was that it was the first time you could properly play as Pokémon. The fact that its two versions let it link between the Game Boy Advance and DS didn't make it too shabby either. For those unaware, it's effectively Game Freak's spin on the roguelike genre, with Pikachu and pals exploring popular locations from the series and taking part in turn-based battles. While easier than most examples of the genre, it's still quite tricky in places and link up with both versions is crucial if you want to gain access to all the available Pokémon.



## POKÉMON RANGER

YEAR: 2006

■ Trust Nintendo to make drawing patterns interesting. Unlike previous *Pokémon* games, *Ranger* requires you to capture Pokémon by drawing specific circles around them. It's clearly used as a justification for the DS's unique control system, but it admittedly works well, getting quite challenging on later stages. Unfortunately, while the minigame-based capture sections are good fun, the main adventuring is pretty dull and feels quite light compared to typical *Pokémon* adventures.



► was a key part of the software supporting the move. For the first time ever, players with access to a wireless internet connection could battle and trade their Pokémon without being in close proximity to one another, and without the need for additional peripherals. It was a huge step forward for players looking to complete their collections and prove their teams against Trainers worldwide. However, the advent of online play meant that nobody ever needed to leave their home to catch 'em all. It's at this point that creating a main series *Pokémon* game for home consoles might have seemed most appealing, and it's something fans had often requested in subsequent years. However, Masuda saw things differently.

"One of the reasons that we continue to feel that handheld platforms are the best place for *Pokémon* is that with a handheld platform, you can take the game with you. We really like to focus on creating incentive for people to meet up with each other in real life. For example, if there's a special Pokémon distribution, people will go to meet each other and fans will talk... about the games. Creating that kind of atmosphere, kind of like a festival, is something that we really like with the *Pokémon* games. Obviously you can also play them at home alone now, and that's another way to play, but being able to do both of them is one of the best parts of being on a handheld platform." Today, the Nintendo Switch consoles make the home/handheld console debate elegantly moot.

It was an understandable position, especially as the handheld games continued to perform so well. *Pokémon Diamond & Pearl* sold a combined 18 million and were followed by an enhanced version in 2008, *Pokémon Platinum*. A fifth Generation of games was on the way, but once again a remake would serve as an interlude. *Pokémon HeartGold & SoulSilver* remade *Gold & Silver* as full fourth-Generation *Pokémon* games, with new visuals and all of the system changes that had been implemented. They also came bundled with the Pokéwalker, an LCD device that allowed players to transfer Pokémon from the cartridge via an

## POKÉMON DASH

YEAR: 2004

■ The best thing about this DS launch game was its ability to link up with GBA versions of the available *Pokémon* to create new courses to race on. Unfortunately, that's the only thing this insipidly dull game has going for it. Racing Pokémon through checkpoint-based courses sounds great fun, but the reality is vastly different due to incredibly bland track design and overly simplistic gameplay. Pikachu runs in whichever direction you swipe, which is as dull as it sounds, while a variety of different terrains and power-ups attempt to inject some entertainment into Ambrella's game.





# THE UNLIKELY LADS

Some Pokémon that are freaky, unnatural and downright impossible

## MAGCARGO

■ With a body temperature stated to be over 18,000 degrees Fahrenheit, this Pokémon is absolutely incredibly hot. How hot? Almost twice as hot as the surface of the sun, which reaches only 9940.73 Fahrenheit, fact fans...



## SPOINK

■ This pig-like creature has a rather unfortunate life – if it ever stops bouncing on its springy tail, its heart will stop beating. That's right, it dies. We prefer a Tigger-esque state of compulsion to a life-or-death situation, frankly.



## TRUBBISH

■ It's a bin bag! More specifically, it's a bin bag with tie-top ears, a broken glass mouth and arms that look like spilled waste, formed from a chemical reaction within domestic and industrial waste. This makes perfect sense, of course.



## YAMASK

■ This ghostly Pokémon retains memories of its former life, as well as a mask it occasionally looks at while weeping. Oh yes, and these guys are human ghosts – so what awaits you in the afterlife, it seems, is captivity. Sweet dreams.



## VANILLITE

■ Created by British designer James Turner, Vanillite is a Pokémon which strongly resembles an ice cream cone. In fact, its snowy topping can be made to melt, exposing a bald, icy head. It gains extra scoops as it evolves, too.



Eusine: Take a look at it!  
SUICUNE is waiting for you!

» [Nintendo DS] Legendries are typically encountered once, disappearing if you knock them out or fail to catch them.

► infrared link and raise their stats by walking around. It also allowed players to obtain items and catch extra Pokémon.

The fifth Generation of games, launching with *Pokémon Black & White*, was in some ways a radical departure from previous entries in the series. "The main goal with *Black & White* was to make the same experience for existing *Pokémon* fans as well as brand-new players," explains Masuda, "so everyone playing the game would experience the same surprises and joy." In practice, this meant that for the first time in the series, the only Pokémon players could encounter were the new ones. It was a welcome change for fans who had experienced over a decade of caverns filled with Zubats and Geodudes, and older Pokémon once again became available after the Elite Four were beaten.

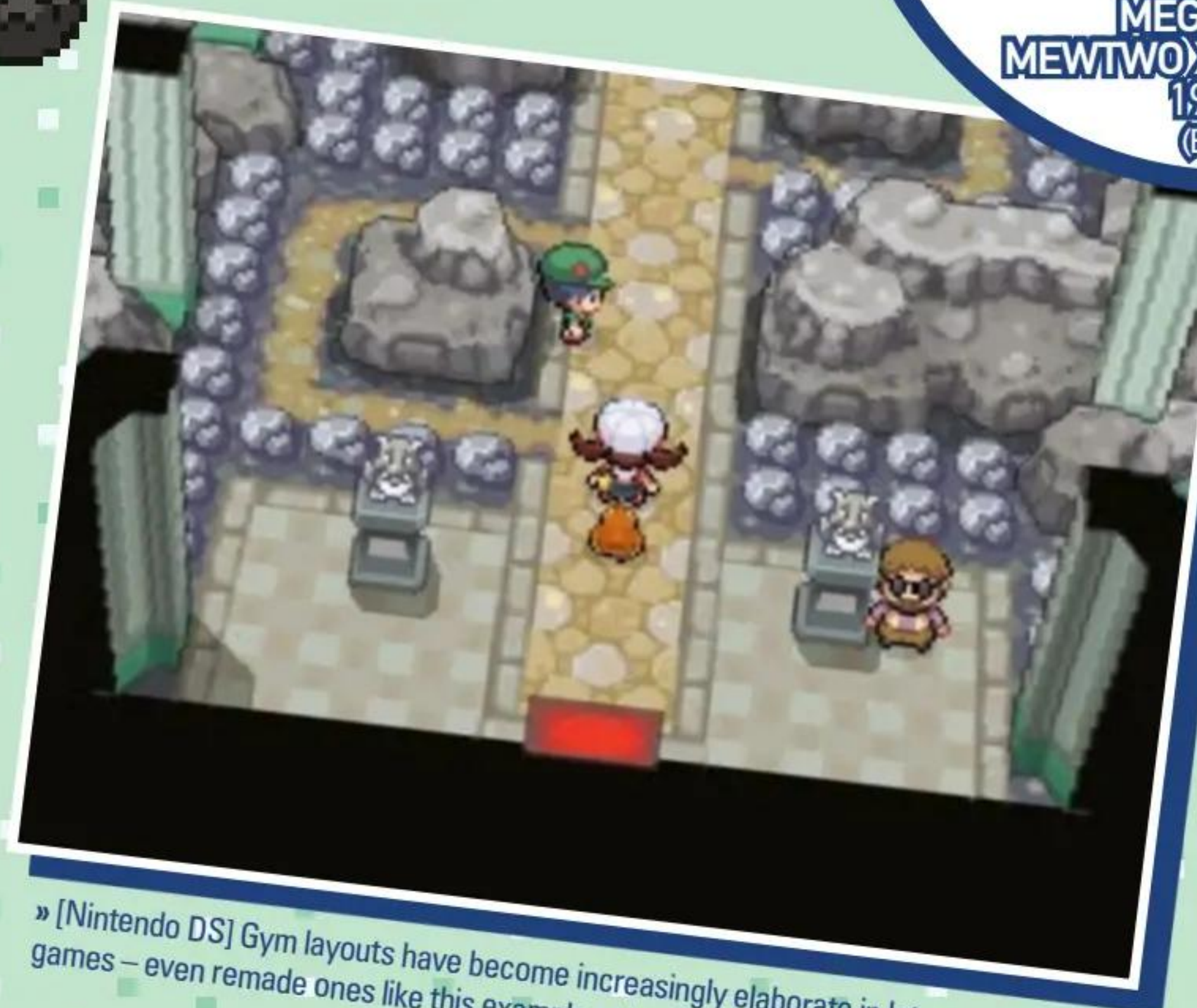
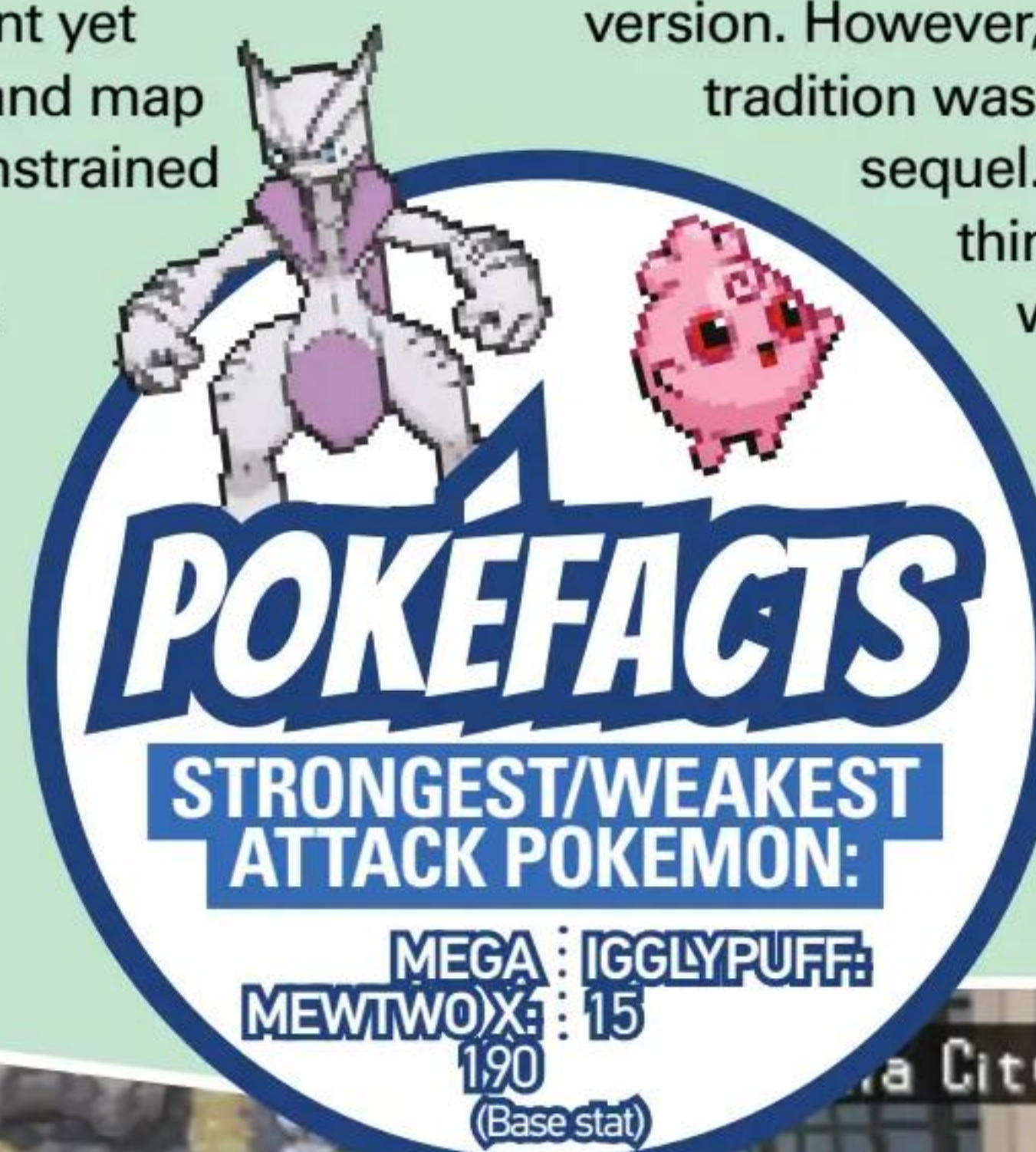
**Other improvements were also seen.** The new Unova region, an urban area inspired by the state of New York, was the best-looking environment yet thanks to improved 3D visuals and map designs that were no longer constrained to grids as in previous games. Seasons now passed as well as time, though at an accelerated rate of one per month, and Pokémon Contests were replaced with the upgraded Pokémon Musicals. There was also a Pokémon Dream World feature, which enabled Pokémon



» [Nintendo DS] Pokémon can follow you outside of their Poké Balls in the second-Gen remakes.

to be sent to the internet to obtain otherwise unobtainable creatures.

Over 15 million copies of *Pokémon Black & White* were sold following the games' release in 2010, marking another success and ensuring the production of the now-traditional enhanced version. However, one more surprising break with tradition was left: a traditionally numbered sequel. "With *Black & White*, a lot of things from a story perspective were left unfinished, some of which were done on purpose. A lot of the staff really wanted to revisit those and tie up some of the loose ends," Masuda recalls. "I remember at the time a lot of people were expecting a *Pokémon Grey* to come out, but I knew originally



» [Nintendo DS] Gym layouts have become increasingly elaborate in later games – even remade ones like this example gain some new tricks.



» [Nintendo DS] The regions of *Black & White* look more realistic, thanks to less grid-based map design.





» [Nintendo 3DS] *Omega Ruby & Alpha Sapphire* introduced the short-lived Soar mechanic.

that I wanted to put out two versions for the game that came after *Black & White*, as we had a lot of ideas we wanted to implement with that – two versions, we'd set the story two years later, and with various other elements of 'two' we thought we'd put that in the name." The games boasted greater differences than previous enhanced versions, with a substantially different story and new locations.

Nintendo's new 3DS handheld saw its first major *Pokémon* release late in 2013, with *Pokémon X & Y* marking the series' first simultaneous worldwide release. Battles now took place with full 3D visuals of the kind previously seen in console games like *Pokémon Stadium*, and players were finally set free from four-way grid movement. A new Fairy type was also added, in order to balance the previously strong Dragon type.

But the biggest change concerns evolution. "One of the reasons why people like *Pokémon* is the fact that they evolve, so we wanted to think of a way to make this even more appealing," says Masuda,

**"WE REALLY LIKE TO  
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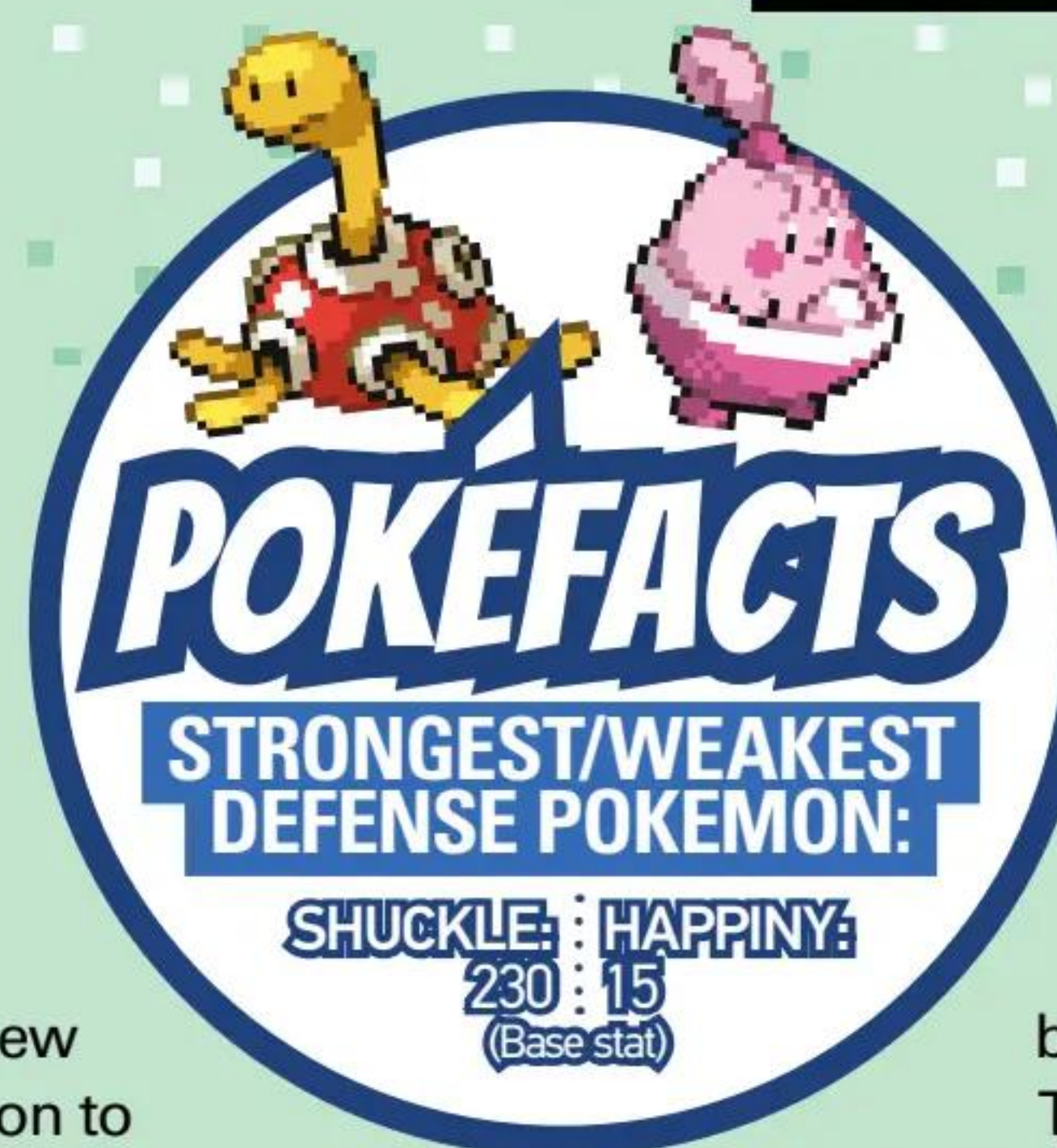
Junichi Masuda

"so I discussed this with the battle system designers, the graphic designers and we came up with the idea of a Mega Evolution that would take place just during the battle." Previously, *Pokémon* could only change forms by evolving outside of battle. The new Mega Evolutions require *Pokémon* to be given Mega Stones to hold and they only happen during battle, reverting once the fight is over. "I really like Charizard, and I also like the Mega Evolutions of Charizard, but if it stayed like that I'd miss the old Charizard," he explains.

