

Development Staff Interview

Stunning graphics, compelling cutscenes, and 3D polygon battles. What went into creating this cutting-edge game that's turning the RPG paradigm on its head? To uncover the mystery, we took our questions directly to the staff of *Final Fantasy*!

They're finally able to speak

The Truth Behind *Final Fantasy VII*

The men who created *Final Fantasy VII*

The struggles and joys of creating something brand new

Interviewer: To begin, would you each mind sharing what parts of the project you were in charge of, as well as any things that, looking back on the production process, you'd say you particularly enjoyed or had to put a lot of effort into?

Nomura: This time around I was in charge of character design as well as other things like storyboards, mecha design, and writing the base story. As for parts I particularly enjoyed, there are so many it's hard to boil down. I guess I'll say I liked everything.

Narita: I'm Narita, the main programmer for the project. I handled the field-related programming and generally served to facilitate the team's work. As you know, we had to suddenly transition from the SNES to the PlayStation, so the first order of business was getting familiar with the platform itself. It was a struggle figuring out how to leverage the hardware in an appealing way and produce a well-balanced game. But what proved really difficult for me in terms of programming was the shift from 2D to 3D. I guess that would probably hold true for all the other programmers as well, though. As for parts I liked, I'd say the surprisingly effective way we were able to fuse the movies with the normal field gameplay this time. The programming involved with that was the most challenging of any we did. We were able to create this unexpectedly beautiful flow from movie to field screen back to movie.

Sakakibara: I did the direction work for the movies. As far as difficulties go, the sheer amount of content we had to create was pretty challenging. As for what parts I liked, I'd say the opening cinematic, which was the very first thing we made. I'm already starting to forget some of it [laughs].

Fujii: I handled the graphics for the battle scenery. I'd say the big challenge was taking pictures the field graphics team had constructed using tens of thousands of polygons, reducing them to the polygon count specified, and then animating them in real time. It was pretty tough picking out the most essential elements from the fields. At first we sort of fumbled our way through, but gradually we got better at it and were able to link the scenery in a convincing way. When the characters were added in and I got to see them in motion, I allowed myself a little pat on the back

for a job well done. The battle backgrounds are a part of the game you won't really notice unless you pay close attention, but we prepared a bunch of different ones for each map where fighting takes place.

Kanzaki: I was in charge of the field backgrounds. Previously, we never had to account for perspective at all with the field memory on SNES, but now we were suddenly able to show perspective. So that was challenging but also gratifying in that we gained the ability to do something we'd been wanting to. But our team was made up exclusively of people who'd never worked with 3D tools before, so starting from square one like that was definitely a challenge.

Yasui: I was responsible for programming stuff like battle effects and summoning magic. What was really fun during production was when Tetsu [Nomura] would send me over a storyboard and I'd think, "There's no way I can make something this over the top." But when I rolled up my sleeves and gave it a shot, it would turn out surprisingly well. Working on the Titan summon was especially memorable. It was a whole new approach to how we worked, and I think it allowed us to create something superior to what we'd made in the past.

What was gained in the transition from ROM cartridges to CD-ROMs

Interviewer: You mentioned the recent change of platform. Were there other benefits from the shift to PlayStation that you took advantage of in your game?

Narita: The biggest benefit was the CD-ROM. If we'd stuck with the 16-bit ROM format, we wouldn't have been able to fit even the opening cinematic [laughs]. All the direction work we did with the movies this time would have been totally impossible.

Kanzaki: In which case I'd be out of a job [laughs].

Narita: But with CD-ROMs we had another problem, which was that unlike ROM cartridges there were issues with memory access. That meant a host of new programming challenges. We were under a lot of pressure to make the load times feel as short as possible, and in the end I think we were able to do a pretty good job with that.

Interviewer: You barely notice the disc read slowdown at all in *Final Fantasy VII*.

Narita: That's right. We had to figure out the best way to conceal it. I think we pulled it off well.

Interviewer: Did you use some sort of cutting-edge technique?

Narita: There's nothing cutting-edge about it. We did it all by conventional means. If we'd wanted to get really serious about it, I suppose we could have used something fancy like that. Not that there wasn't a fair amount of ingenuity involved. If we hadn't been able to pull it off, I think we probably would have had to make some fundamental changes to the project. It's no good if our audience starts feeling frustrated as they play through the game. That was an issue we had to find a solution to, and we figured this approach would work, so that's how we settled on what you see now.

