

PHANTASY STAR™ ONLINE

ファンタシースターオンライン

SEGA'S PHANTASY STAR HAS GONE THROUGH ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT METAMORPHOSIS OF ANY RPG FRANCHISE. SINCE FIRST APPEARING ON THE SEGA MASTER SYSTEM, IT HAS TRANSFORMED INTO SOMETHING THAT IS NOW VIRTUALLY UNRECOGNISABLE FROM THE ORIGINAL 8-BIT GAME. MIKE TOOLEY TALKS TO SEVERAL PHANTASY STAR DEVELOPERS AND DISCOVERS HOW THE EVOLUTION OF THIS SUCCESSFUL SERIES HAS OFTEN GONE HAND IN HAND WITH SEGA'S OWN TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES OF THE TIME.



Phantasy Star started life way back in 1987. Sega's perennial RPG was crafted and sold as the best reason to buy the Master System, with Sega aiming to take on Nintendo's all-conquering NES. Even by Sega's standards it was a bold design brief, and, despite the odds, it was almost fulfilled. *Phantasy Star* would become one of Sega's biggest console franchises, though at the time this was almost unimaginable. The story of the *Phantasy Star* series, lying as close to Sega's internal machismo as it did, serves to chronicle the Sega legend itself. With each instalment of *Phantasy Star* something new was added to the RPG genre or to the technology of the time. The series has brought Sega success and awards, but along the way, as has so often been the case, the Japanese giant has suffered for its art.

By 1986 the Japanese games industry had really hit its stride. Gamers the world over were enjoying stellar arcade titles from the likes of Taito and Capcom; hits like *Bubble Bobble* and *Strider* were heavy on character art and gameplay, and proved to be instantly popular. Sega, though, was in a different league altogether.

Having recently been successfully floated on the Japanese stock market its arcade games, like *After Burner* and *Space Harrier*, were a tour de force of speed and pyrotechnics – they were bolstered by the raw power of custom hardware and cabinets that had no equal at that time. Thanks largely to the formidable Isao Otiawo's drive for growth and the talents of the Sega arcade teams and their leader Yu Suzuki, in the arcades, Sega was unstoppable.

However, in the home computer and console market Sega wasn't having much success at all, and it was Nintendo and its aforementioned NES that was enjoying the lion's share of gamers' money.

Isao Otiawo wasn't prepared to give up on this lucrative market though. Moderate success was previously achieved through Sega's range of SG1-3000 computers, with some of its hardware being used in the then current Master System architecture – Otiawo knew that the hardware was good, and was acutely aware of the problems facing Sega's overseas competitors.

So from 1986 to 1996 Sega ran a club called S.P.E.C. (The Sega Players Enjoy Club). Spec's membership consisted



MAGNIFICENT

One of the many new and innovative features that *Phantasy Star* brought to the series was the ability to nurture a support character that would assist the player on their quest. Mags as they were known were either found or traded with other players. They needed constant feeding but like all living things would thrive and grow based on the food they were given. If a mag's diet consisted of recovery foods then it would have healing bias, likewise if a mag was fed on magic recovery foods or photon drops it would become aggressive. Mags had three evolutions: its original state; at level 20 it would split in two; the third evolution happened depending on character and mag class but defined the mag's attributes and photon attacks. Mags took their power from photon damage taken by the player in battle – once the power bar hit 100 it was ready to send off its photon blast.



» Noah or Lutz as he would later be known, provided a great source of debate regarding the chronology of *Phantasy Star*.



» Odin was the universe's first real hero. When we first encounter Odin he is a stone statue; Myau get Alis to help restore Odin.

of Sega staff and fans alike, giving the developers a chance to speak to fans about their work and vice versa. The format was honest and open; looking back, this was perhaps the industry's first iteration of a focus group. The idea of S.P.E.C. repaid Sega well when it wanted to know why Sega arcade gamers were playing on Nintendo's NES at home. The Nintendo Entertainment System was dominant in Japan and North America, but at that time had few spectacular games, whereas the Master System had accurate home versions of Sega's burgeoning arcade catalogue.

The results of the S.P.E.C. survey told Otiawo all he needed to know: the most anticipated game of the year was *Dragon's Quest 3*: a NES exclusive! *Dragon's Quest*, *Final Fantasy* and *Ultima* appeared to be



» This where it started, innocence abounds.