While *Pokémon X & Y* enjoyed decent sales and critical success, they didn't pierce the mainstream like that inaugural wave in the Nineties. 2016, then, was a shot in the arm for the series as it celebrated its 20th anniversary. *Pokémon Go* arrived in June, and caught the world's attention. This smartphone game put everyone on the real-world streets as they sought to capture *Pokémon* in real-world locations thanks to the game's AR technology. Soon after, *Pokémon Sun & Moon* arrived and it felt like *Pokémon* was experiencing a second Golden Age. These mainline sequels mixed things up a little by adding new 'Z-Moves'

that emphasised the bond between a *Pokémon* and their Trainer.

*Pokémon Sword & Shield* followed in 2019, and took advantage of the Nintendo Switch hardware making it the first mainline *Pokémon* game to appear on a home console. These games were hit with controversy, however,



as they were not able to host all 898 *Pokémon*: the fans called the scandal 'Dexit'. Still, the games are still of the high quality you'd expect from the series, and the new Dynamax feature, which turned your *Pokémon* into a kaiju-like beast, was a hit.

The most recent mainline games, *Scarlet & Violet* adopted an open world approach, giving Trainers freedom to tackle objectives in whatever order they wanted. This new direction was received well, but Game Freak clearly stumbled on delivering wide open expanses, with the game's visuals and performance suffering greatly – something that can be rectified by running it on the Switch 2, but was unexcusable on release.

If you've only experienced *Pokémon* passively, it's easy to write the series off as a fad, but this is a flawed perspective – with the original kids now grown up and still playing, the continued sales of the series rest on more than trends. The truth is that the *Pokémon* games inspire loyalty among fans because they're deep RPGs, with battle systems that have been stretched by dedicated players and multiplayer features that truly bring players together. A game that can still pack players into the same room is a real classic – and that's exactly what *Pokémon* is. ★

» [Nintendo 3DS] Old *Pokémon* like Mewtwo were updated for the first time in years, thanks to Mega Evolutions.



» [Switch] The modern *Pokémon* games might have evolved, but the original DNA is still there.





# PERSONA

HOW THIS  
CONTEMPORARY  
HIGH-SCHOOL-SET  
JRPG WENT FROM  
CULT CURIO TO THE  
GENRE'S ROYAL  
STANDARD

Words by Alan Wen



**It's not out of the ordinary for a spin-off to eclipse its origins.** On TV, you need only look at *Frasier* after *Cheers*, or *The Simpsons* transcending *The Tracey Ullman Show*. *Persona* is perhaps one of the best examples of this phenomenon in games. Of course, if you had grown up with *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy* as your touchstones, you might wonder how a contemporary-set series based on Jungian psychology with Sanskrit terminology and systems revolving around tarot cards would become a defining example of the JRPG.

*Persona* originated as a spin-off of *Shin Megami Tensei*, an even more niche JRPG series with even stranger origins – a spin-off of a series called *Digital Devil Story* from the Famicom days, and which was an adaptation of a series of sci-fi novels of the same name. Still, what they have in common is a modern Japanese setting where players fight demons (in *Persona*, they are supposed to be the manifestations of people's inner darkness, or 'Shadows') but can also recruit them to summon as powerful allies. Think of it as a darker twist on *Pokémon*, except that, instead of capturing demons, you're negotiating with them through dialogue choices.

The early *Persona* games on PlayStation, however, have a messy history in terms of how they were localised (or in some cases, not) for the West. Atlus was trying to make a name for itself in North America alongside other JRPG competitors at the time, such as Konami's *Suikoden*, Capcom's *Breath Of Fire* and Square's *Final Fantasy*. Rather than use the original Japanese title of *Shin Megami Tensei*, it opted for '*Revelations*', a reference to the Christian New Testament's Book Of Revelations, as a series umbrella name it could use for future releases – though, in the end, only one other release went by that moniker.

1996's *Revelations: Persona* established some of the series' conventions, which arguably were influenced by Western culture. The game's core concept of Personas, the demons that your student characters would summon in battle, was taken from Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung's theory that individuals wear different masks in different social situations. The Velvet Room – a key series location the protagonist visits – is also home to a recurring mentor character, Igor, which is based on the Black Lodge in David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks*. The blue motif is likely a reference to the cinematic masterpiece *Blue Velvet*, also by David Lynch.

However, the localisation carried out by newly formed Atlus USA would also go to additional lengths to Westernise it, such as renaming

» [PlayStation] *Persona* has never been on the cutting edge of graphics, but it makes up for that with heaps of style.



» [PSP] A PSP re-release of *Persona* did a good job at bringing it kicking and screaming into the Noughties.



» [PSP] Throughout the series, battles have a short, snappy feel to them, leaving you hungry for more.



characters, updating their portraits with Western hairstyles, and one character, Mark, even had his ethnicity changed. Adding to the undertaking was that there was a lot of text for the small team to translate, resulting in a whole alternate story path, dubbed the Snow Queen route, being cut from the localised version.

**B**y the time it came to the sequel, Atlus USA changed tack and aimed to produce a more faithful localisation, with 2000's *Persona 2: Eternal Punishment* going by the same title as its Japanese release, forgoing the *Revelations* name. While still keeping the Japanese high-school setting, it also introduced a female protagonist, Maya Amano, and rather than a teenage student, she's a magazine reporter.

But this was literally only half the story. *Eternal Punishment* was in fact a direct sequel to 1999's *Persona 2: Innocent Sin*, which introduced the setting of the fictional Sumaru City, the rumour system – where spreading rumours around the city can have a direct effect on game events – and where Maya also made an appearance as a supporting character. *Innocent Sin* was, however, passed over for localisation, potentially owing to multiple controversial factors by American standards: student characters who can attack with guns in the wake of the Columbine massacre; a plot point that involved the resurrection of Adolf Hitler; and a main character heavily implied to be gay.

Despite these bumps, *Persona*'s unique themes still made it stand out as a thought-provoking JRPG with hardcore battles that did well enough to have a future outside of Japan. It was in the next phase that the series really began to take off.

More akin to a reboot, *Persona 3* in 2006 laid down critical foundations that the next two games would also follow. If the earlier games suffered from dated graphics, then *Persona 3* and *Persona 4* could have fallen into the same trap as games developed for the PS2 at a time when the PS3 and HD gaming had arrived. But what *Persona 3* lacked

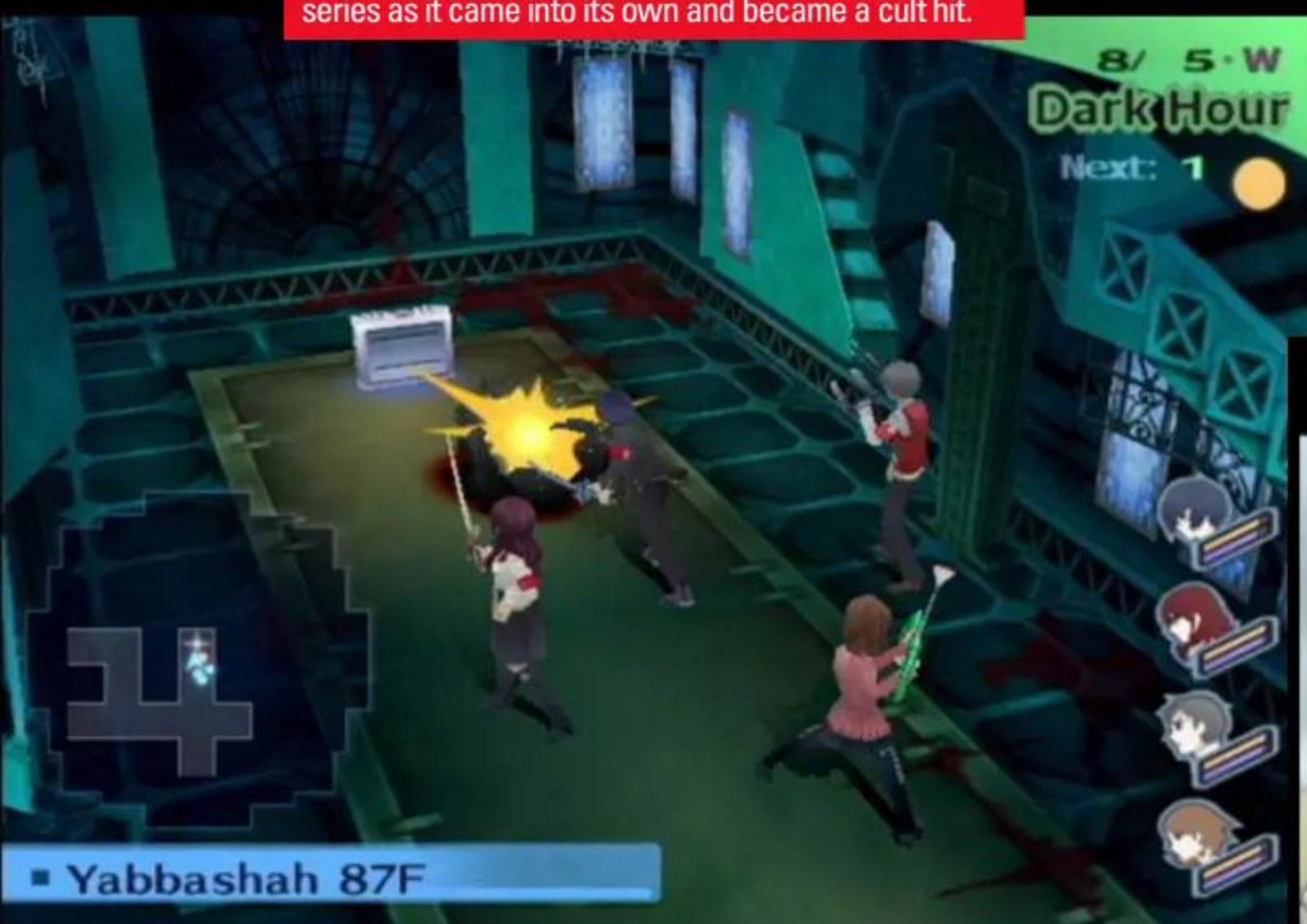


» [PSP] The *Persona* games draw heavily on tarot and Jungian psychology for its recurrent themes.





» [PS2] *Persona 3* marked a tidal shift for the fledgling series as it came into its own and became a cult hit.



» [PS2] Adding anime cutscenes was a no-brainer as they dovetailed nicely with the in-game manga-style presentation.



» [PS2] Many of the things we love about *Persona* today were created for or honed in *Persona 3*.



➤ graphically, it made up for with an effortless sense of style and tone.

The games' aesthetics leaned towards more popular manga and anime, with flashy and vibrant colours that are complemented by a soundtrack that gloriously riffs on catchy J-pop hooks like the repetition of 'baby' in *Persona 3*'s battle theme 'Mass Destruction' or the upbeat melodies of 'Heartbeat, Heartbreak' when exploring the small-town Inaba setting in *Persona 4*.

These brighter themes didn't come at the compromise of the series' darkness but rather brought it into sharper contrast. *Persona 3* is, after all, remembered for having one of the darkest and most memorable stories, and elicits one of the most memorable images where summoning a Persona involves confronting your own mortality: by firing a gun-like Evoker against your head.

*Persona 4*, meanwhile, may have a murder mystery as its central plot, but what people tend to remember most are the very personal and relatable struggles of each of the party members of the growing Investigation Team, with Jung's shadow

concept made even more overt as characters literally confront doppelgangers representing the inner parts of themselves they don't want to see.

**P**erhaps the most fascinating change to the series was that instead of just playing as a high school student, you actually got to live the life of one.

With a unique calendar structure, it meant you weren't just battling shadows but also trying to juggle a social life, attend classes, work a part-time job and even go on dates. Romances have become a more popular aspect in the series, and the social simulation of managing your time is something very unique to *Persona*.

Even if your day-to-day could feel mundane, as you could opt to spend a day not fighting Shadows in dungeons, none of it felt trivial. Every activity has the potential to improve your protagonist's characteristics, such as studying to boost your academics or working a creepy night shift at a hospital to raise your courage. You might later find

**"Persona's cult status only continued to grow over the years as the games were re-released on Sony's handheld platforms"**



that having a higher characteristic is a requirement to work a certain job or upgrade a Social Link. Here are games that understand that making friends isn't just about completing requests and ticking things off a list, but actually making the effort to hang out. It is still all cleverly fed back into the game loop because having stronger bonds with characters also increases the bonuses you unlock when fusing Personas. Meanwhile, improving bonds with party members would mean they could support you better in battle, such as performing a follow-up attack or even protecting you from a fatal blow.

*Persona*'s cult status only continued to grow over the years as the games were re-released on Sony's handheld platforms with substantial new content (or restoring cut content in the case of the first title). Even though *Persona 3 Portable* stripped back some 3D elements due to the PSP's hardware limitations, it introduced a female protagonist who also allowed for new Social Links and potential romances. *Persona 4 Golden*, meanwhile, greatly expanded the original game with new events and even added a third semester to the school year.

Even then, few might have anticipated that *Persona 5* would eclipse everything that came before it. It continued to iterate on the calendar structure and social links of its predecessors, while also bringing back elements from older titles, such as gun attacks or the need to negotiate with shadows with the right answers before you can recruit them. It wasn't just a greatest hits package,

» [PS Vita] *Persona* got its deserved audience with the fourth game – especially its enhanced Vita port.







# OH MY GODDESS

Comparing the spin-off with the central franchise Shin Megami Tensei

■ *Persona* may have become the more popular series, but there are still reasons why the original *Shin Megami Tensei* (translated as 'new reincarnation of the goddess') has a contingent of hardcore fans.

The demons, designed by series artist Kazuma Kaneko, will be familiar since many appear as summonable Personas and have retained their original designs, including de-facto mascot Jack Frost. Functionally, however, demons actually fight alongside you as party members, whereas in *Persona*, they are summoned by a party member.

It was 2004's *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne*, also the first game in the series to be officially localised, that established the now recurring Press Turn battle system. By performing favourable actions like scoring a critical hit or exploiting an enemy weakness, you can gain bonus turns to act more times before an enemy can retaliate. What makes it a hardcore system is not only that enemies can exploit this system, but you can also be punished and lose turns if you miss an attack or, worse, land an attack that the enemy absorbs and regains health from.

With its darker and usually post-apocalyptic setting, a running narrative theme is that the main characters you meet also represent an alignment of law, chaos or neutral. Depending on your bonds and choices, who you ally yourself with determines what ending you'll get and how the world is remade.

» [PS4] *Persona 5*'s highly stylish and kinetic user interface makes it one of the most striking games around.

as it was also a forward-facing game that took the series to its peak with a style and execution that other games which occupy the same genre space are still taking cues from.

**T**he presentation was simply sumptuous, from the achingly fashionable teens of Shujin Academy to the irresistibly sophisticated acid jazz soundtrack.

But what continues to stand out is its extravagant UI design, where everything from battle screens, shop menus, and even loading screen transitions are striking works of art. But it wasn't just an exercise of form over function. Indeed, while it still employed turn-based battles, having every command mapped to an input on your controller, instead of tediously scrolling menus, made these encounters feel more dynamic.

*Persona 5* arrived just as there was a renewed appreciation for Japanese culture, including a renaissance of Japanese games. That made its decision to double down on its Japanese-ness by setting the story in the bustling city of Tokyo all the more potent. But you could also say that its story captured a zeitgeist that transcended nationalities. After all, you don't need to be in Japan to have felt the growing sense of social injustices while corrupt adults in positions of power get away with all manner of abuses and crimes. *Persona 3* might have the most striking image of summoning a Persona, but there's nothing quite as cathartic as seeing a character awaken as a Phantom Thief, an outsider with the power to fight back against the deep rot of society.

*Persona 5* (and its greatly expanded edition *Persona 5 Royal*) isn't just a masterpiece of the JRPG genre but Atlus's most successful game, having sold over 10 million copies to date, a world away from its niche spin-off status almost two decades ago. Perhaps the downside to this success is that the *Persona 5* brand has become a cash cow for more spin-offs, while a sequel remains nowhere in sight. Yet there are reasons to be cheerful, because those foundations and best practices have still carried over to Atlus's other titles, including the remake *Persona 3 Reload*, the upcoming *Persona 4 Revival*, and the fantasy-set *Metaphor: ReFantazio* (made by the same creative leads behind the last three *Persona* games). Each game has smashed records for Atlus while shattering expectations of what a JRPG can be. ★









# FINAL FANTASY VII

IN THE MID-NINETIES, SQUARE'S FLAGSHIP FRANCHISE ABANDONED NINTENDO'S HARDWARE AND EMBRACED THE PLAYSTATION, A MOVE THAT WOULD LEAD TO FINAL FANTASY VII, AN AMBITIOUS, REFINED AND ENORMOUSLY INFLUENTIAL RPG. DIRECTOR YOSHINORI KITASE AND ART DIRECTOR YUSUKE NAORA DISCUSS THE CREATION OF THIS MASTERPIECE WITH US IN UNPRECEDENTED DEPTH. STEVEN SPIELBERG'S JAWS FITS INTO IT SOMEWHERE, AS SAMUEL ROBERTS DISCOVERS...

**W**ithout hyperbole, *Final Fantasy VII* is the RPG that changed the genre. Opening the floodgates globally to Japan's distinct brand of role-playing and popularising the JRPG genre, the 14-million-plus-selling game was, for many players, their introduction to the potential of interactive storytelling and the first videogame narrative to leave a mark on them. It's also divisive, anecdotally referred to as the most returned game of all time and often criticised by Western RPG veterans – yet such cynicism can't mask the impact it had upon release in 1997. Along with *Gran Turismo*, *Final Fantasy VII* shifted millions of PlayStation consoles by demonstrating the machine's capabilities, captivating gamers with a fictional universe of unrestrained scope and style that would govern an entire corner of the industry. Back when the game was being created, Square (today known as Square Enix) was a company in transition, and the influx of talent that brought *Final Fantasy VII* into being, as well as a development culture that fostered creativity, was ultimately responsible for this deservedly celebrated RPG.

At the 1995 SIGGRAPH computer graphics convention in Los Angeles, Square presented an interactive demo to the world that showcased its *Final Fantasy* property in unprecedented fashion. 🐾



☞ This project depicted three characters from *Final Fantasy VI* fighting a Golem enemy in full 3D, a jaw-dropping contrast to the sprite-based 2D roots of the game, complete with visual effects and cinematic in-battle camera angles that implied a future beyond the static staging of the series' stories up until that point. When you look at the tech demo now, you can absolutely see the founding technical conceit of *Final Fantasy VII* embedded within it. Square saw that *Final Fantasy* could be so much more on a platform that allowed the company to experiment with such high-end technical ideas.

The SIGGRAPH project would form the 'seed', as producer and creator Hironobu Sakaguchi dubbed it on a promotional video for the game, of *Final Fantasy*'s move into the next console generation. To any seasoned gamer, the most well-known part of the development of *Final Fantasy VII* is the defection that started it all. Long considered a Nintendo stalwart since the original *Final Fantasy*'s release on the NES in 1987, Square shifted to Sony's PlayStation for its CD-ROM capabilities over the Nintendo 64's comparatively limited cartridge media. This fitted the company's grand ambitions of this new, generation-defining sequel.

