Developer Roundtable (Second Half)
FFVII: A Painstaking Project

Final Fantasy VII hit shelves earlier this year on January 31st. Perhaps you've already beaten it and watched the ending? Here, we pick up where the last issue left off and continue our conversation with seven of the game's developers. By this time, the party was in full swing, and the topic of discussion shifted to what the staff members obsessed over and how they poured their hearts into their work.

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Photos: Tōru Watanabe

A hundred-man platoon of playtesters. Skipping and stopping play were strictly forbidden.

Interviewer: I know you just said you were so busy you never had time to feel hard pressed, but could you tell us what challenges you faced as development entered the home stretch?
Narita: Playtesting was a huge trial.[1] We had a team of roughly 100 people testing, and by the end, everyone was so on edge that all it took was for one person to go "Ah…" and all of us would be like, "What? What happened!?"
Naora: Saying "I'll skip this," or "I'll quit this part" was strictly forbidden.
Sakakibara: We were playing, too. Whenever people started gathering around Kitase or Narita, we'd be like, "Shit…"
Kitase: Right. When a bug cropped up, everyone would come gather around us.
Narita: Burning ROMs for playtesting was also a massive pain.[2] Because we were cramming in every bit of data that would fit, it would take between 30 and 40 minutes to burn a single disc. I'd begin a burn at 2 p.m., then pop home for a bit, and come back to the office only to find: "ROM still burning."
Naora: There was one time I was sleeping at the office and I had a dream. In the dream, we were going gold like it was nothing, and I was bragging like, "Yeah, we're so great."[3] And then I woke up and looked over at Narita, who just looked at me blankly and said, "ROM's still burning…."
Narita: Right? It was ridiculous.
Interviewer: Flipping things around, what were some parts of the project you enjoyed?
Uematsu: I didn't really have time to enjoy anything, either. It just felt like one long sprint to the finish line.
Naora: I remember feeling really excited the first time the visuals appeared and things started moving.
Kitase: The most fun part for me was when the commercial started airing.[4]

Interviewer: That was about a year ago, right?

Narita: Right, right. That was such a phony commercial, though. There was footage of some staff members programming and we were all like, "Who the hell are those guys?"

Uematsu: I was like, "Those guys don't work here."

Each character has a striking trait. In Tifa's case, it's her bust….

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on the game's actual contents? Any particular scenes or CG parts that stick with you?

Nojima: I was very meticulous about how the characters speak. I wanted to avoid having them sound like game or manga characters as much as possible, so I put a lot of effort into their speech, right down to the placement of punctuation marks. That said, I'm still still a little embarrassed by how much of my own speaking style remained. You'll see they often say "*demo*" [でも, a particular way of saying "but" in Japanese, commonly used at the beginning of sentences]….

Kitase: Right, right. At first, everything was written in Nojima's style of speaking.

Nojima: But [*demo*] for Cait Sith's Kansai dialect, I had a specialist come in and translate it.

Narita: Oh, yeah.

Nojima: But [*demo*] you still have people saying, "That's not Kansai dialect!" I guess we'll just call it Cait Sith dialect.

Interviewer: So, your focus with each character's dialogue…

Nojima: Was to have a natural, relaxed flow. Which ended up making the story take longer.

Interviewer: Ah, I see. What about you, Mr. Nomura? As far as characters go, is there anything you particularly like?

Nomura: Huh?

Narita: Aren't you a fan of Tifa's breasts?

Nomura: Everyone's a fan of them!

Naora: What's this now?

Narita: But her breasts are really too big.

Uematsu: They're a bit… overly ample.

Sakakibara: People would say to me, "Make sure you don't change how they look" [laughs].

Interviewer: Well, Tifa's breasts are her defining feature, right? [laughs].

Everyone: Mhm.

Nomura: Regardless of what anyone says, at the end of the day we all like them.

Narita: I mean, of course I like them. They make for good conversation.

