

Coming to America

The making of Final Fantasy VII and how Squaresoft conquered the RPG market

Gek Siong Low

geksiong@cs.stanford.edu



Disclaimer: I have tried my best to find sources that are as reliable as possible (press releases, interviews in published magazines, etc) but many times I had to depend on third-party accounts of what happened. Some of these accounts conflict with one another, so I try to present as coherent an account of the history as I can here. I do not claim that everything in this paper is true. With that in mind, let us proceed on with the story...

Introduction

"[Final Fantasy VII is]...quite possibly the greatest game ever made."

-- GameFan magazine, quote on back of Final Fantasy VII
CD case (Greatest Hits edition)



*Final Fantasy VII CD
cover art*

The story of Squaresoft's success in the US video games market appears at first glance to be like a fairy tale. Before Final Fantasy VII, console-based role-playing games (RPGs) were still a niche market, played only by a dedicated few who were willing to endure the long wait for the few games to cross the Pacific and onto American soil. Then came Final Fantasy VII in the September of 1997, wowing everybody with its amazing graphics, story and gameplay. The game single-handedly lifted console-based RPGs out of their little niche into the mainstream, selling millions of copies worldwide, and made Squaresoft a household name in video games.

Today console-based RPGs are a major industry, with players spoilt-for-choice on which RPG to buy every Christmas. The time of the garage-made RPGs was over. Now RPG development is an entire industry, with dedicated storywriters, character designers and even actors. Even the so-called "old-school" RPGs today sport the mandatory full-motion video (FMV) sequences. In one swift earth-shattering stroke, Squaresoft has altered the entire RPG scene forever. But it was not all plain sailing...

This paper attempts to trace Squaresoft's rocky road to the American market and their eventual success with the release of Final Fantasy VII, the processes and decisions that went into the making of the game, and also takes a look at the future it heralds. Squaresoft's history reads more like an RPG story, full of twists and turns, and bosses to battle. Its success in the US console-based RPG market was no fluke. It was the culmination of many years of hard work, a strong vision and several failed attempts.

Lights, camera, action! *In the beginning...*

*"I just went up [to the president of Squaresoft] and said, "I want to do an RPG"
He said, "Is that good, is that interesting?" and I said, "Yeah, it's fun." So he said, "Okay."
-- Hironobu Sakaguchi (quoted from The First Quarter by Steven Kent)*

In 1987, a small Japanese video game manufacturer named Square Co., Ltd. was in need of a hit. Its games sold respectably, but a blockbuster game remained elusive. Game designer Hironobu decided that he would make an RPG, similar to Enix's extremely popular Dragon Quest, but he felt could vastly improve on the basic formula, and revolutionize the genre. All of Squaresoft's resources and hopes were poured into the making of that one-megabit cartridge game. Because Sakaguchi believed then that the game would be his swan song as a game designer, he named it "Final Fantasy". But it was not meant to be his last effort. The game turned out to be a huge success and kept the company in business to produce a sequel.



*Square's offices in
Tokyo, Japan*

Well, that was just the beginning...

Introducing the heroes

The critical people in the development team

*"Strength without determination means nothing, and
determination without strength is equally useless."*

-- Godo Kusaragi, Final Fantasy VII



*What is Mr.
Sakaguchi thinking
about?*

Hironobu Sakaguchi: Producer

Hironobu Sakaguchi is the visionary behind the entire series. Ever since his success with Final Fantasy I, he has been at the helm as the producer for all the games in the series. Sakaguchi did not start out making RPGs. Before Final Fantasy, he made games such as Rad Racer, King's Knight and World Runner at Square, all of which sold respectably, but Sakaguchi was not satisfied with any of them. He decided to switch genres and that turned out to be one of the best decisions of his life.

Nobuo Uematsu: Music composer

Referred to by some as the John Williams of the video game world, Nobuo Uematsu has been the music composer for all the games in the Final Fantasy series. Surprisingly, he has no formal training in music. After college, he played the keyboard in various bands and decided that he loved writing music than playing it, and eventually got a job writing jingles for radio commercials. In 1985, a friend working at Square asked Uematsu if he wanted to write music for some of their video games and he agreed. In his spare time he listens to Irish music, plays the fiddle, and watches Japanese pro-wrestling.



