Final Fantasy VII - The 10th Anniversary Project
<u>The Birth, Success, and Future of *Final Fantasy VII*</u>

On the 10th anniversary of *Final Fantasy VII*, Yishinori Kitase and Tetsuya Nomura share secret tales from the series' development and discuss where things are headed next.

<u>*Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* Producer: Yoshinori Kitase</u>
Producer of the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*. Served as director for the PlayStation version of *Final Fantasy VII* 10 years ago, overseeing every facet of the project.
<u>*Compilation of Final Fantasy VII* Designer: Tetsuya Nomura</u>
Oversaw character design for the PlayStation version of *Final Fantasy VII* and later the *Compilation*. Also served as director for *Advent Children*.

This year marks *Final Fantasy VII*'s 10th anniversary. With the compilation continuing to unfold, Kitase and Nomura have opened up with a host of untold tales about the series. Despite its popularity, *Final Fantasy VII* sat sealed away for many years. What, then, brought an end to its imprisonment and kicked off the compilation with *Advent Children*? It's with this question our conversation begins.

The compilation began with *Advent Children*

Interviewer: *Advent Children* marked the beginning of the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*, correct? How exactly did this come to pass?
Nomura: It was Kitase who first proposed the idea.
Kitase: When the staff of Visual Works approached me saying they wanted to create a CG movie, having that movie be a *Final Fantasy VII* title wasn't initially part of the discussion. However, we knew if we didn't put our best foot forward, the project wasn't going to fly. We thought about what sort of subject matter would allow us to go all out and ultimately landed on *Final Fantasy VII*. From there, the first thing I did was consult Nomura and [Kazushige] Nojima, our scenario writer.
Interviewer: Why was *VII* the game you chose out of the whole *Final Fantasy* series, which at that point had reached *X*?
Kitase: For myself and Nomura, I'd say *VII* was the game we cared about the most out of all of them. Nomura started getting more and more involved with the character side of things starting with *VI*, but it wasn't until *VII* that he really got his whole body in the water. Also, staff members like Kandō and Kayano, who are now helping lead the *Kingdom Hearts* team, joined just when *Final Fantasy VII* was being developed, and the staff currently supporting Nomura on the titles

he's in charge of had solidly established themselves in the time since *Final Fantasy VII*. I'd say those were the primary reasons we chose it.

Interviewer: Is it true that you have a lot of staff members—such as *Advent Children*'s codirector, Nozue—who joined the company after being impressed when they played *Final Fantasy VII*?

Nomura: Tabata, the director of *Crisis Core*, is another one of those staff who felt moved experiencing *Final Fantasy VII* as a player. But until we finally went ahead and made *Advent Children*, all of us thought it would be too dangerous to touch *Final Fantasy VII*.

Interviewer: Like it would be some sort of Pandora's box?

Nomura: Exactly. Like if we opened the lid once, every idea we'd been sitting on up to that point would come flying out, and we'd never see the end of it.

Kitase: I personally was envisioning that *Advent Children* would be a shorter, more personal work—just enough to make for a nice little story.

Nomura: At first the idea was to make it a short episode with no action whatsoever.

Kitase: But as we continued making it, the story became more and more elaborate, and I changed my mind to thinking it should be expanded.

Nomura: We're in the business of creating entertainment, after all, so we had to deliver a product that was entertaining. Therefore, when I took on the role of director, I decided we should include battles.

Kitase: So when the project kicked off, it was still just a short episode, and I thought, "Alright, I'll let Tetsu [Nomura] take it from here." Some time went by and I was busy with other things. Then one day I heard there were going to be battles. I was like, "What? *Battles*?" [laughs].

Nomura: The content of the short episode that served as the project's origin is still there, though. It's that part during the last scene of *Advent Children* where Cloud is surrounded by children. But things were gradually inserted before that point, and all sorts of events leading up to that scene ended up being added.

Back then, all sorts of ideas were proposed, but they kept getting rejected

Interviewer: I'd like to move on to asking you about the PlayStation version of *VII*, which was released 10 years ago. What goes through your mind looking back on those days?

