

The RPG Revolution

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the **RPG** revolution

With **Zelda 64** and **Parasite Eve** leading the pack of more than 12 innovative role-playing games, 1998 is looking to be **the year of the RPG**

So when's the last time you've been to Hyrule? Link and Princess Zelda's old stomping grounds aren't the 2D, top-down, sprite-filled fantasy land they used to be. And neither are the worlds, combat systems and plot lines of this year's bumper crop of role-playing titles. In fact, 1998 is looking to be the biggest year for console RPGs that U.S. gamers have ever seen. It's almost as if Link-like a pointy-eared Paul Revere—is bucking his horse at full gallop and yelling, "The RPGs are coming! The RPGs are coming!" with an RPG revolution hot on his horseshoes.

More than a dozen role-playing games are expected to hit stores this year for the three main consoles (and that's not including the already released Alundra and Final Fantasy Tactics). Compare that to the six titles that came out for the PlayStation and Saturn in 1997. N64 owners are finally getting their RPG fix this year, too, with Quest 64, possibly Earthbound 64 and—of course—Zelda 64, due out by Christmas. Any way you look at it, RPGs are finally booming in the U.S., leaving the genre's legions of fans to wonder what the heck took so long. After all, the games have always had street credit aplenty. Why are they getting so much credit from so many publishers now?

"The easy answer is Final Fantasy VII, but that's not entirely the whole story," said Working Designs President Victor Ireland, who has strived for years to make RPGs more popular in the U.S. "I say it had a lot to do with an underground of RPG fans that was getting bigger and bigger all along but was never addressed by the marketing people, because they thought RPGs were a niche. And as long as they thought of them as a niche, they remained a niche."

Ireland, the most outspoken expert on RPGs in the U.S., explained that console role-playing games have always been good enough and enjoyed enough of an avid following to go mainstream. It just took the overwhelming success—and advertising muscle—of a few key titles to hammer that message home to the marketing types. "Super Mario RPG on the Super NES and Final Fantasy VII were the two most responsible for bringing it out," he said. "One was a good game, and the other was a good-looking game, and they both had lots of ad and marketing money behind them."

Now that FFVII has achieved its much-publicized million-seller status, publishers suddenly see RPGs as one niche they're eager to scratch. But then, can role-playing games even be considered a niche genre anymore? A Ziff-Davis survey conducted last year found that RPGs were gamers' second-favorite genre, beaten only by action/adventure titles (with one-time reigning champ fighting games tying for third place with sports). And not only are RPGs gaining in mainstream popularity, they're also drawing a new generation of fans. "I think there's always been a strong RPG group of players out there," said Paul Handelman, U.S. liaison officer for Enix, the Japanese RPG giant behind the phenomenally popular Dragon Quest series. "But what's happened recently is there's a new, younger group of people who have gotten into these games. RPGs are attracting a much wider age group."

This new army of role-playing fanatics is just in time not only for the biggest batch of games to hit stateside in years, but also some of the most innovative. Look at the new types of battle systems, for instance. As the tired idea of random, turn-based battles edges closer to extinction, we're seeing

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Parasite Eve

Square, 3rd Qtr.



Parasite Eve's battles will make use of the innovative new "Active Combat System." Unlike FFVII, you can move around freely during combat.

Aya will change her appearance throughout the game. She starts off in this slinky dress when she leaves the opera at Carnegie Hall.



Of all the games covered in this feature, none will come under as much scrutiny as the next high-profile RPG from the people who brought us Final Fantasy VII. After all, it's rare for something to affect the tastes of the game-playing public on quite the scale that FFVII managed last year—but Square pulled it off and at the same time brought RPGs into the mass market.

Yet Square's next big thing, Parasite Eve, is actually a very different game from its predecessor; the traditional swords-'n'-sorcery themes have been entirely eschewed in favor of something with more of a science-fiction flavor. To say that it has a lot in common with Japanese sci-fi anime such as *Akira* or even (in places) some of the *Urotsukidoji: Legend of the Overfiend* stories wouldn't be too far from the truth.

PE makes use of a modified version of the FFVII game engine so, once again, we find beautifully rendered backgrounds overlaid with polygon-generated characters. Set in New York, the game is based on a novel by acclaimed Japanese sci-fi author Hideaki Sena that was

published 18 months ago in Japan. Centered on the experiences of Aya Brea, a rookie NYPD cop, it deals with her investigations into the spread of a freak of nature that is gradually laying siege to the city.

The game begins on Christmas Eve and sees Aya and her boyfriend at an opera that's thrown into turmoil as the actors on stage spontaneously combust. Amidst the confusion, the apparent perpetrator (the eponymous Eve) reveals herself as she announces the ascension of a new order, that of the Mitochondria.

