Sakaguchi decided to call his game Final Fantasy as he was planning to quit Square and go back to continue his studies.

Final Fantasy I

In addition to Wizard Sakaguchi was heavily inspired by a role-playing game called **Dragon Warrior** (Enix 1986), a game designed by Yuji Horii. Dragon Warrior was very popular game, which later spawned the **Dragon Quest** series of role-playing games, which are extremely popular in Japan. Sakaguchi wanted his game to have more adult feel and complicated, epic plot. He hired freelance artist **Yoshitaka Amano** to make the graphics. Nobuo Uematsu, who had already made music Highway Star and **King Knight's Special** (Square 1986), was commissioned to make an epic soundtrack for the game.

Sakaguchi borrowed heavily from the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, especially the Hobbit and ords of the Rings. His game also featured elves, dwarves and mithril, a mythical blend of steel and silver.

In 1987 Square published the **Final Fantasy** (Square 1987) for NES. This was the beginning of one of the best selling game series of all time. Final Fantasy (FF) was well implemented with nice graphics, sound and good controls. It used turn-based combat, where each member in the party did his moves, followed by the opposing party. At the beginning of the game one could choose 4 characters for 6 different character classes: fighter, thief, blue belt, white mage, red mage and black mage. Unlike other NES games of that time it had no title screen at all. Instead it began with long text, like the Star Wars films. The game was more movie-alike than almost any other NES game of its era and had more epic and deep story. The players loved it and soon Square began to solely concentrate on making role-playing games for consoles.

Final Fantasy II and III

The game was followed by **Final Fantasy II** (Square 1988) and **Final Fantasy III** (Square 1990), which both were made for NES and used the same kind of system as the first FF game.

FF2 is the only FF not using experience points, instead each character develops after the combat based on what it was doing e.g. it if was using a sword, it gets more skilled wielding that weapon and its physical strength increases. The game suffered from bugs, the most famous of them was the cancel bug, which allowed canceling a previously issued command but still getting the statistic-increasing benefit from it. The game also featured an end sequence with credits and full names of the authors - a practice unheard on popular NES game of its era. This helped the players to recognize the authors and made the game even more similar to the films.

FF3 introduced a job system, which was basically a character classes, but with the ability to switch between them or even have several of them. FF3 had 11 warrior type jobs from

fighter to ninja and 11 mage-type jobs from white mage to sage. FF3 also had an improved battle engine: if the enemy was defeated the next character automatically switched to a new target instead of hitting thin air.

Final Fantasy IV

The next FF game, **Final Fantasy IV** (Square 1991) was made for the new Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES). The game had even deeper plot dealing with moral problem of whether to serve your king and kill the innocents or fight for the right. FF4 had better graphics and introduced the Active Time Battle (ATB) system, in which players must give orders to their characters in real-time. ATB was used in the next 5 FF games as well as some other games published by Square, such as **Chrono Trigger** (Square 1995).
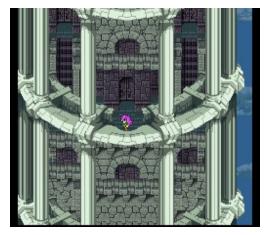
Final Fantasy V & VI and Promotions

In 1991 Sakaguchi was promoted to be the Executive Vice President of Square Co.

Final Fantasy V (Square 1992) was made originally for SNES as well and it had a revamped job system, which allowed each character to master all 22 jobs. The game was a step back in terms of drama, featuring little moral dilemmas and pretty straightforward storyline.

Final Fantasy VI (Square 1994) for SNES didn't bring much new to the game play, except desperation attack, which gave a small chance for a critically wounded character to use an extremely powerful special attack instead of a normal physical attack. The game was more dark and moody than any other Final Fantasy game. Perhaps due this fact, many players consider FF6 to be the best Final Fantasy game in addition to FF7. Final Fantasy VI sold 2.5 million copies alone in Japan.

In 1995 Sakaguchi was appointed to be the president of **Square LA, Inc.**, later renamed **Square USA Inc.**, a research and development studio located in Los Angeles, USA.

Chrono Trigger

Sakaguchi co-designed the high-acclaimed **Chrono Trigger** (Square 1995) with Yuji Horii. It was first made for SNES, but in 1999 also released for PlayStation. Chrono Trigger used a combat system similar to the one used in FF games, including the ATB system. Perhaps the biggest difference from the FF series is that Chrono Trigger had no separate screen for battles and the monsters could always be seen on the screen (allowing player to potentially avoid them, instead of being harassed by countless random fights, a typical feature in Japanese console role-playing games).

