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Vintage Games
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For countless gamers in the United States and Japan, the Final Fantasy series are more than just games—they’re the games. Just hearing the word “Chocobo” or “Moogle”¹ is enough to tickle the thumbs of dedicated fans all over the world. Indeed, few video-game franchises in the history of the industry have enjoyed the popularity, longevity, and high acclaim of Hironobu Sakaguchi’s epic series. The first Final Fantasy, developed during a financial crisis at Square, not only rescued the company but soon became

¹Not to be confused with J. K. Rowling’s word “Muggle,” meaning a person not born in a magical world and lacking any sort of magical ability, in the 1997 U.K. book Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone.
a definitive console role-playing game—a reputation the series continues to enjoy. Because the series is much too lengthy and complex to cover adequately in a single chapter, we’ve decided to focus here on *Final Fantasy VII*.

Why the seventh game? Although fans and critics argue (often quite divisively) about which of the many *Final Fantasy* games are the best or most influential, the seventh game is perhaps the most interesting from a historical perspective. It was the first to take advantage of the CD-ROM format, a decision that necessitated (or perhaps justified) Square’s infamous break with Nintendo and new partnership with Sony. This exclusive partnership played an important role in the PlayStation’s commercial dominance over the Nintendo 64. *Final Fantasy VII* is also notable for being the first of the series to receive an official PC Windows port, which expanded its audience and influence considerably. It also made the transition from the 2D of its predecessors to 3D, polygonal characters on pre-rendered backgrounds. Though the graphics may look primitive by modern standards, they were stunning in 1997.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *Final Fantasy VII* is arguably among the best games ever made. The highly polished gameplay, lavish production, intricate storyline, and well-developed characters all contribute to the game’s high playability, then and now. It has won countless awards and remains at the top of many online and printed best-of lists. In August of 2006, GameSpot named it one of its “Greatest Games of All Time,” remarking that “the game stands the test of time.” IGN’s contemporary review called it a “cinematic wonder,” the “RPG by which all others are to be measured.” There is even a computer animated film based on the game, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, released in the United States in 2006. In this chapter, we’ll explore the history of the game and touch on the series, paying particular attention to what makes it so different from most Western role-playing games.

*Final Fantasy VII* raises a number of contentious issues among fans of computer and console role-playing games. Some of these issues are technical and are concerned with how the game handles combat and leveling, the quintessential components of any role-playing game (henceforth, RPG; we’ll ignore the tabletop RPG and focus on electronic games only). The *Final Fantasy* series is famous for experimenting with combat and leveling systems, and because of or despite these many changes, the series has continued to please old fans and win over new gamers, year after year. Another major concern is the role of story and plot

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2 See Chapter 1, “Alone in the Dark (1992): The Polygons of Fear,” for more on this technique.


5 The movie picks up two years after the events in the game.
in RPGs. Whereas most RPGs originating in the United States and Europe were focused primarily on tactics and statistics, the eastern RPGs of Japan distinguished themselves by railing their gameplay into tightly orchestrated, linear narratives. This convention turned off some fans of American RPGs, who preferred freedom to directorial control. A good example of this trend in modern RPGs is Bethesda’s *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2007; Microsoft Xbox, PC, Sony PlayStation 3), a game praised for its open-ended, “sandbox”-style gameplay. What we’ll see in our discussion of *Final Fantasy VII* is how its emphasis on character development and storytelling plays out in one of the most celebrated of all Japanese RPGs. However, the first issue we’ll address here is the cultural differences between the American and Japanese gaming communities.

We see one crucial difference in the types of games preferred by the two markets, particularly as they stood in the late 1990s. Although the American audience for console RPGs was humble, this was completely untrue of the Japanese market, where Enix’s *Dragon Quest* (*Dragon Warrior* in the West) and other console-based RPGs dominated the shelves. Indeed, an article in *Newsweek* about *Final Fantasy VII* condescendingly referred to American gamers as “vidiots [who would] rather twitch-and-shoot or fight hand to hand than explore and interact.” These and other critics hoped that *Final Fantasy VII* might at last inspire more U.S. gamers to turn away from the latest *Mortal Kombat* or *Street Fighter* and engage in what they saw as a much more thoughtful and substantial genre. Although it’s debatable whether *Final Fantasy VII* answered their prayers, many of the millions of gamers who purchased it for the PlayStation or PC became dedicated—even fanatical—fans of the franchise.