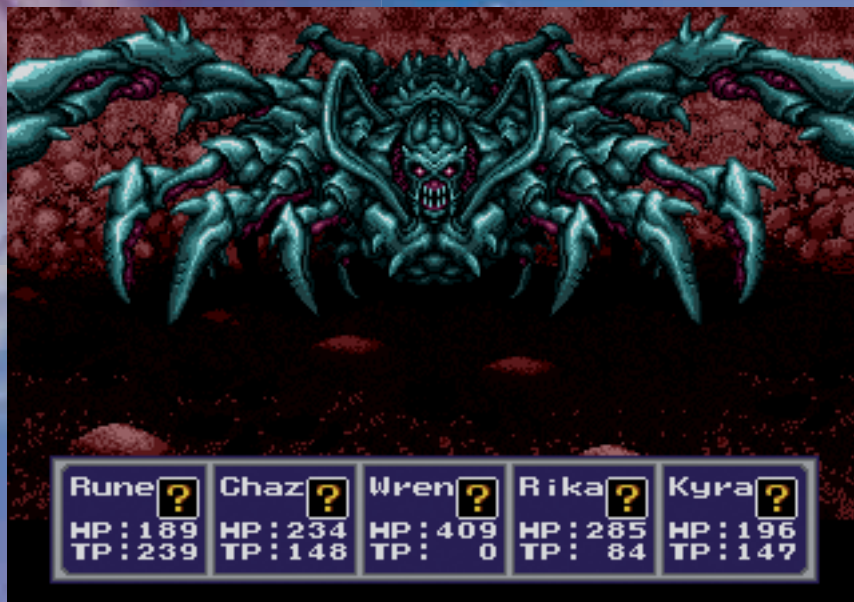
» The first *Phantasy Star* villain. The once magnanimous King Lassic.



» Don't be fooled, despite having no finger, Myau was an amazing asset to the party.



» The first time incarnation of Dark Falz as seen in *PS1*.



the difference – three massive franchises, three massive RPGs. All exclusive to Nintendo consoles and Sega had nothing to offer that was even slightly similar.

It was the decade of *Dungeons & Dragons* and Otiawo wasn't about to let Sega miss the adventure. And so it was that he assembled a team of talented individuals from within Sega to produce its very first RPG.

AM8, as it was to be known, started as a disparate group of talent and drew little interest from the other teams at Sega at the time. Ironically, *Phantasy Star* the game would bestow success on all who were involved with it. Yuji Naka was to cut his teeth designing a game world, something that had eluded him up until this point (most of Naka's previous portfolio at Sega was made up of home conversions of Yu Suzuki's arcade games). As Naka's idol and mentor, without even being connected to the project, Yu Suzuki's influence would be felt throughout the *Phantasy Star* universe. Yuji Naka was joined by Reiko Kodama who had started with Sega in 1984 and was no stranger to success thanks to her work on the arcade title *Ninja Princess* and the Master System's flagship title *Alex Kidd In Miracle World* – responsible for overall game design she would eventually persuade Naka to develop the 3D engine that would make *Phantasy Star* stand apart from its competitors. Joining the senior Kodama was Naota Oshima, again tasked with overall game design – his contributions were to make Naka and Kodama's ideas a reality. Of most significance to the franchise though was

the inclusion of two others not directly involved with creating the game: enter Miki Morimoto and Tokuhiko Uwabo.

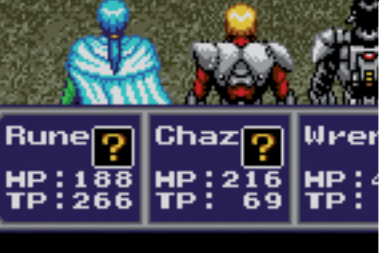
Morimoto had been around Sega for a couple of years at this point; he had joined to become part of the arcade division. Sadly, this opportunity didn't present itself for Morimoto, so he continued to work somewhat begrudgingly in the home entertainment sector. His career high at this point was to be director of the seminal *Ys*.

Morimoto was a big player within S.P.E.C. and his mandate for *Phantasy Star* was to ensure that the gamers got exactly what they asked for without recreating the Greek legend of Homer. As for Uwabo, his job was to score the works of the team and provide a suitable set of sound effects – not an easy transition when your previous musical scores have been for fast, action arcade games like *After Burner* and *Space Harrier*.

With the team members in place, it was time to create the game. "I don't really remember all the details, but Yuji Naka indicated basic concept with game style, while each team member broke this down further to eventually create *Phantasy Star*'s design," begins Reiko Kodama. "We wanted a game that was unlike any other consumer RPG that was out there. We thought the 3D dungeons in PC games were interesting, and detailed event scenes would be a unique way to convey the story – two features that weren't in any other console RPGs at the time. The game's mix of sci-fi and fantasy setting was also part of this desire to create a unique RPG," she continued.



» Dark Falz gets stronger through each game and became a much tougher proposition each time.