Nomura: These guys are just trying to single me out. If I made them smaller, everyone would get angry at me.

Interviewer: What are some other features you like or put particular energy into?

Nomura: I made sure to give everyone some striking feature. For Cloud, it was his pointy hair, for Barret, it was the scars on his cheek… and for Tifa, it was her chest. That's all.

Narita: Got it…

Interviewer: Ah, so that justifies it. What are some points the rest of you were very particular about?

Narita: Definitely the linkage between field screens and movies. When playtesters told me they couldn't sense where one ended and the other began, that made me feel really good. That's the part I was most worried about and which ended up going the most smoothly.

Sakakibara: When I play it myself, I can't differentiate between the movies and the field maps.

Kitase: Get out of here.

Naora: Really!?

Narita: He's just saying that because he made [the movies]!

Sakakibara: No, no, it's the way it's directed that makes it hard to tell what's what. I got fooled just like everyone else.

Interviewer: Could you tell us your favorite CG scene, Mr. Sakakibara?

Sakakibara: More than that quality, it's the way they blend into the gameplay so well. Like he said before, it's that connection with the field maps. No matter how pretty the visuals are, it's no good if everything's a disjointed mess.

Interviewer: How about you, Mr. Naora? Areas you put extra effort into?

Naora: We wanted to bring out a sense of day-to-day life. The people in charge of design were really particular about this and made things super detailed, going so far as to show stuff like toilets and refrigerators. There's even a picture frame with Kitase's face in it.

Interviewer: Where can we find that picture?

Kitase: You left that in?

Narita: Didn't we take that out?

Uematsu: Sakaguchi's still in there, though [laughs].[5]

Narita: Right, on the wall in a certain town…

Naora: Though we may have made him too small to see.

Narita: But the mustache should stand out [laughs].

Uematsu: We'll find out soon enough.

Narita: Since we didn't include a dev room this time, maybe we should have just left everyone's faces in somewhere.[6]

Interviewer: Speaking of dev rooms, you had one in *IV*, right?

Kitase: But with the move to 3D polygons, you can no longer offhandedly say, "Hey, let's add a dev room in." The amount of work it would involve is just too great now.

Interviewer: By the by, what's your personal favorite track, Mr. Uematsu?

Uematsu: There isn't any in particular [laughs]. At the end of the day, the music really only comes to life when it's linked with the game's events. As far as individual tracks go, I like the songs that play on the field maps, but in the context of the game, the track that plays in Cosmo Canyon left a particularly strong impression.

Kitase: That's a good one.

Narita: That one was a hit with everyone.

Uematsu: That was the track I had the most trouble deciding to include. It was a type of song we'd never really used up to that point in *Final Fantasy* games. The sheet music stayed up on Kitase's keyboard for ages, so I figured that was his signal for me to put it in.

Kitase: The very first time that song came to me, I was like, "Yeah, this is nice." I thought, "This is what *Final Fantasy* is going to be this time."

Uematsu: But you know, I think this time the music is being trumped by the visuals. It can't keep up with the feel of the images.

Kitase: No, I don't think that's true. It wasn't until everything came together that the game really took shape.

Interviewer: When you link music with visuals—especially CG movie scenes—it seems like it's really important to match the two well.

Uematsu: This time, I was able to write the tracks after seeing the already completed visuals. On top of that, every time Tetsu drew an image or storyboard, he'd bring it to me and be like, "Here, go off this."

[Everyone laughs.]

Uematsu: He'd say, "Here, put the music to this" [laughs].

Narita: And this was coming from a guy 10 years younger than you [laughs].

Uematsu: But so I'd get a video recording of the actual completed movie. And then I'd have to use a stopwatch to adjust where the song plays and test and retest it. I'd have to simultaneously use both hands to press the video and sequencer buttons, like, "Three, two one, go!"

Kitase: How analog [laughs].

Uematsu: But the music and the visuals and all the other parts really need to cohere to make a game, so maybe I was just extra finicky about that stuff.