Sakakibara: And the good thing about switching to CDs is that we can offer them to customers at a lower price.

Characters come to life with a 3D polygon engine

Interview: Now that the characters are depicted with polygons, it seems their expressions and gesticulations have also changed.

Narita: Character's movements during events were actually created by members of the planning staff, such as character designers. Usually planning staff members tell the people responsible for configuring motions what they'd like to have done, and the motion people go ahead and do that. But in our team's case, our planning staff learned how to set up motions and created and applied them whenever they felt like doing so. Therefore, you'll see that motions vary depending on who created them. Some of the staff designed more grandiose movements while others took a subtler approach. Of course, there were specialists who worked on the motions for battles, so they took care of all those. But the movements characters make during events on the field were in fact applied by members of the planning staff.

Kanzaki: With the battles, we had a motion specialist responsible for each character.

Narita: Nomura was an absolute slave driver when it came to retakes. He was always making people redo what they'd created. He'd be like, "Nope, that part's not right."

Sakakibara: But it was really thanks to him that the motions turned out as realistic as they did.

Interviewer: It looks like each character has their own cool signature pose.

Nomura: We were more particular when creating those than we were with any of the other motions, since they're the most representative of each character's personality. So I was really nosy when it came to getting them right [laughs].

Interviewer: Since we're on the topic of characters, could you tell us how they were created in the first place?

Nomura: I drew the characters as I was thinking up the basic idea behind them. I was never told by anyone to depict them in a certain way. Rather, I decided what I wanted them to be like and drew them accordingly.

Interviewer: So it sounds like you had this big overarching story and from there came up with characters that would fit into it nicely.

Nomura: Not quite. Cloud and Barret were there in the beginning. Then came the story, and as I worked away at it I'd think, "Okay, let's have this sort of character appear here." I was creating the characters as I came up with the story, so there wasn't much consideration put into them after the fact. I already had a mental image of how each character would look as I went about designing the story.

Interviewer: So the image for each character developed side-by-side with the story.

Nomura: That's right.

Interviewer: Would you all mind sharing which characters are your favorite?

Yasui: I personally can't get enough of Red XIII's events. Every time I think about that one scene I start tearing up [laughs].

Kanzaki: I guess Tifa, because of her massive bust [laughs].

Fujii: I'd say Yuffie. I like her little sound effects. Also, I know they aren't characters, but I love the summons.

Yasui: Ah, yeah. I have a particularly strong attachment to Titan. I was told by Nomura that Titan would work by flipping over a piece of the ground. Like he'd peel up part of the earth. And he had to do it no matter the location [laughs]. At first I thought about setting down an ordinary ground surface so that he could come in and flip over the same slab regardless of the arena, but I decided that would be boring. In the end I was able to figure it out thanks to a little flash of inspiration.

Narita: My favorite character is Barret. He deals the same amount of damage even if he shoots from the back row [laughs].

Kanzaki: Yuffie and Vincent are like that, too.

Interviewer: From what I gathered playing the game, Yuffie isn't guaranteed to become a party member.

Narita: Yuffie isn't required to complete the game. I actually didn't recruit her myself. As for Vincent, I just can't forgive him [laughs]. So I have to go with Barret.

Sakakibara: My favorite is Jessie, because of how she wipes your face [laughs]. It would have been even better if she could join the party.

Nomura: For me it's got to be Cloud and Sephiroth. I find their relationship really interesting. I went with this concept of making everything about them cool from the very beginning. Everything from their battle motions to their event scenes are super stylish. Cloud's relationship with Sephiroth makes you think of [Miyamoto] Musashi and [Sasaki] Kojirō.

The miracle of many people's power coming together as one

Interviewer: During the DigiCube video, Vice President Sakaguchi spoke about how amazing it was to see the energy of a multitude come together in one effort. Was there any moment you felt that way, too?

Narita: At the end of the project we threw a party to celebrate. All the development staff got together, defeated the final boss, and watched the credits roll after the ending cinematic. Each of the project leads then stood up and gave a little speech. I thought, "Ah so that part was done by so-and-so and these things were done by such-and-such." It was then that it finally hit me what a huge number of people were involved with the game.