A happy Uematsu in the office



Kitase directs

Yoshinori Kitase: Director

Yoshinori Kitase wanted to be a film director, but found it hard to achieve his aspirations in the Japanese film industry. When Square began work on Final Fantasy V, Kitase replaced Hiromichi Tanaka as the director. It was an important change in the history of the series, for the series quickly took on a more cinematic and mature tone soon after Kitase came on board.

Bloopers and obstacles

Why the earlier Final Fantasies didn't quite make it

Yuffie: "Cloud, sign this."

Cloud: "What is it?"

Yuffie: "It's a contract that says when the war is over, the materia will belong to me."

--Yuffie Kusakagi talking to Cloud on the Highwind, Final Fantasy VII

In the early days of console-based RPGs, there was a general misconception that American players were not sophisticated enough to play complicated RPGs, preferring instead to play "simpler" fighting or platform games. This was probably based on observations that RPG games do not sell as well here as in Japan. This has now changed for the better, but even today, we can still sometimes see the legacy of this early perception in the way the games are localized.

Final Fantasy I was localized and released in July 1990 for the US market by Nintendo after Final Fantasy III was released in Japan, and surprisingly it actually sold more in the US than in Japan. Yet, sadly for the fans, this success wasn't enough to bring the rest of the games over to the States. Nintendo of America felt that Final Fantasy II was too similar to the first game to sell well in the States, and neither did they decide to localize Final Fantasy III.

When Squaresoft upgraded to the Super Famicom (SFC) with Final Fantasy IV, its release in Japan in August 1991 wowed Japanese gamers with the vastly improved graphics and sound. Nintendo released the localized version for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) just three months later in November 1991, but it was a dumb-downed version to make it "easier" for American gamers, with many items, areas and even character skills removed. In addition, it was horribly mangled by Nintendo's censorship. Swear words and references to sex and death were removed, and even a "stripping" dancer (she kept her last layer of clothing on) in the game was taken out. Nintendo was extremely cautious not to offend the American market, perhaps overly cautious. Many players were upset, but the game was still fairly successful, although not as successful as it was in Japan. Final Fantasy IV was released as Final Fantasy II in America, starting a confusing naming game which was only resolved with the arrival of Final Fantasy VII.

Nintendo was not the only one to make mistakes. Squaresoft also made the same mistake of viewing American players as being "simpler" when they released Final Fantasy Mystic Quest in October 1992. Specially tailored for the US market, it was a "simplified" RPG meant to attract gamers who will then later "graduate" to the regular Final Fantasies. The game bombed. Players who had finished FFIV (FFII US) were still fuming mad over the game, and along came this game to insult their intelligence even more. To add to this indignation, FF Mystic Quest was released in Japan later as "Final Fantasy USA", perpetuating the "dumb American" perception even more.

Final Fantasy V, released in Japan in December 1992, almost made it across the ocean. Squaresoft announced that it would be Final Fantasy III in America, and even started work on the English translation, but it was dropped for unknown reasons. Speculations abound, including one that says Squaresoft thought that the game would be too complex for US gamers, and another one that hints at squabbles with Nintendo over cartridge size. Anyway, the game was later announced for US release again in 1995 by Squaresoft, and then again in 1997 by Eidos, but both times gamers never saw the game. It eventually arrived in 1999 as part of the Final Fantasy Anthology for the Playstation. But that is another entire story unto itself, worthy enough to be discussed separately some other time.



Squaresoft's offices in Costa Mesa, California

Final Fantasy III for the US turned out to be Final Fantasy VI. Released in Japan in April 1994 and later in America in October 1994, near the end of the life of the SNES, FFVI squeezed out every ounce of performance from the aging system. This was also the first game in which we could see the clear guiding hand of director Kitase towards a more dramatic and mature tone. Final Fantasy VI addressed issues such as suicide and teen pregnancy, and handled them in a mature manner. The game was very successful in the US market, but still wasn't able to break out of the RPG niche. Squaresoft knew then that it was time to move on. To achieve a breakthrough, a newer, more powerful console system was needed, but that new console was not destined to be a Nintendo machine.