Upon further investigation, Aya discovers that Mitochondria is the organic matter contained within all living cells responsible for producing energy. It soon becomes apparent that Eve's Mitochondria has mutated to the point of sentience, and through her it's attempting to annihilate all inferior life-forms. As this parasitic energy absorbs life energy, it transforms Eve into a superbeing that can switch between solid and liquid form, while also destroying living matter simply by looking at it.

Once absorbed by the mutated Mitochondria, a living being is broken down completely into a slimy goo before being rebuilt as a more



The CG rendered backgrounds are generated by a team headed up by former movie artists who have worked on *Apollo 13* and *True Lies*.

Must-play RPGs

In case you missed out on the past decade of RPGs, here are the standout games, from the first breakthrough classics to the most recent masterpieces.

● The Legend of Zelda NES, 1987

● Zelda II: The Adventure of Link NES, 1988

● Phantasy Star Master System, 1988

a huge assortment of novel approaches to combat in the new traditional-style RPGs.

Namco's *Tales of Destiny*, due out in the third quarter, is a perfect example. This PlayStation sequel to the Super Famicom cart *Tales of Phantasia* is traditional in every way except when it comes to combat. Encounters with



Combat in Namco's *Tales of Destiny* looks more like a 16-Bit side-scroller, complete with button combos for attacks.

enemies shift the game into a pseudo Side-scrolling Mode, in which you send each party member into action with specific button and joystick combos. Each character wields a unique sword that can unleash different slashes and spells, and like a regular character, these mystical swords gain experience, strength and new attacks throughout the game.





As with FFVII the camera angles change to best accommodate the action. Transition from exploration to combat is smoother, though.



powerful creature—often a combination of numerous animals or even plants that are instilled with Eve's malevolent intent. As the game progresses, Eve's parasite sets up a "nest" in the Central Park Zoo, and before long snakes, bears, birds and monkeys all get horribly mutated, as Eve continues to rampage through the city.

Fortunately though, with all of these mutations hell-bent on destroying the world, Aya is armed with a fair amount of weaponry. Starting the game with an automatic handgun, she later picks up more powerful weapons. Control of the combat has evolved quite significantly since FFVII, too. Although the system used is fundamentally the same—with Active-Time bars filling up as you prepare for each attack—Aya can move around the battleground in real time to avoid taking damage. And just as Cloud can increase his abilities with Materia in FFVII, Aya soon learns to manipulate the Mitochondria (or "Parasite Energy" as it's referred to in the game) within her own system. Just as you'd expect, battles can get spectacular.

What really sets PE apart is that it's a true international collaboration between noted Japanese and U.S. talent. Script writer and game designer Takayuki Tokita has previously been responsible for Chrono Trigger and FFIV, while battle designer Yoshihiko Maekawa was the director on both Super Mario RPG and FFVI. U.S. artists Steve Gray and Darnell Williams are both in charge of much of the CG work throughout the game, and Gray is noted for his work on the movies *True Lies* and *Apollo 13*. Finally, musician Yoko Shimomura composed for Super Mario RPG and Front Mission.

This broader, collaborative approach to development along with the adoption of a more mainstream sci-fi story should help push PE into as many homes as its predecessor. The game hits Japan on March 29. Let's just hope we see the U.S. release soon after.

Also Squared Away...

Parasite Eve may be getting the most hype, but it certainly isn't the only Square RPG that could hit U.S. stores by year's end. Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon, which came out in Japan in December, is a strong contender for U.S. release.

The game—actually the third in the Mysterious Dungeon series—stars the familiar feathered Square mascot (and a moogle sidekick) who you guide through miles of dungeons that change in layout each time you play.

Another hot Square property is Xenogears, which hit Japan in February. Like Parasite Eve, this traditional RPG offers a sci-fi setting, and its incredible polygonal landscapes and sprite characters make Xenogears Square's answer to Grandia. The game's story revolves around huge robot suits called gears, which your characters can slip into during battles to unleash super-charged attacks (the suits are best saved for Bosses and other tough enemies, since they have a limited fuel supply). The battle system is especially innovative; instead of plowing through menus, you perform button combos when your attack gauge is at its peak. With more than 20 minutes of FMV created by Production IG (the folks behind the *Ghost in the Shell* anime), Xenogears is yet another highly polished Square RPG.