Another key cultural difference worth addressing is cuteness, or what Chris Kohler calls “kawaisa.” Although the majority of American RPGs are quite serious and even gritty in tone, most (if not all) Japanese RPGs prominently feature cute, comic-relief type characters, often juxtaposed (or clashing) with more mature themes and situations. It’s likely this element of kawaisa that traditional RPG fans find so off-putting about *Final Fantasy VII* and other games. Though it is well beyond the scope of this chapter to analyze kawaisa in the Japanese context, it seems to be a defining characteristic of the manga style of comics and graphic novels that have so deeply permeated Japanese popular culture.

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7 See Chapter 17, “*Street Fighter II* (1991): Would You Like the Combo?”

8 For a much lengthier and insightful look at Japanese versus American gaming culture, see Kohler’s *Power Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life* (Brady Games, 2004).
Japanese audiences also seem less concerned with graphical realism than American gamers, many of whom value realism over the exquisite but highly stylized aesthetics of famous manga artists and the “super-deformed” style\(^9\) of games like *Final Fantasy VII*. To put it simply, Western gamers raised on *Ultima* and *The Bard’s Tale*\(^10\) may have a hard time getting over kids with blue, spiky hair and enormous eyes, to say nothing of kawaisa-like talking kitties (*Sega’s Phantasy Star*) and smiling slimes (*Dragon Warrior*). These gamers can seem prejudiced in their criticism of Japanese RPGs, which can seem quite juvenile to the uninitiated. Fortunately for Japanese developers hoping to tap into the U.S. market, this cultural rift has narrowed, thanks to the influx of anime and manga, a growing movement that *Final Fantasy VII* might very well have sparked. More Americans than ever have been exposed to hit films from Hayao Miyazaki (2001’s *Spirited Away* and

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\(^9\) Meaning characters drawn in an exaggerated manner, often with large heads and small, stocky bodies.

2004’s *Howl’s Moving Castle*) and rave about many of the anime programs now broadcast on outlets like the SCI FI Channel.

There is also the problem of language. As anyone knows who has even the most basic knowledge of linguistics, translation is a difficult and frightfully inaccurate process. Grammar and syntax aren’t the only obstacles; a much larger problem is the cultural concepts and understandings expressed in language. For instance, games such as Shigeru Miyamoto’s *Devil World* (Nintendo, 1984; Nintendo Famicom, NES) were not released in the United States because of their rampant religious imagery, which may well have offended some American gamers and brought negative publicity to Nintendo. Kohler gives several such examples in his book, but for our purposes it’s enough to realize that even with superb translation, at least some important concepts will be lost. What seems confusing, inappropriate, or even incoherent to us may make perfect sense in the original language and cultural context. One characteristic quality of the pre-2000 *Final Fantasy* games is inaccurate—even laughable—translations. Thankfully, the later Nintendo Game Boy Advance (GBA) and DS ports have been retranslated and handled with care.

Much as Richard Garriott and Origin altered and even redefined the gameplay mechanics of each new *Ultima* title, the long-lived *Final Fantasy* series has itself often changed. However, this is not to say that the series has evolved in a linear progression. Instead, innovations that appear in one game may be omitted from the next, only to be restored later in altered form. Some of these
changes fundamentally alter the gameplay, such as the Active Time Battle (ATB) introduced in 1991’s *Final Fantasy IV* (released as *Final Fantasy II* in the West). ATB revolutionized combat with a hybrid turn-based system. Although it superficially resembled the turn-based games of its predecessors, now the characters’ turns were timed and required faster reactions from players. ATB seemed the right system at the right time, appealing to the Super NES generation, who were far more familiar with classic action games like *Super Mario Bros.* than legendary RPGs like *Ultima*. A seminal innovation introduced in the fifth *Final Fantasy* game is the refined job system, designed by Hiroyuki Itō. This system offered vast customization options for characters, allowing them to train in more than 22 jobs that ranged from traditional classes (Thief, Knight) to some seen in no other RPG (Dancer, Mime). Each of these jobs eventually offered secondary abilities, such as the Dancer’s flirt, which reset the enemy’s ATB timer. Characters could train in a job long enough to learn some of its secondary abilities, then switch to other jobs for some truly interesting and effective combinations. This incredibly flexible and nuanced system was largely missing in the next installment, whose characters were limited to a single, prechosen job. The ATB and refined job system are only two obvious examples; a more comprehensive history could list many more important innovations, discussing at length how they affected gameplay.