» Above left and right: By Phantasy Star 4 Dark Falz had evolved again. And by Phantasy Star Online Dark Falz had evolved into one of the most spectacular bosses to be seen on a videogame.

With the game skeleton created, it fell to the designers and programmers to add flesh to the bones. Development gathered at pace and at this point the game really started to take shape.

Oshima and Reiko were determined to have their 3D dungeons and event scenes and as such tasked Naka with developing a 3D engine for the Master System, asking him to use all that he had learnt from the Yu Suzuki code he had seen as a conversion programmer. Naka rose to the challenge and delivered an engine that was beyond the then known threshold of Sega's 8-bit console. The same incentive was applied to Tokuhiko Uwabo for making *Phantasy Star's* soundtrack. "How would you have approached this in the arcade division?" was the question that was asked. The answer would hit gamers in the pocket as Tokuhiko did exactly what the arcade division would do: increase the spec of the hardware. So Otiawo green-lighted the incomplete *Phantasy Star* to have its own FM sound chip built into the cartridge. This wasn't all though – to accommodate the 3D sections *Phantasy Star* would need a bigger cartridge. Again the team were told, "whatever it takes". As *Phantasy Star* took shape and the story line progressed it was decided that



» By Phantasy Star 3 gamers had an expectation of who was behind the evil of the game.

the lead character should be female. "Back then the idea of a female hero was practically unheard of," continues Kodama. "We wanted to do things that hadn't been done before, like animated monsters and 3D dungeons, so the idea of a female came naturally; we thought it would be an interesting change."

Phantasy Star eventually shipped on 20 December 1987 and launched to expectant Japanese gamers on a cartridge weighing in at 8-mega bits, some 16 times the size of a standard Master System cartridge. It also came with the aforementioned built-in FM Chip and the console's first in-built cartridge save system – all in all a fitting swansong as the last game released on the MK1 Master System.

Set on the planet Palma, *Phantasy Star* followed the story of Alis Landale as she sets out to avenge her brother's death and free her people from the corrupt rule of King Lassic. Interestingly, as the story unfolds Lassic is shown as a magnanimous and fair leader, who has been corrupted by a demon called Dark Force. Dark Force we would learn later would be the omnipresent boss throughout all the *Phantasy Star* games. AM8 had done it. It had delivered a

DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN...



YOU ENTERED THE LOBBY?

Walking into the lobby of *Phantasy Star Online* for the first time is one of the series' biggest highlights. Despite only being able to use a keyboard to communicate, Sonic Team's ingenious chat system instantly broke down the boundaries for players all around the world.

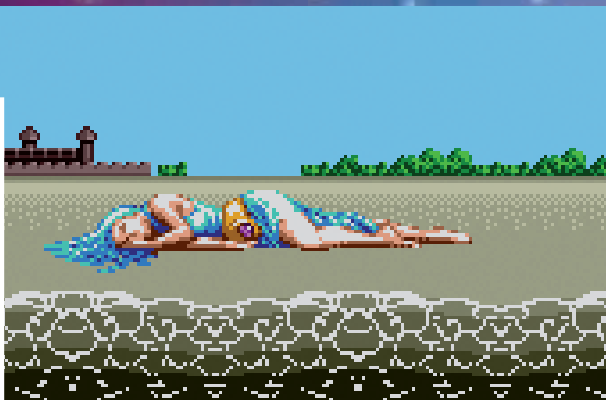
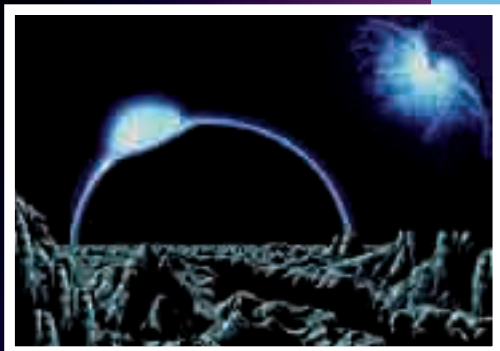
"BACK THEN THE IDEA OF A FEMALE HERO WAS PRACTICALLY UNHEARD OF, WE WANTED TO DO THINGS THAT HADN'T BEEN DONE BEFORE, SO THE IDEA OF A FEMALE CAME NATURALLY"

first class RPG that had bowled over reviewers and gamers alike. It had steamrollered formulaic RPGs to create new standards of its own. Players were awarded a space ship for interplanetary travel; the 'boss who's not a boss' was seen here for the very first time; but most importantly AM8 hadn't just created a timeline, it had created a universe: a universe gamers would want to return to over and over again.