And finally there's the attention-grabbing Brave Fencer Musashiden, due for Japanese release this summer and reportedly compatible with Sony's Dual Shock Controller. This action RPG—seemingly Square's attempt to take on *Zelda 64*—is set in a 3D world in which the hero can wield swords in both hands and slash enemies while running and jumping (it's heavy with platform-game elements). Unlike most action RPGs, the game is composed of levels, with a huge Boss guarding the end of each stage. Square has high



Brave Fencer Musashiden is a hot contender in the first-PlayStation-game-to-look-like-Zelda 64 contest.

hopes for this fantastic-looking game, and it may even become the first in a series.

As with Parasite Eve, neither Sony nor Square have announced when and if they'll bring any of these RPGs to the U.S. But chances for stateside release are extremely good, considering the booming success of the genre in America.



Square's stunning Xenogears (top) and Chocobo's Mysterious Dungeon (bottom) are both highly likely to hit the U.S.



Which character from the Street Fighter series made a cameo appearance in a Super NES RPG?

● Dragon Warrior
NES, 1989

● Phantasy Star II
Genesis, 1989

● Final Fantasy
NES, 1990

● Dragon Warrior II
NES, 1990

Shadow Madness, due on the PlayStation by the end of the year, also lets gamers get more down and dirty on the RPG battlefield. Created by Crave Entertainment (one of the very few American console RPG developers), the game borrows a few combat style points from Super Mario RPG. As in that classic, success in Shadow Madness combat demands quick button taps at just the right moments. "We want to make fewer battles that you have to think about more," said Ted Woolsey, Crave's VP of marketing. "You're not gonna get through the game's battles as easily as just tapping the

same button over and over to skip through menus, like in other RPGs. You have to time buttons both on the receiving and giving end of attacks so that you either amplify or change their effect. It's not just endless battles, but fewer of them, they make more sense and you have to work a little harder."

Square's most recent RPG, SaGa Frontier, throws a few new twists into traditional RPG combat, too. Instead of battles popping up randomly (as in Final Fantasy VII and nearly every other non-action RPG—except Earthbound—over the



Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete

Working Designs, August



As you can see here, the quality of the animation in Silver Star Story (right) has been improved dramatically over the original game (Lunar: The Silver Star, below).



Lunar: Silver Star Story may not be as unique or innovative as other RPGs covered in this feature, but don't let that turn you off to the game. It's a remake of one of the hottest RPGs ever (Lunar: The Silver Star for the Sega CD), and it's finally getting its

due credit on a mainstream platform—the PlayStation. Lunar tells the story of Alex, a young adventurer who embarks on a quest that could save the world. Sounds familiar, right? But this story—and how it's told—is one of the game's greatest aspects. Presented in Working Designs' trademark humorous but exceptionally well-written manner, and complemented by over 45 minutes of spectacular FMV anime, Lunar's story is captivating.

Unlike some other remakes (which for the most part have

fortunately stayed in Japan), this game actually improves upon the original in every aspect. The graphics are enhanced, the music is redone, and—best of all—many story elements have been altered and expanded upon. The key point is where Alex and co. board the boat to Meribia early in the game. In the original version, Luna stays behind, but in the remake she comes with, and from there lots of little things branch out and change for an almost entirely new experience. Trust us—fans of the original will not be let down.

We've also learned of new, subtle changes in the PlayStation version. For one, there will be about 300 percent less text overall. Most of the nixed text is from shop conversations and other minor areas that really won't be missed. Another change is related to the text itself. For the first time, Lunar will have—drum roll please—lowercase text! No more CAPS LOCK making you feel like everybody's screaming, as was the case with the Sega CD versions of Lunar and Lunar 2. And speaking of Lunar 2, the Saturn remake is nearly finished in Japan. Will a PlayStation port be far behind? Our Magic 8 Ball says, "Count on it..."

Lunar's improved battle system allows for more strategic turn-based combat, without a bunch of annoying menus.



Chun-Li was hidden in one of Breath of Fire's towns as an NPC.

● Dragon Warrior III
NES, 1991

● Final Fantasy II
Super NES, 1991

● Warsong
Sega CD, 1991

● Dragon Warrior IV
NES, 1992

last 10 years), you can see each gang of monsters scurrying through the dungeons. Hence, you have a slight chance of zipping past enemy parties, thus dodging another time-consuming round of turn-based combat. And SaGa Frontier isn't the only traditional RPG to make getting from point A to point B much less of a hassle; Grandia for the Japanese Saturn and Lunar Silver Star Story Complete for the PlayStation make use of the same see-the-enemy-first feature. It seems developers are finally catching on to the idea that, yes, it's more than a little frustrating to

have your dungeon meanderings interrupted every 15 seconds by another drawn-out battle.