"We were fans of Nintendo's hardware, although in order to use CG movies in the game like we intended, we needed a lot of storage

space, and for that reason decided on a platform that used the higher-capacity CD media," director Yoshinori Kitase tells us.

It is ironic that this franchise would soar on a Sony platform, given that Nintendo famously broke away from an agreement for CD-enabled SNES collaboration with the electronics giant earlier in the decade. The emerging disc format enabled *Final Fantasy VII* to be far more cinematic than its forebears – an important factor, especially to Sakaguchi. Yet an interesting factor in all this was the set of technical influences on the team, many of whom were from Western game development, as Kitase explains to us: "We looked at trends in the foreign-made PC games of the time, such as *Alone In The Dark* and *Heart Of Darkness* [and so on], and made it our objective to combine together smooth action sequences using polygon-based characters and clever camera work with the insertion of effective CG movies at a high level. I believe that we pretty much achieved our goals in this regard."

**W**hen it came to setting and story, *Final Fantasy VII* would similarly be a departure from series convention. While the previous entry in the series had a pronounced steampunk theme, the set of environments in the seventh game would vary



## SIDE HUSTLES The best of Final Fantasy VII's extra tasks and minigames

### ☞ CHOCOBOS

Catching them, riding them, racing them and breeding them – the Chocobo element of *FFVII* is a game in itself, and becomes bewilderingly complex when you're looking to breed that lucrative Gold Chocobo, which can reach parts of the map that even the Highwind cannot.



### ☞ BATTLE ON FORT CONDOR

Visiting Fort Condor triggers this intriguing little strategy offshoot, where you fund small skirmishes to hold back Shinra forces from the giant bird perched atop the fort. It's no *Age Of Empires*, but it shows how diverse the ideas are in *FFVII*.

### ☞ SNOWBOARDING

On the second disc, Cloud gets the opportunity to snowboard down a mountain. Later in the game, it re-emerges as a tricky arcade game at Gold Saucer's Wonder Square. This minigame was popular enough to justify a mobile spin-off, which was only available in Japan.



### ☞ MOTORCYCLE CHASE

One of the nicest surprises early on is an action-packed minigame where you have to protect your comrades from Shinra soldiers on bikes by ramming them off the road with Cloud's inexplicably large Buster Sword. It's great fun.

### ☞ FIRST-PERSON SHOOTING

Visiting the 'Speed' part of Gold Saucer triggers this bizarre but quite impressive first-person shooter section, where hitting a high score lands you a prize. This is notable for its kaleidoscopic visuals, in stark contrast to much of the game.



### ☞ BATTLE ARENA

The only way to get Cloud's Omnislash Limit Break outside of the finale, and a clever means of extending the combat's appeal, the battle arena on Gold Saucer is a relentless challenge where you have to survive successive rounds of enemies and status ailments.





## FINAL FANTASY VII'S UNSUNG HERO

**Kitase weighs in on the high popularity of Zack Fair, Cloud's former mentor**

As you may recall, the entire flashback sequence where Cloud remembers the events in Nibelheim that led to Sephiroth's transformation into a twisted enemy turns out to be a bit different. Later, we learn that Cloud confused himself with Zack, his superior in the army. Ever since then, Zack has remained a popular figure among *Final Fantasy* fans, which led to the spin-off *Crisis Core*. His role in Cloud's story makes him a unique element in *FFVII*'s tangled web.

"Zack is the vessel onto which Cloud twistedly projects his complexes towards SOLDIER [Shinra's elite fighting force]," Kitase tells us. "He was created by the scenario writer, [Kazushige Nojima], as he was trying to build up the mystery surrounding Cloud's past, and we did not originally think of Zack as a major character, but he seemed to be strangely popular with the fans. Much later on, Zack featured heavily in *Crisis Core*, and Mr Nojima was in charge of the scenario for both titles.

When he first created Zack, I doubt that he could possibly have thought that we would be delving into the same character's story many years on!"

» [PlayStation] *Final Fantasy VII*'s Materia system is so deep that it can eventually transform the entire rhythm of a battle, by letting you alter the conditions of it.



massively from continent to continent, from a vast, polluted metropolis to backwater towns; that clash of futuristic technology against these remnants of a beautiful old world.

We asked Kitase to discuss the inspirations for the planet's creation, and he graciously passed our questions on to *FFVII*'s art director, Yusuke Naora. "Initially, we wanted to try something new by having a corporation as the major enemy while still keeping the game broadly in the fantasy genre," he explains, referring to the Shinra Electric Power Company. "Having decided on this concept, we actively included many steampunk-like elements to try to merge the appeal of traditional high-fantasy 'brick-built' structures and sci-fi elements at a high level. However, as there was to be magic present in this world, it would have been hard to have cyberpunk-esque unknown future technology sitting comfortably with the other influences, so we tried to keep that aspect down as much as possible."

Naora continues: "On the design side, we were also very much inspired to mix in things from many different periods in a semi-chaotic manner, including things from our everyday lives such as the newer buildings in Tokyo, the streets of Ginza, and the Shibuya station building." All this led to a laudably diverse set of environments, which still felt like a cohesive part of the same world.

The setting was closely connected to the narrative – the backdrop of *Final Fantasy VII*'s story is that the planet is suffering, being drained of resources by the ruthless Shinra, which is also a prominent military force. Yet the central conflict of the story is actually smaller-scale than that. For the developers, it was more about the symbiotic struggle between the hero, Cloud, and the mysterious, seemingly out-of-reach villain, Sephiroth, that drove the game forward, as Kitase explains: "Throughout the story, I really wanted to depict Sephiroth as an overwhelmingly powerful threat. However, if you have a villain as an actual opponent who appears before the heroes then however strong or charismatic you make the character, he will still feel very much

'life-sized' and limited in scope, reduced to another minor evil."

What source of inspiration helped the team tackle this issue? You'd be surprised. Kitase continues: "To solve this problem, I decided to present Sephiroth indirectly, making the player aware of his existence through hints and stories but not having him show himself before them much. The player sees the aftermath of his ruthless deeds but does not arrive at the source of the evil for a long time. This was the same method used by Steven Spielberg in the film *Jaws*. Finding the butchered President Shinra on the top floor of the Shinra building and the impaled body of the Midgar Zolom are moments symbolic of this approach."

Players don't properly encounter Sephiroth until they're around ten hours in, and even then it's in fleeting glimpses – we see him often in flashbacks, leading to the revelation about his grim origins and subsequent breakdown. He, along with the attached musical theme, 'One-Winged Angel', would become iconic aspects of *FFVII* upon release. Cloud, the amnesiac hero trying to piece his distressing memories back together, was an equal point of fascination for players. It's this dynamic, with their subsequently explored history of bloodshed and trauma, that players hadn't seen before in *Final Fantasy*. "Furthermore, however far the player pursues him, Sephiroth is just out of reach, and because of this our image of him becomes more and more idolised and idealised," says Kitase. "This story structure also overlaps with the reasons that Cloud has such a complex about his own past, and I believe it is an effective tool for showing the relationship between the two characters."

**A**ll the character designs and their personalities were left in the hands of the designers, a break from previous games, where Sakaguchi would oversee their conception.

This was also the first project where Tetsuya Nomura would be the sole character



“WE MADE IT OUR OBJECTIVE TO COMBINE SMOOTH ACTION SEQUENCES WITH CG MOVIES AT A HIGH LEVEL”



» [PS5] *Final Fantasy VII Remake*'s combat is massively different to how it was on the original PlayStation.



how we wanted to show how civilisation and the environment coexist. Cloud and his companions first appear in the game as a group trying to take down the Mako reactors, but in the end, we see them getting help from the Lifestream which is the source of that energy, and going forward into a future of coexistence with the planet. I believe that this theme of how we can strike a balance and live in harmony with the environment is one that is shared by all of us."

The Lifestream is the literal embodiment of the planet's energy, where all life emerges from and where it returns to with death. Its genesis came from Sakaguchi, who had come up with the idea as a reaction to tragic events in his own life. "When we were creating *Final Fantasy III*, my mother passed away," he said in a video to coincide with *FFVII*'s release. "And ever since, I have been thinking about the theme of life. Life exists in many things, and I was curious about what would happen if I attempted to examine life in a mathematical and logical way; maybe this was my approach in overcoming the grief I was experiencing."

With that delicate balance in mind, an antagonistic force like Shinra seemed suitable – it also presented a fine opportunity to go against the curve of the last six games. "We had a feeling that ideas for villains in RPGs had kind of become stale and repetitive, with it always being something like a massive dragon or an evil ruler who had acquired an ancient power," says Kitase. "When we asked ourselves what a more modern take on a powerful evil would be, we came up with the idea of a corporation that pollutes the environment for excessive profit."

**T**he most talked-about moment in this complex tale, though, would be the death of a major character.

One of the conditions of running our exclusive interview from Square Enix was that we wouldn't reveal this character's name – but you know which one we're talking about. Everyone knows it. You might have spent hours training this character up before the event occurred. It didn't matter. This character was wiped out of the story. Such a brave decision would be the defining moment, and it stunned this new generation of JRPG fans and is still the subject of much conversation today.

It is odd that Square Enix declined to comment on the sequence, having done so in the past – even Kitase himself, back in 2003. It could be that the company is hoping new gamers discover *Final Fantasy VII* and is hoping to safeguard that twist for maximum emotional impact. Whatever the reason, that moment was designed by Square to create a sudden void in the player, to make them think they'd have acted differently were they to know it was coming.

There are more surprises besides, though. A major plot point some way into the game sees the threat level raised significantly as giant creatures, a super-boss motif of the series known as Weapons, march into the overworld and heighten the drama of the closing act. The Emerald and Ruby Weapons are especially tough to beat, yet incorporating these powerful entities as part of



» [PS4] Cloud Strife as he appears in the much-recommended remake of *Final Fantasy VII*.

Aerith (or Aeri – a misspelling in the game's translation, as you probably know); and down-and-out pilot Cid Highwind; as well as more esoteric faces like the tomb-dwelling, optional companion Vincent Valentine, struck a chord with gamers, as their stories dovetailed skilfully with the main narrative.

These small tales, even Sephiroth's, traced back to the all-encompassing Shinra plot device – the corporation draining the planet of its resources. Given that *Final Fantasy VII* was made in the mid-Nineties, you could draw obvious parallels with the real-world environmental issues at that time. Yet environmentalism, surprisingly, was not part of the team's storytelling agenda, Kitase explains: "We did not particularly plan on bringing out environmental destruction as a major theme of the game but rather intended the story to depict the internal struggles of Cloud and Sephiroth."

"However, if pushed, I would say that this theme was not so much that of concern over destruction of the environment but more about

designer, who, having contributed work to *Final Fantasy V* and *Final Fantasy VI*, replaced Yoshitaka Amano from the previous titles. A *Famitsu* interview with Nomura (translated by *Andriasang*) explains that Cloud was essentially his creation, yet Kitase told us that determining both the looks and personalities of every one of *Final Fantasy VII*'s iconic cast of characters was "largely the responsibility of [Nomura]". It marked a sea change for the series. Gone were the primarily medieval, dreamlike heroes of Amano, and in came a fresh, exciting cast that would have an extensive impact on Japanese popular culture – not to mention birth a string of ideas that would be appropriated into character clichés, like spiky hair and giant swords. Amano would still contribute character sketches and the iconic meteor logo, however.

The immense backstories for these heroes and villains were fine-tuned by scenario writer Kazushige Nojima, while many of the actual narrative ideas came from a unique exercise that once again showed Square's experimental approach. "When designing the game, we asked all staff on the *Final Fantasy* team to submit possible episode ideas for character backstories and created the overall stories by putting these together," says Kitase. "It was the scenario writer, Mr Nojima, who managed to put together a complete and detailed story from this massive pool of ideas, a process that was much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle."

This exercise led to an intriguing collection of stories across the cast of heroes, with one main plot driving it all: the planet's impending destruction at the hands of Sephiroth, where he would harness the world's natural defences – known as the Lifestream – for himself. The cast of *Final Fantasy VII*, including the tortured, unfocused Barret; the last of an ancient race



**CONSTANTIN JUPP**  
Senior release producer,  
Media Molecule

“*Final Fantasy VII* made me realise that games

were so much more than just running or shooting or fighting. Far from mindless entertainment, they could actually stir emotion within the player. It's the game that inspired me to join the games industry and help create those experiences for others.”



the Sephiroth storyline imbued them with a new importance. Kitase explains why the team opted to do this: "In all *Final Fantasy* games, we always put in very powerful monsters in the latter parts of the game to challenge dedicated players and to deepen the gameplay experience, enhancing the longevity of the title and giving something to do aside from the main quest. We had already got the concept of the Weapons as defenders of the planet for *FFVII* and so decided to tie that together with these play-enhancing features."

But the story, despite forever being the guiding light for the *Final Fantasy* series, was matched by *FFVII*'s immense technical and mechanical advances. Creating a masterpiece of this calibre, with such scope in setting and the jaw-dropping amount of iconography that would define Japanese RPGs from there on, was the product of a talented group of people, sharing a potent creative culture. We asked Kitase about the team's dynamic at the time.

"Before *FFVII*, we only really had 2D pixel art designers, but for this project many 3D CG specialists and designers came in from outside the company, leading to an interaction of various working cultures that was very stimulating," he says. "All the in-house designers also



» [Top left] Catching and breeding Chocobos is one of the true tests of the game.

» [Bottom right] *FFVII* is a high point for the series' stunning creatures, with Bahamut being a decent means of lazily dispatching enemies.



## “SEPHIROTH IS ALWAYS JUST OUT OF REACH, AND SO OUR IMAGE OF HIM BECOMES MORE AND MORE IDOLISED”

started to learn to use CG tools, and we held a lot of seminars and explanation meetings. I personally received instruction in how to use Alias PowerAnimator, and around a tenth of all the character motions seen in the game's event scenes were actually created by me!"

We had to ask Kitase if anything changed in development – and, as it happens, Square had a relatively airtight vision of *FFVII*, with only one change that fans will definitely have noticed. "The only thing that we had to change during development was the level of deformation on the characters. The fact that the characters are depicted at different levels of deformation in the field, battle and CG sections is a remnant of these changes." Whereas field characters ended up being blocky 3D models, the characters in battle had far more detail. As Kitase mentions, too, you can see this difference in CG movies – some depict the characters in blocky form, while others, like Sephiroth before the flames of Nibelheim, are more impressively realised. It's a curious inconsistency, but of course forgivable in the face of the finished product's other achievements.

The locations have aged better, thanks to the heavy use of prerendered backgrounds. Yet part of *Final Fantasy VII*'s appeal to long-time fans was the introduction of a fully 3D world map. Despite the cinematic touches present in other parts of the experience, the world map



**RANDY PITCHFORD**  
CEO, Gearbox Software



“Obviously, role-playing games were a huge influence on *Borderlands*.

*Final Fantasy* offered many of the standards and tropes that are borrowed by many role-playing games of today. The engagement and motivation that comes from levelling up and the draw of collecting loot first became clear to all of us when we did such things with pencil-and-paper games. While many PC games applied these principles, *Final Fantasy* managed to capture the design in a most accessible way at a time when our controllers had only a d-pad and two buttons. The elegance of the *Final Fantasy* approach to role-playing has inspired a generation.

In fact, the very first videogame that my wife and I played together from beginning to end was the first *Final Fantasy* game on the NES. To this day, we have fond memories of that experience and an irrational loyalty to the franchise. I know that many people see *Final Fantasy VII* as the high-water mark for the series, but for me it was the earlier *Final Fantasy* games on the NES and Super Nintendo that have had the most impact.



## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT...

### EXPANDED FFFVII ADVENTURES



#### ADVENT CHILDREN

This cinematic direct follow-up to the *Final Fantasy VII* story hits and misses in equal measure. The action sequences are genuinely well-done and creative but the story quality nosedives when you realise it's all a big contrivance to resurrect Sephiroth and undermine the original adventure.



#### CRISIS CORE

This Zack Fair-starring prequel was one of the essential purchases of the PSP's library. Its action-oriented design proved ahead of its time, considering the direction future *Final Fantasy* titles have taken. Less popular was the inclusion of the character Genesis, a poetry-reciting edgelord played by the Japanese musician GACKT.



#### DIRGE OF CERBERUS

There's a universe where a Vincent Valentine-focused third-person shooter would have worked well. Sadly, it's not the one we live in. Despite the derision, *Dirge Of Cerberus* had a few high points, such as giving the villainous Professor Hojo more scenery to chew and shedding some more light on Vincent's origins.

was seen as an updated version of the SNES overworld. "This part of the game was not actually all that much of a challenge," says Kitase. "It goes without saying that creating data for a 3D map was hard work, but for better or worse we decided to do the map along pretty similar lines to a 2D world map from the *Final Fantasy* games of the Super Famicom era, so there were not a lot of problems with the overall vision."

Instead, the team had to spend more time worrying about the individual locations themselves, which were significantly more imaginative than their cartridge-based forebears. "It was actually a lot harder and took much more work realising the fully rendered backdrops for the towns and dungeons, as nothing like these had ever been done before at the time. Having said this, the world map in *FFVII* did play a very important role in the game. After the first part,

and highly memorable themes and leitmotifs. Any poignant, dark or pleasant instance is helped along enormously by his work, and he made an easy collaborator for Square. "We basically just showed Mr Uematsu the character designs and the scenario and had him familiarise with the overall themes and images of the game before letting him loose. There were no specific detailed requests, and he was allowed to create the score comparatively freely," says Kitase.

While HD technology and high-capacity storage media have let Square Enix realise the most elaborate of visions with *Final Fantasy*, there is something pure about the seventh game. It's such a well-rounded experience that it's obviously the product of a developer at a peak of creativity. Being the first *Final Fantasy* released in Europe, and armed with a slightly misleading marketing campaign that focused on FMVs over gameplay,

“WHEN THINKING ABOUT A MODERN TAKE ON A POWERFUL EVIL, WE CAME UP WITH THE IDEA OF A CORPORATION”

which is spent in the oppressive and cramped environment of Midgar, the feeling of liberation and freedom at the moment when you step out onto the world map is one of the game's most memorable highlights." That's completely true, and that moment serves as a captivating drop-off point in the remake trilogy. *FFVII* progressively puts more power in the player's hands through the way they interact with the world.

Random battles would remain integral, but as directed by the SIGGRAPH presentation, the look of them marked an exciting leap in technology. "We had decided on the idea of battles in 3D, with the camera panning and zooming around the action, from before beginning development on *FFVII*. In 1995, we created a prototype game based on doing the battles from *FFVI* in 3D and showcased it at the SIGGRAPH convention that year. This test game was made with an eye to perfecting the idea for the battles in *FFVII*."

Aided by the straightforward yet endlessly customisable Materia-based ability system, as well as visually extravagant Limit Break attacks, the combat in *Final Fantasy VII* would never become a chore. This title also saw the best work of composer Nobuo Uematsu, building on his incredible music in *FFVI* with a series of stunning

it turned a historically marginalised genre into an international phenomenon.

**F**inal Fantasy VII's appeal was so widely adopted that fans and curious outsiders petitioned Square Enix for it to receive the remake treatment.