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12An earlier job system had been introduced in *Final Fantasy III*, which was released in Japan in 1990. It was recently updated and released in the U.S. for the Nintendo DS in 2006.
Now that we’ve covered some of the background issues surrounding the series, let’s delve into *Final Fantasy VII* itself. As the first of the series to break from the confines of cartridge onto the seemingly unlimited vistas of multiple CD-ROMs, *Final Fantasy VII* was intended to launch a bold new generation of console RPGs. The massive increase in storage space made it possible to incorporate full-motion video (FMV), or prerendered cut scenes that interrupted gameplay to advance the plot and character development. Interestingly, however, the developers did not incorporate digitized speech, having gamers instead read vast amounts of onscreen text. Voiceovers wouldn’t appear until *Final Fantasy X*, released four years later for the PlayStation 2 (PS2).

![Part of a minigame in *Final Fantasy VII*](image)

Showed here is part of a minigame in *Final Fantasy VII* in which Cloud must perform more squats than his opponent. The minigames vary in their control schemes, but this one involves pushing a sequence of three buttons on the controller in rapid succession.

Though CD-ROMs offered much more storage space than cartridges, they were infamous for long loading times. Loading delays were commonplace for computer gamers, but console gamers had come to expect instant gratification. One of SquareSoft’s main concerns was that *Final Fantasy VII* would suffer from the long loading times that dogged other CD-ROM games found on earlier platforms like the Sega CD, ruining the pace of the game and turning off gamers. Thankfully, Square devised clever programming feats that minimized or even eliminated loading downtime, pleasing gamers and impressing critics.

Sony’s PlayStation was far better equipped to handle advanced 3D graphics than the Super NES had been, and SquareSoft (formerly Square, now Square Enix) meant to take full advantage
Of the technology. Many games before Final Fantasy VII had very impressive cut scenes that featured far superior graphics to the in-game graphics. Although SquareSoft’s game had the same type of disparity, Final Fantasy VII surpassed gamers’ expectations by placing many of the best special effects in-game, making even routine battles superior to the cut scenes of other games. Battles are shown from an immense variety of camera angles, keeping these repetitive sequences fresh and appealing. The developers also blended the cut scenes carefully into the gameplay, lending the game a more coherent, film-like feel. In many games, the cut scenes tell a story that seems only marginally related to the actual gameplay. This rupture between gameplay and cut scene can make gamers feel little connection to the protagonist. Final Fantasy VII succeeds marvelously in bridging this gap, keeping players firmly tied to their onscreen persona.

Beyond all these important graphical innovations, Final Fantasy VII also offered two new gameplay features: Materia and Limit Breaks. One surprising aspect of the game is that the characters can wear only one piece of armor and a relic. This limitation is a substantial departure from other RPGs, which place great emphasis on finding and equipping dozens of various pieces. However, the game compensates for this simplicity with Materia, an evolved form of the “Esper system” seen in the sixth game. Materia can be inserted into slots on certain pieces of equipment. The manual breaks it into five color-coded categories:

- Independent (Purple): Enhances stats
- Support (Blue): Increases the effects of other Materia
- Command (Yellow): Grants new combat abilities
• Magic (Green): Lets character cast offensive or healing spells
• Summon (Red): Allows characters to summon monsters

Materia levels up along with the players, assuming it has been equipped. Higher-level Materia offers new or greater abilities. Furthermore, it can be swapped between items or party members, greatly expanding the possibilities for customizing characters. Materia also plays a critical role in the plot, which we’ll discuss in a moment.