Speaking of battles, we're seeing a certain RPG sub-genre that deals mainly with combat finally catch on in the U.S. after years of popularity in Japan. The strategy RPG, which caught on big with American gamers when they played 1996's Vandal Hearts (and before that the subtly different Dragon Force and the Shining Force series), is carving its own growing niche among die-hard RPG fans, as proven by the success of FF Tactics and the just-released Tactics





Azure Dreams

Konami, May



In the overworld areas of Azure Dreams, you can rotate the screen completely in either direction, a common feature in 3D RPGs as of late.

Battles in the Tower take place in real time, and you can enlist the help of up to two monsters at a time during your journey.



Konami's latest RPG is a bit different from its last two PlayStation ones (Suikoden and Vandal-Hearts). Azure Dreams (abbreviated from its Japanese title, Other Life, Azure Dreams) is an interesting game that can best be described as a new-school dungeon dweller with a variety of unique and innovative twists that set it apart from anything we've seen thus far.

Azure Dreams revolves around a town called Monsbaia, which you help develop, and a huge nearby tower called the Tower of Monsters. The tower is where the bulk of the game takes place. Inside, you seek out treasure and destroy monsters to gain experience and make money. Then you use that hard-earned dinero back in town to create more structures and buy better equipment. This alone sounds rather basic, but the depth of gameplay involved with everything you do is what makes this game so enjoyable. For example, in the tower, each level is randomly generated, making for a new and different experience every time you play (similar to the Mysterious Dungeon series in Japan). Battle

takes place in real time in these dungeons, and you can enlist the help of numerous kinds of monsters that you first catch (as Monster Eggs), and then breed into full-grown critters. Two monsters can travel with you at any time, and how they grow depends on how you nurture them.

Azure Dreams also offers a fairly non-linear story. Decisions you make anytime during play will directly affect the game's outcome. You might choose to help someone at one point, while at another you'll ignore a plea for assistance. You even get to work on acquiring a love interest! There are seven eligible ladies who you can try to win over. You can even save different romances to the Memory Card and play out each episode separately, which can result in completely different endings. Minigames abound, too (like bowling, monster racing and more), and we're sure there's plenty more we've yet to see.

With all its different gameplay styles, Azure Dreams could very well be the "mutt" of RPGs. One thing's for sure—it'll be hard to pass up when it hits stores in May, even if just out of curiosity.



This bridge leads to the Tower of Monsters, where a majority of Azure Dreams' gameplay takes place.

- **Zelda: A Link to the Past**
Super NES, 1992
- **Lunar: The Silver Star**
Sega CD, 1993
- **Secret of Mana**
Super NES, 1993
- **LandStalker**
Genesis, 1993
- **Shining Force**
Genesis, 1993

Ogre. The next big thing on the strategy-RPG horizon (not counting Dragon Force II in Japan) is Atlus' Rebus for the PlayStation. Due in August, the game is geared toward strategy-RPG newbies. It doesn't feature the complex job system of FF Tactics or the hours-long battles of Tactics Ogre. Instead, players concentrate on building an army of monsters and an arsenal of spells from 160 spellcards, then unleashing the creatures in battle. Rebus also offers two story lines—one for a boy, the other for a girl—that you pick at the game's outset. Like FF Tactics, Rebus'

battlefields are polygonal, while its sprite fighters are the handiwork of Yoshitaka Amano, the artist who designed the characters for Final Fantasy I through VI. Action RPGs are getting a bit of an overhaul, too. The most obvious example of a new take on an old genre is Zelda 64. But another innovation in real-time hack-and-slash is hitting the PlayStation from an unlikely source—the PC. Electronic Arts' port of Diablo retains all the visceral, Gauntlet-inspired action that made the game such a huge PC hit. You get the miles of never-the-same-layout-twice



The Granstream Saga

T*HQ, June



During the game Lune will come across two very important gals—one of whom is introduced when Lune barges in on her shower.



Published in Japan by Sony, The Granstream Saga is one of the more interesting RPGs headed our way this year, courtesy of T*HQ. Set in the future, the game stars a boy named Lune who gets tangled in a huge quest that involves his father, a magic scepter, two beautiful girls and the devil (sounds like an episode of *Melrose Place*, no?).

Granstream is a top-down RPG with a lush, fully polygonal world. Everything moves along smoothly and the animation in most parts is very nice. Lune can move in eight directions, and the camera can be rotated in eight directions as well, allowing you to search behind crates, stairways and so on. The game makes use of some dramatic camera angles, as well (when certain events are happening), but the core of the gameplay takes place from the standard top-down view.