Fujii: For me, I really felt the full power of the work when I saw the world, fields, and battles all connect with one another.

Narita: Until then we'd been working on the game separately and in pieces, and only toward the end did everything get combined. After we added the world map, it became possible to wander around the world, and it was at that point I really thought to myself, "Wow, so this is what we've accomplished."

Interviewer: This RPG seems to stand apart from previous games in a number of ways. Did that realization strike you at any point during production?

Narita: The way we went about making it was totally different from previous games in the *Final Fantasy* series. Before now, there was nobody responsible for directing the project in the literal sense of the word. Each individual was their own director, creating their own assets for the game. But this time there was someone at the helm deciding the general flow of things and seeing that all the pieces came together. We really didn't have any other choice, I suppose. But to my knowledge there aren't any other RPGs that take that creative approach. To imitate it you'd need as large a team as we had, as well as the equipment that entails. So I guess it's that production process that totally sets it apart. You could say it was more akin to making a movie.

Sakakibara: Speaking of movies, we were also required to make sound effects on par with what you'd hear in an actual film. The sensation you get with those sound effects is totally different from anything done in the past.

Kanzaki: The quality of the backgrounds was also taken to a whole new level. We didn't recycle anything.

Interviewer: How about the battle effects?

Yasui: When I was creating the battle effects, they started to feel more and more commonplace to me, and I sort of lost that feeling of awe when looking at them. But when I saw them during the debugging phase at the very end of the project, I was blown away all over again. I was like, "Man, I'm so glad I did a good job with my part" [laughs]. I would have been in trouble if I'd given them a bunch of lousy effects [laughs].

Kanzaki: But there was definitely a ton of anxiety at the start of development.

Narita: In a way, it really is a miraculous piece of software. I mean, the production period was only one year long.

Fujii: It was the shortest one to date, I think.

Narita: Yeah, that was a big part of it. Usually, you move to a new platform, finish learning your way around it, and then spend a year developing on it. But we had to learn the hardware and produce the game in the same year. When I saw the finished product I honestly couldn't believe my eyes. I was also amazed by the number of people who worked on it, and that it was completed in such a short amount of time.

Fujii: The time constraint was certainly a source of worry. I couldn't work on the battles until the fields were finished, so in reality I had only about six months to do what I had to do. The final dungeon was a frantic race to the finish line.

A monumentally tough game to master! *Final Fantasy VII*'s volume of content

Interview: How did the game turn out in terms of volume?

Nomura: A blind playthrough will take somewhere in the region of 60 hours. If you get caught up raising chocobos or battling in the arena, that number will be quite a bit higher. There are things like items, summon materia, and techniques that can only be obtained from that side content, so completely clearing the game will require a considerable amount of time.

Fujii: It's easy to max out the in-game timer if you get really absorbed.

Narita: You'd think 99 hours would be a generous cap, but it's easy to go over it. When that happens it's hard to tell which save file is the most up to date [laughs].

Interviewer: So if all three discs total 60 hours, is it reasonable to assume each one is 20 hours long?

Narita: Right, let me explain that so nobody feels discouraged along the way. By the time Disc 1 is over, you'll actually be past the halfway point already, instead of a third of the way through. I'm sure it feels quite long. If you imagine the whole game being 10 units long, then you've already made it through six. Disc 3 consists only of the final dungeon and the ending cinematic, so if I were to give a ratio for the content across all three discs, it would be roughly 6:3:1.

Kanzaki: We've loaded the game with quite a bit of side story content. This includes events that aren't required to complete the game, as well as missable events that won't occur if you don't have certain characters in your party. We've used these as a way to substantiate the main scenario.

Interview: Speaking of character-specific events, what determines the partner you get during the **** sequence?

Narita: We've worked out a system where Aerith, Tifa, Yuffie, or even Barret can appear [laughs]. There's a sort of affection level hidden in these characters' parameters, and it will increase or decrease depending on the choices you pick in conversations. It will also fluctuate based on how long the character has been in the party with you. Of course, Aerith's scene is the best. It's the most thrilling.

Interviewer: It seems like each character has their own unique events.

Nomura: Even stuff like how Tifa ended up in Midgar won't be revealed unless you explore every nook and cranny of the game.

Sakakibara: Things you skim over on the first playthrough will make a lot more sense the second time.