Kitase: The introduction of 3D graphics definitely caused drastic changes to the development environment. *Final Fantasy VII* was our first 3D game, and we had to make it for the brand new PlayStation hardware. It turned out to be a memorable work in more ways than one.

Nomura: With *Final Fantasy VII*, I personally had this really strong feeling that we were pulling out all the stops. Back during *V* and *VI*, plenty of ideas would be suggested, but nearly all of them got shot down, whereas with *VII*, we were finally able to implement all sorts of things we wanted to do.

Kitase: Tetsu proposed a bunch of different ideas for *VI* as well.

Nomura: Up through *VI* I was called the "300 batter"; I'd make 10 suggestions and only three or so would get implemented.

Kitase: Back then, if he took an idea straight to the team, they'd bounce it right back and reject it, so instead he came to me while I was putting together the event scene performances and such. He'd be like, "I'm not too keen on this part," or, "I want to do it like this" [laughs]. That's why Shadow and Setzer from *VI* have got Nomura's prints all over them.

Interviewer: I see what you mean when you put it that way!

Kitase: Nomura really did come up with a ton of ideas.

Nomura: I think the first time my opinion got through was probably with *V*. I brought up how the ending just wasn't satisfying enough.

Kitase: Oh, right, right, right [laughs]. Out of the blue he was just like, "Yeah, I'm not convinced." So I said, "Okay, let's think it over a bit," and that was the first time I took his advice.

Nomura: I'll go ahead and say this because I'm pretty sure the statute of limitations has expired, so to speak. The first scenario was written with this "Where to now, Bartz?" ending where Bartz rides off into the sunset with Faris and Lenna chasing after him. And I was like, "After this big, long journey, that's how it ends?" [laughs]. So I went over to Kitase's work area and we thought things through.

Kitase: With *VII*, we decided we'd have Nomura draw the characters from the beginning. I guess you could say all the stuff he was sneaking around doing during *VI*—

Nomura: It finally paid off [laughs].

A detective who chases the protagonists? *Final Fantasy VII*'s phantom first draft

Interviewer: *VII*'s scenario was equal parts gut-wrenching and enigmatic.

Nomura: I actually still have the first plot [Hironobu] Sakaguchi wrote, though the premise is completely different from the one we ended up with. I think he wanted to make it a bit more of a detective story. It had this hot-blooded detective character named Joe.

Interviewer: It sounds like a pretty awesome premise.

Kitase: But the backstory for the city of mako took shape around that time, too.

Nomura: He'd written more or less up to the point where we blow some place up there. The hot-blooded detective would then be pursuing the main characters. So the protagonists blow the place up and Joe, our hot-blooded detective, gets on their tail.

Interviewer: Those characters sound totally different [laughs]. Who took over the scenario after that?

Nomura: That plot was the starting point, and then myself and Kitase went about constructing the remainder of the premise, proposing things here and there. Then after all that, Nojima came to us and we handed him the backstory and character relationship charts we'd made up to that point and entrusted him with the rest. Once that was done, I transitioned to doing character design and storyboarding work.

Interviewer: Was the setting for stuff like Shinra and Avalanche and the Turks already there?

Nomura: That stuff was Kitase and Nojima's doing. I mainly concerned myself with Cloud's side of the story—things like his connection with Sephiroth. I wanted to make it a story about chasing after Sephiroth, journeying in pursuit of this hero from the past who one day vanished. There was sort of a division of labor between Kitase, who focused more on the game's world, and myself, who gave more thought to the characters.

Interviewer: Was it you who came up with the Lifestream and overall world premise, Mr. Kitase?

Kitase: I believe it was Sakaguchi who came up with the concept of life cycling through the planet and the universe at large.

Nomura: I think there was a detailed premise for the Lifestream written into his plot.

Kitase: Sakaguchi came up with the original idea, which we eventually molded and fine-tuned into what it is now.

Nomura: The way the work flowed was that we had this initial premise for the Lifestream and mako reactor explosion, and the two of us ran with that and expanded on it, then handed it off to Nojima so he could bring things together into a detailed scenario.

The secret story behind the birth of Zack can now be shared

Interviewer: *VII*'s deep story is a defining feature of the game. What led you to settle on the mystery of Cloud's memories belonging to someone else?