Final Boss Battle

Fighting the Big N

*"You are just a puppet. You have no heart and cannot feel any pain."
-- Sephiroth, Final Fantasy VII (flashback in Nibelheim)*

Despite the long working relationship Squaresoft had with Nintendo, not everything was well. Nintendo had an infamous reputation for exerting tight control over the game makers and Squaresoft was no exception. In addition to problems over censorship and localization, other issues also contributed to the gradually souring relationship.

In December 1991, Squaresoft had to delay the release of Romancing SaGa (not released in the US) into January 1992 because of bugs, but found it impossible to fix the bugs due to a lack of cartridge memory. Squaresoft requested Nintendo to allow them to use the new 12M cartridge but was denied. Nintendo was reserving the cartridge for the release of Enix's Dragon Quest V. Squaresoft was left with no choice but to take out parts of the game, including a final boss scenario.

Also around then, Squaresoft was developing Seiken Densetsu 2 (Secret of Mana) for the Super Famicom CD-ROM system, but due to arguments between Nintendo, Sony and Philips, the CD-ROM system was scrapped. Squaresoft was forced to downsize the game to fit onto a cartridge, and the result was lots of bugs.

And there was September 1995, when Squaresoft decided to reduce the production of their games, and was almost hauled off to court for “breaking the rules”. Squaresoft realized then that Nintendo’s approach to marketing was not for them.

Finally, there was Super Mario RPG, which Squaresoft developed jointly with Nintendo. It was originally supposed to be a Squaresoft release, but Nintendo took over at the last minute, and it became a Nintendo release. Nintendo complained that Squaresoft rushed the development of the game, and things never looked worse between the two companies.

Plot twists

Squaresoft’s defection to Sony

“Looks like Kya ha ha ha and Gya ha ha ha are up to something again.”
-- Cait Sith, talking about Scarlet and Heidegger
on the Highwind, Final Fantasy VII

When Squaresoft found out that the next-generation Nintendo 64 Disk Drive would not be a CD-ROM system but was going to be yet another cartridge-based system, they decided it was time to move on. In 1996, Squaresoft suddenly announced that they were leaving Nintendo and defecting over to Sony, and that the Final Fantasy VII would be released for the Sony Playstation console, a less powerful 3D console than the Nintendo 64 but which uses CD-ROMs. The news shocked the industry, although it was already known by industry watchers for some time that Squaresoft was planning to leave Nintendo. Thus was finally ended Squaresoft’s 10-year long relationship with Nintendo. Sony’s CD-ROM system provided Squaresoft with the freedom and capacity it needed to make the next-generation Final Fantasy games without worrying about cartridge sizes.

At that time the Sega Saturn console was very popular in Japan, with a huge library of games. But Squaresoft decided, for unknown reasons, to go with Sony instead. It was even more surprising considering that Shiochiro Irimajiri, the president of Sega, and Tomoyuki Takechi, president of Squaresoft, grew up in the same city and are childhood friends.

It has been rumored that Sony gave Squaresoft a discount in the production cost for their CD-ROMs. Furthermore, Sony was willing to support Square’s independent marketing company, Digicube. By mid-March, Nintendo dumped all their Square stocks, which were bought up by Sony. In December 1996, Sony Computer Entertainment America agreed to a multi-title publishing deal with Square Co., Ltd., allowing the company full North American publishing and distribution rights to Square’s 1997 PlayStation product line.

The impact on Nintendo was great. Soon after Squaresoft’s defection, Enix followed suit, taking along with them their Dragon Quest series. The loss of the two most popular RPGs in Japan left Nintendo reeling from the blow, and for a long time after that, there were no RPGs on the Nintendo platform. Many RPG players converted to the Playstation together with Squaresoft and Enix.

At the 1997 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), Sony’s Phil Harrison made this argument against Nintendo using Final Fantasy VII: “FFVII, with three CD-ROMs, would weigh in at 1.8GB of data. There’s no way that any Nintendo cartridge-based system could cram that much data into one game.”

George Harrison of Nintendo responded that he didn’t care about Final Fantasy VII, because “most of our customers wouldn’t want or appreciate such a slow and tedious game such as Final Fantasy VII.”