Pleased with *Phantasy Star's* success, Sega commissioned a translation and ten months later *Phantasy Star* was released in North America. Retailing for \$10 less than the hardware it was played on, even Sega was surprised to see the speed that the game was selling. The translation wasn't good, name changes made to some key characters changed the sex of the characters (even changing the story) and some gamers treat it as a different game entirely. Still, *Phantasy Star* was considered a great success and as such a sequel was quickly put into production. AM8 stayed together but were strengthened by Toru Yoshida joining AM8 as team manager. Sega had learnt from the past and knew that with a new console almost ready for launch, in the shape of the Mega Drive, it had a great chance to get an RPG established before Nintendo had finalised the specs for its then next generation SNES.

The first thing Toru Yoshida did was to make the decision that the game should be in 2D: "I wanted to lose the sparse 3D dungeons of the first game and create a densely-populated environment to give a sense of scale," he told *Mega* magazine at the time. The battles would play out in three dimensions though and the character animation had improved immensely





» PS3 was much darker than the first two games, something gamers noticed from the sinister introduction.



» Special thanks to www.shinforce.com who supplied us with many useful images, including this rather splendid boss from Phantasy Star Online.

THE OTHER PHANTASY STARS

Being a Sonic Team franchise has seen *Phantasy Star* locales and characters appear in many other games, usually as hidden extras. Some are interesting curios but some really are something to behold. *Hoshi Wo* on the Sega Master System allowed players to visit Palma, Motavia and Dezoris via a shuttle that must sound familiar to some of you. *Super Daisen Ryaku* on the Mega Drive contained a map of the planet Mota. *Shenmue 1* and *2* featured a Myau Musk Cat toy while the bus Toy had the journey Paseo-Zema on its information board. Rouge's final stage in *Sonic Adventure 2* contains *PSO* pick up boxes containing rings, and the subsequent *Sonic Adventure 2* battle contained *PSO* costumes for Shadow and Sonic, unlockable by attaining all A grades. Even as recently as the GameCube *Beach Spikers*, Sonic Team have been hiding away goodies – just type PHANTA2 as a girls' name to unlock two outfits, some green hair and Numan ears. A Humewear face also becomes available.

SET ONE 1000 YEARS AFTER THE FIRST GAME, A DESPERATE FUTURE IS PAINTED WHERE TECHNOLOGY AND NATURE STRUGGLE TO CO-EXIST

since the first game. The cutscenes remained as well and demonstrated the power of Sega's new hardware, with Rolph, the main character, having the end of *Phantasy Star* narrated to him through a series of cutscenes.

Phantasy Star II is where the themes of the series really started to emerge. Set 1000 years after the first game, a future is painted where technology and nature struggle to co-exist – a future where ecology is governed by a machine: Mother Brain. Developed to manage the ecology of the Agol system she has started to malfunction. Where Alis had to make do with the companions destined to meet her, Rolph gets to choose his own party to take on his adventure. Then there is, Nei, Rolph's partner through this adventure who would go on to become a firm fan favourite and prove once and for all that videogames can be emotive; Nei's fate would be mirrored in many games after *Phantasy Star II* (*Final Fantasy VII* for instance), but as in life you never forget

the first time.

Another reason *Phantasy Star II* stands out in the series is due to its impressive boss battles. "I remember that both Dark Star and Mother Brain were remarkably tough," recalls Yoshida. "I don't quite know what inspired me, but Mother Brain comes from a mother with an unmistakable sense of language. I borrowed elements from computer and mothers, so when I brought her to life I managed to give her a Godlike feel." And they were tough too; techniques became integral to the game, and battles moved to a higher plain as a result, challenging players who were used to a one-dimensional attack tactic. Team play was now a necessity.

Released in March 1989 in Japan, an English translation hit stores in North America in time for Christmas, where the game dominated sales charts for the coming months.

With success now assured for *Phantasy Star*, Sega developed a third instalment almost back-to-back with the second, using the same game engine, but with a vastly different team as many of the original team had moved on to new projects. Step forward Kazunari Tsukamoto, who would join Reiko Kodama and Toru Yoshida in what has become the most talked about *Phantasy Star* of the early years.

Phantasy Star III: Generations Of

Doom was created as and proved to be quite a departure for the series. Set a thousand years after the events of *Phantasy Star II*, this time the player would be thrown into the midst of a civil war, with the game being open-ended. The player could take a different role in each generation and this led to different story line branches and one of four different game endings. Having little correlation to the first two *Phantasy Star* games didn't prevent the game from being excellent in its own right though.

