



FORMAT

DS

PUBLISHER

Square Enix

DEVELOPER

Square Enix

REVIEWED BY

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ONE MORE TIME

FINAL FANTASY IV

Being a self-confessed novice to the entire JRPG genre I approached this review with a certain trepidation. The experience of plunging head-first into a world of levelling-up, item management and – gritted teeth – random battles is to all intents akin to hearing heavy metal or reading, say, Dostoyevsky for the first time. Unless it's all that you've ever known there's a certain natural sensory hurdle to clamber across. But then, what was once overwhelming, be it the sheer impact of Slayer's 'Reign In Blood' or all 500-plus pages of 'Crime And Punishment', suddenly becomes accommodating – even vital – and before you know it there's a whole new world of cultural discoveries to make.

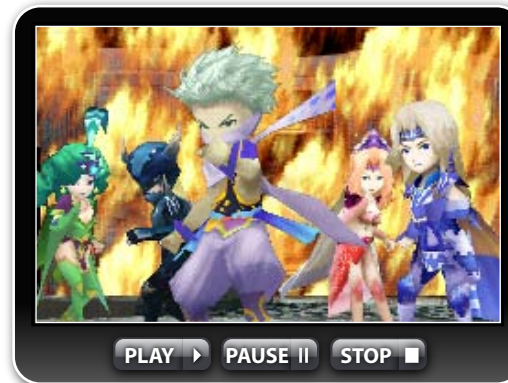
Many would have felt the same way playing *Final Fantasy IV* upon its original release. The first SNES entry for the legendary series, released as *Final Fantasy II* to maintain continuity for western gamers, the game is generally regarded as a milestone for the series for the introduction of Square's Active Battle System which, for the first time, allowed you to input commands during real-time. Indeed, much-missed Nintendo magazine *Super Play* ranked *FFII/IV* the 20th best SNES game of all time, saying that "the story, soundtrack and finely-tuned gameplay make it essential playing to all RPGers".

That was back in 1996. Twelve years on and *FFIV* is now the latest in Square Enix's series of polished remakes for the Nintendo DS, just two more instalments away from that hallowed seventh game. The first thing that really stands out is the faultless way a strong narrative thread and characters are introduced; within the first hour a theme of redemption and the imperialistic ambitions of a power-hungry monarchy are established, Cecil emerging as a principled, engaging protagonist (referred to amusingly as

the Dark Knight, though this is apparently a regular character class within the series). The plot and gradual arc is subtly implemented; it's only thinking about the game later that I realise just how strong the translation and voice acting is.

This at times compulsive momentum truly carries *FFIV*, and goes some way to explaining just why JRPG devotees regularly cite story as the most significant part of the genre. Without this investment in a cast of heroes, this need for catharsis and the expectation of wrenching twists, the abstract battle system (well, abstract to someone reared on the *Zelda* games) and attendant exploration would be little more than numbers and an exercise in mind-numbing repetition. Granted *FFIV* does come across as the equivalent of jumping in at the deep-end for someone new to the genre, but even something as pivotal to the game's mechanics as levelling-up can take on a certain relaxing quality. The game is hard, often annoyingly so, but deeply rewarding if the effort and patience are spent.

Visually the 3D makeover does a solid job. There are enough effects and functional animations (e.g the swirling screen preceding every battle) that nod to the title's origins, balanced by elegant presentation and a superb score (from series staple Nobuo Uematsu). The DS isn't used to its full capabilities, but like the previous remake of *Final Fantasy III* Square Enix's agenda with these new editions has been less about dragging the series kicking into the next-generation and more about preserving the games for new audiences to discover



them as they were meant to be played – much like the manner in which folk songs would be passed from one singer to the next, or the periodic remasters of classic cinema. *FFIV* may be a form of heritage gaming, but it's no less a pleasurable example of videogaming for being so.

Returning to the theme of trepidation, aware that *Final Fantasy* attracts passionate and vocal debate unlike any other series, I contacted a best friend and ardent fan to explain just what the games personally mean to him, and what I could expect from this undeniably superb example of the series. His reply referenced everything that becomes clear after a dedicated playthrough: the overarching themes, the engrossing plots, the superior level of characterisation, the depth, the worlds, the music... *Final Fantasy* may still be too overwhelming to some – this writer included – but like, er, *Slayer* and *Dostoyevsky*, *FFIV* is a great and demanding art. Consider me converted.

VERDICT ★★★★★