This campaign lasted over a decade, and in 2020, fans finally got what they desired... well, part of it at least, as this reinterpretation is coming in three instalments.

So far, the two entries in the *FFVII* remake trilogy take us up to the tragic events at the City Of The Ancients, with the planned finale taking up the unenviable task of wrapping up the rest of the plot. It's a remarkable showing, presenting the classic story with full voice acting and cinematic flair. That's not all, though, as the battle system has been rewired to accommodate an action-oriented style of play. Plus, there's discussion on whether this is actually a remake; there are instances where characters – particularly Sephiroth and Aerith – seem to know what the road of fate has in store for them. Plus, with the inclusion of parallel realities, what twists are the team planning for the finale, exactly? Tantalising questions aside, this remake is an exciting interpretation of the *FFVII* canon worth following to its climax. ✨

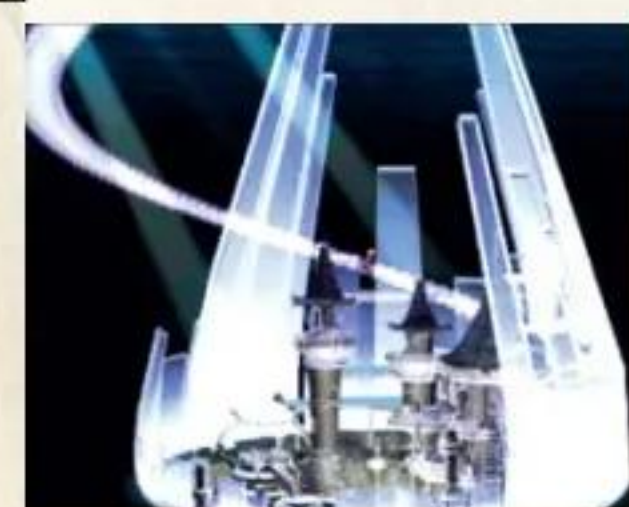
» A localisation snafu referred to Tifa's surname as Lockheart instead of the intended Lockhart.





## THIS PLANET AS MY VESSEL

With insight from Final Fantasy VII's art director, Yusuke Naora, we pick out key locations from the story

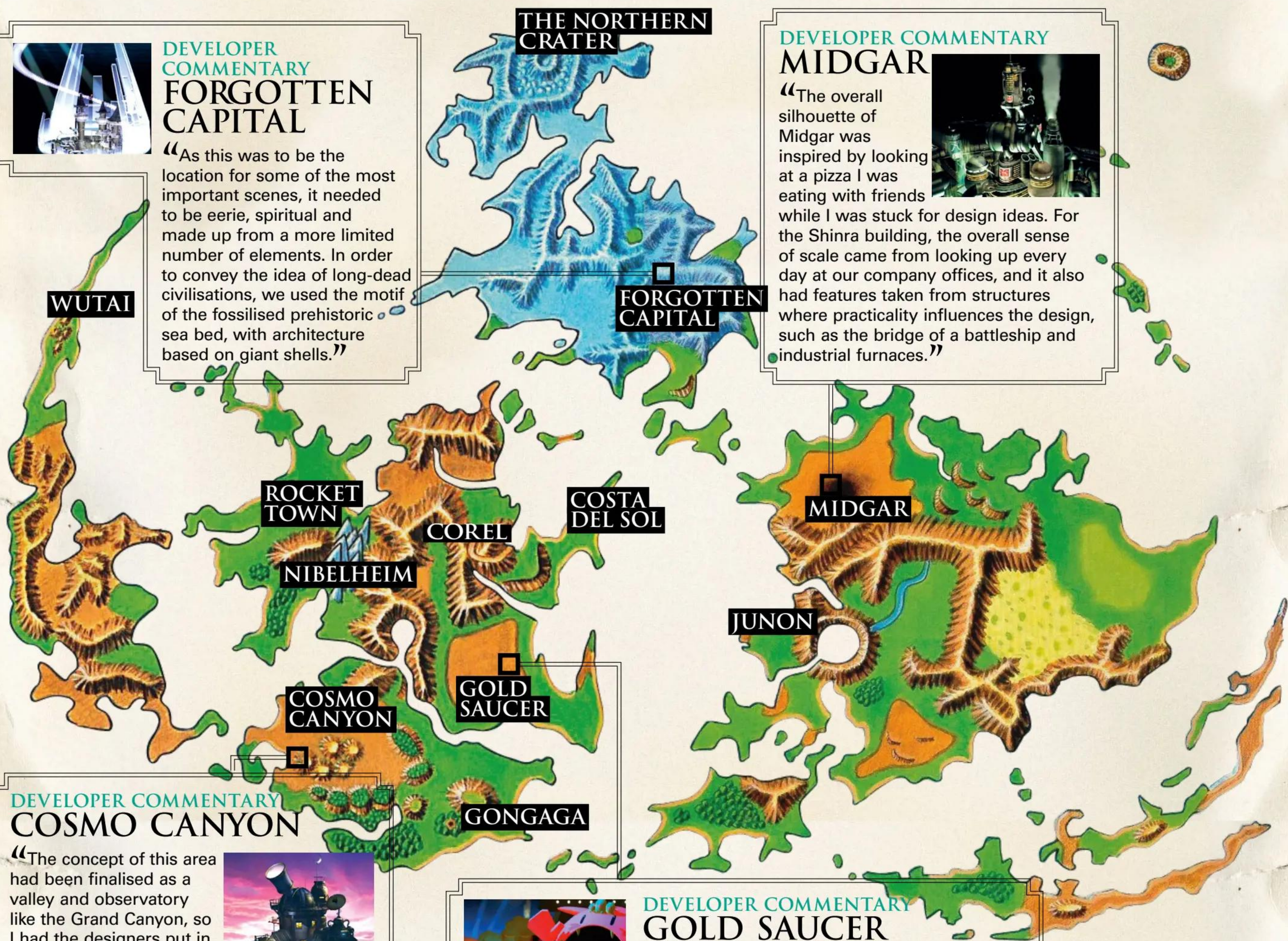


### DEVELOPER COMMENTARY FORGOTTEN CAPITAL

"As this was to be the location for some of the most important scenes, it needed to be eerie, spiritual and made up from a more limited number of elements. In order to convey the idea of long-dead civilisations, we used the motif of the fossilised prehistoric sea bed, with architecture based on giant shells."

### DEVELOPER COMMENTARY MIDGAR

"The overall silhouette of Midgar was inspired by looking at a pizza I was eating with friends while I was stuck for design ideas. For the Shinra building, the overall sense of scale came from looking up every day at our company offices, and it also had features taken from structures where practicality influences the design, such as the bridge of a battleship and industrial furnaces."



### DEVELOPER COMMENTARY COSMO CANYON

"The concept of this area had been finalised as a valley and observatory like the Grand Canyon, so I had the designers put in more of a medieval feel, with fantasy elements such as the clockwork 'cosmic spheres' planetarium and the gyroscope compass."



### DEVELOPER COMMENTARY GOLD SAUCER

"As there were a lot of minigames in the title, I set the question of, 'What would an amusement park in this world be like?' and made sure everyone had fun when designing this area."



### □ JUNON

A port town that is also a military base, Junon is attacked later on by Sapphire Weapon, where the ceremonious Junon cannon takes it down.

### □ THE NORTHERN CRATER

This is where Jenova landed about 2,000 years before the start of the story – a creepy, expansive abyss where the climax of the game takes place.

### □ NIBELHEIM

As more observant players will know, after Nibelheim was burnt down by Sephiroth, the entire town was rebuilt by Shinra and the citizens were replaced with its employees in a cover-up.

### □ COSTA DEL SOL

An utterly bizarre, Spanish-style holiday town with a relaxed atmosphere, players could later buy an overpriced house in this pleasantly different part of the world map.

### □ GONGAGA

This sad little town is the location of an exploded Mako reactor, with the citizens mourning their dead. Like a sister town of Nibelheim, in a strange way.

### □ WUTAI

A more culturally differentiated locale than everywhere else, Wutai is the sole town on the far western continent and marks the only location where the heroes team up with the Turks.

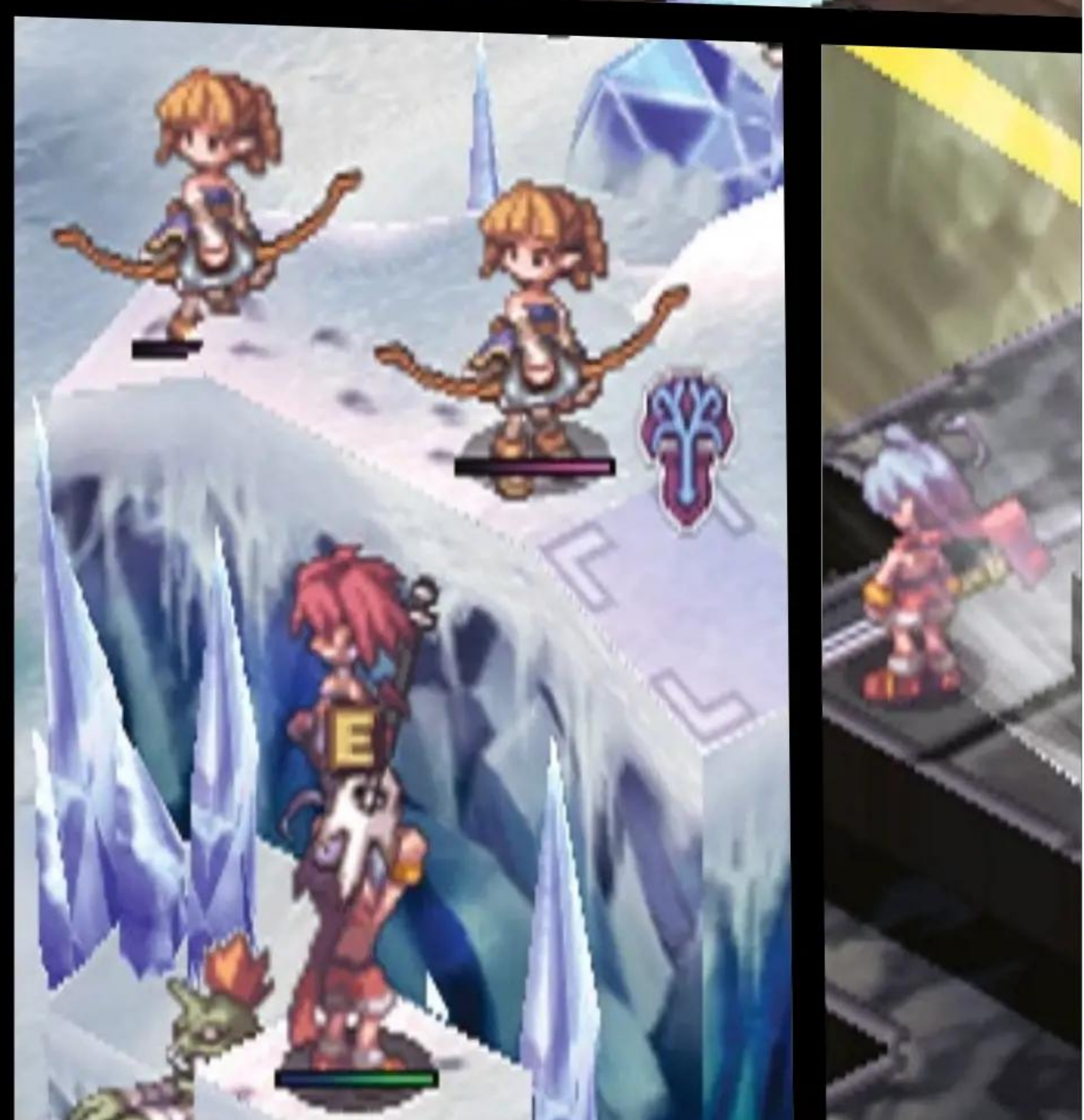
### □ COREL

Barret's hometown turned post-Shinra-wreck, this is where you can catch the lift to the far more jolly Gold Saucer. There's a ruddy superb chase sequence here later in the game, too.

### □ ROCKET TOWN

Built around a launchpad, this is where one of the more interesting characters, foul-mouthed pilot Cid Highwind, hails from. It's a cheerful moment when you finally get the rocket into space.





# THE MAKING OF Disc Gate Hour of Darkness

WHEN THE DEVELOPERS OF NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE DECIDED TO PURSUE A PASSION PROJECT, THE NEARLY BOTTOMLESS STRATEGY JRPG THAT RESULTED BECAME THE COMPANY'S DEFINING GAME, AND GAVE IT A NEW MASCOT TO BOOT. SOHEI NIKAWA EXPLAINS HOW THIS DEVILISHLY GOOD GAME WAS CREATED

Words by Nick Thorpe





# The Making Of: Disgaea: Hour Of Darkness

魔界戦記ディスガイア

## SPREADING DARKNESS

The original PS2 release isn't the only way to enjoy Disgaea – here are the other conversions



### DISGAEA: AFTERNOON OF DARKNESS

PSP

Released for the PSP in 2006, this conversion of *Disgaea* offers multiplayer battles and some new optional bosses. However, the biggest addition is Etna Mode, a new story featuring Etna as the protagonist after she accidentally kills Laharl at the beginning of the game.



### DISGAEA DS

DS

2008 brought a conversion of *Disgaea* for the original Nintendo DS, boasting touchscreen controls and the additions made to the PSP version. Various cutbacks had to be made to the game's graphics and sound, including the removal of a lot of voice acting and toned down special attack animations.



### DISGAEA PC

PC

Released in 2016, *Disgaea's* computer debut struggled with some early bugs but patches later smoothed things out. The game's UI and textures have been updated, although the sprites haven't, and there's keyboard and mouse support. Content is otherwise broadly the same as the PSP version.



## IN THE KNOW

» **DEVELOPER:**  
NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE

» **PUBLISHER:**  
NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE,  
ATLUS, KOEI,  
SQUARE ENIX

» **RELEASED:**  
2003

» **PLATFORM:**  
PLAYSTATION 2

» **GENRE:**  
STRATEGY RPG

**B**eing an evil overlord isn't an easy job. For a start, some of your wicked minions will inevitably be loyal only to themselves. So you need to be strict in dealing our disciplinaries to your underlings, while remembering that they need to be in good shape to fight – after all, you need to repel rivals for your domain almost as frequently as do-gooders. In order to do all of that successfully, you need the ability to formulate solid battle strategies. If you're thinking, "I can handle all of that," but don't have the time for a career in politics, then you're probably the sort of person who'd love *Disgaea: Hour Of Darkness*, a cult classic strategy RPG.

*Disgaea* was something of a passion project for its development team. "Disgaea was made right around when Nippon Ichi Software was ten years old," says Sohei Niikawa, president of Nippon Ichi Software and producer of *Disgaea*. "Up until that time, the company ranged from ten to 20 people. Every year, there would be one game, and if that game didn't sell the company was at risk of

going out of business. Right before we decided to make *Disgaea*, we met internally and had lots of discussions to try to decide what to make next. The result of that process was that we had no clue, we didn't know what to make. So we decided, 'Let's just make what we want to make.'" This ethos required flexibility, a need which shaped the setting of the game, too. "We thought we could do a game set in the Netherworld, with demons as the main characters, and because of this, essentially anything goes."

Though *Disgaea's* story touches on a conflict over leadership and later war between worlds, it's a lighthearted game. "My style for writing is comedy, I like to write comedy. Whenever there's an opportunity to throw a nice joke in, I make sure to do it," says Niikawa. While the protagonist Laharl gets some good lines in, much of the game's laughs are provided by the other major characters, Etna and Flonne. "The four previous games I had written had all featured a female main character, so this was the first chance I had to work on a male



# MEET THE CAST

Who's who and why are they here? Find out with this primer

## LAHARL

■ The son of King Krichevskoy, overlord of the Netherworld. At the start of the game, he awakes from a two-year nap to find that his position as heir is highly disputed, and sets out to reassert it.

## FLONNE

■ An angel sent from Celestia to kill King Krichevskoy, only to find out that he's already dead. Flonne is a bit of a ditz and strongly believes that everyone is capable of love, including demons.

## LAMINGTON

■ This high-ranked angel is the one responsible for sending Flonne on her quest to assassinate King Krichevskoy. He's calm and kind, but there may just be more to him than initially meets the eye.

## CAPTAIN GORDON

■ Alongside his sidekicks Jennifer and Thursday (a robot, of course), he serves as a defender of Earth. The kids love him, but he's slow on the uptake and easily tricked, making him somewhat ineffective.



## ETNA

■ A demon who serves as Laharl's vassal. She's a bit of a bully, especially towards the Prinky squad she hired, and has very questionable loyalties. She also provides delusional anime-style previews of coming chapters.

## VYERS

■ This vain and dramatic demon is the early frontrunner in the race for the Netherworld's throne. Laharl has no respect for him, and refers to him exclusively as 'mid-boss' after meeting him.

## VULCANUS

■ This archangel is Lamington's second in command, and rather more outspoken and loud than his boss. He's got no time for demons, and views humans as essentially sheep that angels must herd.

## PRINNY

■ Sinful human souls are sewn into these peg-legged penguin bodies upon death, to toil in the Netherworld until they earn reincarnation. They're a bit lazy and fond of the word 'dood' – and they explode when thrown!

## “DURING THE MAKING OF THE GAME, THERE WAS AN ANYTHING GOES APPROACH... SEE WHAT WORKS”

SOHEI NIIKAWA

► main character,” says NiiKawa. “So, I wanted to have two heroines. That said, it wouldn't be interesting to have both of the heroines be demons, so I wanted one to be an angel.”

The devilish vassal Etna is a favourite thanks to her bizarre 'episode preview' fantasies and general fondness for insubordination, and she's crucial to getting the game off to the right start. “It was important to create an impactful first scene that just let players know what kind of game, what kind of world this was,” says NiiKawa, referring to Etna's attempts to wake Laharl up with an arsenal of weapons. “Within *Disgaea's* genre, not many games have an opening like that.” Then there's Flonne, a ditz trainee angel who has seen a little too much anime – seemingly an odd fit with the demonic cast. “If you have a setting like the Netherworld, in contrast

to that you need something like heaven, or Celestia as it's called in the *Disgaea* world,” explains NiiKawa. “The idea of having a world filled with demons and a world filled with angels allows us to expand the plot and push it forward, and that's why Flonne exists.”

Still, the breakout characters of the game were the Prinnyes, who now serve as the mascot of Nippon Ichi Software. “The design was left up to the character designer, Takehito Harada,” explains NiiKawa. “The only thing I requested of him, after explaining the world and the kind of setting we were dealing with, was to create a mascot character. And I got a penguin... we didn't expect them to become this popular!”

Though *Disgaea's* setting was unusual, it turned out that the game Nippon Ichi wanted to make was pretty close to what it'd already been working

on. The team's previous game was *La Pucelle: Tactics*, a strategy RPG, and *Disgaea* is a game of the same genre. The usual trappings are all there – battles take place on isometric maps, and each side takes turns executing orders. Characters have a range of physical attacks and can join up in teams, or use special skills including magic attacks. There are a variety of job classes and weapons, and plenty of items to equip.