"*Phantasy Star: Generations Of Doom* is slightly different from the others," begins Kazunari Tsukamoto. "*Phantasy Star 1, II* and *IV* all have a vertical flow, while *III* has the feeling of being more like a side story." It's a fact not missed by Reiko Kodama. "Most of the planning staff for the game were from *Phantasy Star II*," she continues. "When we were in the planning stages for *Phantasy Star III*, we thought that we wanted to make something that could be played without prior knowledge of the first two adventures, instead of the



» *Phantasy Star 3 CARD Revolution* was a fantastic game, with some of the prettiest in-game visuals seen on the GameCube. Worth looking up just for the offline mode.



IF YOU PLAY ONE PHANTASY STAR GAME...

PLAY THIS...



PHANTASY STAR ONLINE - DC

Never mind the many console firsts it broke, *Phantasy Star Online* should be enjoyed because it took the beloved series in an exciting new direction, whilst ensuring fans wouldn't be disappointed with the end result. Those with a 360 or PS2 may want to try *Phantasy Star Universe*, as it's the same game but on a far grander scale.



» *PSO* took materials from the original *Phantasy Star* and brought them right up to date, as the evolution of the dragon shows.

game being a direct continuation. I think it is an interesting game in its own right. The reason why the story was so radically different is that the development team wanted to create a unique *Phantasy Star*, something they achieved and I'm very happy with the outcome"

After the run away successes of the first three games, Sega and gamers alike were hungry for more *Phantasy Star*, and a couple of minor releases on the Game Gear did little to sate the thirst for a return to Algo. The first *Phantasy Star Adventure* was an adaptation of the Sega Game library download title *Phantasy Star II: Text Adventure*. This game sought to provide a background history for the characters of *Phantasy Star II* and was greatly enhanced by the use of graphics. The second, *Phantasy Star Gaiden*, is set between *Phantasy Star 1* and *II*, where the player learns that Alis has gone off to set up her own colony. Although solid to play the game was aimed at a younger audience and the anime graphics didn't convey the feel of *Phantasy Star* like other games. By now, 1993, Sega was a vast tidal wave that swept over everything before it. Its arcade machines dominated, it



» *Phantasy Star II: Text Adventure* kept the feel of the first games, but had no animation.

was out-performing Nintendo in homes outside of Japan, and the team that Isao Otiawo had put together to make an RPG had served up a blue hedgehog that had become one of the most recognisable characters in the world. Sega's R&D departments however were finding it difficult to progress the Genesis hardware and within four years developers had almost maxed the capabilities of the machine. And so it was that Sega released the Sega CD, a CD add-on for the Genesis that incorporated hardware upgrades that would allow sprite scaling and 3D effects akin to Mode 7: Nintendo's standard at that time.

Development of *Phantasy Star IV* began in early 1993. Pictures of a 3D game world started to surface in the Sega press at the time and rumours persisted that *Phantasy Star IV* was Mega CD-bound, to give the new hardware a much-needed killer app. Debates raged through letters pages in magazines as to whether the game should be released on a new format, with existing users worried they would lose the opportunity to play what was already being heralded as the end of the story. At the eleventh hour the format was changed and it was decided that *Phantasy Star IV* would indeed be a cartridge game for the Genesis. The 3D dungeons were removed and the game took a similar form to the previous games, albeit enhanced beyond the expectations of the hardware it would appear on.

"We really wanted to use those 3D dungeons in the game," regrets Kodama. "The ideas we had proved to be a little too much for the hardware to handle and, unfortunately, we just couldn't convey the sort of setting we really wanted."

Released in December 1993, the *Phantasy Star* team threw everything

that they had at the game, resulting in a title that would tie up the unfinished threads of the earlier games, while introducing 16-bit gamers to anime storyboards and animation and a much more refined graphics set. The battle configurations had also changed and it was now possible to chain techniques together to create combinations, making boss battles much more palatable. Alternatively you could fight while riding vehicles in the "Machine Battle". It was interesting how the team that created *Phantasy Star* all wanted to contribute to the final episode. Kodama, who by this time could pick and chose projects, said "I worked on this title because I really wanted to illustrate spiritual exchanges, friendship and love among different races" while Toru Yoshida tells us that, "with *Phantasy Star IV* our biggest goal was to finish the game neatly. This was the one where I worked as a director and as such I dedicated all my energies to it" finally, Akinori Nishiyama adds "I focussed a great deal of creative energy on painting the lives of the people inhabiting Motavia and am very pleased with the results". It seems everyone involved wanted to ensure that the universe was summed up properly.

For six years *Phantasy Star* had enchanted its players and drew unbridled passion from its design teams and then nothing. It all stopped. *Phantasy Star* had reached a hiatus that would last for six years. With hindsight this made perfect sense, as *Phantasy Star* had achieved all that *FFVII* did, except a generation earlier; the rumoured Saturn Betas would only have delivered more of the same and after six games *Phantasy Star* needed technology to catch up so that it could progress again.

