

YJ 45th Anniversary Special Interviews - Round 2: Tetsuya Nomura

Won't Follow, Can't Be Followed

Part of a series of special interviews celebrating YJ's 45th anniversary! For this second installment, we sat down with Tetsuya Nomura, the creative director behind *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*, a much-anticipated title released earlier in 2024! We investigate the appeal of this bold creator known for numerous unique and innovative works!

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On *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*

Interviewer: *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*—the long-awaited second installment of the *FFVII* Remake Project trilogy—has finally released this year. What sort of goals did you hope to achieve with this latest title?

Tetsuya Nomura: This is more to do with the overall goal of the Remake trilogy, and not just *Rebirth*, but one desire has been to correct and unify distortions in people's perceptions. The usual formula with a remake is to keep gameplay systems and story as is while enhancing graphics. However, more than 20 years have passed since the original game came out, and merely improving the visuals wouldn't create something that meets modern standards. I also think players' memories of the game have been heavily skewed by nostalgia. I don't think there are many people who've been constantly replaying *FFVII* for the past two decades, so each player's memories have slowly and steadily diverged over time. Furthermore, with *FFVII* having multiple spinoff titles, certain scenes have become different from what they were in the original. Because of all the time that's passed and the existence of these spinoffs, there's been this subtle "distortion of perception" in players' memories. When someone replays the game, they might think, "Wait, this is how the scene goes? But I remember it differently." I'm conscious of this too, but particularly Nojima, who's in charge of the scenario, was concerned about this "distortion of perception," so we really want to bring everything together into one.

Interviewer: I've definitely sensed that "distortion of perceptions" with the spinoff titles. But how is this "distortion" depicted in the game itself?

Nomura: There's a scene near the end of the game where Sephiroth is hurtling through this white space and Cloud goes flying along with him, and you see all sorts of visions. Among these many visions must certainly be the world of *FFVII* in each player's heart. And although they're all *FFVII* each one is slightly different. You've sort of got these multiple alternate timelines existing. We've made the differences quite clear—for instance, in world A, you'll have a certain character alive, while in world B, they aren't—but basically, everyone has different interpretations of things, and their memories get gradually rewritten over time, plus there's the

discrepancies introduced by the spinoffs. And so in this title as well, we've allowed players to experience several different layers of the world, and the visions you see are meant to express that idea.

Interviewer: With *Rebirth*, we have the arrival of the world map. Were you able to realize what you had in mind for it?

Nomura: Yes. And that's really thanks to the hard work of all the staff involved. I think we managed to present a version of *FFVII*'s world map that everyone—ourselves included—could only dream of.

Interviewer: We also got a load of minigames and exploration content. Was this in part to motivate players to investigate every corner of the massive world map?

Nomura: That's right. Without objectives, there'd be no incentive to explore every nook and cranny, and players would just end up wandering aimlessly around the open world—and that would defeat the whole purpose of having a huge world map. So we've packed in all sorts of content so that the more players explore, the more discoveries and rewards they'll find.

Unpacking a Creative Vision via *FFVII*

Interviewer: In manga, it's somewhat rare for the protagonist to be a cool, handsome guy, but with the projects you're involved in, we get all sorts of stylish, attractive characters. Are there certain things you keep in mind when designing main characters?

Nomura: Huh? They don't make protagonists handsome in manga? [laughs].

Interviewer: For instance, Naruto [from *Naruto*] and Luffy [from *One Piece*] aren't really treated as cool, handsome characters in their stories, right?

Nomura: I see what you mean. The reason I like to make protagonists good-looking actually stems from an experience I had back in high school. A classmate of mine was playing a game, and the protagonist in that game wasn't particularly cool or attractive. I remember my friend saying, "Why do I have to be ugly even when I'm playing a game?" That comment left a strong impression on me [laughs]. Based on that experience, I realized people have this desire to be cool and handsome in games, and so that's how I've approached designing protagonists.

Interviewer: So your own experience is reflected in your work, then. In *Rebirth*, as the story began to reach its zenith, I once again realized how fascinating a character Sephiroth—the villain—is. What sort of things do you pay attention to in designing and conceiving of villains?

Nomura: As I see it, you don't want to get too adventurous with the protagonist [in terms of design and backstory]. If you make the character unorthodox, they'll turn out too sharp around the edges, and players won't be able to emotionally connect with them. I personally really like characters with strong, quirky personalities, so I take those risks I don't feel I can with protagonists and instead direct that creativity toward villains.

Interviewer: Do you have a favorite villain?