**H**owever, the 'anything goes' approach can be found in oddly amusing systems, such as throwing.

Characters can lift others and throw them around, often for extra movement. “This idea was from the director,” we're told. “During the making of the game, there was an anything goes approach – throw out your ideas and see what works. So we all agreed when the idea was proposed, that this would be a really fun mechanic. In other strategy RPGs, you have to go tile by tile to reach your enemy, which is kind of boring. So we thought, ‘Throw him over there and get to work!’”

Some of the systems used in *Disgaea* actually originate from

*La Pucelle: Tactics*. These include Geo Panels, tiles on the battle map which can grant special properties to the characters standing on them, and Geo Symbols, which determine the properties given. If destroyed, Geo Symbols can change the Geo Panels on the map, damaging any character standing on them. “Previously in strategy RPGs, you either smacked the enemies to death or used magic on them. The cool thing about Geo Panels and Geo Symbols is that they create a puzzle-like element, so you're not constrained to having to beat the enemy in one particular way,” says NiiKawa. “I wanted to give the player that freedom.”

*Disgaea's* other unique features can be found outside of battle. For a start, there's the Dark Assembly. You can present proposals to this group of senators, such as improving stats such as counterattack rates, which they will vote on. “The Dark Assembly in and of itself is nonsensical. With most games, there are a clear set of rules and parameters within which you must play. We were thinking what could we do to add something more interesting – maybe all these rules that were in place didn't have to be there,” says NiiKawa. Of



# The Making Of: Disgaea: Hour Of Darkness

魔界戦記ディスガイア



» [PS2] Not all attacks work this well from height – sometimes, you just can't reach your foe.



## DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

### PIECES

**SYSTEM:** SNES

**YEAR:** 1994

**LA PUCELLE:**

**TACTICS (ABOVE)**

**SYSTEM:** PLAYSTATION 2

**YEAR:** 2000

**THE GUIDED**

**FATE PARADOX**

**SYSTEM:** PLAYSTATION 3

**YEAR:** 2013



» Sohei Niikawa rocked up to our interview wearing his trusty Priny hat.

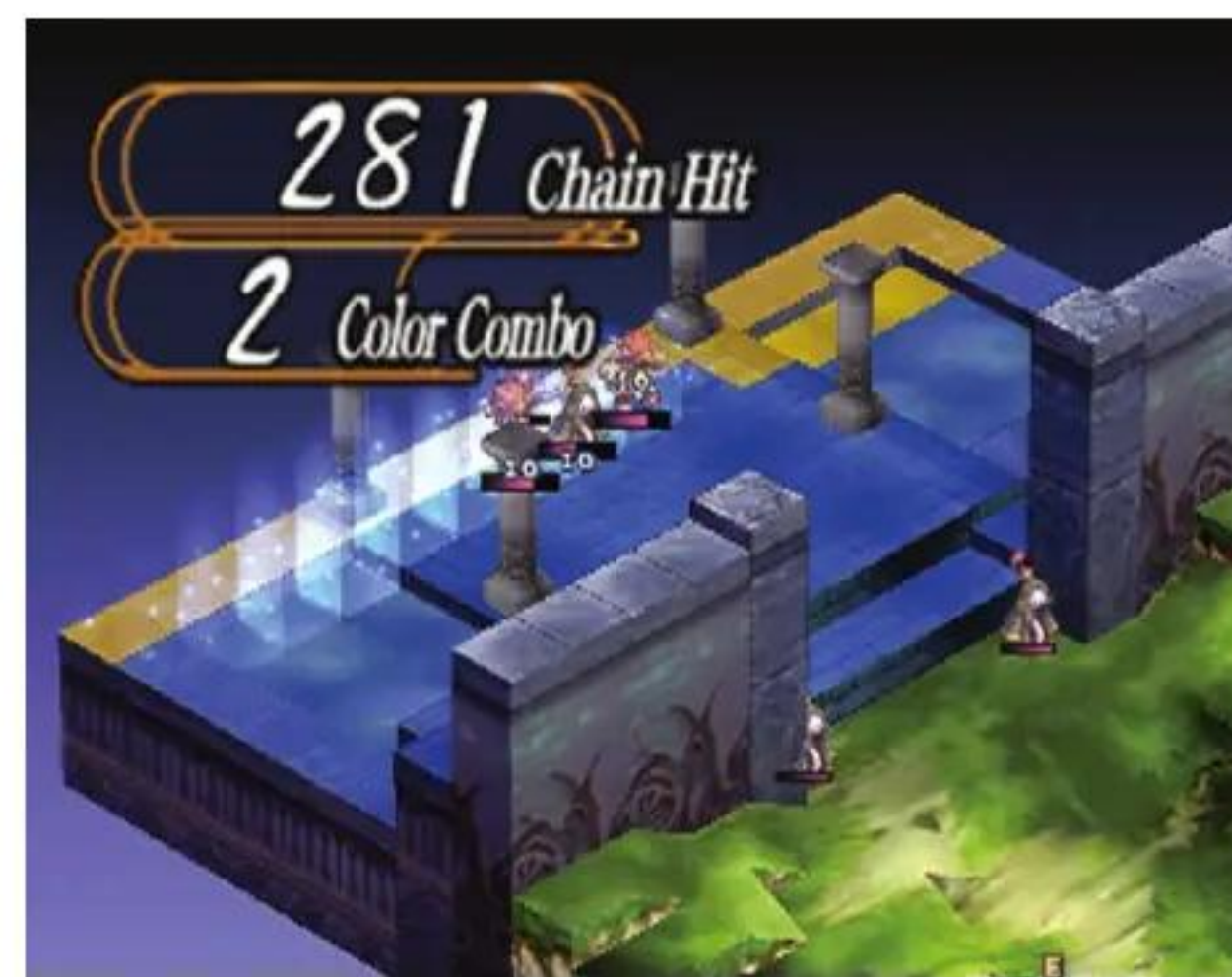
course, dirty politics can be employed – it's possible to bribe senators and even subjugate them by way of force.

**A**nother way you can progress is to visit the Item World to improve your equipment. "Levelling up

items is fun, but just going to a menu and hearing a 'ping ping' noise is not as interesting," says Niikawa. "So the idea was, 'What if a world existed within these items?' We could allow the player to enter the world as a dungeon, and travel through that world to strengthen it. That's where that idea came from." However, Item World did conflict with getting the player through the game. "The thing is though, the Item World dungeons are randomised, so it's a new experience every time. We ran into issues where people were only playing Item World, and getting lost in that without continuing with the main story."

One aspect of the game that was uncommon at the time was its use of 2D sprites. This was the only frequently criticised aspect of the game, with reviewers remarking that visually, *Disgaea* could have been achieved on the original PlayStation. "As a company, we were well-versed in making sprites," explains Niikawa. "There's also a warmth to 2D sprites. Looking at the artwork of Mr Harada, we thought we could best express his artwork through 2D."

*Disgaea* was initially released in Japan in January 2003, and Nippon Ichi's goal was for the game to sell 100,000 copies – a lofty target given that *La Pucelle: Tactics* hadn't managed to hit the 50,000 mark. "Before the game came out, when we were doing test play and debug, I also participated," Niikawa recalls. "I found that I was just playing the game, just enjoying it. That was the first time in my career that I'd experienced something like that, playing the game that I'd made and seeing just



» [PS2] When you smash Geo Symbols on Geo Panels of a different colour, you can cause crazy chain reactions.

how much fun it was, and how much I wanted to keep playing it."

Despite this confidence, there was no expectation that the game would be internationally successful – indeed, it initially wasn't planned for an export release. "We thought we were just going to sell it in Japan," reveals Niikawa. "At the time, Atlus USA picked it up and released it in America – they came to us, and said, 'We'd love to do this game, please let us do it.' I remember telling the person who came to ask for the game, 'I wrote this with Japanese otaku in mind, and I have all these parodies and references to manga and anime. I don't think this is going to sell over there.'"

The North American release took place in August 2003, and Koei published a European version in May 2004. Reviews were positive, with most praising the game for its engaging battles and enormous scope for character and item development. In the end, the unplanned overseas release ended up helping Nippon Ichi to achieve its goal. "I was very worried, but the game came out and ended up selling better than it did in Japan," says Niikawa. "I was incredibly surprised by that!" In the 15 years since *Disgaea* launched, it has become Nippon Ichi's best-known series, with six main sequels (each focusing on a new cast), as well as the direct sequel *Disgaea D2* and two games in the Priny platforming spin-off series. *Disgaea* has already been converted a few times, and a new HD remake means that you won't have to track down an older copy. So if you haven't had the pleasure, you might wish to consider playing *Disgaea* – especially as we hear there's a Priny suit waiting for those who shun its charms. ★



## BACK TO THE NETHERWORLD

Sohei Niikawa discusses *Disgaea*'s definitive remaster



A high definition remake of the original *Disgaea* was released for Nintendo Switch and PS4 in 2018. But what prompted the decision to revisit the original game?

"This is the 15th anniversary of the series, so there's no better time to do it," answers Niikawa, when we spoke to him ahead of the game's launch. "Also, this is an excellent opportunity to allow fans of the series to experience the game with high resolution graphics, so that it looks better than it ever has, and give them one more chance to spend some time with these characters."

"Another thing is, here we are being interviewed by *Retro Gamer* – this game is very old at this point," Niikawa continues. "But I feel that there are many young people, middle school students, high school students, that haven't had a chance to play this yet, and I'd love for them to have the chance to play it as well." Indeed, while the PC audience got a version of *Disgaea* a couple of years ago, the most recent console conversions of the game were released a decade ago for the PSP and Nintendo DS.

So what makes this edition different from the re-releases we've seen in the past? "The biggest feature is that many versions of *Disgaea* have been released that added bits of content here and there, so this is an opportunity to compile all of that and make one complete version," concludes Niikawa, meaning you won't miss out on Etna Mode or any of the optional fights from the previous releases.





# NORBUO UEMATSU

## 植松伸夫

### The Melody Maker

We sat down with gaming's most celebrated and successful composer to discuss over three decades of his career, from helping establish some of the biggest RPGs in the world to his flirtation with the mainstream and his colourful, progressive-rock-flavoured inspiration

**N**obuo Uematsu didn't want to be a composer for videogames. You can tell from his varied influences that the world's most popular videogame composer grew up with other intentions. Uematsu educated himself with Elton John records, learning music by ear on his sister's piano and his grandparents' guitar, before developing a taste for British prog rock by the time he graduated Kanagawa University with a degree in English.

"My plan was to become a more conventional composer," Uematsu told us when we asked about how he ended up working with Square back in 1987 on a little game called *Final Fantasy*. "But the trouble was that I couldn't find work anywhere outside the gaming industry! That's how it goes, I guess."

Uematsu dreamed of writing music for European films, creating scores that elicited emotion from the viewer, that galvanised that romantic lining that defined European cinema in the late Sixties and early Seventies. A chance meeting with Square developer Hironobu Sakaguchi in Tokyo lead Uematsu to composition for games, simply because it was the path of least resistance into music composition of any kind.

Many years later, Uematsu is still working with Square, and on the *Final Fantasy* brand, too (albeit as a freelancer): indeed his some of his recent work is from *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth* – for which he penned the main theme *No Promises To Keep*. It's a legacy

that's lasted 35 years, with humble MIDI beginnings on the very first *Final Fantasy* game Square developed back in 1987.

"I was extremely surprised [by *Final Fantasy*'s success]", Uematsu reveals. "Up until that point, Square hadn't really had any hits, so seeing the game do so well was something I hadn't expected at all!" It wasn't just Uematsu that was caught out by the game's success; the peculiar naming convention of the series came from Square's assumption that the RPG would be its last ever game, so the studio went all in on what it assumed would be their eponymous *final fantasy*. Before this, Uematsu had composed

» [Famicom] Despite being a bit of a black sheep in the series, *Final Fantasy II* featured an amazing soundtrack, courtesy of Uematsu.



Firion	HP	200 / 200	MP	40
Maria	160 / 160		90	
Gus	350 / 350		20	
Leon	200 / 200		40	

for games like *Genesis* and *Alpha*, neither of which enjoyed much success at home or abroad. Things looked grim for Square, and Uematsu kept his part-time job at a music rental shop in Tokyo, just in case things didn't work out.

As it happens, Square's gambit paid off. Sales were strong in Japan, and the series took off – its mix of intelligent world design, inventive characters and rousing music were repeatedly cited as reasons for the game's success. These are elements that would come to define the series as a whole, and Uematsu fit director Hironobu Sakaguchi's vision for the series perfectly – after all, the mix of pop and prog inspirations in Uematsu's formative years ran perfectly parallel with what Sakaguchi wanted *Final Fantasy* to be: at once familiar and ground-breaking.

"Fantasy-based RPGs are the easiest genre to compose music for, if you ask me," Uematsu told us as we asked him to pick out what made RPGs appeal to him the most. "If you look at more action-oriented genres like shooting games for example, the genre itself will often dictate what you can and cannot do. They require a score that's fast, intense and upbeat. RPGs, on the other hand, often contain scenes that work better with a more melodious score. But RPGs also allow me to write battle themes where I can change the rhythm and the key freely, which is something I like to do quite a bit. Having that



“ Maybe there [are] some young people out there who listened to my music and thought to themselves, ‘I could do that’ ”

Nobuo Uematsu

An acclaimed composer, Nobuo Uematsu has enjoyed a career spanning over three decades. His music is known for its rousing soundscapes, progressive sensibilities and emotional hooks. But despite his success, Uematsu remains humble – a self-taught musician, his love for music has always come first and has led to him forming his own studio and record label. From *Final Fantasy* to *Chrono Trigger*, without Uematsu it's safe to say RPGs wouldn't have taken the shape they do today. Uematsu has been instrumental in shaping the industry and is still influencing mainstream opinion of the relationship between games and music to this day.





» Final Fantasy music is played live worldwide in concerts such as *Distant Worlds* and *Final Symphony* – frequently with Uematsu in attendance.



“To Zanarkand was one of those rare pieces that I felt came out just right. I think I did a good job on that”

Nobuo Uematsu

► variety, the freedom to write these different types of music, is something I feel very comfortable with. It's the easiest way to work for me.”

But *Final Fantasy* isn't just any old RPG series – there's a specific tone and mood to each game, from the hopeful message of the first title and its story of Warriors Of Light holding back an ancient evil, to the doomed, pessimistic outlook of *Final Fantasy V* and its narrative dirge towards death. Each game in the series has a personality that – in no small part – is realised by its score.

“[Composing for] a *Final Fantasy* game, the process is mostly the same every time a new one comes along. Before I go to work, I need to understand the general mood of the game. So I'll usually start reading the script to find out more about the background of the game and what kind of characters it features. Grasping the overall mood is key, really.”

Many mainline games and a myriad of spin-offs later, and Uematsu's arpeggio motifs and delicate melodies are still used by other composers in tribute to the series' legacy. Just one refrain from the theme of the original game is enough to elicit gooseflesh in players that know *Final Fantasy* as a series – as an experience – and that's a fact that isn't lost on Uematsu.

“It's a great honour [to hear my motifs used today]. It always makes me very happy. It's been quite a while now since I stopped working [on the *Final Fantasy*

series], so I feel extremely honoured that these melodies are still being used.”

Uematsu saw Square through arguably the most exciting period in RPG history: as the series' style evolved, so too did his own. *Final Fantasy* morphed from 16-bit to 32-bit, giving Uematsu even more space to play with the music, give even more characters

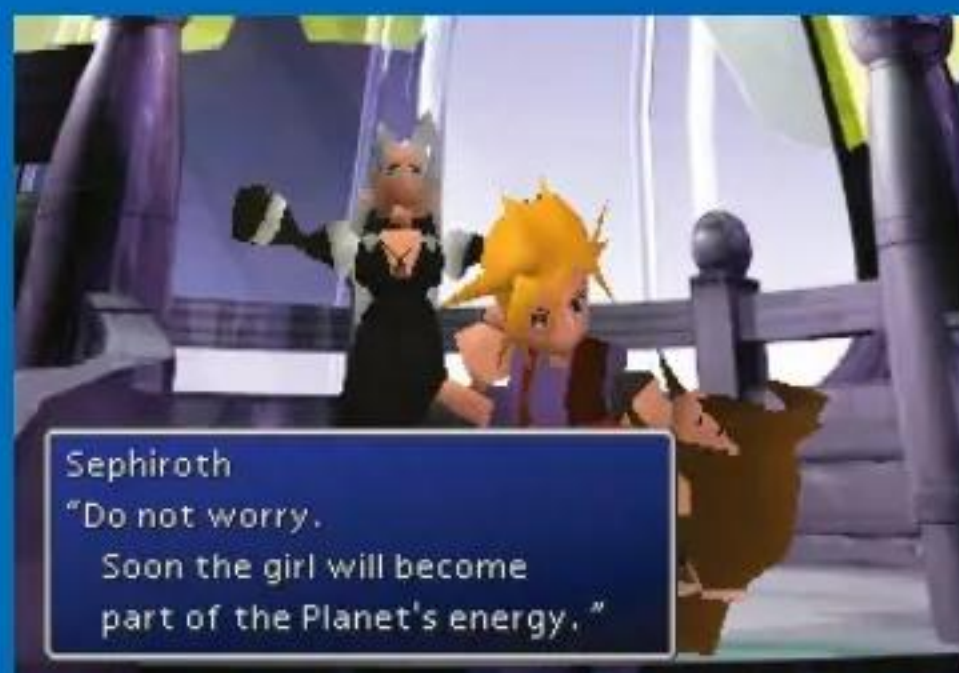
## TOP FIVE

Essential listening from the musical maestro



### LIBERI FATALI (FINAL FANTASY VIII, 1999)

■ The opening track to *Final Fantasy VIII* had vocal elements that mixed Latin phrases with a language of anagrams to create a brooding and Gothic track that sets the tone of *FFVIII* within its opening bars. *Liberi Fatali* was even used by the USA's 2004 synchronised swimming team to support its routine.



### ONE-WINGED ANGEL (FINAL FANTASY VI, 1994)

■ *One-Winged Angel* was the first *Final Fantasy* track to have lyrics (in Latin), and Uematsu has cited the theme to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* as an inspiration for the piece. Uematsu wanted *One-Winged Angel* to sound like a Sixties or Seventies rock track, performed by a full orchestra – a goal he certainly achieved.



### DANCING MAD (FINAL FANTASY VI, 1994)

■ This is the showstopper of *Final Fantasy VI* – a lengthy beast that moves from Baroque to Fugal, somehow mixes the musical motifs of a circus, a funeral and a prog-rock headline closer into one 14-minute piece. It's potentially the most ambitious, sprawling piece of games music ever written for a 16-bit system.



### TO ZANARKAND (FINAL FANTASY X, 2001)

■ One of the pieces that Uematsu is personally most proud of, *To Zanarkand* encompasses every all of *Final Fantasy X*'s themes: loss, uncertainty and beauty. The lone piano at the start of the track and the gradual, delicate build of the supporting orchestration almost always is performed live at Uematsu's concerts.