Interviewer: Do you think any one of those parts needs to be at the forefront?

Uematsu: I think having them in balance is more important than anything else.

Playtesting provided a chance to enjoy the game as a consumer might

Interviewer: By the time this article is in readers' hands, I'm guessing lots of people will have finished the game and seen its ending. Would each of you mind sharing a personal message with our audience?

Uematsu: If you're done with the game, go out and buy the CD!

Narita: So shameless [laughs].

Kitase: Must be nice having a knack for business like that [laughs].

Uematsu: It's a four-disc set this time, ladies and gentlemen, and if you act now, one of just 10,000 limited edition copies can be yours!

Narita: Wait, how is the game itself three discs but the music takes up four?

Uematsu: Don't you worry about that [laughs].

Kitase: Uematsu said earlier how the visuals won out over his music, but I'd just like to point out he did at one point have "This one's going all the way!" written on some sheet music [laughs].

Uematsu: Well, you get fired up in the moment.

Sakakibara: I'm actually a newcomer to playing RPGs, both professionally and in private. It seemed like it was going to be a slog, but I enjoyed it so much I ended up playing through to the end. I'm hoping players like me who love movies but are iffy on games will have fun with it, too.

Naora: There was a brief period toward the end where I was honestly having fun with it. I felt like a consumer even though I was playtesting the game. I get the feeling it's going to be a game you can pull out years later and have a great time with, so I hope everyone will really sink their teeth into it.

Narita: I'm a programmer, so for me it's all about bugs [laughs]. If you happen to find any still in there, I apologize for that. We've removed as many as possible to the best of our abilities. But I think the game is so entertaining that a few bugs here and there won't be a problem.

Naora: Excuses, excuses! [laughs].

Narita: I dedicated the whole first year of my newlywed life to this [laughs]. I barely got to talk to my wife at all. Our rhythm is all out of sync.

Uematsu: One year? Try 10! [laughs].

Interviewer: And how about you, Mr. Nomura?

Nomura: The monsters… There were an incredible number of people helping out with each one. And you might beat the game without ever having met some of them. So I hope people don't overlook the monsters. We got really elaborate with how they move. Also, each character can learn a variety of limit breaks. But I think it's pretty rare for a player to see every limit break for every character. I'm hoping people will try to see them all. If you can't make it happen on your first playthrough, try to do it on your second. Oh, and there's a super hidden one. A summon, that is. I'd love it if players would try to find it.

Interviewer: What does it do?

Kitase: We can't say [laughs].

Narita: We've also done camera blocking for every single one of the summons.

Nomura: The Leviathan summon that shows up in the demo is only the tip of the iceberg.[7]

Uematsu: Is it just me or is Tetsu's head getting bigger and bigger? [laughs].

Kitase: "Just the tip of the iceberg" he says. "Just an appetizer to our five-star main course" [laughs].

Nojima: We've made all this progress with the 3D graphics and the movies and all, but the story has definitely evolved as well, so I hope everyone will enjoy the tale we present to you. Obviously you've got the big dramatic scenes, but I think if you can pick up on the nuance in ordinary conversational dialogue, there will be many points later on where you'll go "Ohh!"

Kitase: What's this? You've perked up suddenly. But it's true, you sort of get to enjoy it twice this time.

Interviewer: Enjoy it twice?

Narita: There's a lot of stuff you pick up on the second time through. Like, "Ah, I get it now!"

Nojima: Does that mean it doesn't make sense the first time?

Narita: No, no, it's not that. There's just a lot of foreshadowing and stuff, you know? What I mean is that you can enjoy it more deeply the second time around.

Nojima: I know what event is coming up next, and maybe it's just my age that makes me more prone to tears, but I can't help crying still [laughs].

Uematsu: No, it's a tear jerker. I had to play with a roll of toilet paper next to me [laughs].