Nomura: I'm pretty sure Sephiroth is the most beloved, but then again, he's a pretty handsome guy himself [laughs]. Oh, and I also like Organization XIII [an association of villains that

features in Kingdom Hearts II]. Without the unique personalities they all have, I don't think their designs would be all that distinctive. What I really like about them is how their character traits come to life through a combination of inner personality and outward appearance.

Interviewer: They've got very fascinating personalities too, don't they? Out of all Organization XIII's members, who is your favorite?

Nomura: It's got to be Xigbar...and Luxord. I really like those two.

Interviewer: Ah, right. That "mysterious guy working behind the scenes"—type character [laughs]. In *Rebirth*, with all the game's party members finally together, the interactions between them feels like a major draw. Why do you think it is that *FFVII*'s characters are so popular?

Nomura: I mentioned before how I feel like I can only take creative risks with villains, but because *FFVII* was the first project I worked on where I was deeply involved in character design—not just appearance but personalities as well—I ended up making the playable cast very quirky as well [laughs]. Back then, I was still young and didn't have a good grasp on established conventions, so I really just aimed to make characters with strong personalities. I guess when you think about it, *FFVII* has a pretty odd cast of playable characters, doesn't it?

Interviewer: It does indeed [laughs]. And their silhouettes are all very distinct as well.

Nomura: I think that's actually part of the appeal. For instance, Red XIII [a canine character from *FFVII*] has got four legs, but if you think about it, the way that character is managed [in-game] has to be different from all the others, so you wouldn't usually just plop a four-legged character into the party. And then there's Cait Sith and his fat moogles, who are two characters in one. There are quite a few decisions like that I made out of the rashness of youth.

Interviewer: Aerith and Tifa as these sort of "dual heroines," right? But how exactly did they come about?

Nomura: I don't think I've ever mentioned this anywhere before, but Aerith was created first. However, her personality was actually close to Tifa's. But I didn't want to follow the usual formula up to that point, and instead decided to go with dual heroines. At that point, I split up the personality that belonged to Aerith and thus the character of Tifa was born. And since Aerith has this burdensome destiny she shoulders during the story, I developed her inner personality to emphasize that aspect.

Interviewer: That's quite the scoop. How did you go about designing them?

Nomura: I envisioned Aerith as a more colorful character befitting the role of heroine. Since Cloud has this rather shadowy side to him, both in terms of his inner personality and outward appearance, and since Barret is also quite stern, I used red with her outfit and went with a brighter hair color to add a touch of vibrance. Also, at that time with polygon-based games, we couldn't render flowing textures or depict detailed hair, which is why I decided to have it tied up [laughs].

Interviewer: So that's what happened behind the curtain [laughs].

Nomura: And I couldn't have Tifa's be tied up in the same way, so instead I made it long, which proved more difficult to animate. However, she does have the top of it tied. That was also something we did to make managing its movement easier.

Interviewer: What do you think are the strengths and individualities of your character design?

Nomura: To be honest, I don't know. I know there are lots of people who draw in a way that mimics pictures of famous characters, but until recently, I'd never seen people drawing things to look the way I make them do. Even when I myself draw stuff, it feels like it'd be hard to do it again the same way if asked [laughs]. But I do pay a lot of detailed attention to the logic behind why I use certain colors and shape things the way I do. So when I check the designs other people have drawn, I also find myself asking things like why they shaped this part this way, and so on. It's probably not something many other people are particular about. But those sort of design specifics become part of the character's personality, and ultimately I think they form part of the game and its story. I think my designs are the way they are because of the work they're a part of.

Interviewer: When designing outfits, do you give any consideration to how they're put on and taken off?

Nomura: It's certainly something I think about. But that's probably not apparent just from looking at them [laughs]. Back when cosplaying was just starting to become a thing, there were times I'd be drawing stuff and think to myself, "This probably won't make for good cosplay." But then to my surprise, people would actually go and pull it off.

Interviewer: With the rise of social media and increased opportunities to hear players' impressions and interpretations, to what extent do you think creators should reflect players' opinions in their stories?

Nomura: Players' perspectives are very interesting, and I find myself learning a lot from them, so it's certainly something I look closely at. As for reflecting those opinions in one's work, I don't think doing so is necessary at all, but if you find there's something that needs to be done, then it's best to do it. That said, if you take things in a totally different direction from what players want and write a scenario where something grueling happens to a popular character, then that's not going to land well with players emotionally. That said, simply seeing a request to do something and going, "Alright, got it," isn't the right approach, either. The key is not just to go along with players' opinions but to think about the scenario clearly with intent. Regarding Aerith [in part 3 of the Remake Project], I can't speak on anything yet.