The Limit Break is a variation of the “desperation attack” that debuted in 1994’s Final Fantasy VI (released as Final Fantasy III in the West). In the sixth game, characters gained special, powerful attacks when their health bars were low. The seventh game borrowed this concept, but now the effect’s meter fills up with each enemy attack. Once the Limit Break is achieved, characters can use it immediately or save it for a future battle. Higher-level characters gain additional Limit Break attacks, and the regeneration rate is affected by the character’s emotional state: fury increases it, and sadness slows it down. The Materia and Limit Break systems are a great way to add variety and complexity to what would otherwise become very tedious battle sequences.

A typical combat scene in Final Fantasy VII has Cloud pitted against three opponents. When the “time” bar fills, Cloud is able to execute a move. When the “limit” bar fills, he can execute a “break,” a special, super-powerful move.

A final technical consideration worthy of note is the highly acclaimed soundtrack composed by Nobuo Uematsu, perhaps one of the industry’s best-known game composers. Uematsu realized that the PlayStation gave him many more channels of sound to work with than had been possible with the Super NES. Instead of that unit’s humble eight channels, Uematsu now had 24, though
eight of those were reserved for sound effects. However, Uematsu decided to use the PlayStation's integrated MIDI support rather than incorporate prerecorded sounds, which would have required longer loading delays. Nevertheless, the score is varied and effective, and has subsequently been rearranged and released on commercial audio CDs and remixed by dozens of amateur artists. However, Uematsu's decision to rely on the PlayStation's sound hardware was disastrous for the PC port, whose MIDI output tended to sound tinny and outmoded in many PCs. Fortunately for PC owners, a variety of unofficial patches and fixes are available to address this problem.

Although the game's graphics and audio may seem dated today, modern gamers can still appreciate the story and richly developed characters. Unlike previous Final Fantasy games, Final Fantasy VII is set in what can perhaps best be described as an alternative future of fantasy and sci-fi; factories and robots mesh with magic and swordplay. The game is set on Gaia, a planet being slowly destroyed by the giant corporation named Shinra. Shinra is killing the planet to acquire a mystical energy called Mako, though its ultimate purpose isn't clear until much later in the game. The main character, Cloud Strife, begins the game as a hesitant mercenary assisting a group of eco-terrorists named AVALANCHE. AVALANCHE is committed to destroying the Mako reactors, but they are opposed by SOLDIER, Shinra's elite squadron of fighters.

Eventually, Cloud finds himself embroiled not only with AVALANCHE but a girl named Aerith, a sweet “flower girl” who turns out to be much more important than anyone expects. Cloud agrees to be Aerith's bodyguard, and it's up to the player to decide how to handle her as a love interest. Aerith is being pursued by SOLDIER, who may be interested in what she believes to be useless white Materia. Because the game's story is often considered one of its most memorable features, it would be a shame to give away the many surprises for the sake of summary. Suffice it to say that many gamers came to love the characters and care about what happened to them, and the narrative turns out to be much darker and sophisticated than the typical RPG. Although the game certainly scores high in the fun department, it has also brought many tears to the eyes of sensitive gamers.

Final Fantasy VII was a grand success for SquareSoft, and it's hardly surprising that sequels would soon follow. The eighth game appeared in 1999, again for Sony's PlayStation. This game eschews the "super-deformed" in-game look of the previous games for a more realistic, Western aesthetic. Though still hugely successful, the sequel met with more negativity than its predecessor. Andrew Vestal of GameSpot wrote that "a large part of the game simply consists of proceeding from area to area with little or no impetus
to continue, and the main villain is almost assuredly the least threatening in the series’ history,” giving the game an 8.5 out of 10 point score.13 IGN’s David Smith had more praise, but still noted that “Final Fantasy may be showing its age, or perhaps more precisely a lack of evolution to suit that age.”14 Both reviewers criticized the audio, which they felt didn’t rise to the series’ own high standards. However, the bulk of the reviews in other publications had nothing but praise, and it’s likely that SquareSoft had simply pushed the PlayStation’s capabilities too far in the previous game. The technological leap from Final Fantasy VI to VII was immediately noticeable, but the next game simply didn’t have much more to offer in terms of audiovisuals.