### BATTLE AT THE BIG BRIDGE (FINAL FANTASY V, 1992)

■ A song that has reappeared again and again in *Final Fantasy*, this was originally written for the Gilgamesh boss fight in *Final Fantasy V*. Thanks to Gilgamesh's repeated appearances in the franchise, the song has been the subject of multiple remixes and re-orchestrations.



their own themes, create even more sprawling and evocative OSTs. More of his rock-based musical education came to the fore in his battle tracks, more of his appreciation for European classical music showed itself in his character themes, and more of the love of progressive rock appeared in his work – melding melody and mathematics, emotion and musical theory.

**T**he pinnacle of this evolution of both game and music was 2001's *Final Fantasy X* – the first game in the series to feature voice acting, stereo sound and move to a true 3D engine. Uematsu, by all accounts, was moved by the game's scenario and the result was a score that was a significant departure from anything else he'd done for the series. He composed his first solo piano track for the game, created a modal hymn rooted in Okinawan tropes (with huge narrative implications) and – due to constant late nights and tight deadlines – resorted to hiring composition assistants for the first time in the series' history.

Ever a perfectionist, the result was at least something Uematsu could be proud of – in his own eyes, a lot of *Final Fantasy*'s music comes across as 'samey', a lot of the tracks don't resound with him. "It's up to each listener to find out whether my music is special to them and why. I always feel that my compositions are all too similar. There are a lot of pieces that I personally don't like very much."

This changed with *Final Fantasy X*, however. Despite the tight deadlines and the various changes in how Square had begun to manufacture and produce videogames, the resulting OST to the game is something that would forever mean a great deal to Uematsu, and there was one track in particular that has stuck with him to this day.

"*To Zanarkand* was one of those rare pieces that I felt came out just right. I think I did a good job on that one. The way it develops is something I'm rather proud of." It was around this time that live *Final Fantasy* concerts started to gain popularity in Japan, and in 2002 Uematsu attended the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra's sold-out show. This was the beginning of Uematsu's tenure as the 'face' of games music, and the composer found himself overwhelmed by the fan reception to his scores – especially as the Orchestra started playing his personal favourites, headlining sets with *To Zanarkand*.

Uematsu ended up leaving Square in 2004 to pursue a career in freelance composition, but remained on good terms with old friend Hironobu Sakaguchi. Uematsu's work between 1998 and 2001 on non-game projects gave him a taste for the wider world of music, and as Square evolved and became a more



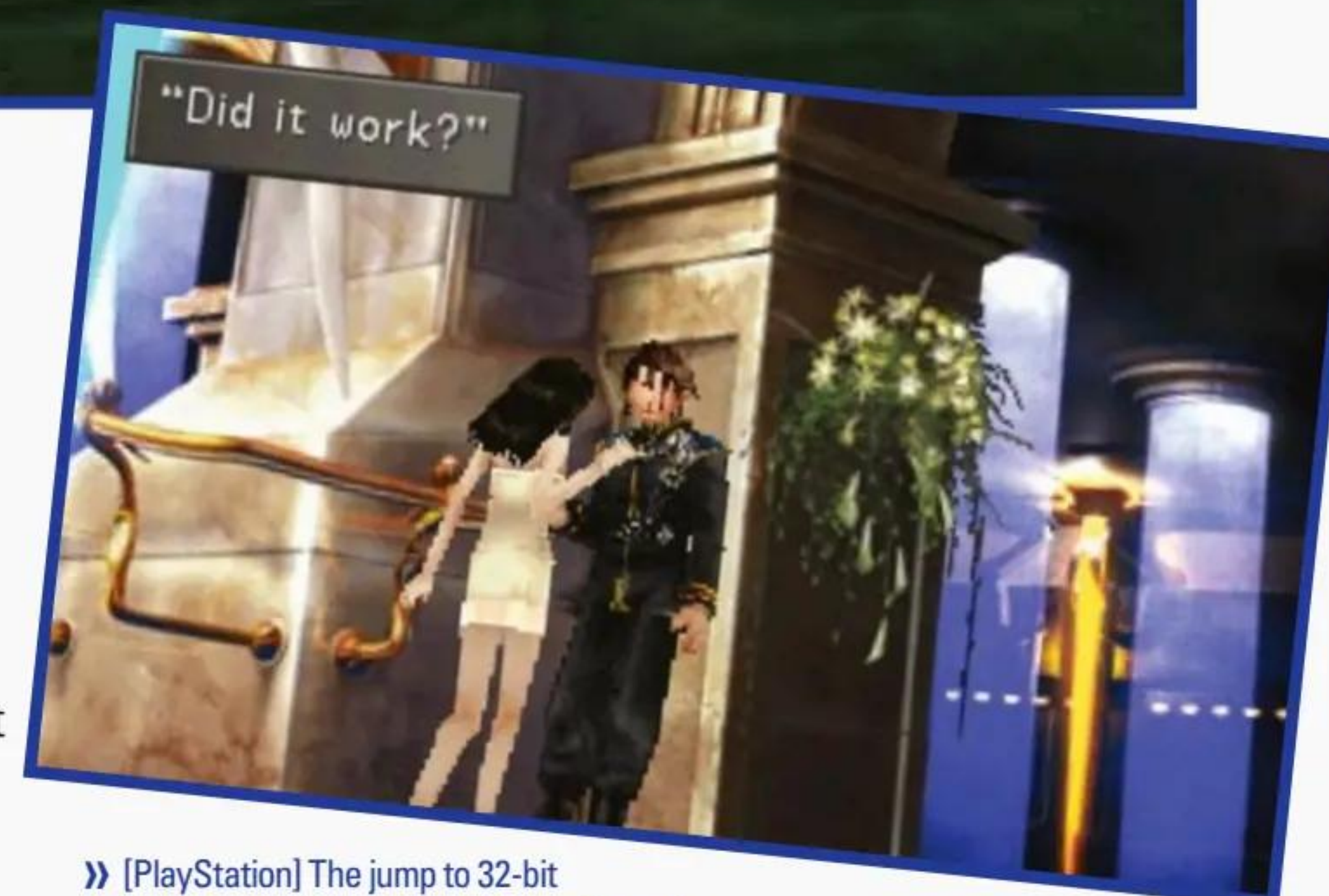
» [PlayStation] *Final Fantasy VII*'s iconic *One-Winged Angel* theme is in part inspired by Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze*.

commercial beast, Uematsu found himself moving further away from the publisher – on a physical level as well as an emotional one.

"There were many different reasons [for leaving Square]. A lot of people will think I'm joking when I say this, but one thing that influenced my decision to become a freelancer was that the company [Square] had recently relocated and it took me a lot longer to get to my workplace. I used to drive to work most days, but driving all the way to Shinjuku was a big stretch for me, really. I felt that there were better ways to spend the time I lost through my daily commute. But there was also another reason. I had been in the game industry for two decades, working on nothing but videogame soundtracks. If you look at life like a big learning process, I felt like I had graduated from this part of my life. I was ready to move on to the next school."

Uematsu still very much identified as a rock musician, despite making a name for himself in the pseudo-classical sphere of music in videogames, and having that music translated into live, orchestrated performances. Sensing this desire from their contemporary, fellow Square employees Kenichiro Fukui and Tsuyoshi Sekito offered Uematsu the chance to join their *Final Fantasy*-influenced live rock band, The Black Mages.

Initially, Uematsu was resistant, but after supporting the duo with keyboard parts at a live show in 2003, he caved and agreed to be a part of the band proper. Consisting of Uematsu himself, the two founding members, Keiji Kawamori, Arata Hanyuda and



» [PlayStation] The jump to 32-bit systems enabled Uematsu to refine his work.

Michio Okamiya, The Black Mages became an official band, and Uematsu's musical diversity took on a whole new shape.

"My original idea was to be the band's producer and nothing else," he tells us. "I never planned to play any instruments myself. But then Mr Okamiya, the guitarist, said he was out if I didn't play with the band. It was such a crazy thing for him to say, but it made me feel guilty enough to give in to his request."

**W**hen asked where the idea for the band came from, Uematsu was keen to deflect back to the original two Square staffers that approached him. "The idea for the

band originally came from Mr Fukui and Mr Sekito. [They] should get the credit. They thought it would be fun to do these rock arrangements of the battle themes from *Final Fantasy* and played some samples for me."

This wouldn't be the only live rock/game music band Uematsu would find himself in, though: in 2010 he founded Earthbound Dads and got straight to work on making his dream version of *Final Fantasy VI*'s *Dancing Mad* a reality. Fast-forward a year and his classical-inspired arrangement has been performed myriad times within a progressive rock context, and Uematsu has again toured the world, bringing his Deep Purple, The Who and The Beatles-inspired performances to life.

Despite moving away from Square (now Square Enix) in 2004 and going freelance, Uematsu remained particularly close to his old friend and colleague Sakaguchi, who had left the company a year prior to Uematsu. "We [still] have a very good working

» [SNES] *Final Fantasy VI* features some of the series' most iconic compositions, from *Terra's Theme* to *Dancing Mad*.



» [Xbox 360] *Blue Dragon* had its share of great music.







► relationship, I'd say," Uematsu explains. "By now, I can more or less tell what kind of mood he's currently in from the way he writes his mails. You know, what words he uses and all that [laughs]. I know straight away if he needs me to finish a piece really quickly, what direction he wants me to take on a tune or if he's not really happy with my work. We know each other well enough to understand what's written between the lines."

This relationship with Sakaguchi resulted in a pretty decent start to Uematsu's career as a freelancer – it was Sakaguchi who landed Uematsu his first big gig as an independent worker, offering him work on 2006's *Blue Dragon*. Initially, Uematsu had intended to wind down his work life a little upon becoming a freelancer – after setting up his own studio (Smile Please) with his wife Reiko, and establishing his own record label (Dog Ear Records) based on his dog and mascot Pao, Uematsu intended to spend more time in his mountain cabin, but actually found himself working longer hours than he ever did at Square. And he was still working primarily on game soundtracks, too.

"I personally don't have a strong preference or wish to write only videogame music. It's just that I have been working in the industry for decades now, so naturally, people tend to think of me as a videogame composer. That's why I get so many offers to write music for

videogames. But I'm not saying that I'm unhappy about that... I do enjoy the freedom that comes with working on soundtracks for role-playing games," Uematsu explains. "Getting to write different types of music is a lot of fun."

**We asked Uematsu what he likes to listen to in his own time, what he likes to consume away from videogames – after all, considering his legacy, it makes sense that his tastes range far and wide, and his output is the natural result of a hybrid, eclectic taste.** "[I listen to] all

kinds of music, really. I randomly listen to many different genres like rock, jazz, classic or world. The list goes on and on. There's no genre of music that I don't enjoy."

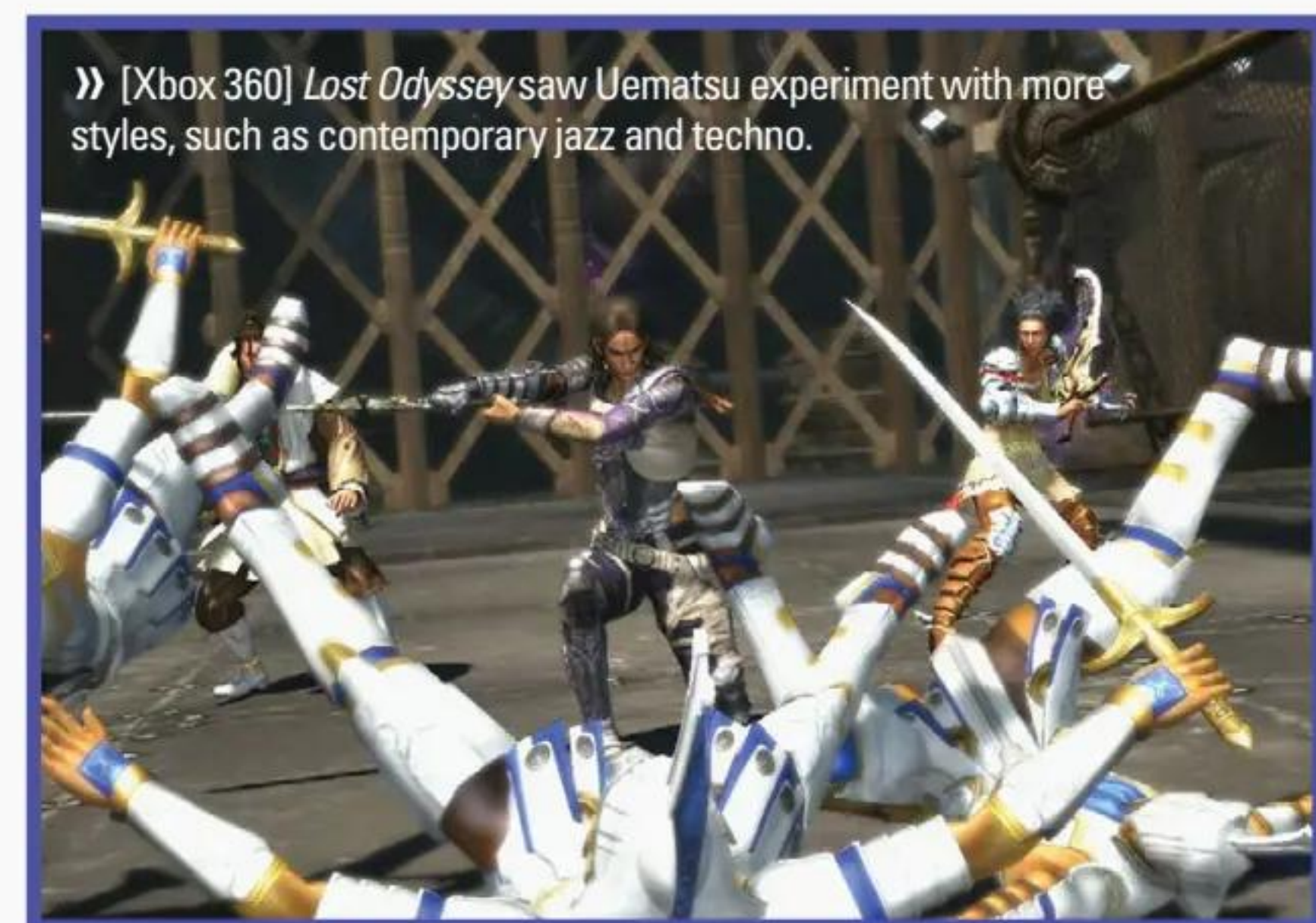
When it comes to how Uematsu views his own impact on music, though, the outlook is a lot more humble. "Well... maybe there [are] some young people out there who listened to my music and thought to themselves: 'I could do that. If something as unrefined as this is all it takes, I could do that guy's job, too.'"

It's another example of Uematsu's painfully humble attitude towards his own work – despite accolades from music bodies recognising his contribution to not just game music but music as a whole, Uematsu still seems to view himself as an imposter: a pretender to the throne he finds himself begrudgingly occupying.

"My music is really extremely simple. If someone who listens to nothing but Beethoven sets out to become a composer, he will have a very hard time trying to live up to his idol. But I'm sure there are plenty of people out there who think they can write melodies that are just as good as mine."

That isn't to say Uematsu doesn't hold videogame music in high esteem, though: Uematsu even goes

» By September 2015, Uematsu had appeared in at least 520 videogame concerts. He was given his own Guinness record for the feat.



» [Xbox 360] *Lost Odyssey* saw Uematsu experiment with more styles, such as contemporary jazz and techno.



» [PS4] *To Zanarkand* (*Final Fantasy X*) is one of Uematsu's personal favourite tracks.



» [Wii] Uematsu helped compose the epic main theme for *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*.

as far as to not listen to other pieces of games music because he wants his own style to remain pure, for his own sound to settle in naturally without external influences from the same field interfering with how he works. That's why most of his motifs and melodies come to him whilst he's out walking his dog. But there is one piece of music that Uematsu admits that had a big impression on him when he first heard its iconic opening notes. "The *Super Mario Bros. Theme*. That's absolutely fantastic, a real masterpiece," he laughs. "Everybody loves it! I don't think there's a single person out there who hates that melody. But what makes the theme so appealing to me personally? That's difficult to say. It's actually a rather complicated melody, and yet you can just hum along to it quite naturally. I wonder why that is. I really don't know. Mario's character, the way the game plays, the music. Just about everything about *Super Mario Bros* comes together just beautifully. Koji Kondo is absolutely brilliant."

Uematsu has had a complicated relationship with game music throughout his career. On the one hand, it's been responsible for his worldwide success, his recognition in the Hall Of Fame on Classic FM, his status as one of the most notable musicians in gaming. But on the other, it's an area he never intended to fall into, and his life has been shaped by it.

Uematsu doesn't like to think of himself held alongside the likes of Beethoven or John Williams, of being included in the myriad Halls Of Fame he's been inducted into. "It does make me happy, don't get me wrong. But I'm worried that if I get too excited about these things, they might go straight to my head. That's why I try not to think about accolades too much!"





“When you play a game with the sound turned off, it feels like you can't breathe properly”

Nobuo Uematsu



## SELECTED TIMELINE

### GAMES

- MYSTERY QUEST, NES 1987
- FINAL FANTASY, NES 1987
- FINAL FANTASY II, FAMICOM 1988
- THE FINAL FANTASY LEGEND, GAME BOY 1989
- FINAL FANTASY III, FAMICOM 1990
- FINAL FANTASY IV, SNES 1991
- FINAL FANTASY V, SUPER FAMICOM 1992
- FINAL FANTASY VI, SNES 1994
- CHRONO TRIGGER, SNES 1995
- FINAL FANTASY VII, PLAYSTATION 1997
- FINAL FANTASY VIII, PLAYSTATION 1999
- FINAL FANTASY IX, PLAYSTATION 2000
- FINAL FANTASY X, PLAYSTATION 2 2001
- FINAL FANTASY XI, PC 2002
- FINAL TACTICS ADVANCE, GAME BOY ADVANCE 2003
- BLUE DRAGON, XBOX 360 2006
- LOST ODYSSEY, XBOX 360 2007
- SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL, WII 2008
- LORD OF VERMILION, ARCADE 2008
- FINAL FANTASY XIV, VARIOUS 2010-2017
- OCEANHORN: MONSTER OF UNCHARTED SEAS, PC 2013
- TERRA BATTLE, IOS 2014
- FANTASIAN, VARIOUS 2021
- FANTASY LIFE I, VARIOUS 2025

Uematsu's modesty shines through when we bring up luminaries of the classical music scene – despite having *Guardian* articles dedicated to outlining the comparisons in Uematsu's work and the classics, he still feels humbled to be mentioned in even the same paragraph as his predecessors.

"I do feel that these comparisons are something of an insult to John Williams and Beethoven," he explains. Maybe if Uematsu had ended up working in the romantic European movies he'd grown up admiring, he'd have felt different about his place in composition history. "After all is said and done, my music is just a series of notes that I come up with while I'm humming. They're not complex or intrinsically crafted compositions. I just make them up randomly."

But that isn't to say Uematsu disregards the impact of his aural soundscapes have on the projects they accompany. "Just try to play a game with the sound turned off and you'll see straight away [how important] music is to games", he explains. "It feels like you can't breathe. I think music plays a role in videogames that's similar to air or oxygen. When you play a game with the sound and music turned off, it feels like you can't breathe properly."