Squaresoft's relationship with Nintendo remains touchy even to this day. The split was so bitter that even after Nintendo re-established relations with Namco in 1999, Yamauchi, president of Nintendo, still refused to consider working with Squaresoft. When asked about if Nintendo would allow Squaresoft to publish games for their upcoming GameCube console, Minoru Arakawa of Nintendo replied, "I don't think it is yet time for Squaresoft."

Gimme enough gil and I can create miracles...

The development budget

"These days, all it takes for your dreams to come true is money and power."

-- President Shinra, Final Fantasy VII

Work on Final Fantasy VII began in early 1996. The development budget for Final Fantasy VII was reported to be a whopping US\$45 million. Never before had so much money gone into the making of an RPG. Over a hundred artists worked on producing the most amazing computer graphics ever seen in a video game. Beautifully rendered full-motion video (FMV) sequences were woven directly into the gameplay, and the game played out pretty much like a movie. Pre-rendered backdrops graced the screen throughout the entire game world.



One of the many eye-popping CG movies in Final Fantasy VII

It was a very radical thing to do. The conventional wisdom then was that RPGs were all about fighting monsters and leveling up – graphics was not seen as an important factor. Squaresoft believed otherwise, and thought that graphics would appeal to a much wider audience. They took a huge gamble with the production budget and proved that their intuition was right. They also showed that a Hollywood-sized budget can in fact be used for an RPG, and raised the status of RPGs away from the perception that RPGs were made by a few guys tinkering around in a garage.

Final Fantasy VII was the first game in the series to use developers on both sides of the Pacific. The main game engine was developed at the Japanese offices of Squaresoft, supervised by Hironobu Sakaguchi, while the impressive video sequences were created at the new and expensive offices of Square USA in Honolulu, Hawaii. Squaresoft fully took advantage of the many talented and experienced computer animators and powerful computers this side of the Pacific.

Where are the fighters and mages?

Gameplay design

"Just when you thought he was smart, he'd go off and do some damned fool thing."

-- Cid Highwind, talking about Cloud, Final Fantasy VII

But FMVs do not make an RPG. The focus on making breathtaking movie sequences didn't mean that Squaresoft stopped being concerned with the player experience. Every new Final Fantasy has to have something new in terms of gameplay, and in Final Fantasy VII that innovation was the materia system.

In a way, the development of the materia system could be seen as a “natural” combination of FFV’s Job system, and FFVI’s Relic system and Esper magic system. Still, Final Fantasy VII was to be a completely whole new experience that breaks away from the traditional RPG mold of fighters and mages, and the materia system was designed exactly to do just that.

The battle system didn’t change much. Final Fantasy VII still kept pretty much the Active-Time Battle system introduced since FFIV. What was changed was the way magic is used in the game. The character-specific classes and abilities from the previous games were scrapped and replaced with a classless character development system. Any character can use any spell as long as the appropriate materia (little orbs of condensed magical energy) is currently equipped on a weapon or armor, and the strength of the spell does not depend on the character abilities. Other characters can “train” the materia and transfer it to other characters depending on the situation. Furthermore, different combinations of materia can have various added side effects. This system allowed for a whole lot of freedom and strategy in character customization, and completely eliminated the problem of the limited usefulness of healer classes in traditional class-based RPGs.

Spiky hair is good *Character design practicalities*

“Oh! Cloud! Your hair looks like a Chocobo!”
-- Tifa Lockheart, Final Fantasy VII
(bird’s nest on the Corel Train tracks)



*Tetsuya Nomura,
character designer*

Previous games in the series used the character designs of Yoshitaka Amano, a well-respected artist from outside the industry. However, with Final Fantasy VII, Square found that it was impossible to recreate Amano’s flowing style in their 3D polygonal models. They decided to abandon Amano’s exquisite designs and found Nomura to take over as the chief character artist. As a more traditional manga-styled artist, Nomura’s designs were much more easily adapted to the 3D platform, and looked just as attractive. This manga-inspired design is most evident in main protagonist Cloud Strife’s spiky hair. Amano worked on the world maps. This change in style in Final Fantasy VII was also fitting in that it was in line with Square’s leap into a completely new platform. Nomura stayed on as the character artist for Final Fantasy VIII. For Final Fantasy IX, Amano made a comeback as character artist because Square wanted the game to encompass all the previous Final Fantasies and to “go back to its roots.”