Final Fantasy IX, released in 2000 for the Sony PlayStation, abandoned the realistically proportioned characters of its prequel and dove back into traditional anime-style graphics. It was billed as a return to the series’ roots—welcome news indeed to longtime fans of the series. By this point, the first PlayStation was showing its age; the PS2 had debuted the same year. Nevertheless, SquareSoft was able to push the original system to the limits, and critics were generally pleased with the result. IGN’s David Smith wrote that the developers had built a fantasy world “he would be content to stare at,” praising the graphics while wondering if the gameplay might be “showing its age.”15 Andrew Vestal

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of GameSpot felt that the game was “great” despite feeling like “a throwback” to earlier games in the series.\textsuperscript{16}

The tenth game, \textit{Final Fantasy X}, debuted in December 2001 for the PS2. Meeting with near-universal acclaim, the tenth game abandoned the prerendered backdrops of its predecessors and replaced them with full 3D environments. Facial expressions are now more realistic and detailed, an apt innovation considering that this is the first game in the series to incorporate digitized speech. A direct sequel, \textit{Final Fantasy X-2}, followed in 2003. This game features a female cast and was yet another commercial success for the company.

\textit{Final Fantasy XI} marks a severe departure from the previous installments, abandoning the tried-and-true single-player campaign for the massively multiplayer online (MMO) model.\textsuperscript{17} It debuted in 2002 in Japan for the PS2 and was released later

\textsuperscript{16}See http://tinyurl.com/69rjxy.

\textsuperscript{17}See Chapter 24, “\textit{Ultima Online} (1997): Putting the Role-Play Back in Computer Role-Playing Games.”
in other territories, as well as in PC and Microsoft Xbox 360 formats. Although the game enjoyed initial success, the arrival of Blizzard’s World of Warcraft in 2004 ended its dominance on the MMO charts. The criticisms and explanations for the game’s performance are many, but most seem to agree on one point: Square Enix simply had neither distinguished itself from the competition nor learned from their successes. At first it didn’t offer the Player-Versus-Player (PVP) options that popularized its rivals, and it suffered from the usual setbacks with lag and exploits that plagued other new MMOs. Greg Kasavin of GameSpot complained about the lengthy installation required for the Windows PC version,

Japanese RPGs have gone in weird—and for many gamers, wonderful—new directions. Back of the box for Kingdom Hearts for the Sony PlayStation 2 shown here, which combines the worlds of Final Fantasy and Walt Disney into an enjoyable experience for fans of both properties.
which took over an hour after all the necessary patching and updating.\textsuperscript{18} According to the latest information available from MMOGCHART.com, a website dedicated to tracking MMO subscriptions, Final Fantasy XI commanded only 3.1% of the total market share in April 2008.\textsuperscript{19} World of Warcraft, meanwhile, commanded 62.2% of the market during the same period, with more than 10 million active subscribers. Nevertheless, the game is the longest-lived MMO in the console market, where it can avoid direct competition from World of Warcraft and the many other computer-specific MMOs.

Given the developer's lengthy record of past successes and stunning innovations, the modest response to its first foray into the online world seems puzzling. Beyond the technical aspects already mentioned, perhaps the key failure is the lack of a solid, coherent narrative and memorable characters. Although the game did employ a variety of set quests and cinematics, these elements tended to get buried in the rather repetitive, exacting nature of the gameplay; this was no game for novices. A few American gamers also resented having to wait so long to enter the world, which had been colonized a year earlier by Japanese gamers, many of whom had already risen to the highest levels and were far more powerful than the U.S. immigrants. Despite several expansions, Final Fantasy's MMO simply hasn't managed to win the acclaim of its single-player cousins. Hiromichi Tanaka, Square Enix's producer, told Electronic Gaming Monthly that the next online incarnation will “aim for something different from the beginning,” though it's unclear at this point what this entails.\textsuperscript{20}