Nojima: But what made me cry most was when the opening cinematic started playing and the prelude track came in. Just seeing that had me drained. I watched it and was like, "Alright, I'll pick this up again tomorrow. That's enough for today" [laughs].

Nomura: Just calling it a day and going home.

Nojima: I feel like that rescued me from some of the game's events, throwing in the towel like that. I was like, "Shoot, I can't just say goodbye to everyone. Alright, I'll sneak out and head straight home."

[Everyone laughs.]

Kitase: So you'd just up and leave [laughs].

Interviewer: It would be great if players find the game equally moving.

Nojima: Oh, and there's one event players with motion sickness will find particularly touching. That one's sure to move them to tears [laughs]. I speak from experience.[8]

Interviewer: Finally, could you give us some closing words, Mr. Kitase?

Kitase: We had to add an extra disc and push the release date back a bit, but I think we were able to produce something that will keep players entertained for several months. Plus you've got stuff like the hidden [censored] we put in. So I hope people will take the time to enjoy it fully and play through not just once but two or even three times.

So concluded our roundtable discussion. Afterward, the seven staff members went off in groups of two or three and scattered to the night. What will they speak about in private? Their trials and tribulations with *VII*? Or perhaps the dreams they have for *VIII*? For now, we'd simply like to thank them for their hard work and the time they took to speak with us.

Director: Yoshinori Kitase
Joined Square on April 1st, 1990. Managed *FFVII*'s overall development. As director of this game, he oversaw a team of over 100 people and coordinated all aspects of production.

Composer: Nobuo Uematsu
Joined Square on April 1st, 1986. Has produced the soundtrack for every game in the *FF* series. One of the longest-serving members of the franchise.

Lead Programmer: Ken Narita

Joined Square on April 1st, 1990. If you include his part-time work before officially joining the company, he's been involved with the programming of every game in the *FF* series.

Character Designer and Base Story Writer: Tetsuya Nomura
Joined Square on April 16th, 1991. Responsible for all sorts of iconic character illustrations. Past projects include *FFV* and *FFVI*.

Art Director: Yūsuke Naora
Joined Square on June 1st, 1993. In charge of overall art direction, with a focus on the backdrops that scaffold the game's world.

CG Movie Director: Motonori Sakakibara
Joined Square on May 1st, 1995. A professional CG craftsman. *FFVII* marks his first foray into the series.

Story and Scenario Writer: Kazushige Nojima
Joined Square on February 1st, 1995. The so-called playwright of the project. He built out the story by incorporating Kitase and Nomura's ideas and crafting them into a finished scenario.

Footnotes

1. Playtesting: A process whose main goal is to catch bugs. Some programmers go as far as to call debuggers their natural enemies.

2. Burning ROMs: ROMs are burned frequently throughout development to allow for playtesting various other checks. Technically speaking, in this scenario they use erasable CD-Rs instead of CD-ROMs. Programmers will often catch a bit of shut-eye while they wait for the ROM burner (called a ROM writer) to finish its job—kind of like waiting for a toaster to toast bread.

3. Going gold: Packaging the product into a finished release. It marks an end to developers' long and arduous work on the project.

4. Commercial: After it was announced *Final Fantasy VII* would be releasing on the PlayStation, a TV commercial started airing that featured a panoramic view of Midgar overlaid with the message "A New *Final Fantasy* Begins."

5. Sakaguchi: Hironobu Sakaguchi, producer of the acclaimed *Final Fantasy* series. His stylish mustache is hard to forget.

6. Dev room: A hidden room where all the developers could be found in games like *Final Fantasy IV*. It made for a nice dose of playfulness. You could talk to Producer Sakaguchi along with other members of the development staff.

7. Leviathan: One of the game's summons. It can be seen in the demo that was packaged with *Tobal No. 1*.

8. Motion sickness: Sakakibara [*sic*] frequently suffers from motion sickness. He got queasy in the cab on the way to the restaurant and was a bit green for the first leg of our roundtable discussion.