Kitase: That puzzler of a story regarding Cloud's memories was put together by Nojima.

Nomura: Nojima was also the one who created Zack's character and backstory. At first he didn't exist at all, but then we suddenly received a request to make him. That's why we don't have fully drawn character setting art for him.

Kitase: Right, right.

Nomura: He's a character who suddenly popped up one day. *VII* was also Nojima's first *Final Fantasy* game, and he had to do the writing while dealing with a host of other challenges.

Kitase: Nojima hadn't yet fully resolved the mystery during the scenario writing process, so we were looking at things from the same perspective as players. We were like, "So now this character named Zack is on the board. I wonder where the story is headed…" [laughs]. On top of that, Nojima himself was the one in charge of producing the event scene that would bring the whole mystery to its conclusion, so we didn't know how the puzzle would be solved until the very last minute.

Nomura: Was that the only time Nojima was personally in charge of putting together an event for the game?

Kitase: I was keeping an eye on him, wondering to myself, "How's this guy going to handle himself?" [laughs]. But to my surprise, Nojima didn't have an endpoint in mind, either. By taking charge of Nibelheim personally, he seemed to be trying to pull all the story's threads

together and put a neat bow on the whole thing. It wasn't until quite late in the process that he finished that part, and the rest of us finally realized, "Ah, so that's how he's wrapped it all up."

Difficulties making the first 3D CG *Final Fantasy*

Interviewer: How did the shift to 3D CG change the development process?

Kitase: It had a big impact on how *Final Fantasy* games are made. The introduction of CG movies shifted a huge amount of emphasis to the scenario side of development. Back during the SNES era, it was, in a way, possible to start making the game before the scenario was fully nailed down. For instance, if the order of events in the scenario changed, there was enough flexibility so that we could just say, "Alright, we'll make these changes to this part."

Nomura: Thinking back, I'd say we were able to create the game and play things by ear like that up through the SNES days. To put it less flatteringly, we'd proceed without the scenario being finished and have each event lead write the scenario for their own event and then connect them all together. That was roughly how it worked.

Kitase: With *VII*, a lot of effort was put into the scenario in that respect, and when it first came to us, Tetsu asked a lot of questions: "We've added even more mystery—now what?" "How is this part going to work?" "Why don't we try moving things along like this?"

Nomura: I would write the character relationship charts myself. I don't know where they wound up in the end, but with *VII* I wanted to make a story where the characters' relationships all intertwined, and I kept on making those charts even though nobody ever asked me to [laughs].

Interviewer: The 3D characters act out some dramatic scenes. Did you run into any trouble, such as not having enough polygons?

Nomura: We had three types of models: field, battle, and movie. Each of them had different proportions and different ways they'd be shown.

Kitase: Looking back now, I can see we struggled a bit in that department [laughs]. If you asked me whether *VII* was a flawlessly assembled piece of work, I'd say it was a little disjointed in that area. Yet ironically, looking back it's a part I feel we worked on incredibly hard. Each of us did the best we could do. We were all putting our best foot forward as members of [what was then] Square, and despite being in over our heads, we got the thing done.

Interviewer: Definitely. I'd say that's a good place to be.

Nomura: We actually changed the proportions of the characters' battle models partway through the production process. At first they were a little squatter. It would be impossible to do nowadays, but back then I double-checked all the models and battle animations.

Interviewer: Every single one of them?

Nomura: More, actually. I'd also check everything with the enemy characters and give them instructions like "Fix this here," "Tweak that there." But so when Cloud would swing his sword overhead, his hand would clip into his head. That was no good, so I said, "Well, I'll just have to adjust his proportions so he's taller." I raised his head to a reasonable height and went to Sakaguchi basically to ask him if it was alright.

Interviewer: I'm glad to see the final result ended up being closer to the character design picture.

Kitase: So that's why there are multiple versions of the illustrations with different proportions.

Nomura: I actually changed the character designs one time as well. The pictures I first presented were a little less realistic looking….

Kitase: Right, right.

Nomura: That's the reason we changed the 2D portraits partway through the project.

Future developments and the fate of the compilation

Interviewer: Following *Advent Children*, there was also *Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII*, which starred the Turks as protagonists, as well as *Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII*, which revolved around Vincent. How did these entries come about?