Like so many other RPGs these days, Granstream's most unique aspect is its battle system. All battles take place in real time, with you controlling your character's every movement. When you enter battle (which, by the way, is not random—

all enemies are at specific points in the game and can be seen on screen), your scepter produces your weapon and armor, and you go to work. You can move around your enemy freely, and you can dash forward and back, or side to side to evade attacks. Depending on your weapon, you can unleash special combos that cause multiple hits of damage. You can use magic spells, too, but most of them are not attack related.

Granstream's only possible downside is its extreme linearity, but that's not necessarily a bad thing (generally, linear RPGs have stronger stories and more structured play). We'll let you know more when we receive an English version of the game.



Granstream Saga's battle system is refreshingly unique, with real-time battles that give you complete control over your character.

Who's the only character to star in every Final Fantasy game (and, no, we're not talking about Chocobos)?

● Breath of Fire
Super NES, 1994

● Illusion of Gaia
Super NES, 1994

● Popful Mail
Sega CD, 1994

● Shining Force II
Genesis, 1994

dungeons, the hordes of detailed monsters, the huge arsenal of weapons and the requisite Multiplayer Mode (although it only supports two players). Sure, many purists chide Diablo for being too arcade-like to be a console RPG, but its hybrid approach to role-playing makes it a game for everybody.

Just as the mechanics of RPGs are being tweaked left and right, the games are also finally getting away from their traditional castle, dungeons and countryside settings. Although RPGs set in modern locales have been common in Japan for years (see the Shin Megami Tensei series, of

which our *Revelations: Persona* is a spin-off), the true-grime cityscapes of *Parasite Eve* and future-shocked real estate in *Panzer Dragoon Saga* are a far cry from the medievalized realms most often found in U.S. RPGs. And if you need another example that we're not in fantasy-land Kansas anymore, keep an eye out for *Earthbound 64*, due for the N64 DD in Japan this summer (with a possible U.S. release by Christmas). If—as word has it—*Earthbound 64* is a direct follow-up to its Super NES prequel, this offbeat *Zelda* 64-esque RPG should be set in sprawling suburbia, complete



Panzer Dragoon Saga

Sega, March



The gameplay is complemented with exciting in-game cinemas (above) and lush full-motion video (below).



Forget about the super-deformed characters, talking animals and cutesy story lines of most old-school RPGs. Panzer Dragoon Saga is a dark role-playing game that immerses you in a grim world so real, you'd think you were watching an epic movie.

The long (more than 10 minutes) intro introduces you to the Panzer universe, where nations war with ancient weapons dug up from the bowels of the planet. You play as Edge, a young guard on a remote excavation site. Your adventure starts when a turncoat general assassinates your captain and steals a mysterious artifact from your post. We don't want to spoil any more of the story for you (since it's one of the

strongest points of this four-CD game), but let's just say it will draw you into its strange and fascinating world like very few RPGs can.

Another highlight of Panzer Dragoon Saga is its amazing combat system. Fighting works a bit similar to the Final Fantasy RPGs, where you act in turns after short time increments. In Panzer, however, you have three time meters. As they build up, you get access to different actions and more powerful attacks.

But a Panzer game couldn't be complete without elements from the previous games in the series. In Saga, you can circle around opponents in 90-degree increments, looking for weak spots and staying out of harm's way (just as you would in Saga's two shooter predecessors). Be careful, though—you'll be penalized for wasting too much time in combat. The faster you kill an enemy, the more experience points and better items you'll receive.

With its well-blended mix of science fiction and fantasy, and its unique and revolutionary combat system, Panzer Saga will be a role-playing experience unlike anything you've played before.



A guy named Cid appears in every FF game—usually in the form of an engineer. He's even in FF Tactics.

● Phantasy Star II
Genesis, 1994

● Dark Wizard
Sega CD, 1994

● Final Fantasy III
Super NES, 1994

● Earthbound
Super NES, 1995

with ATMs, burger joints and shopping malls. Some of the scenery could be a little too familiar: It's rumored that this DD game'll let you map your own face onto the main character, courtesy of Nintendo's video-capture cartridge.

And then there are the RPGs that are so polished it's hard to pin down their specific innova-



So far, *Breath of Fire III* looks to be a stunning RPG. We'll put it to the test next month when we review it.

tions. *Zelda 64*, of course, is one of them. So is Capcom's *Breath of Fire III*, due on the PlayStation in early April. While it packs all the dragonboy-grows-up flavor of its two Super NES prequels, *BoFIII*-like Konami's *Azure Dreams*—is also the ultimate mix-and-match RPG. At various points in the adventure you'll assemble a town with the help of a fairy work force (similar to the castle-building

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Shining Force III

Sega, May



The plot of Shining Force III actually spreads out over three CDs (30-plus hours each), but right now only Scenario 1 is slated to be released here.