As for why Final Fantasy VII broke away from the super-deformed characters (so called because they are usually two heads tall), Sakaguchi has an interesting story to tell. In an interview for the Japanese Famitsu magazine in early 2000, he revealed that FFVII did in fact have shorter characters about four heads tall in the early planning stages. However, they quickly realized that trying to animate a character wielding a big sword in 3D results in him stabbing himself in the forehead, so the characters were made even taller. The more realistically proportioned characters in FFVII thus appear to be more the result of practical 3D animation than from any desire to go for a “realistic” look.



Imagine what would happen if Cloud was a little shorter...

Music takes a back seat

Why the music is not digitally sampled

“I don't think there is meaning to using sampling to mimic real instruments. If I were to use sampling, I would like to use it in a hip-hop kind of way. I think we're in the midst of a transition from synthesized game music to recorded game music right now.”

-- Nobuo Uematsu, in an interview about FF8

At a time when most games employed the use of Red book (audio CD) format for the game music, Final Fantasy VII surprisingly uses synthesized MIDI from the Playstation's internal sound chip. When asked about this during a 1997 interview, composer Uematsu revealed that recorded sound takes time to read whereas sound chips don't. It also allowed the music to change smoothly and quickly without pause. The objective, Uematsu said, was that he did not want players to feel stress.

There was, of course, the other reason that recorded music consumes more CPU cycles that could otherwise be used to speed up the 3D engine. Even the sound effects were not pre-recorded, but are “chirpy” sound effects generated by the Playstation's built-in sound chip. Using synthesized MIDI is very typical of the Final Fantasy games. Later games (FFVIII and FFIIX) still employ the same synthesized sounds, even though other RPGs used recorded music. There were actually ideas to use a famous vocalist to sing a song for the ending of FFVII, but the team couldn't come up with a good reason to do it, so the mandatory pop song didn't appear in the series until Final Fantasy VIII.



FFVII Original Soundtrack cover art



Cover art of the FFVII “Reunion” soundtrack. Note the Digicube logo on the top-left corner

There was one exception to the synthesized formula in FFVII however. The final boss battle with Sephiroth uses Latin chants layered over the MIDI theme. Uematsu refused to say if that is pre-recorded music. My educated guess is that it is most probably done using some kind of wave-table synthesis, since the chants are basically short samples of sound.

Uematsu started composing the music after the story was written, but changes to the game were frequent, even late into the development process. The entire FFVII score took a total of 8 months to compose. Over a hundred tunes were written and to Uematsu's credit as a master composer, the FFVII soundtrack hit the top of the Japanese charts after the soundtrack was released.

Let's just kill Aeris... *Drama is everything*

"Then I'll be going now. I'll come back when it's all over."

-- Aeris' last words, Final Fantasy VII
(in Cloud's vision/dream at the Forgotten City)

It is also interesting and surprising to note that, despite all the caution over the gameplay elements and how music should not impact the gameplay, the developers were extremely amenable to dramatic changes in the story.

Perhaps the most dramatic change to the story was the death of Aeris, a main character. It was probably the most poignant and memorable moment in any RPG story ever written. Players were said to have mourned for days, or even wept when Aeris died, although major characters die all the time in all the Final Fantasies. It would come as a surprise to many players to learn that Aeris' death was not in the original story, and that the reason she died was the result of a simple phone call.



Aeris' death shocked and saddened many players all over the world

In a book "Final Fantasy VII Kaitai Shinsho", Nomura was quoted, "Actually, we only had Aerith (the original Japanese name for Aeris) at the beginning, and Tifa did not exist. But on a Sunday evening, I phoned the director Mr. Kitase and suggested 'Let's kill Aerith and put in Tifa' (laughs). So now we have two heroines, and we have an event where one of them dies."

Yes, the truth can sometimes be cruel. There was obviously no intention on the part of Nomura to resurrect Aeris later. It was definitely not something that was left out of the game due to time and space constraints.