It's that understanding Uematsu has for the relationship between a videogame and its score that has lead to millions of people around the world enjoying his compositions – even outside of the traditional gaming space. Uematsu has appeared five times in the annual Classic FM Hall Of Fame, and even reached



» In 2012, *Aerith's Theme*, from *Final Fantasy VII*, was voted into the number 16 position of Classic FM's annual Hall Of Fame top 300 chart.

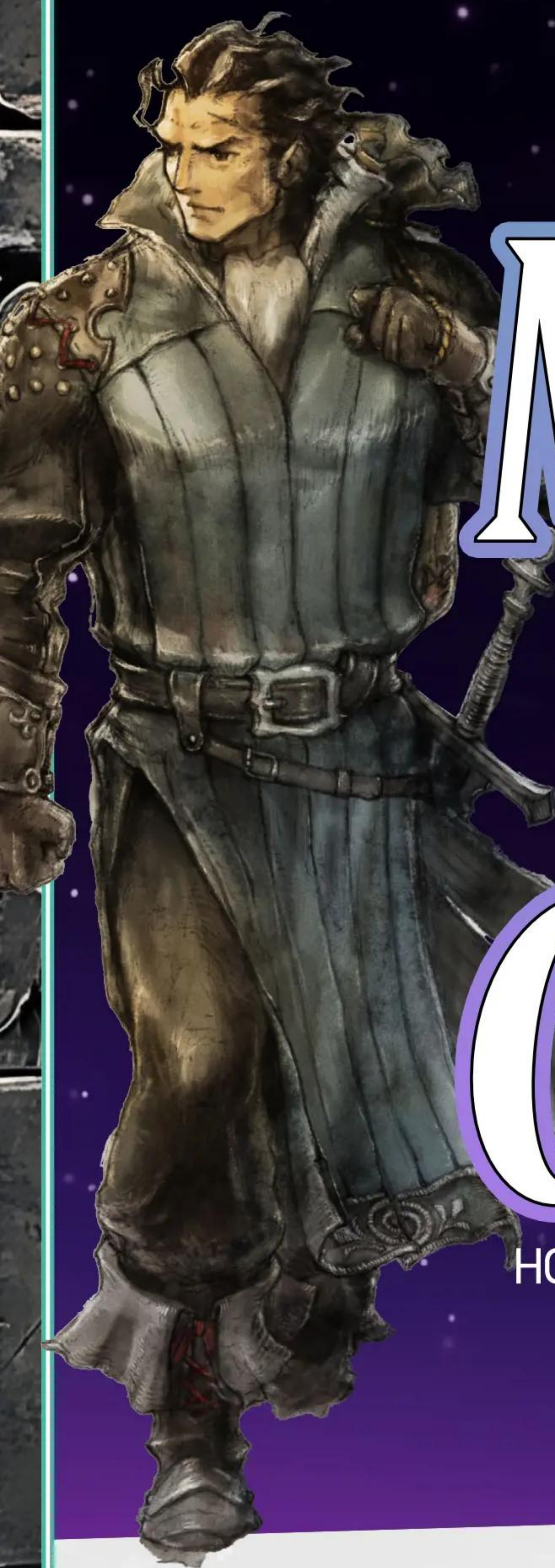
third place in the esteemed listings in 2013, with the organisation calling him 'part-John Williams, part-Wagnerian leitmotif, part new-age soundscaper – and a legend in his own right', high praise for someone that considers himself an outsider in his own field.

Without Uematsu, role-playing games wouldn't be where they are today. His ear for the cinematic, the grandiose, the progressive, the nuanced has left an impact on generations of players, and is now starting to proliferate outside the industry and draw more people into retro gaming for inspiration and artistry. There are very few people that have the right to shout about doing such a thing, but the ever-humble Uematsu wouldn't: he'd rather just carry on humming a new melody to himself whilst he's out walking his dog. \*

Special thanks to Thomas Böcker for arranging this interview.







# MODERN JRPG CLASSICS



HOW DEVELOPERS ARE CONTINUING THE LEGACY OF  
CLASSIC JRPGS WITH A MODERN TWIST

Words by Alan Wen



» [Switch] Square Enix's HD-2D art style is gorgeous and has been used for its remakes of classic JRPGs.



» [Switch] Each character has their story to follow, but inter-party interaction is sadly lacking.

## Octopath Traveler

No other developer has quite nailed the retro-modern aesthetic quite like Square Enix, with its trademark HD-2D art style of lovingly handcrafted pixel-art visuals placed in 3D environments, making use of modern effects like lighting and shadows, as well as voice acting and an orchestral score. The first game to use this aesthetic was *Octopath Traveler*: a JRPG featuring an ensemble cast, taking some inspiration from the publisher's Super Famicom cult classic *Live-A-Live* (also remade in HD-2D in 2022).

Following the adventures of eight protagonists from different walks of life (incidentally, the first letter of each of their names put together spells O-C-T-O-P-A-T-H), you get to choose which hero you want to play as first before eventually forming the whole ensemble. Each hero plays vastly differently from one another, so besides sword-wielding warrior Olberic, there's hunter H'aanit, who can capture monsters and summon them as allies. Each also possesses unique abilities that can

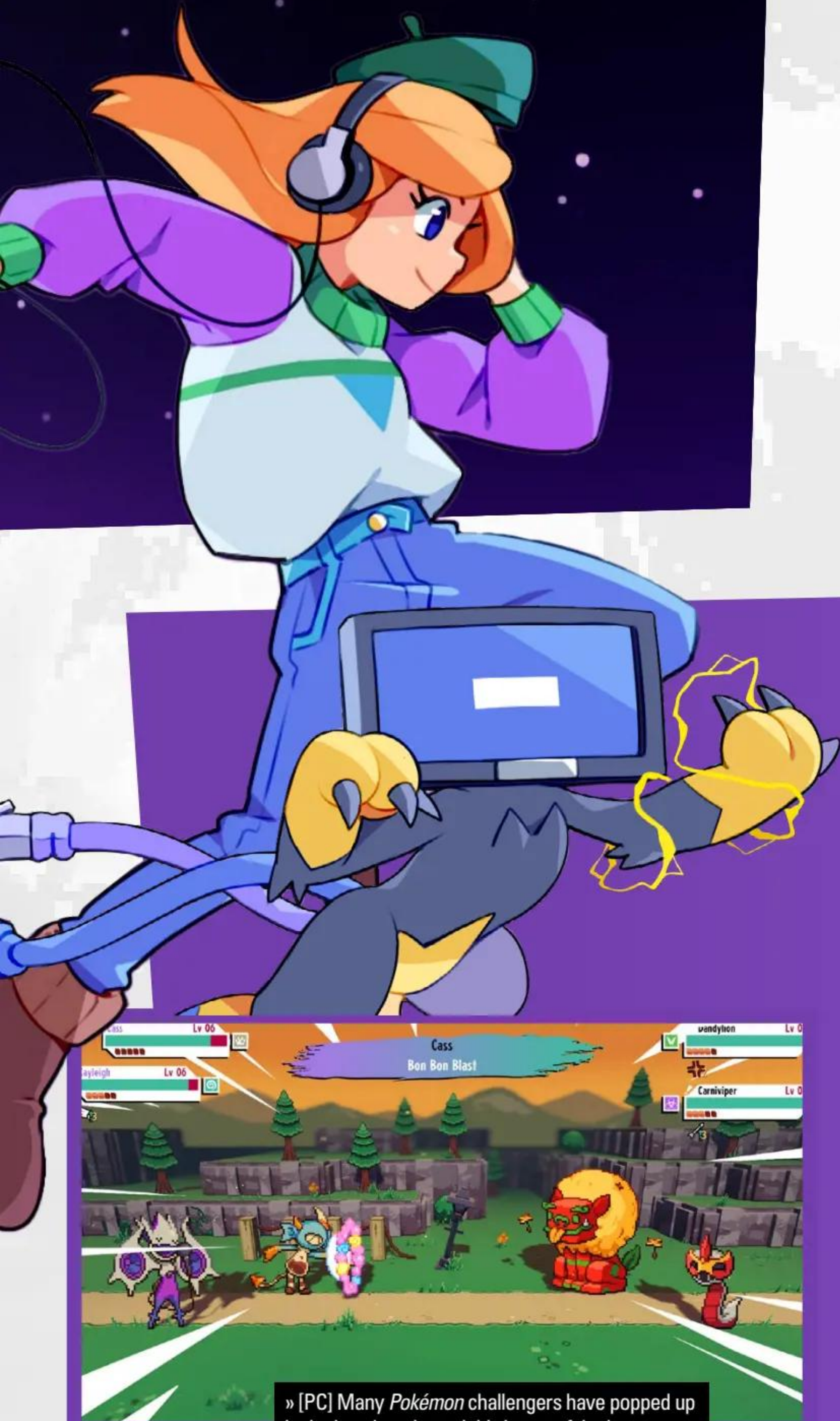
be useful when exploring, such as how thief Therion can pickpocket townspeople, while as a scholar, Cyrus can scrutinise them for useful information. Their individual stories also differ in tone, from dancer Primrose's dark quest for vengeance to the light adventures of Tressa trying to make her way in the world as a cheerful merchant.

The way they cross paths when forming a party isn't always elegant, as companions tend to fade into the background when a particular character's story takes centre stage. Nonetheless, they come together fantastically in turn-based battles, with a boost and break system that feels like an evolution from the Brave system in Square Enix's *Bravely Default* series, while being able to learn one another's skills as a secondary job greatly expands your tactics. In a presentation that recalls classic *Final Fantasy*, the enemies your diminutive pixel heroes face are also drawn in detailed, towering form.



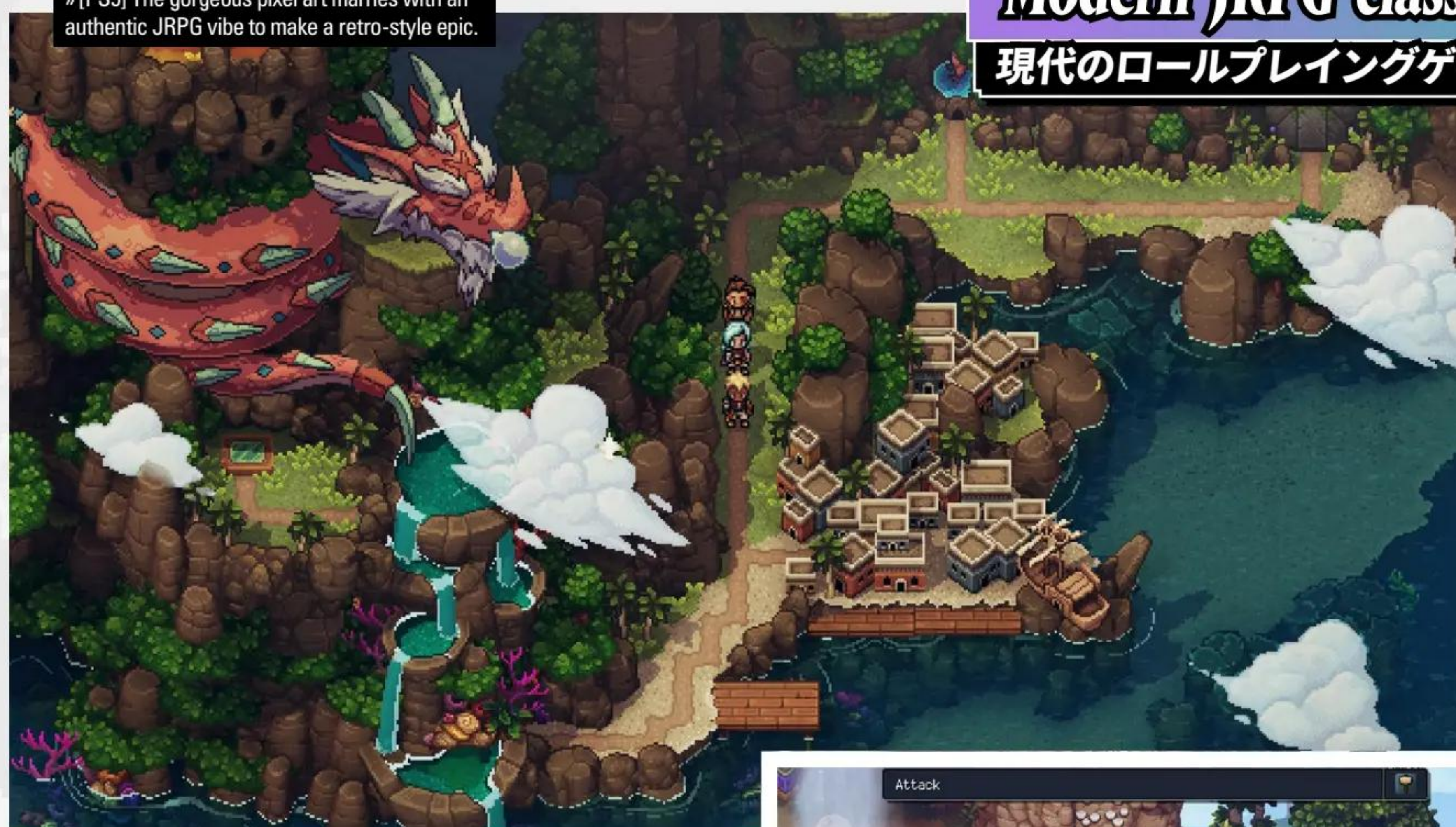
**Y**ou needn't dust off an old console or buy a retro collection to experience the best of what JRPGs have to offer. Instead of taking a trip down memory lane, these legacies are continuing. We don't just mean another *Final Fantasy* title, but rather you can play new games that are taking classic JRPGs as their foundational core, whether that's in the graphics, mechanics, or just the general vibe, but then doing something new with them.

What you might find surprising is that many modern examples of JRPGs are actually made by indie teams from outside of Japan, but whose love for this genre has clearly been formative. But more than just paying homage or imitating what's gone before, they also find exciting ways to change up the formula and inject some modern ideas that make these classics in their own right.



» [PC] Many *Pokémon* challengers have popped up in the last decade, and this is one of the best.

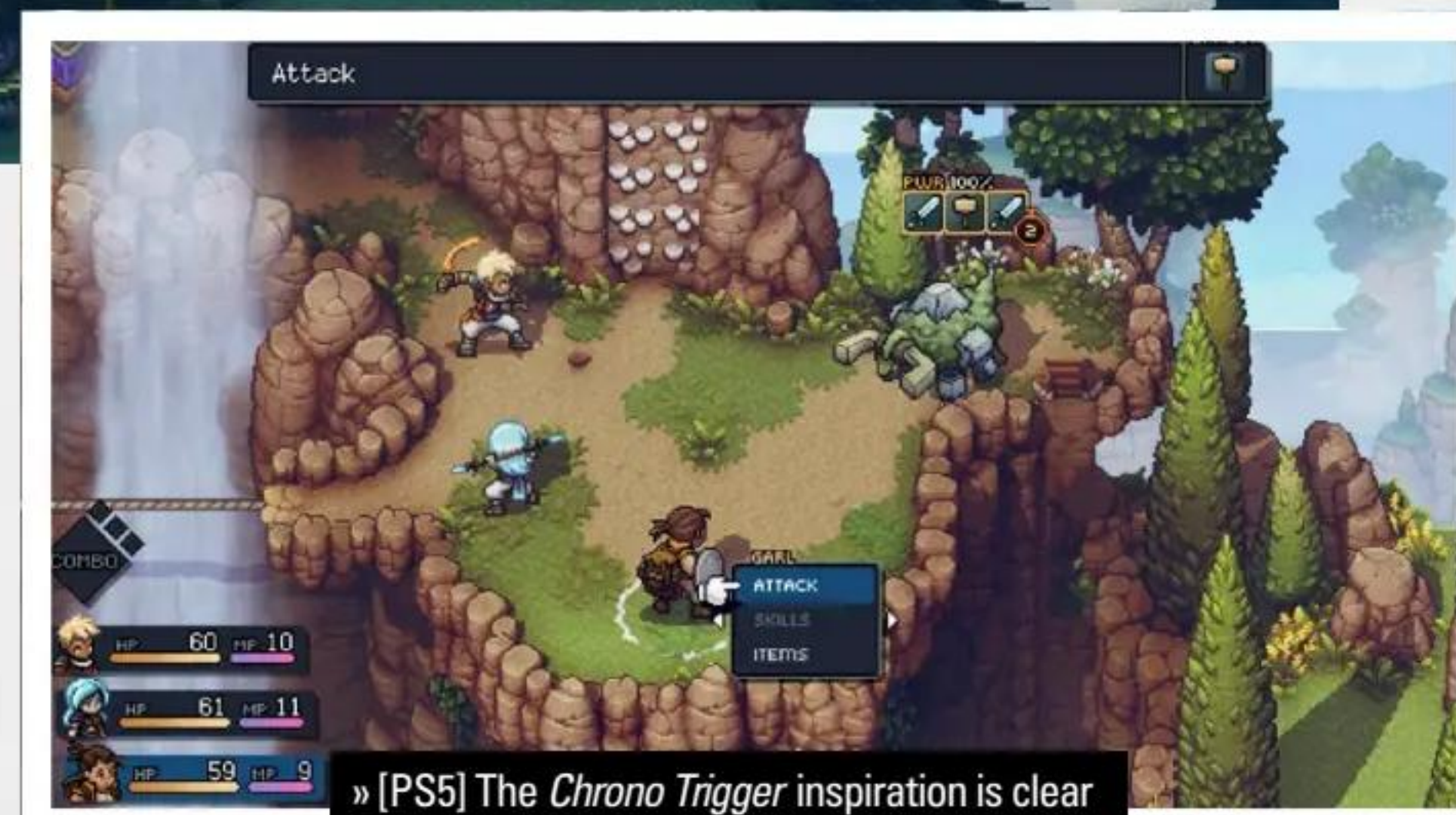
» [PS5] The gorgeous pixel art marries with an authentic JRPG vibe to make a retro-style epic.



## Sea Of Stars

This top-down pixel-art JRPG may be inspired by SNES classics, including *Chrono Trigger*, but also *Secret Of Mana* since it's possible to play in co-op as you control dual protagonists Valere and Zale: Solstice Warriors trained to fight with the power of the Moon and Sun. But Sabotage Studio wasn't content with recreating a game from the Nineties. It's not just that this world, comprised of different islands, is enhanced with modern dynamic lighting and ambient sounds, it also ditches the constraints of old-school grid-based movement as you can freely run, swim and climb the terrain much like in a 3D world. You even unlock traversal tools that make it feel more like an action-based *Zelda* game.

Nonetheless, this is still a JRPG governed by turn-based battles, although these too have some clever dynamic elements that take a leaf from the well-timed button presses used in *Paper Mario* to enhance attacks. Each party member also has their own unique skills with different mechanics, such as bouncing a boomerang back and forth for repeat hits, or charging up a spell that can deal larger area-of-effect damage. These



» [PS5] The *Chrono Trigger* inspiration is clear to see in *Sea Of Stars's* battle scenes.

abilities also can't be spammed right away as they cost mana points, which you also have a limited amount of. But because you can replenish them during battle, it means you're also waiting for the right time to use them. Combine this with a lock system where you're prioritising which enemies' locks to break so that they can be stunned from charging up a deadly attack, and this is an extremely smart and rewarding battle system.