Kitase: We created those titles separately, rather than according to any system established ahead of time. We later decided to tie them all together in light of the trend they followed with *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*.

Nomura: We talked earlier about how a whole bunch of staff joined in around the time of *VII*. Everyone on staff feels genuine love for *Final Fantasy VII*, and I myself want to be involved in the series. Those feelings of attachment have caused the circle of people interested in the project to widen, and I think the *Compilation* is a result of that.

Interviewer: It seems like the internet is full of topics like "Will *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* be the last chapter in the compilation?" Is the compilation still going to continue after this point?

Kitase: As far as we're concerned, there hasn't been any decision to end it yet.

Nomura: We haven't decided that *Crisis Core* will be the end. I've still got some thoughts that I'm keeping to myself.

Interviewer: The clamor for a remake of *VII* has gotten really loud. What are your thoughts on that?

Nomura: It seems like these rumors often pop up overseas—"Is a remake of *VII* currently in development?" I'm sorry to say that right now we're not working on one in any capacity.

Kitase: Although, when I asked the staff working on *Final Fantasy XIII* why they decided to join the company, sure enough there were a lot of people who answered, "Because I'm a fan of *VII* and I want to help make it, too."

Nomura: Of course, we're also aware of what the fans are expecting and continuously taking all sorts of things into account. As long as there are people who wish to make it and people waiting for it to come out, I don't want to say the project is over.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time. I'm looking forward to your future work.

The newest entry in the compilation: *Elegy of Cait Sith*?

Nomura: I guess this means "EC" is next—*Elegy of Cait Sith*.

Interviewer: Wait, what? "EC" is really up next?

Nomura: "DC" is the *dirge* of Cerberus, so I figured "EC" should be the *elegy* of Cait Sith. In the last scene we'd have Cait Sith meowing at Midgar from that cliff Red XIII stands on.

Kitase: Finally, it's Cait Sith's time to shine!

Nomura: Although he's never actually done anything like meow before, has he? [laughs].

From Hideki Imaizumi

Sephiroth's never-before-shown true face
Although Sephiroth appears in the original *Final Fantasy VII* and other entries in the compilation, *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* depicts a still-human side of Sephiroth that we never get to see in those titles. He even goes so far as to deceive Shinra in order to help Angeal, a man he's been ordered by the company to apprehend. Additionally, there are exchanges between Sephiroth and Zack that you can't help but smile at. Seeing Sephiroth's true face like this is a major highlight of the game.

-Producer Hideki Imaizumi
Noteworthy Works: *Final Fantasy X, Final Fantasy X-2*, *Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII*

The image and feel of characters' voices were evaluated and re-evaluated
This was the first time we had voices for living versions of Aerith and Zack, as well as a sane version of Sephiroth, so with Nomura directing them once again, the voice actors took their time and carefully considered how to proceed with their performances. We aimed to make the voices sound younger than in *Advent Children*.

From Hajime Tabata and Hideki Imaizumi

Loveless is uniquely linked to *Final Fantasy VII*
Imaizumi: In addition to being featured on a billboard in Midgar, *Loveless* is also mentioned in Cid's dialogue toward the end of *Final Fantasy VII*. Of course, Loveless is a fictitious tale in the form of an epic poem that's unique to the world of the game, but its themes are intertwined with the story of *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII*. As we can hear from Hojo in the demo version of the game, *Loveless* is actually missing its final chapter. Genesis questions what the contents of the story's nonexistent ending could mean for himself and the others. It gradually becomes clear that the epic is related to the fate of SOLDIERs. It's quite an important part of the premise, and because of it, Genesis's potential stage time shot up compared to what it was in the beginning. Then again, I was constantly asking Tabata to put him in [laughs].
Tabata: At Imaizumi's request, it was necessary to give Genesis a strong sense of presence as a *Final Fantasy VII* character, seeing as he's so deeply bound up with the game's story. We accomplished this by connecting him to *Loveless*. It was Naora, who happens to be in charge of the art for this game as well, who originally came up with the idea of *Loveless*. When I asked him about the story behind it, he told me, "Hmm… I forgot" [laughs]. Kitase gave me the same response, so we rounded up opinions from the staff regarding what they envisioned *Loveless* to be about at the time and ended up going with a work based on an original story. By having *Loveless* feature as an epic poem, we were able to bring a higher degree of realism to Genesis's backstory.