Still, players hoped for a "better" ending, and for quite a while a rumor circulated online that Aeris could be resurrected. It all started with a post on a newsgroup by an American player who played the Japanese game and completely misunderstood a scene at the end of the second disk to mean a failed resurrection of Aeris. Then somebody who went by the name of "Ben Lansing" saw the post and decided to post on the newsgroups claiming that he was a translator at Square USA during the production of the game, and had inside knowledge on how Aeris could be revived. He supported his claims with the supposed changes made to the US version of the game, such as the Underwater materia and the new FMV sequence which he said was that of Aeris' resurrection (it was actually for the Diamond Weapon monster). He also pointed to many places in the game where the relevance to the story was unclear (such as the sick man in Midgar) which he wove into his elaborate instructions for the revival process. The whole story was too complicated to describe in detail here, but the release of the American version finally revealed many of his claims to be false. Despite many inconsistencies in his claims, many people believed him, and there were even staunch supporters who claimed to have successfully revived Aeris using his instructions. Anyway, "Ben Lansing" eventually posted that the whole thing was just a hoax, and laughed at the general stupidity of American players.

Hoaxes and rumors are common for every video game, but it is quite amusing to see how such an impromptu and innocent change in the story can have such a huge impact on the players, sparking off such a chain of events.

Down with the censors! Off course!

Translation woes finally solved?

“...Hmm. That’s how you’ll fool them”

-- Cloud Strife, Final Fantasy VII
(outside the HoneyBee Inn)

Squaresoft’s breakaway from Nintendo had one advantage – it was no longer at the mercy of Nintendo’s strict censorship rules. It did not mean that neither Sony nor Squaresoft would not censor the games though. Sony did in fact consider if the American version of the game should be “modified” from the Japanese version, but strong user feedback made Sony release the game uncut, for the very first time, in the US. Even the vulgar words were kept intact in the translation. Sony’s willingness to listen to the players meant that RPG players could finally get to enjoy unadulterated games. It was a win-win situation.

However, an uncensored work does not mean that the localization is necessarily better. Final Fantasy VII didn’t fare that much better than other games in the genre in the English translation. There was the occasional incoherent dialog. Many words were misspelled, such as the “Off-course!” in the Gold Saucer Battle Arena. In some cases, some instances of a word were missed during the translation, leading to confusing scenes. One example is when the player tries to feed the white chocobo in Mideel and the character asks if it wants “Samolen Greens” which doesn’t exist. However, choosing to feed the chocobo results in a “Mimett Greens” being consumed. The original Japanese name was “Mimetto”, so it is a mystery how that could translate into “Samolen Greens.”

Some translations were made for purely aesthetic reasons, but players tend to be really picky about what is aesthetic and what is not. I have also found many gripes about the translation of certain terms, such as “Gold Needle” becoming “Soft”, where the player said was unnecessary because the original term would have fit in English. However, I could see that the motivation behind some of these translations was differences in culture, and the changes were made for greater clarity to American gamers.

Still, Final Fantasy VII’s translation was better than many other RPGs that came before. Translation will always be an issue with the players, and I don’t see it going away anytime soon. It was said that Squaresoft did not have enough time to translate and correct all the mistakes before the US release date, and that the typos would be fixed in the later PC version, but I have no way of verifying that. Anyway, it should be noted that Final Fantasy VIII and the later games appeared to have much less of a problem with localization.

So money do not quite make miracles *Is the story complete?*

Barret: "What's going to happen to Midgar? We can't let that happen!"

Red XIII: "Forget Midgar, we've gotta worry about the Planet."

-- Barret Wallace & Red XIII, Final Fantasy VII

Overall, the development of the game was pretty rushed. Squaresoft actually had less time to work on Final Fantasy VII than it had with the previous games, according to their initial projected schedule. The release date was pushed back from December 1996 to January 1997, and the game was expanded from the originally announced 2-disk set to span 3 disks. Many changes were also made late in the development process. I have already mentioned the last-minute addition of Tifa to the story. Another late character was, surprisingly, Sephiroth the main villain, who was revealed to be in the story much later.

Nobuo Uematsu himself admits in the liner notes for the FFVII soundtrack that "There is one thing common in all the Final Fantasy games. None of them are complete." (except for his music, that is).

Aeris' death was not what made Final Fantasy VII incomplete. Rather, it was the fact that Squaresoft felt compelled to make all those changes to the US version of the game, including a clarification and tightening of the storyline, which was pretty vague in the Japanese version. The game was obviously incomplete, for otherwise Squaresoft would have been content with a direct translation.