Some people consider Chrono Trigger to be one of the greatest games of all time, and are especially fond of its music. Some other people dislike the game's "short" length. It takes only 20-25 hours to complete the game, where as it takes about 100 hours to complete **Dragon Quest VI: Maboroshi no Daichi** (Heartbeat/Enix 1995). Personally I think even 20-25 hours is too much for most games – why have so much repetition?

Chrono Trigger had a sequel on Sony Playstation called **Chrono Cross** (Square 1999), but most reviewers consider it inferior to the original.

Screenshots from Chrono Trigger (left) and Chrono Cross (right)

Final Fantasy VII

Final Fantasy 1-6 had all been made for Nintendo game consoles. One of the key reasons for Square switching to produce the next installment of Final Fantasy for Sony PlayStation (PS) instead of Nintendo 64 (N64), was the fact that N64 didn't have a CDROM-drive like the PS did. Sakaguchi wanted to make the next game much bigger than any of the previous games, featuring lots of cut-scenes with pre-rendered graphics. These cut-scenes could not be skipped or shortened and they often required some player interaction to proceed. Due to the existence of the lengthy videos the game was split into 3 CDROMs, containing an impossible amount of data to squeeze onto a N64 game cartridge, which were about 8 Megabytes in capacity at that time.

Final Fantasy VII (Square 1997) was released on 3first January 1997 and on 3first August 1997 in USA. It sold an amazing 3 million copies in the first 48 hours after its release. A year later FF7 was released for Windows PCs as well. By the year 1999 FF7 had sold more than 8 million copies worldwide. It got rave-reviews all over the world. GameFan review stated it to be, "quite possibly the greatest game ever made".

Final Fantasy VII (FF7) is a menu-driven role-playing game with a fairly linear story. It used the same ATB system and turn-based combat, but limited the amount of persons in a party to three. In the combat the player selects actions for each character e.g. attack, use item (e.g. drink potion to get health points or mana points back) ,or use special ability. Desperation attack, which made its debut in FF6, made a comeback in FF7 under the name "limit break".

The game also featured *materia*, magic orbs, which can be placed on weapons and armors, to access magic spells later, or to access special commands and other abilities. The American and international version of the game had extremely difficult, optional boss monsters called WEAPON. Emerald Weapon could kill all three characters in a party with just one attack.

Despite the fact the game had nothing novel in its game play, many people consider it to be not only the best Final Fantasy game, but the best game ever. This is perhaps due the fact that some people really love the storyline behind FF7. At the end part of the game one central character, called Aerith Gainsborough (Aeris in the American version), dies. This brought many players to the verge of tears.

Parasite Eve

Next Sakaguchi produced **Parasite Eve** (Square 1998), a game based on a Japanese novel of the same name by Hideaki Sena. The story revolves around a genetic scientist who tries desperate measures to revive his wife, leading to a new threat to mankind. The game version is a mixture of survival horror and a role-playing game. The popular game had a sequel a year later: **Parasite Eve II** (Square 1999). The sequel was much less popular than the first part, mainly due to gamers disliking that it for having too much survival horror and similar to Capcom's Resident Evil game series, instead of being a role-playing game.

Final Fantasy VIII

Final Fantasy VIII (Square 1999) came on 4 CDROM for PS. The combat of the game revolves around monsters, called Guardian Forces, which can be summoned. The player must have a Guardian Force to use special abilities. Previous FF used magic points (MP) to activate spells and many other special abilities, but in FF8 spells are drawn from enemies from special Draw Points. The game also introduced a collectible card-based mini game called Triple Triad. The game was an enormous success like FF7. In just 3 weeks it earned more than $50 million in sales, making it the fastest selling FF title. A year later the game was released for Windows PC as well. FF8 has sold over 6 million copies worldwide.

Chocobo Racing

Sakaguchi produced **Chocobo Racing** (1999) a racing game using popular characters from the Final Fantasy series, including Chocobo himself. It is similar to Nintendo's MarioKart, but it never became as popular and no sequels were produced.

Vagrant Story

Sakaguchi co-produced **Vagrant Story** (Square 2000) - an action role-playing game featuring some of the best graphics ever seen on a Playstation platform. The game allowed the player to hit different areas of the enemy's body, jump and move objects to a new place so as to use them to climb over obstacles that were otherwise too high.

Screenshot from Final Fantasy 9 (on top of page screen shot of Vagrant Story)

Final Fantasy IX

Final Fantasy IX (Square 2000) is graphically the most brilliant FF game on the PS platform. It had a humorous story and cute cartoon-like characters. Its combat system was quite different from previous two FF games. FF9 had 4-character parties and a trance system, similar to "limit break" and desperation attack. In FF9 most spells could target multiple enemies. Despite having excellent graphics and soundtrack the game was not as popular as FF7 or FF8.