Battles are spread out over various kinds of terrain, which can affect your party's movement in several ways.



Assuming the ever-delayed Magic Knight Rayearth doesn't fall past its latest ship date, Shining Force III may well be the last Saturn RPG to be released in the U.S. when it hits stores in late May. Fortunately for RPG fans, this is a great way to go out.

Shining Force III continues the grand tradition of its Genesis (and Sega CD) predecessors by offering strategy-based battles with fancy graphics, RPG-like spells and level building and a great story line that progresses gradually after each battle. Like many strategy RPGs (such as Vandal-Hearts or Final Fantasy Tactics), the heart of the game lies in battle. Yet in Shining Force these battles are more simplified than the aforementioned two titles and, quite frankly, more fun. That's not to say they're not improved from past SF games; there are many new types of spells (including monster-summoning spells), and you can "bond" with other party members throughout the game to create teamwork, and thus an edge in battle.

Since the entire game is in a gorgeous 3D environment, you can rotate the playfield completely in

either direction at any time using the L and R buttons. You can also zoom in and out with the X button. This makes it easier to find hidden items that are concealed behind walls and other hard-to-see spots—especially useful when exploring towns and castles (which, by the way, is a major part of SFIII, unlike in the last game in the series, Shining Force CD).

But best of all (and possibly worst of all—read on), Shining Force III incorporates a new concept called the "Synchronicity System," where the game is actually spread out over three discs. Each disc (which, in Japan at least, is being released about three months after the previous one) lets you play out a different side of the same large story—a very cool, innovative approach to RPG gaming. That's the best part. The worst part is we're likely to see only the first disc in the U.S., so how the whole story pans out may never be revealed here in the States. That pretty much sucks, but hey—beggars can't be choosers. At least we're getting a part of the trilogy. Perhaps Sega will release the remaining two CDs as a final "thank you" to Saturn fans who've stuck with the system until the end.



As in past Shining games, your party members can learn a variety of useful magic spells. Having a good healer around at all times is essential.

● Chrono Trigger
Super NES, 1995

● Lunar: Eternal Blue
Sega CD, 1995

● Beyond Oasis
Genesis, 1995

● Light Crusader
Genesis, 1995

● Super Mario RPG
Super NES, 1996

portion of Suikoden) and apprentice your character to various combat masters. There's even a dragon-gene system that lets you tailor the form of the half-man/half-dragon hero.

GameArts' Grandia for the Saturn in Japan is another all-around excellent RPG. Let's forget for a sec that, like BoFIII and Xenogears, it's a beautiful polygonal game that



Grandia is one of those RPGs that makes you want to learn Japanese to play it. Could it reach the States? Never say never.

lets you pan the camera. Grandia has become famous among game importers who laud its in-depth magic and combat system—specifically, the ability to power up and combine the elemental magics of earth, fire, water, etc. Unfortunately, there's no chance of Grandia ever coming to U.S. Saturn owners, but that doesn't mean stateside RPG fanatics are out of luck. Strong rumor has it the game will

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Magic Knight Rayearth

Working Designs, May



Even though the story is based on the Japanese anime series, there are several events and sub-quests that are exclusive to the video game.

It's been in the works for more than two years now, but finally it looks as if Magic Knight Rayearth is nearing completion. This gorgeous-looking Saturn action RPG (which has been delayed numerous times, mainly due to licensing problems) is coming with a host of enhancements over the Japanese original, which already was one of the best games of its kind when released in August 1995.

Rayearth, which is based on a popular anime series in Japan (the manga is available in the U.S. from Mixx Publications), tells the story of three teenage girls who, while on a field trip to Tokyo Tower, are summoned to a faroff world where magic and fantasy collide.

We've previewed Rayearth before, so you know the basics of its gameplay—just think Zelda-style action with bright, vivid graphics and lots of anime flavor. But in the latest version we received from Working Designs, we found some interesting new features. One fault with the Japanese game is it's a bit on the easy side, so WD has enhanced the enemy AI—making them faster and more lethal, and Bosses are much more dangerous than they ever were. Another

change is that a lot of the pointless audio in the towns throughout the game (not the important plot stuff, but the less critical banter) has been taken out so that WD could add voice to the Diary entries that each character makes throughout the game. The whole diary thing is already a creative and useful way to go back and see how the story has progressed through the eyes of each main character, but now you'll be able to hear the characters read their diary entries. Even the diary text is improved—it's all hand-written!