Changes to the US version include the addition of the Weapon monsters, new FMV sequences that showcase the Diamond Weapon and a much longer Sephiroth summons animation sequence. Some weapons, for example, Yuffie's Rising Sun, were put back into the US version, and some items such as the Guide Book (necessary to get the Underwater materia for fighting the Emerald Weapon) were also added.

The US changes also introduced several bugs, of which the most well-known was probably the bug where you can duplicate an item infinitely many times given the right button presses and that you have the W-Item materia. Improvements to the gameplay were also made. For example, materia can be exchanged more easily in the US version than in the Japanese version.

Even with the additions to the US version, many plans still didn't make it into the game. One of them was that Final Fantasy VII was in fact intended to have multiple endings for the multiple characters Yuffie and Vincent. According to Nomura in an interview for the Japanese GameFan magazine, he said, "Because to have included [Yuffie and Vincent], we would have to make four different endings and we were constrained by the space on the CD, so we decided not to include them."

Another reason for the incompleteness of the game as given by some players was that there are many materia, weapons and items that were either disabled or removed, although I wouldn't say that it is a compelling argument for the incompleteness of the game.

Whatever the arguments and speculations were, Squaresoft did try their best to make as complete a game as possible. As Sakaguchi himself said in an interview once, "Final Fantasy VII was completed to the best of our ability and funding."

Victory! Gained 1000000 EXP and 1000000 GIL Success in the marketplace

*"If this is all a dream, don't wake me up."
-- Cloud Strife, Final Fantasy VII*

Incomplete or not, Final Fantasy VII was shipped in Japan on January 31, 1997. It became an overnight sensation, with 2.3 million copies snapped up in just 3 days. For the US, however, more work was needed to really open up the market.

Sony spared no expense in marketing Final Fantasy VII in the US, allocating a budget of up to US\$100 million just for marketing alone. Three 30-second commercials were made highlighting the graphics and gameplay and aired on prime-time slots on all the major networks. There were also major print campaigns in popular publications such as Rolling Stone, Spin and even Playboy, and the gaming magazines. Sony even teamed up with Pepsi for a major holiday promotion featuring the game.



FFVII Japanese version cover art

Customers who bought a Playstation console in September 1997 received a disk containing a demo of the game and previews of other yet-to-be-released Squaresoft titles. Other gimmicks include limited edition FFVII T-shirts and pre-paid phone cards to Sony's hint line, "just in case [gamers] get stuck in the game."

The extensive marketing campaign paid off handsomely. Hundreds of thousands of consumers throughout the country reserved a copy of the game, months before its release. Retail outlets nationwide broke the official North American September 7 release date, eager to satisfy the overwhelming consumer demand for Final Fantasy VII.



One of the many FFVII figurines

"Final Fantasy VII's success in North America has surpassed our original sales expectations and with the holidays steadily approaching, this is only the beginning," said Andrew House, VP marketing, Sony Computer Entertainment America, in a news article on December 4, 1997. He continues, "the sales success reported from our retailers to date is proving that an expansive variety of video game players are buying Final Fantasy VII."

And then there was the merchandise. Many players went on to buy Final Fantasy VII models, posters, soundtracks. Sprite-based characters in the previous games do not transform well into toy figurines. The move to 3D opened up new possibilities for RPGs. It's no longer just about making the game. Every release of a major Squaresoft game now comes with a full assortment of merchandise.

Squaresoft finally managed to crack the US market. Altogether, over 6 million copies of Final Fantasy VII were sold worldwide. Final Fantasy VII proved that everybody would love RPGs if given the chance. In addition, a special FFXVII International edition was released in Japan so that Japanese gamers could savor the additional FMVs made for the US version. The game was also ported over to the PC platform. Released in June 1998, it featured better graphics that took advantage of better PC hardware, bringing the game onto the desktops of non-console gamers.