Narita: That's why you shouldn't just zip through the game. There's a lot of depth to experience in terms of both scenario and mechanics.

Sakakibara: There are tons of hidden surprises—all sorts of Easter eggs not even the members of the development staff know about.

Narita: There are also monsters you may never see even once. We've put them into the game, but because of the RNG there's a chance you won't encounter them.

Kanzaki: Like **ng and **ng in ***** Manor.

Fujii: The ***** Reactor only has two maps, but we made sure to prepare battle backgrounds for them. Pretty much every player will speed through them without encountering anything, though. We went to the trouble of making those backgrounds only for them never to be seen [laughs].

Interviewer: You went with three types of equipment this time: weapons, armor, and accessories. Why did you decide to keep things simple in that department?

Nomura: When you equip a weapon, the character's appearance changes accordingly. If we'd been more elaborate with the armor, characters' appearances would have had to change to match them, too, so we had bracelets as a simple stand-in.

Fujii: The idea is that by equipping these bracelets, a barrier is erected around the character.

Nomura: Plus there's the whole materia interchange system, so if we hadn't kept the other stuff simple, it would've become pretty incomprehensible.

Interviewer: How about we finish up with some final remarks for your audience?

Yasui: I think *Final Fantasy VII* is entertaining both subjectively as a player and objectively as a viewer, so please be sure to give it a try. Also, be sure to collect all of the game's summons [laughs].

Kanzaki: I very much hope players will stay strong and make it all the way through the final dungeon. Be prepared for a long journey, though [laughs].

Fujii: I'd like it if players would take a look at the battle backgrounds. Of course, it's also fine if you don't notice them if that means you're immersed, but I felt I had to give them a plug because they tend to fly under the radar [laughs].

Narita: When swapping out the disc, make sure you don't do it anywhere but on the disc change screen [laughs]. That would be a real tragedy. Also, please be careful with your PlayStation when doing it. Stick to the basics and don't rush yourself while playing.

Sakakibara: I hope players enjoy the ending cinematic and watch the staff roll all the way to the end. Even after the credits are over, be sure not to reset [laughs].

Nomura: Much has already been said about this game prior to its release, but it's a work that really shines when experienced as a whole, so I hope people will play it with an open mind.

Sakakibara: I'd love to see people with no gaming experience try playing it. Also anybody who's into movies or new to the RPG genre. Please give it a go.

Interviewer: Thank you all very much for sitting down with us today.

Ken Narita

As the game's main programmer, Narita was responsible for field-related programs and the overall management of his team. With *Final Fantasy VII*'s long production finally at an end, Narita's main wish now is to enjoy the newlywed life!

Tetsuya Nomura

Took charge of numerous areas, including character design, storyboards, mecha design, game systems, and writing the base story. He's the man who breathed life into the game's characters. His top priority now is to take a nice long rest on his futon.

Motonori Sakakibara

Sakakibara was responsible for directing the many movies scattered throughout the game, beginning with the opening cinematic. His aim right now is to get in shape. His job has had him sitting down all day, so he's grown rather sluggish.

Kenzō Kanzaki

Kanzaki was in charge of the field backgrounds. After a long, hard struggle with the PlayStation's VRAM, he drew up some secret fields of his own. His number-one desire now is to travel—hopefully overseas.

Akira Fujii

Fujii directed the combat scenes, picking the most important features from the field and assembling them into battlegrounds with a limited number of polygons. What he wants to do most now is hone his skills for whatever task comes next.

Kentarō Yasui

Yasui was responsible for programming magic spells and summons. The game's many mighty summons are the result of his hard work. He hopes players will do their best to gather them all. What he longs to do most right now is sit down and play some mahjong.

[Image caption:] The opening cinematic. No doubt many players were blown away when they saw the demo version.

[Image caption:] The power of summons exceeds that of any person. Just watching them is enough to leave you trembling.

[Image caption:] The way characters move during events is phenomenal. Their performances look surprisingly natural.

[Image caption:] Do these post-battle poses give us a glimpse of the characters' personalities?

[Image caption:] Evidently, Yuffie can be pretty hard to recruit as an ally if you proceed through the game normally.

[Image caption:] Jessie makes an appearance early on in the story. Will she be involved in the latter stages as well?