On 19 September 1999 Sega made the headlines at the Tokyo Game Show by announcing that a new *Phantasy Star* game would be released for the fledgling Dreamcast system and would make full use of the console's online technology. Sonic Team would take responsibility for the development of what would go on to be one of Sega's biggest games of the last ten years and for many would provide an entry level to the *Phantasy Star* universe.

Development was beset with problems: the Japanese beta was running late and was proving unstable. This was to be the first online console RPG and as such Sega was breaking new ground and had no history or best practices in place – every milestone had to be learnt along the way. As the launch



» *Phantasy Star 4* told the story through animated story boards that added a vibrant feel to *Phantasy Star*.



» Dark Falz has an astonishing array of attacks, and unlike other bosses doesn't follow a set routine.

THE COMPLETE LOWDOWN

» Right: The Anime displays of *Phantasy Star 4* were superb, and depicted the game in a way not seen by western gamers at that point.

STILL IN THE DARK

Dark Falz or Dark Force is the only recurring character that has made an appearance in every game. Seemingly destroyed on countless occasions he just keeps coming back. As far as videogame bosses go he has killed more lead characters than any other.

He panders to the weakness and vanities of the worlds that he dominates and watches as citizens evoke their own downfall.

Phantasy Star 2 talks of people getting complacent and lazy after the events of *PS1*, living as they have in a Eutopia for 1000 years.

Dark Falz has evolved down the years and tackling Dark Falz at the end of *PSO* on Ultimate setting

is one of gaming's toughest challenges; his Megid attack alone can reduce a whole party's health

to one HP, leaving them all but dead – once you leave a boss battle to resurrect, you can't rejoin until the boss is vanquished. For maximum frustration try tackling Dark Falz with a retro editor, who accidentally sells the epic weapon you leant him when he was meant to be buying trimate, doh!

approached Sega hit upon the idea of giving away *ChuChu Rocket!* – an addictive puzzle game – to Dream Arena users. The idea was that if you gave a game away en-masse, you would negate the relatively low (at the time) online user numbers by encouraging use of one game.

Naka agreed and told Sega World back in 1999, "in this case it was the network. We learned a lot of lessons from *ChuChu Rocket!*, but for *PSO* we had to learn a lot about the differences of networking in different countries, since this is a global RPG. I realized in a sense how great Microsoft is, because as long as you have Windows, you can connect to the network and play online games anywhere. So with *Diablo* and *Ultima Online*, Windows takes care of most of the networking stuff, whereas in making *PSO* we had to start with the game, and then one level below that – the network." He then went on to add some light to the biggest struggle facing *PSO* at the time: "A PC costs maybe ten times as much as a Dreamcast, and people generally look at the many PC games that are online and think it must be easy, since there's a whole bunch of them. But people probably don't realize how much more difficult it is to make network games for a machine that costs one-tenth of a PC. I think that in the end, we were able to create something that was even better."

As the deadline approached, last minute changes were made and some features were dropped or reduced in size. *Phantasy Star Online* launched in

