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Videogame Icon Essay

Fantasizing of Finality: Hironobu Sakaguchi and an Ultimate Dream

Hironobu Sakaguchi was born in Hitachi, Ibraki, Japan in 1962. After studying electrical engineering briefly in college, Sakaguchi dropped out of Yokohama National University to become a part time-employee at the newly formed company, Square. The company would later achieve independent status, branching away from its parent corporation, the Denyusha Electric Company. Following this schism, Sakaguchi signed on as a full time worker, becoming Square's Director of Planning and Development, and essentially its cofounder.

Square's first games were unsuccessful. In an attempt to rescue the company from a brush with bankruptcy, Sakaguchi and Square's other cofounder, Masafumi Miyamoto pooled the remainder of their available funds to produce one last game. Sakaguchi stated that this "final" game would be "fantasy" in theme, and a role playing game. With the prospect of a selling video game and solvent future at Square seeming all but a pipe dream by this point, the two dubbed their game with ironic intent and a tinge of gallows humor: "Final Fantasy."

The game turned out to be a much better seller than either of them (or anyone else) had anticipated. Released on December 18, 1987 on the Famicom (or Nintendo Entertainment System), "Final Fantasy" became an overnight bestseller across Japan, and morphed into a juggernaut in the gaming industry. The "Final Fantasy" series had been born out of the near death of Square and what had surely seemed like the dissolution of a dream (this was perhaps the "final fantasy"). The game salvaged what was left of Square's finances, and quickly became its most lucrative franchise. After the immense popularity of "Final Fantasy," Square planned sequels and direct spin-offs to capitalize on

its novel success. The later games retained thematic similarities and certain elements of game-play which typified the first *"Final Fantasy"*. It is currently the sixth best-selling videogame franchise to date. After Square released *"Final Fantasy" IV* for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, the company promoted Sakaguchi to Executive Vice President.

Hironobu Sakaguchi is particularly credited for blurring the elements of videogames and film animation by inserting a preponderance of cut sequences throughout game-play, which serve to drive the storyline and further engage the player. It was with this idea in mind that Sakaguchi launched Square Pictures' first – and regrettably, last – film production. While the film was generally well-received by critics, *"Final Fantasy": The Spirits Within* was the second-largest animated box office bomb in history, losing Square \$120 million as a result. Shortly thereafter, with the company devastated by this financial calamity, Square merged with its longtime rival, the game-producing company, Enix, to create Square Enix in 2003.

Hironobu Sakaguchi continues to serve the company in various posts on their newer releases, with roles ranging from Executive Producer to Original Concept Designer, until *"Final Fantasy" X*. Sakaguchi has been credited for directly influencing a slew of other video games, besides just the enormously popular *"Final Fantasy"* series for which he is undoubtedly best known. Sakaguchi provided the original concept for Playstation's *Parasite Eve*, and served as producer for the game, along with performing as active supervisor for *Chrono Trigger* on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System.

When interviewed previously, Sakaguchi has described his fixation with the fantasy/adventure domain of genres as opposed to strictly action-based games: "I don't think I have what it takes to make a good action game. I think I'm better at telling a story." Sakaguchi has also attributed the successes of the *"Final Fantasy"* series to, "constantly challenging the development team to try new things." Some of this novel creativity may have taken the form of "a brand new form of entertainment uniting

interactive games and motion pictures.” The *“Final Fantasy”* games have helped to manifest this interactive idea with the seamless inclusion of full motion videos and photo-realistic character models.

Hironobu Sakaguchi was showered with accolades for the duration of his career at Square, and was inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame for his lasting contributions to video gaming and interactive media. Following the release of *“Final Fantasy” X*, Sakaguchi voluntarily resigned from his post as executive vice president at Square to start a new company, Mistwalker, funded with help from Microsoft Game Studios. At present, his Mistwalker company produces game concepts and writes storylines, along with outsourcing computer coding and videogame graphics to other companies. Currently, Sakaguchi claims to be occupied with a “large scale project,” on which he is “betting a lot.”