Rayearth looks like it's going to be the final third-party Saturn game, and if you've stuck with the system this long, you'd be foolish to pass up this little gem.



Each main character keeps a diary of events as the journey progresses. Some of their entries are rather hilarious.

Each of the three girls will learn powerful spells during the course of the game that are essential to victory.



Say you're stuck in Hyrule's Lost Woods in the original Legend of Zelda. Which route do you follow to escape?

● Lufia II: Rise of the Sinistrals
Super NES, 1996

● Suikoden
PlayStation, 1996

● Revelations: Persona
PlayStation, 1996

● Dark Savior
Saturn, 1996

come to one of the consoles here. Whether it's the PlayStation or Katana remains to be seen.

At the same time RPGs are making these new strides, we're also seeing a fundamental change in the way the games themselves are developed. "There seems to be two trends in the genre," Crave Entertainment's Woolsey said. "One is the sweeping cinematic blockbuster trend, and the other is the more sublime story-and word-driven type games." Woolsey, who before coming to Crave worked for Square, where he translated Final Fantasy III and several

other RPGs, explained that the blockbuster-type titles are the RPG equivalents of Hollywood event flicks. He's talking about glitzy, hotly marketed, hotly anticipated games like Final Fantasy VII, Parasite Eve and next year's epic Dragon Quest VII. The less-flashy titles are...well, everything else. These are the more traditional, no-hype games such as Saga Frontier and Tales of Destiny, which do not present every plot point through a cinema or voice-over.

Die-hard RPG fans will always tear into these solid but lesser-known RPGs. But can such games achieve market-





Quest 64

T*HQ, June



Yamo Rick
"Hey there! Have you seen a silver-haired man with ear-sharp eyes? Where has that knave gone?"



The little compass in the top-left corner of the screen displays the time of day. Every two minutes or so of real time makes up for about an hour of game time.

Quest 64 is a significant game for several reasons, but the most important may be the simplest—it's the first RPG for the N64. Developed by Imagineer in Japan, Quest 64 will actually hit the U.S. first. You guide Brian, a young Spirit Tamer out to find his missing father, who disappeared while trying to retrieve a stolen book of magic. The game isn't quite the action RPG that *Zelda 64* will be (where you have full control over the battles), but then it's not quite the traditional RPG that, say, *Final Fantasy III* was either (where the battles are turn-based). In Quest, fights take place in real time, but they occur randomly.

When a battle begins, you're confined to a certain area where you can move freely and attack as you wish, but you can't move outside of that area until the next round of attacks. Aside from that novelty, the game is strictly traditional. Brian cannot jump, and the majority of the game takes place moving from area to area, collecting items, talking to

people and exploring dungeons.

Quest's magic system, however, is unique. As a Spirit Tamer, you have control over the four elements (wind, earth, water and fire), and each of the four C buttons corresponds to one of them. You can mix spells for different effects (there are more than 50 spells in all), and you can increase the strength level of each element by gaining experience in battle or finding power-ups.

One other innovation is the passage of time in the game. It's not a new concept—but it's not used often enough in RPGs, and this is the first time it'll be put to use in a 3D environment (needless to say, the graphical contrast between day and night is very nice). Your compass in the upper left-hand corner of the screen guides you along, while its red dot indicates the time of day. Certain events may only happen at night (or only in the daytime), so time will play an important factor in gameplay.

T*HQ is planning to release Quest 64 in June. That should give RPG-starved N64 owners plenty of time to see everything this huge game has to offer before RPG heavyweight *Zelda 64* hits home this fall.



After choosing a spell (top), you unleash it on your enemies (middle) and then hopefully put the opposing pests away for good (bottom).



Head north, west, south, west—a route that leads to the cemetery and its hidden Magical Sword.

● The Legend of Oasis Saturn, 1996

● Dragon Force Saturn, 1996

● Shining the Holy Ark Saturn, 1997

● Vandal-Hearts PlayStation, 1997

wide success when they share shelf space with the mainstream masterpieces from Square—which after all has hundreds of programmers and artists and millions of dollars to pour into each product? "People are always asking companies why on Earth would you try to do anything RPG if there's Square?" Woolsey said. "The bottom line is the same as in Hollywood. Why does anybody make a movie if there's James Cameron or Schwarzenegger? Because that's just one kind of movie, and it's a blockbuster, but there are other stories to tell in small-budget movies. It's the

same with RPGs. There's room for both types of games."