Imaizumi: One of the great things about *Final Fantasy VII* is how it's packed to the gills with potential setups like that, allowing you to expand on it as foreshadowing. We can create a story like this now and watch it play out without feeling like anything has been retconned in.

From Hajime Tabata

<u>We aimed for summoning scenes that rival the impact of those in *Final Fantasy VII*</u>
When summons appear as enemies, we've arranged them to be very formidable foes with varied movesets and the ability to evade attacks. Some summons can be obtained by defeating them while others cannot; the ones that appear as enemies during the main scenario must be defeated. The summoning scenes in this game are presented as movies, with their appearance and attack scenes integrated naturally into the flow of the battle. In addition to Ifrit and Bahamut, which we've already shared with the public, we also showcased two new summons—Odin and a gold-colored Bahamut Fury—in a trailer and during demo gameplay at the Square Enix Party. No matter which summon you call on, its attack scene is sure to be flashy and impactful. After all, summoning scenes were a major highlight of *Final Fantasy VII*. With Ikumori from Visual Works in charge of movie direction, we resolved to approach a level of impactfulness on par with that of the PlayStation original. In the end, I think we were able to deliver scenes that pack a powerful punch despite being on a portable system. Therefore, I hope players will acquire all the summons and watch their scenes.

Interview with Producer Hideki Imaizumi and Director Hajime Tabata

Interviewer: The trailer shown at the Square Enix Party was spectacular. There were even people crying. It's a touching trailer precisely because we know what's waiting for us at the climax.
Tabata: Because we knew the manner in which things would end, we were very deliberate about depicting Zack's time alive in a vivacious and humanized way. As a result, I think many in the audience were able to emotionally relate.
Interviewer: September 13th can't come soon enough.
Imaizumi: It'll be released just one day before *Advent Children* was two years ago. We considered forcing things so it would come out on the same day, but since it's right before a holiday weekend, we went ahead and scheduled it for Thursday as planned so that players could take their time and enjoy it.
Interview: What's the current development status?
Tabata: Things are moving along nicely. We're searching for ways to improve the quality as time permits.
Imaizumi: We know we're keeping players waiting, but Tabata has asked for a few more minor adjustments that should dramatically improve the game. We don't want to do half measures, so we've decided to polish what we have so we can deliver it to users in a superior state.

Interviewer: What about a special PSP bundle?

Tabata: I'll get back to you about that. We've got a surprise in the works.

Interviewer: I saw there was a new Turks character in the demo version at the party.

Tabata: She's a prodigy and the youngest member of the Turks. Cissnei is sort of her codename. She's Shuriken from *Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII*. The idea is that she was assigned to a mission during *Crisis Core* before joining up with the rest of the player Turks in *Before Crisis*. Actually, as far as her connection to other works in the compilation goes, we decided how she'd be involved with *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII* before she ever appeared in *Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII*.

Imaizumi: We were very mindful when creating new characters of how we could link them to the *Final Fantasy VII* setting without things feeling out of place. Genesis was another character whose backstory and trajectory we decided on early, and I think we were able to arrive at an interesting character by chiseling him down to a detailed state. We also had Gackt perform a number of different voice styles for us, and together came up with an image and feel for the character. It took some time, but it was worth it. At first, the voice he came out with was so different from his singing voice that everyone wondered whether it was actually him.

Interviewer: This game will be a must-play for those waiting for a remake.

Tabata: I'm hoping for a remake myself, so I'll be sure to give Nomura and Kitase a little push [laughs]. But before then, I'll be overjoyed if *Crisis Core* can please fans by adding further depth and merit to *Final Fantasy VII*.

[Image caption:] Director Hajime Tabata (left) and Producer Hideki Imaizumi (right), who's making his first appearance in a magazine.

[Image caption:] Each family also appears, and despite being a SOLDIER 1st Class, Zack's human warmth is easy to see.

[Image caption:] "Ayaka's song was also a fantastic fit. The scene it's used in is very moving."