Perhaps in response to the relatively faint praise received for XI, Square Enix returned to the single-player model for its next sequel, Final Fantasy XII, which debuted in North America in 2006. This PS2 exclusive helped restore the series' former glory. The random encounters were gone, and story and character development took center stage. The game is also notable for its highly effective voice cast, which Greg Kasavin of GameSpot felt “deserved special mention” and Jeremy Dunham of IGN called “top-notch.”\textsuperscript{21} Perhaps the largest change to the gameplay is that now combat didn’t involve switching to a different screen, one of several new features likely inspired or borrowed from the online game. This smoothed out the narrative by reducing the disruptions caused by the frequent random encounters of its predecessors. However, a more controversial change was the ability to

\textsuperscript{18}See http://www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/ffinalfantasy11/review.html. Surprisingly, the console versions also feature lengthy hard drive installs.
\textsuperscript{19}See http://www.mmogchart.com for the latest charts.
\textsuperscript{20}Electronic Gaming Monthly, September 2008 Issue 232, pp. 34–35.
automate many of the tasks that formerly had to be managed for each character in the party. Some gamers felt that the result was hands-off gameplay; others thought it was a great leap forward. In any case, the game continues to sell well and is overall highly regarded. Of note, *Final Fantasy XII* is set in Ivalice, the game world explored earlier in the *Final Fantasy Tactics* games, among the most important in terms of the numerous *Final Fantasy* series spin-offs and compilations.

Released for the PlayStation in 1998 (a year earlier in Japan), *Final Fantasy Tactics* is labeled as a “tactical role-playing game,” a subgenre that emphasizes strategic combat. In the case of *Final Fantasy Tactics*, this involves a fully 3D isometric battlefield that can be rotated to offer a better view. Though not as popular as the main *Final Fantasy* series, a spin-off named *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* was released in 2003 for the Nintendo Game Boy Advance. A sequel to this game, *Final Fantasy Tactics A2*, followed in 2008. All of these games are set in Ivalice, Yasumi Matsuno’s creation. The central idea behind Ivalice is that magic coexists with machinery. It’s essentially a medieval world based loosely on Christian Europe, including a powerful religious institution named the Glabados Church.

The *Final Fantasy* franchise is so immense and diverse that it’s easy to get lost in the many sequels, spin-offs, and cross-overs. However, it’s important not to lose sight of *Final Fantasy VII*’s role in establishing this franchise in the United States. Although the series had always been popular among console RPG aficionados, it wasn’t until the seventh game that it really hit the U.S. mainstream. Gamers who had never played an RPG, much less a *Final Fantasy* game, were drawn to the title by the media buzz and the game’s own intense marketing campaign. This multimillion-dollar marketing campaign emphasized the 3D graphics and animation, intriguing gamers with its promise of film-like action and an

*Blue Dragon* (2007), based on a design by *Final Fantasy* series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, who also supervised development and wrote the plot, is a role-playing game developed by Mistwalker and Artoon, and distributed by Microsoft Game Studios exclusively for the Microsoft Xbox 360 as an effort to make the American console more popular in Japan. The loose association with the *Final Fantasy* series was played up in all the countries the game was released in, though the game itself was only a modest commercial success.
epic storyline. Surprisingly, the commercials showed little actual gameplay—nary a single battle scene, in fact. This tactic suggests that the advertisers felt the thrilling cutscenes would sell the game better than the underlying gameplay mechanics. However, most fans of the series would likely agree that the graphics were merely the bait; the hook was the story and gameplay.

*Final Fantasy VII*'s legacy is hard to overestimate. Its incredible popularity and record-breaking sales helped launch the RPG as a viable genre for the console market. Countless Japanese RPGs of varying quality followed in its wake, and nowadays it's common enough to see even top-rank American RPG makers such as BioWare targeting the console market first. Moreover, the game's impact wasn't limited merely to the gaming industry, but is likely one of the major forces behind the rise of Japanese manga and anime in North America. In short, *Final Fantasy VII* was a true cultural phenomenon that is without question one of the greatest games of all time.