[Image caption:] Like light and shadow, Cloud and Sephiroth stand in stark contrast to one another. When will the pair settle their past?

More *Final Fantasy VII* Facts - Part 1

A first for the *Final Fantasy* series! A production with movies that pack a powerful punch!

Movie scenes have been incorporated into the game at every turn. *VII* is, of course, the first production in the *Final Fantasy* series to make use of these cutscenes. It's just one benefit that's come out of the shift from ROM cartridges to CDs made possible by the new hardware. *VII* makes use of two types of movies: discreet full-motion videos and event cutscenes woven into the game. The former features full-scale characters, as seen in places like the opening cinematic and the Shinra Building escape. In the scene where Cloud flees from the Shinra Building on a motorcycle, his reflection can be seen in the lobby's gleaming floor as he speeds along, demonstrating the game's painstaking attention to detail. The latter type of movies are a composite of cutscene visuals and a more cartoonish version of the characters. These appear frequently throughout the game, such as in the scene where the mechanical tower is destroyed. Because the transition from one screen to the next is so smooth, the game's tempo is never the

least bit interrupted. *Final Fantasy VII* sets a new cinematic bar that game developers will no doubt be struggling to clear from here on out.

[Image caption:] The material and surfaces of the bike also deserve attention. Paired with the realistic sound effects, it feels just like watching an actual movie.

[Image caption:] Tifa is shown with realistic proportions during the Shinra Building escape movie. Her breasts even bounce for a moment. A must-see scene for every Tifa fan.

[Image caption:] During the mechanical tower collapse, the movements of the cartoonish character models add to the tension and heighten the overall impact of the cutscene.

More *Final Fantasy VII* Facts - Part 2

Secrets of the Titan Summon

Titan is one of the game's summons. He uses "Anger of the Land," a magnificent attack where he lifts up and overturns part of the ground. Watching him peel up and flip over a piece of earth, regardless of where the battle is being fought, is a real treat. Whether you're on a beach, deep inside a mountain, wandering through a dungeon, or even somewhere indoors, as long as there's a surface beneath you, he'll find a way to turn it over! It's amazing to think this seemingly hopeless concept was implemented thanks to a bit of old-fashioned inspiration. When you arrive in an unfamiliar area, try summoning Titan. That's right—no matter where you are, Titan will work his magic, peeling up and overturning the terrain.

[Image caption:] Titan can turn over anything and everything. Who decided to call it "Anger of the Land" and not "Table Flip"?

Battle backgrounds in various locations

It's hard not to focus on the characters' realistic animations during combat, but you should also pay attention to the outstanding backgrounds, which match the atmosphere of the corresponding fields. You'll notice that a number of variations have been prepared that match the map where combat occurs. Wherever enemies can appear, you're sure to find backgrounds specifically prepared for combat in that area. Whenever you arrive at a new location, go out of your way to get in at least one battle. In small maps that you only traverse once, there's a chance you might miss out on an exclusive background.

[Image caption:] Even out on the field the backgrounds will vary. If you're near the ocean you'll battle on the beach; if you're in the mountains you'll fight on the peaks.

Blazing fast load times

Access times are the biggest challenge CD-ROMs face. Not a few CD games have found themselves stymied by the length and frequency of these disc reads. However, *Final Fantasy VII*

has done an admirable job overcoming this obstacle. While characters act out scenes or music is played, data is constantly being buffered so that you don't have to suffer when loading encounters or entering and exiting dungeons. The speed with which the game saves is also astounding. Despite tracking the growth of countless materia, save files require only one block of memory. It truly is a marvel!

[Image caption:] The time required to save is short, making for a very comfortable experience.

Don't cruise through too quickly—there's loads to enjoy!

Final Fantasy VII is a content-packed game that will take you somewhere between 50 and 60 hours to complete even if you proceed at a regular pace. It's loaded with all sorts of amusing features like chocobo breeding and Gold Saucer minigames. With so much to enjoy, it would be a shame to breeze through it quickly. Raising chocobos is an especially elaborate experience, so be sure to give it a go. Countless hidden features have also been prepared for players, including easily missed subevents and items and materia that can't be obtained over the course of normal play. Those aiming for a perfectly complete file will be working away well after the in-game timer reaches its maximum value.

[Image caption:] The chocobo ranch is a great place to raise chocobos.