FFVII International version cover art

Opening up new worlds *Toward Hollywood*

"You can't give up now! There ain't no gettin' off of this train we on!"
-- Barret Wallace, Final Fantasy VII

Final Fantasy VII revolutionized the look and feel of console RPGs. It was going to be the first of many "cinematic RPGs", a term which Square came up with to describe their Parasite Eve game, so called because the FMV sequences are an integral part of the storytelling. In the old-school style of RPGs, FMVs (if any) were used primarily as cut-scenes to reward the player after having achieved a certain quest. Today RPG players are split into two main camps – one group favoring the gameplay and character development aspects, detesting the gratuitous "eye candy" and whining about the direction the industry seems to be taking, the other group favoring the graphics and storytelling, and who dislike the need for constantly leveling-up the characters.



*Squaresoft's offices in
Honolulu, Hawaii*

In FFXVII's footsteps came many other similar Squaresoft releases. Square took the term "cinematic" to new heights with the release of FF8, which used almost true-to-life 3D characters to tell the story, which was interestingly, a love story. Parasite Eve and Vagrant Story merged gameplay and drama together seamlessly. There were many wannabes and copycats too. Sony, after seeing the tremendous success of Final Fantasy VII, released their very own Legend of Dragoon game, which garnered mixed reactions from the players, because of the over-emphasis on graphics rather than the story.

Squaresoft is not resting on its laurels. It did not simply sit back and churn out more Final Fantasy VII's. With each new game came new innovations, daring risks. Perhaps the most daring risk Squaresoft is taking now is their production of a full-length, fully computer-graphics animated Final Fantasy movie, The Spirits Within, due to be released in the theaters in the summer of 2001. It was a logical step in line with the cinematic direction the series is taking. The movie is being produced at Square's Honolulu Studios, the computer graphics powerhouse that produced all the FMV sequences for Final Fantasy VII and later.

This is not the first time a game has made the leap to the silver screen. Nintendo's failed attempts at the Mario movie comes to mind instantly, and there were many others too. What are so special about Squaresoft's endeavor are that the story will be completely new and not based on any of the previous games, and that the computer-rendered animation will blow everyone away. So far, only 17 minutes of the movie have been revealed to a lucky few and the general consensus is that it is fantastic. It is definitely not like the horribly animated 3D cartoons shown on Saturday morning TV. If you think Final Fantasy VIII was fantastic, then you should see what they could do in the movie.

Final Fantasy? *The future*

"...she smiled till the end."

-- Cloud Strife, Final Fantasy VII

This is an exciting time in the history of video games. We are seeing a merger between the video games and movie industry, and Squaresoft is at the forefront of the revolution. With the huge amounts of money pouring into the Final Fantasy movie, its performance at the box office this summer can make or break the company. And with the surprisingly low profiles of Final Fantasy IX and X, one can't help but wonder if Squaresoft might have been sticking their necks too far out. However, regardless of whether Squaresoft achieves success at the big screen, what is certain is that the revolution has already begun. Squaresoft has blazed the trail for future game developers to follow, and many will.

We will always look back at Final Fantasy VII as the game that started it all, the one game that proved beyond a doubt that big budgets and RPGs do mix well, that RPGs are not just about getting lost in dungeons and slaying monsters, and that everybody loves a good story anytime. It also paved the way for other smaller RPGs to do well in America. Final Fantasy VII was indeed an important milestone in RPG development. No one really knows what the future may bring to Squaresoft, but here's hoping that Squaresoft will succeed in all their future endeavors, that we will continue seeing more wonderful games (and movies) from the company, and may none of the Final Fantasies be the final one!



*A scene from the upcoming Final Fantasy movie,
The Spirits Within*

THE END?

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About the author



Gek Siong Low is a Masters candidate in Computer Science, specializing in Human-Computer Interaction, at Stanford University. He got his Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science from the University of California at Berkeley. Scanning his email messages one day, he noticed a new class, STS145. "Hmm, history of computer games, now that looks interesting..." and asked his adviser if he could take the class. His adviser approved and this is how this paper came to be.

In his spare time, Gek plays the classical guitar, watches too much Japanese anime and reads manga. He completed Final Fantasy VII during the last winter break (finally!) and still gets play the occasional video game. An RPG gamer who can't seem to play well at anything else (except for turn-based strategy games), he plays Squaresoft games almost exclusively and has collected quite a number of Squaresoft titles. He hopes that one day somebody will write a book on the complete history of Squaresoft.