Final Fantasy X

Final Fantasy X (Square 2001) was the first FF game on the PlayStation 2 platform. The new platform, of course, allowed better graphics, but the game system was also subject to changes. ATB was replaced by a Conditional Turn-Based Battle System designed by Toshiro Tsuchida. It also had a new experience leveling system called Sphere grid, which is a sort of mini-game of its own. I personally found FFX to be an utterly boring game in the beginning, with ok graphics, but overly long game-play involving an inflated numbers of annoying characters.

Making a Final Fantasy film: the Spirits Within

In 1997 Square Co. Ltd. formed a film division, named Square Pictures, located in Honolulu, Hawaii, to produce motion pictures using Computer Graphics (GC). The studio's first film was **Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within**, released on July 11, 2001. The film was directed by Hironobu Sakaguchi. He got the inspiration for the basic story of the film from the death of his mother. The film will be remembered in movie history for a couple of reasons. It was the first full-length motion picture with (fairly) realistic looking human characters produced entirely using CG. Secondly it made about $123 million in losses, making it the biggest financial flop in the history of films.

Just like the Final Fantasy games, the film was technically excellent, but the animation was stiff and the story was filled with clichés, bland characters and borrowed elements from anime films and Aliens-movies. The film's production costs were huge: $137 million plus $30 million for marketing, but the box office sales in North America were just $32 million.

The huge financial losses of the film caused Square to shut down Square Pictures and the entire game company might have gone bankrupt if Sony would not have poured money into Square. In 2002 Square Co, Ltd. merged with Enix, another Japanese video game producer, famous for its role-playing games, creating Square-Enix. Many people speculate that one of the key reasons for this merger was the financial troubles caused by the film.

Final Fantasy X-2

Final Fantasy X-2 (Square 2003) was the first direct sequel in the series of FF games. All the previous Final Fantasy games have been separate games, each with their own storyline, often totally unrelated to previous games in the series. The story of FF X-2 takes place two years after the end of FFX. The game-play had several changes. Conditional Turn-Based play was replaced with ATB. Battles happen faster with more emphasis on quick decisions and timing. The party consists of three girls: Yuna, Rikku and Paine. Since there are no other characters to control, there is no way to swap characters in the team, as in earlier FF games. The game also featured *Garment Grids* and *Dress Spheres*, which are similar to the job system in FF5. The game-play was more non-linear than in other FF games, which are very linear, as in most console RPGs. FF X-2 was a disappointment to the many fans of the series and perhaps the biggest critique is that the game had a good ending and the fact that it was light-hearted compared to the epic tragedy story of its precursor. Despite getting not-so-good reviews and some fan complaints it sold over a million units.

Massively Multiplayer Final Fantasy XI

16th May 2003 marked the Japanese launch of Final Fantasy XI, a massively multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG). FF11 was not designed or produced by Sakaguchi, but nevertheless it is the only MMORPG published both on consoles (PlayStation 2) and PC. Nowadays it is one of the most popular games in its genre. There are 31 servers for playing the game, named after the summoned creatures of earlier FF games.

Success of Final Fantasy

By 2001 Final Fantasy games have sold 33 million units worldwide and there are more FF games in production, even though Sakaguchi and many other key members have departed from Square.

I have personally never enjoyed the Final Fantasy series of "games". Especially after FF7 the games have included really long cut scenes, which cannot be skipped, making them more like a non-interactive movie experience with an overly long plot and boring characters, and, as such, they are less like games. The battle system of any FF title suffers from the same weaknesses as most console RPGs produced in Japan. They are clearly aimed for people who have patience and want to "enjoy" a story-based game, which can easily last more than 50 hours. However the games have superb music. Almost all the games have a sound track composed by Nobuo Uematsu. The game soundtracks have also been released on CD.

More a Story-Teller than a Game Designer

Sakaguchi can be classified as a game designer, who is actually more of a story-maker and cut-scene film maker, than a game designer. He and his team, who made the Final Fantasy games, have hardly come up with a single original idea in game design worth copying to other games. But it is obvious that the sad stories in many of his games appeal to a large number of people. In 2000 Sakaguchi became the third person to be selected for the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences' Hall of fame. His games have sold over 60 million units worldwide in total.

In 2004 he left Square and formed his own development studio, **Mist Walker**. Microsoft hired them to make exclusive role-playing games for the Microsoft Xbox 360, hoping that Sakaguchi's name and talent would make Xbox 360 more popular in Japan, where console role-playing games are extremely popular.

Screenshots from MobyGames and pictures from interviews.

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