Perhaps what makes *Sea Of Stars* a true classic, though, is its characters, especially the Solstice Warrior's best pal, Garl, who might not have the same powers but can still put up a decent fight with the same tools for cooking up a nourishing meal, and has the purest of hearts that will make you melt.

## Cassette Beasts

There have been plenty of imitators of *Pokémon* that would make a Ditto blush, but Bytten Studio has a genuinely refreshing take on the monster-catching JRPG where, on the remote island of New Wirral, you use cassette tapes to record monsters, then play them back to transform into them with their abilities.

There's a darker tone to this game, also separate from the real world, while the key to getting back home is by defeating nightmarish-looking Archangels. Given the cast is also made up of young adults rather than children, it also adds to a more grown-up vibe than is traditionally the case for *Pokémon* games, while building relationships with companions is just as crucial to succeeding in battle.

The cute pixel-art, top-down presentation and turn-based battles may feel familiar, but the mechanics feel freshly modern, such as using monster abilities to explore the open world by gliding, swimming, climbing and flying. It also really runs with the cassette concept, as you can remaster monsters into more powerful forms, or find rare bootleg versions of beasts with different variants. You can even use the fusion system to combine two monsters into something completely new and powerful!





## Chained Echoes

With JRPG inspirations hailing from 16-bit classics like *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy VI* and *Secret Of Mana*, to sprite-based 32-bit titles like *Suikoden 2* and *Xenogears*, *Chained Echoes* is, remarkably, the passion project of one German developer, Matthias Linda, for seven years.

Set on the vast continent Valandis as war rages between three kingdoms, there's a blend of fantasy and sci-fi as you can fight with swords and spells, but also hop on board a mech to fight and traverse the world. There's a terrific ensemble of characters whose motivations and backstories are all fleshed out, from princess-in-disguise Lenne, to swift samurai assassin Sienna, adding to a mature and sophisticated narrative.

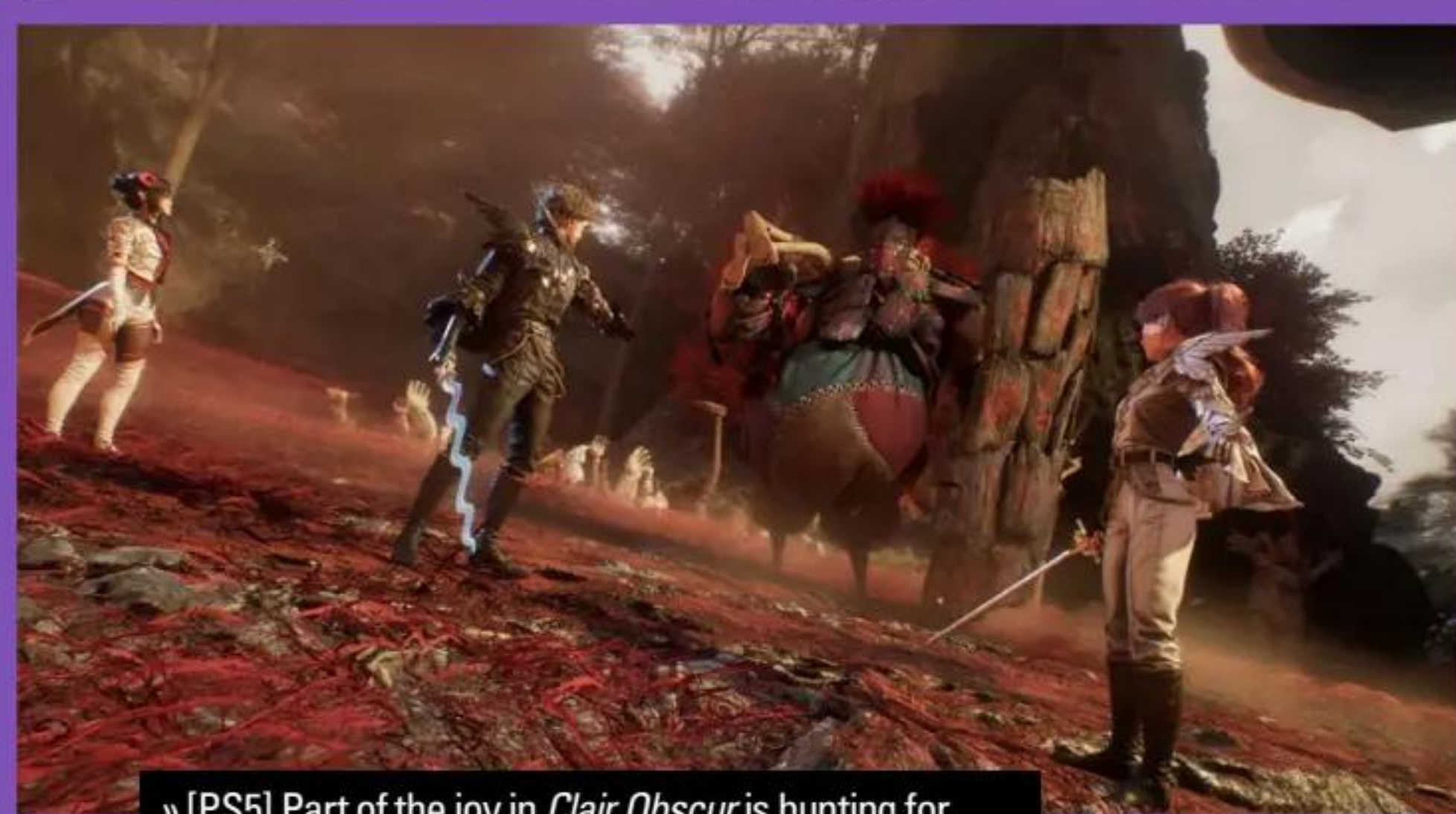
Most refreshing is its approach to combat and progression, which ditches random encounters and a focus on grinding levels. You can see enemies on the map before engaging in battle, and instead of gaining experience, acquiring Grimoire Stones unlocks new character-specific skills. The Overdrive system brings a unique tactical layer in turn-based battles as you're encouraged to perform specific actions in order to keep the gauge in a sweet spot that has your party fighting at optimal strength and defence, while also taking care not to overheat. With health and technique points automatically replenished after a battle ends, there's also no excuse not to go all-out every time.



» [PC] Characters run the gamut of JRPG tropes, but not in a negative way thanks to the deft writing.



» [PC] The turn-based battles display the turn order, like *Final Fantasy X*, so you can plan accordingly.



» [PS5] Part of the joy in *Clair Obscur* is hunting for new outfits and decking out Expedition 33 in style.

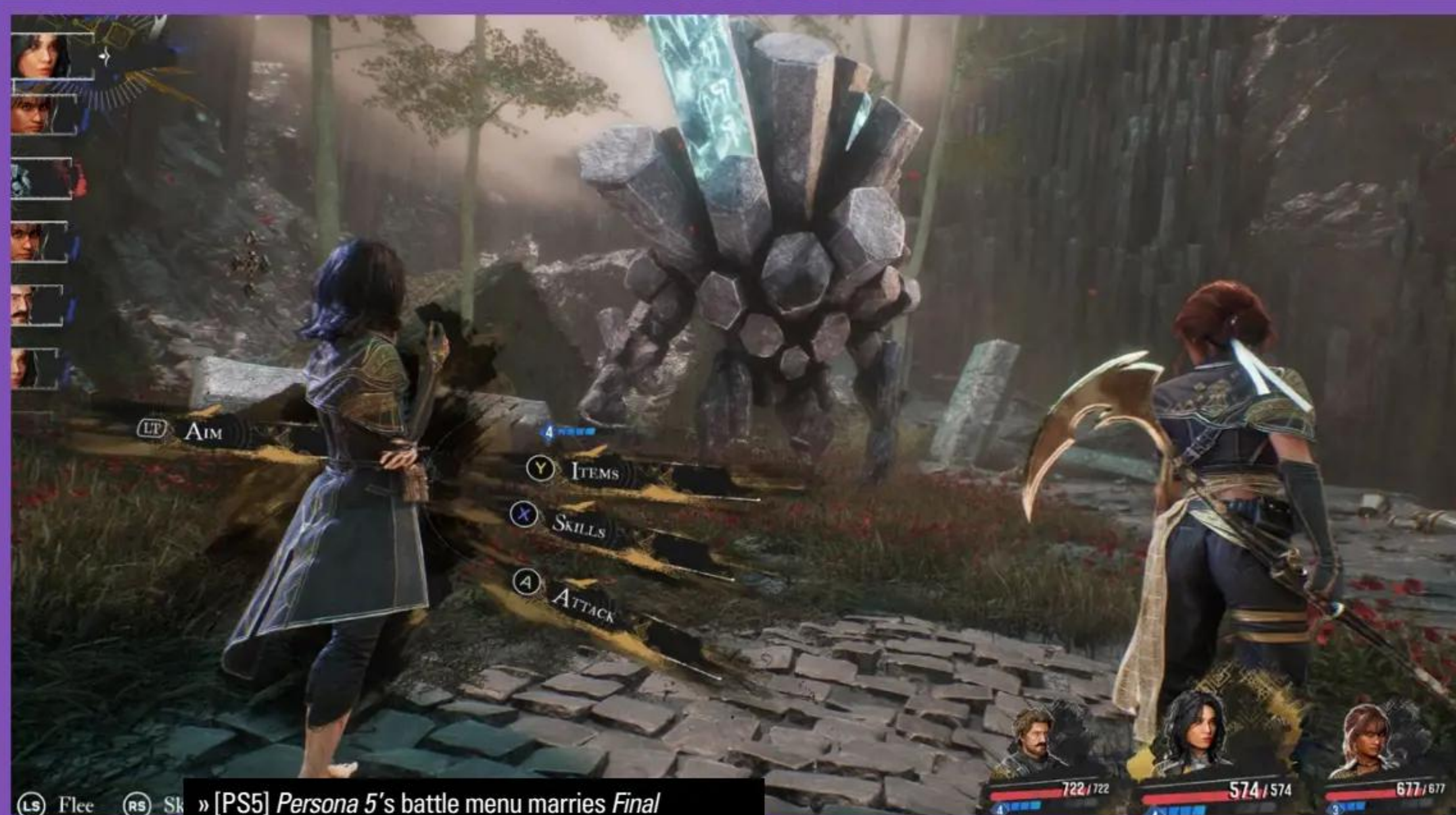


## Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

Although most retro-inspired JRPGs have typically looked to the genre's 16-bit heyday, it shouldn't be a surprise that the formative games for newer generations also come from later years. So it is that *Clair Obscur: Expedition 33* takes inspiration from the JRPGs of the PS2 and Xbox 360 eras, when there wasn't just a focus on more realistic visuals but more mature stories and characters.

There's an aching melancholy to this world where its people are being killed off year after year by a god-like entity called the Paintress. As members of the titular expedition on a suicide mission venturing deep into the Continent, your job is to break this cycle by killing the Paintress. It's one of the most visually stunning JRPGs powered by Unreal 5, harking back to the high-fidelity realism that the likes of *Final Fantasy X* and *Lost Odyssey* were aiming for in previous generations. Sandfall Interactive, however, also channels its native French aesthetics and culture to the game, sometimes with tongue firmly in cheek, such as with fights against mimes, which can reward party members with hilariously stereotypically French outfits like a striped shirt, beret and baguette ensemble.

What makes *Clair Obscur* so electrifying is a turn-based battle system that's every bit as edge-of-your-seat exciting as a hardcore action game. The influences can be traced back to Japanese games, from the stylish UI of *Persona 5*, the time-based button prompts of *Paper Mario*, and the ruthless parry windows of *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, but put together, it's a modern JRPG quite unlike any you've played.



» [PS5] *Persona 5*'s battle menu marries *Final Fantasy X*'s turn queue to deliver style and substance.





## Undertale/Deltarune

One of the most influential indie games of the last decade is also one of the most unique JRPGs that subverts many of its tropes and traditions. That could also be because developer Toby Fox's inspirations also include some more offbeat examples of the genre, including *Earthbound* and 'anti-RPG' *Moon*, the latter a PlayStation game that was only finally localised in 2020.

In *Undertale*, you play a human child who has fallen into the 'Underground' populated by monsters. When you face them in battle, it's presented in a first-person perspective reminiscent of early dungeon crawlers. However, when it comes to defending against attacks, this plays out like a bullet-hell shooter at the bottom of the screen, where your character is represented by a small red heart as you avoid taking damage from all manner of projectiles. The patterns of the projectiles vary, and more often than not, adopt some literal out-of-the-box mechanics, making this a quirky side to battling.

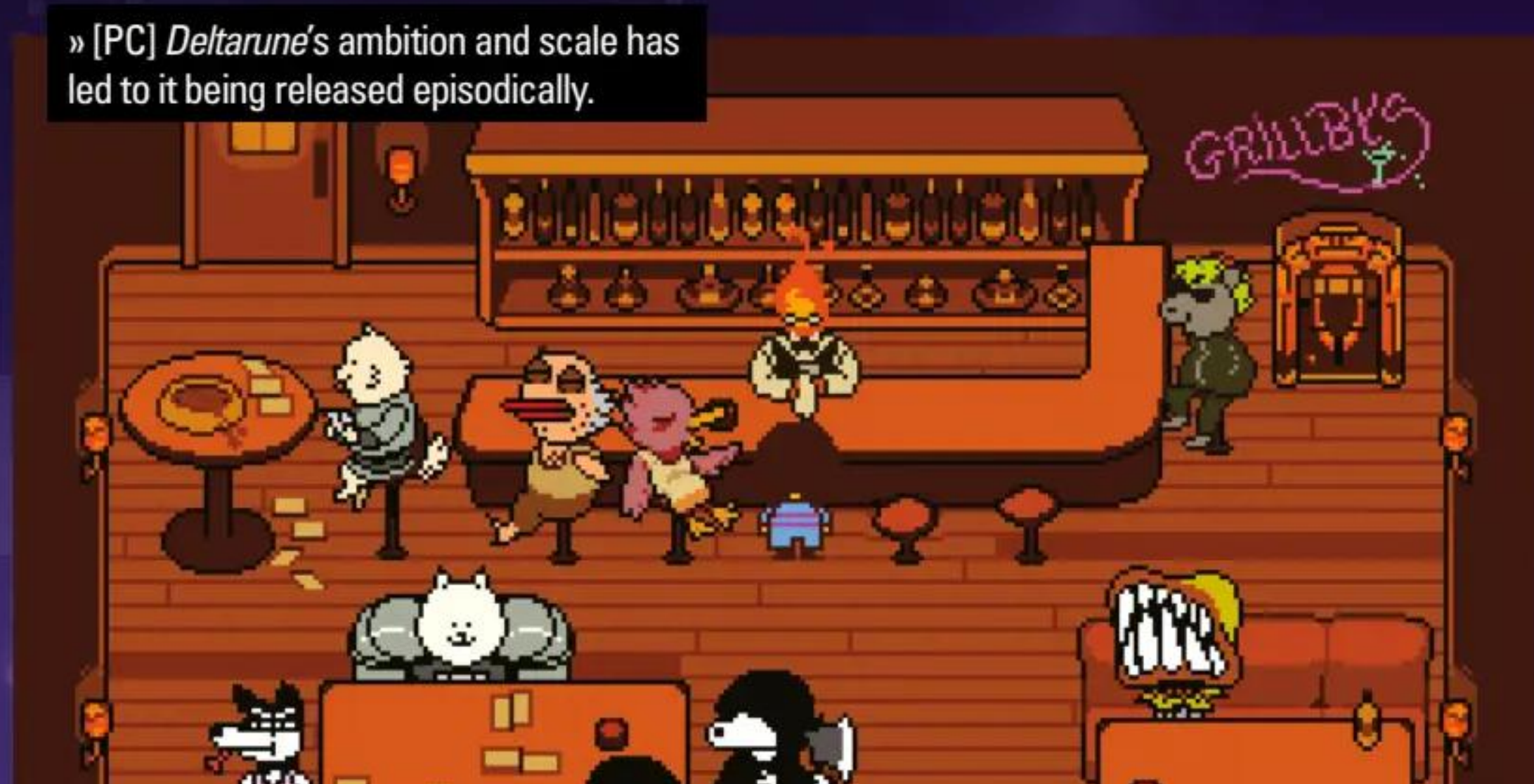
What makes these 'brawls' all the more unusual is that you're encouraged not to fight. Instead, you always have the option to spare your enemies. That doesn't come easy, as you often have to wear them down first, making some fights last longer, but that also gives you other novel and humorous

» [PC] Toby Fox's quirky humour channels *Earthbound*, tinged with a bit of *Monkey Island*.



\* (This ghost keeps saying 'z' out loud repeatedly, pretending to sleep.)

» [PC] *Deltarune*'s ambition and scale has led to it being released episodically.



\* Grillbz said that he'd offer you a glass of water, but he doesn't touch the stuff.

» [PC] *Undertale* and *Deltarune* teaches us that sometimes, compassion is more effective than violence.



\* Everyone treated the enemy with tender loving care!! All the enemies felt great!!

ways of interacting with enemies. By not fighting or spending money on more powerful weapons, you'll actually find non-violence is the more fun way to play *Undertale*, even if it's also possible to kill every single enemy to achieve the 'Genocide' route.

But there's such a charm to Fox's sometimes crudely drawn characters, from pun-loving skeleton Sans to the entertainment robot Mettaton who takes multiple forms, that you can't help but want to save them. It also helps that *Undertale* is incredibly funny, perhaps one of the most hilarious games you'll ever play, with gags coming thick and fast.

You can't talk about *Undertale* without its follow-up, the episodic *Deltarune*, which is still currently unfinished. While also taking place in the Underground, albeit in an unclear timeline or parallel version of it, you also traverse between light and dark worlds, going to school in the former, while transforming into a hero in the latter. A major difference is that this is a party-based adventure presented like classic *Final Fantasy* – and you'll also initially have the challenge of trying to control one of your more hot-headed allies if you're trying to play mercifully.

Already a longer game than the relatively bite-sized *Undertale*, despite this, *Deltarune* is even more ambitious, with more mystery surrounding your protagonist, Kris, who may or may not be controlled by someone else, while retaining a similar lo-fi charm. Better still, it also allows Toby Fox to flex his wider love of gaming history, from a game-within-a-game that riffs on *The Legend Of Zelda* to a character that harks back to pre-rendered 3D sprites.

Thanks to stellar English-to-Japanese localisation work from 8-4, which also handled the console porting and publishing of both games, *Undertale* and *Deltarune* are rare foreign-developed JRPGs that are as beloved in Japan as around the world.

» [PC] The games keep both feet planted proudly in the surreal and bizarre.



\* First, we're starting the reading from page 142!



\* oh man, thanks for checking that. that's wrong

» [PC] The skeleton Sans is a standout celebrity from the series, thanks to his boss fight.



“WHAT MAKES THE BATTLES ALL THE MORE UNUSUAL IS THAT YOU’RE ENCOURAGED NOT TO fight”



# THE ULTIMATE JRPG HANDBOOK

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