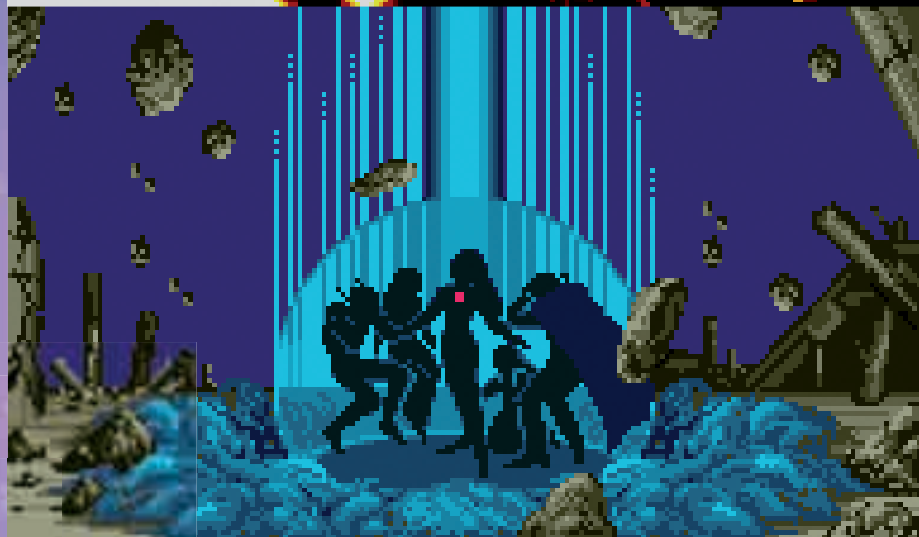
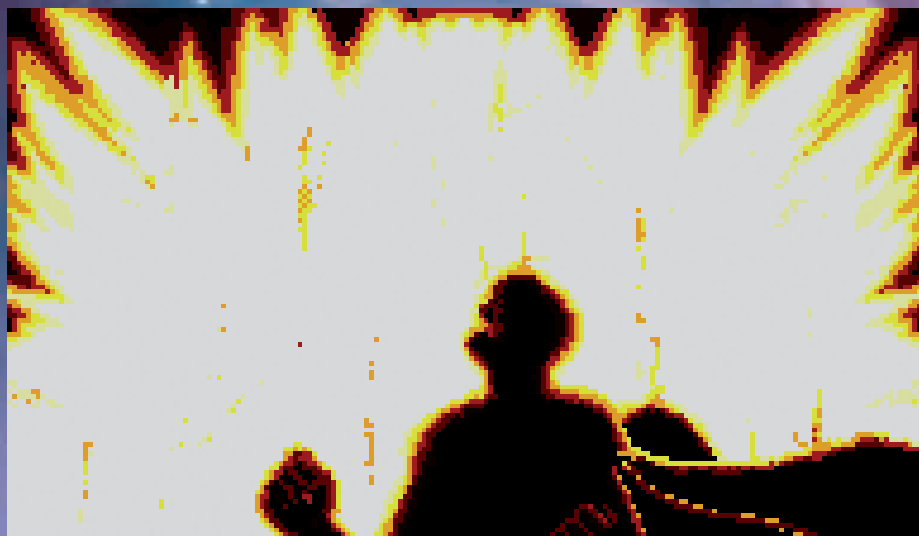
Japan on 21 December 2000 and the response was overwhelming.

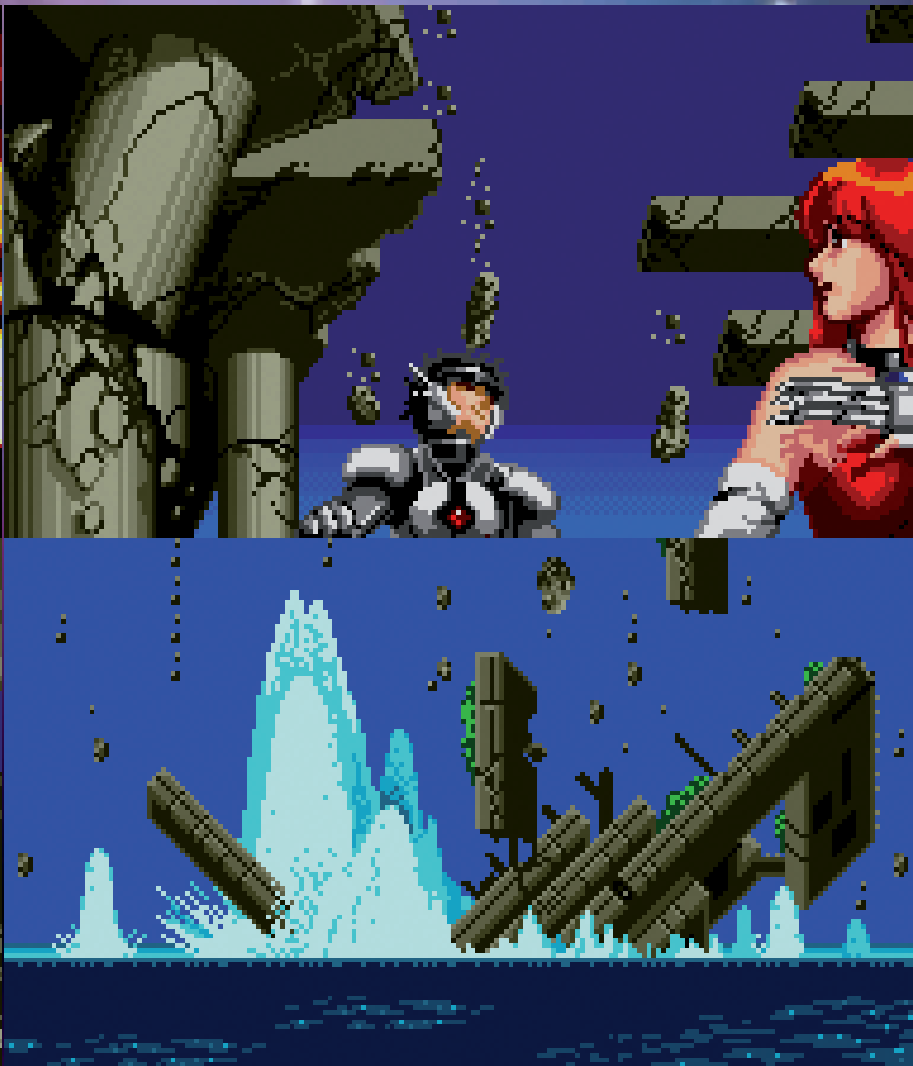
Players were awestruck by the vibrant world that Yuji Naka and his team had created and few