And with RPGs suddenly in mainstream demand, there's room for plenty of publishers to license Japanese RPGs for American gamers, too. Some are fairly new at bringing out these games over here. T*HQ is one example, as is Namco, whose only previous U.S. RPG was *Great Greed for the Game Boy*. This rush to release RPGs has some in the industry worried. "A lot of people who haven't done RPGs or haven't licensed them and have no idea what they're about or what players want are going to jump in and license a bunch of





The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time

Nintendo, 4th Qtr.



If FFVII kicked off the RPG Revolution, it's surely Zelda that will run it to the end zone. With development headed up by Shigeru Miyamoto, it probably packs more gameplay innovations than the rest of the games in this feature put together. If you've been reading recent issues of *EGM*, you're up to speed on much of the information that has gently trickled from Nintendo. Many of the specific details are still shrouded in secrecy. Yet we have been able to track down some new screen shots and information.

As we've said before, it's Zelda's subtleties—aside from the obvious graphical excellence of the game—that will truly set this apart from any other action RPG. The oft-reported horse scene is unique in itself, but most importantly it's the control system that will become a milestone in RPG history. The simplicity of its design, allowing action buttons to be context sensitive while also allowing a camera "lock-on" to make viewing the battles easier will no doubt be copied in other "Zelda wanna-bes" before the end of the year.

Since we last reported on the game in issue #103, we've seen that there are now weapons unique to the differently aged Links. While the older Link makes use of his sword and shield, as well as a bow and arrow, young Link has a boomerang weapon that only he can use. We've also found that the variety of attacks Link can perform on his enemies will have differing effects on what object is revealed once the assailant is destroyed.

City scenes in Zelda 64 look phenomenal. Note the detail in the leaves.

We have also learned that the Rumble Pak will be used to startling effect throughout the game. Rather than simply throbbing away and occasionally jolting you during fights, it will be used to convey Link's surroundings in a way similar to 1080° Snowboarding (previewed on page 30 this month). Differences in the terrain texture will be passed through to the player via subtle changes to the hummings that emanate from the Pak.

If any RPG can be described as "revolutionary" then this is it. While other games in this feature are here because of their different approaches to story, setting and combat, Zelda takes a tried, tested and familiar formula and turns it on its head. Now, if only they'd announce the official U.S. name for the game and release date (it could hit as early as October).



The classic Boomerang returns, but only the younger Link can wield it.

The latest shots not only show how beautiful the graphics are in Zelda, but they are also an effective showcase for the true graphical power of the N64.

RPGing on the Go

Let's face it—even the hardest of the hardcore RPG fans can't stay home ALL the time. For you, there is the Game Boy. Sure, there aren't THAT many RPGs available for Nintendo's undying portable system, but of the few that are available, there exist some truly excellent games. For example, no RPG—heck, no gamer period—should be allowed to walk the Earth without a copy of **The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening**, regarded by many as the best Game Boy game of all time. Finding a copy should be no problem at all, since Nintendo recently rereleased the game as a part of its Player's Choice series of million-seller titles. Then there's the **Final Fantasy Legend** series (FF Legend I, II and III), which are more traditional RPGs—and great ones at that—from the wizards at Square. Those three games and **Final Fantasy Adventure** are all being re-released this April by Sunsoft. If you haven't got 'em yet, get 'em. Also keep an eye out for Nintendo's upcoming **Pocket Monsters** RPGs ("Pokemon" in the U.S.), slated for release this fall.



Final Fantasy Adventure is the prequel to Secret of Mana, and a great Zelda-like adventure for the Game Boy.

● Wild Arms PlayStation, 1997

● Final Fantasy VII PlayStation, 1997

● Alundra PlayStation, 1998

● Final Fantasy Tactics PlayStation, 1998

● Tactics Ogre PlayStation, 1998

crap and release it," Ireland said. "That's my only fear. If you get too much of that, you'll kill the market quickly."

Don't start worrying just yet, though. As we've shown, too many revolutionary titles are on the way, and our Review Crew will always highlight the hits from the misses. And if you still can't find an RPG you like, create your own with ASCII Entertainment's RPG Maker—a PlayStation title due by Christmas that lets you design your own adventures.

The RPG genre's momentum certainly won't stop once Link makes his triumphant charge this fall. Next year will

bring us another super RPG lineup—including Konami's Dear Blue, Dragon Quest VII and Final Fantasy VIII—to get excited about. And as long as developers keep pumping out solid, innovative role-playing games, the new army of RPG fanatics will stick with the genre until...well, they're an old army of RPG fanatics. "People have been getting turned on to role-playing games for the last 10 years," Ireland said, "but they just didn't have enough of a choice of games in English to play. Now they do, and once you make a person an RPG player with a good game, they're that way for life."