ever noticed that the sounds of *Phantasy Star Online* were largely a reworking of the original score; *PSO* had absorbed all that had been *Phantasy Star* before and restructured it into a world draped in beauty and shrouded in foreboding. The timeless tale of machines and nature failing to coexist was to return and there is much evidence to suggest that *Phantasy Star Online* was borne from a backstory of *Phantasy Star II*. The story unfolds against a backdrop of helpless optimism on the planet Ragol and Pioneer 2: a ship carrying a race of settlers looking

for a new home after their home world was destroyed. The Hunters Guild (which first appeared in *Phantasy Star IV*) offers quests onto the planet surface that drive the narration. Each quest acts like a burlesque dancer slowly and tantalisingly unwrapping layer upon layer until all you see is Ragol without the veneer. And then *PSO* unfolds into a warped fantasy, a future-world Hotel California you can check out any time you like. But this is a world you can never leave; the harder you look the less hospitable Ragol becomes, until it dawns on you that the reason there are no

» The instantly recognisable Mother Brain from *Phantasy Star 2*. She evoked the powers of planets in an attempt to thwart your attempts at shutting her down.





survivors from pioneer 1 is that the world is consumed by an evil that is feeding off anything that has the misfortune to be alive on Ragol. No one can be trusted and as your character develops and grows you can't help but feel an affinity with Red Ring Rico, who, although missing, has littered the planet with useful information for the gamer to discover. Despite never meeting her, the fate that befell her would melt even the most savage beast.

Online the game allows four players to meet up in a lobby. Online quests are available, but soon give way to character levelling and rare item exploration. *PSO* included another innovative online feature in the way that chat could be carried across the world, a user interface that transcended language by enabling icon chat. Now for the first time European players could play and communicate all around the world. Sega also gave *PSO* its own time zone; linking up with Swatch, *PSO* operated on a beat time system, that meant in-game everyone played on the same time frame. This was useful for the special event quests that were periodically launched to tie in with holidays like Christmas and Easter. Such was the success of *Phantasy Star* that

Sega published these figures showing online statistics just four months after the Japanese release: Japan (release 12/21/2000): 130,000 players; America (release 1/31/2001): 70,000; Europe (release 2/16/2001): 35,000. Remember that in 2001 most Dreamcast connections were dial up, Japanese gamers had to pay for a hunters licence and less than five per cent of European users had broadband and as such had to pay per minute to play. 26000 simultaneous players was the record at that point – some six months later this number would double.

Midway through 2001 Sega released *PSO Version 2*, which was a slight update offering interactive lobbies, a higher-level cap and far tougher bosses. In 2002 and 2003 respectively the Nintendo GameCube and Microsoft Xbox would receive their own versions in the form of *Phantasy Star Online Episode 1* and *2*. The first was a bug-fixed update of *PSO*, while *Episode 2* was a reworked version of *2* that featured new levels, weapons and bosses.

2004 saw Sega release *Episode 3: C.A.R.D Revolution* as a GameCube exclusive. Staying firmly with Pioneer 2

this title aimed to conclude the story that *PSO* started. Using a totally different play mechanic to the previous *Phantasy Stars* it had more in common with the earlier *Phantasy Star* games than *PSO*, but played out through a series of card battles. The character classes remained the same as *PSO*, as did the enemies and the game proved once again that innovation is never far from the franchise's creators.

So as *Phantasy Star* looks towards its impending 20th birthday and the recent release of *Phantasy Star Universe*, what more can we expect from the evergreen series? According to, Takao Miyoshi, *Phantasy Star Universe's* producer the best of the old and the new. "In terms of balance between offline and online, I put the same weight on both elements. I feel that it would be nice to play the story-based offline mode first and then go online. That would be the way to play it, and I feel it is more fun to play that way. I think there is currently a very good balance between offline and online play in *PSU*." Time will tell, of course, but no one has ever been disappointed when expecting great things from *Phantasy Star*, have they Sonic Team?

PSO INCLUDED ANOTHER INNOVATIVE ONLINE FEATURE IN THE WAY THAT CHAT COULD BE CARRIED ACROSS THE WORLD, A USER INTERFACE THAT TRANSCENDED LANGUAGE BY ENABLING ICON CHAT

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