

An Exhaustive Discussion of *Final Fantasy VII*

An Exclusive Interview with Square's Sakaguchi and Kitase

In a lengthy conversation, the two provide a detailed look at the enigmatic *Final Fantasy VII* and discuss what's next for Square.

The Pair Who Hold the Keys to *Final Fantasy VII*

Hironobu Sakaguchi

Square's executive vice president, Sakaguchi has been involved in a multitude of projects. Right now, he's keeping a close eye on *Final Fantasy VII* in his role as executive producer.

Yoshinori Kitase

A developer making his Famitsu debut. Kitase helped develop *Final Fantasy V* and was responsible for many famous scenes from *Final Fantasy VI*. He's currently working as director for *Final Fantasy VII*.

CD-ROMs were the best choice for Square's games

Interviewer: I imagine most of our readers were expecting Square to develop this game for the Nintendo 64. What led you to bring your business to Sony's PlayStation?

Sakaguchi: After they were finished with *Final Fantasy VI*, Kitase and some of the other staff had a bit of free time on their hands [laughs]. And so we put our minds together trying to figure out how we should create a product for new hardware, which resulted in an experimental video.

Interviewer: I take it that was the video you exhibited at SIGGRAPH.¹

Sakaguchi: At the time there was all sorts of next-gen software being developed with the SGI workstation.² As such, we thought it would be a good idea to use the machine. It would ensure our game was supported, regardless of what hardware it ended up on. But we decided that if we were going to use the SGI, we needed to have a way of rendering clips frame-by-frame in real time for our game. We couldn't just go the cinematic route and spend hours rendering every frame, linking them together when the process was done.

Kitase: If I'm remembering right, we only had three months to work on it.

Interviewer: Just three months to do that video? That's pretty incredible.

Sakaguchi: Gradually we began to get a full idea of what this next-gen equipment could do. But our software was going to require a great deal of memory. That SIGGRAPH video alone used 20 megabytes—and it really shows with how breathtaking the visuals are. So it was no longer an issue of what hardware we would use. Rather, we realized that if we wanted to produce something of the same caliber as what we showed at SIGGRAPH, we'd have to switch to CD-ROMs.

Starting a movement by supplying software at a low price

Interviewer: You mention memory concerns prompting your decision to go with the PlayStation. Are there any other reasons?

Sakaguchi: Another reason we decided on CD-ROMs has to do with the price. I think a big part of why the first *Final Fantasy* game was so well received—and why subsequent entries continued to attract large numbers of fans—was the ¥5,000–¥6,000 price tag. We're trying the same approach with *Bahamut Lagoon* and *Gun Hazard*, but the retail price for the ROM release is over ¥10,000, so people aren't jumping at those new titles like they did in the past. With CD-ROMs, we can put out a two-disc game for just ¥5,800. At that price, I think we have the potential to create a title that will sell millions of copies.

Interviewer: So it sounds like memory capacity and low price are the biggest reasons. Could you give us your honest impression of the PlayStation hardware?

Sakaguchi: It's an excellently balanced machine. I do think disc reads are an area of concern. You can't just interrupt what's on the screen to do your loading; we'll have to use a method where data gets read in while the game keeps moving so that the player doesn't feel like things are constantly loading. If we can solve that puzzle, memory capacity won't be an issue, the polygons will move smoothly, and the hardware should work fine.

A number of CG staff members from Hollywood are also involved in development

Interviewer: It's not uncommon to hear of teams being padded out to accommodate the switch to CD-ROM development.³ Has Square augmented its staff in any way?

Sakaguchi: We've definitely seen an increase in the number of CG-related staff.

Kitase: But it's not like we're bringing on people who've worked with CG before and sticking them in their own separate unit. We want them to help with the gameplay side of production as well. In doing so, existing staff members who only have experience with creating games will be able to absorb CG techniques from them.

Sakaguchi: But even with *Final Fantasy VII*, 80% to 90% of our on-site staff is still made up of existing members. As for the CG staff, thanks to the capabilities of the hardware, they're now in a position to apply their previous experience directly to a video game. Several big names from the cinematic special effects industry are now contributing to *Final Fantasy VII* in some form or another. These are people who've worked at places like Digital Domain⁴ and Lucas's ILM.⁵

Interviewer: I can't wait to see what's in store.

Plenty of new challenges to take full advantage of the large memory capacity

Interviewer: How are the two of you involved with *Final Fantasy VII*'s production?

Sakaguchi: I've been working together with Kitase ever since *Final Fantasy V*. With *Final Fantasy VI*, Kitase did the direction for all the events people now consider famous—the opera house scene, Celes's suicide attempt, and that scene where Setzer is reminiscing as he descends the stairs. I'm not completely stepping aside for our younger developers yet, but with *Final Fantasy VII*, Kitase is the one responsible for almost all of the story. He initially had hopes of being a movie director, so he's well suited for directing things this time. I'm leaving all of the event and field work in his capable hands.

Interviewer: And how about yourself?

Sakaguchi: For the first time since *Final Fantasy III*, I'm leading things on the combat side. We've got a very solid team handling the battles, so this time I'm stepping back a bit and working as more of a producer.

Interviewer: Seeing as the game will be on the PlayStation, could you elaborate a little more on the changes we can expect from previous *Final Fantasy* installments?

Kitase: Up till now, memory capacity restricted what we could do from the beginning, and we'd go about brainstorming and creating visuals from there. But this time, that constraint is no longer there. The increase in memory capacity is having a huge impact on what we're doing.

Interviewer: So does that mean the visuals will see the most change?

Kitase: That's right. Things like the system, scenario, and event direction haven't changed much at all. The graphics also look more beautiful than they used to, but this time we're focusing on how we put images together in terms of space and composition. In previous games you'd have a few fixed perspectives, such as a bird's eye angle, but with this game the camera can be moved freely and zoomed in as close as we want. We plan on leveraging that to compose better visuals. The quality of the images has of course improved, but more than that we're seeing an evolution in our cinematic approach,

Sakaguchi: Speaking of cinematics, we're also aiming for music that feels less repetitive. In movies, you don't have tracks that repeat themselves from start to finish. The intensity and tempo of the songs change to suit the scene. I think we can achieve something closer to that... at least until our composer Uematsu burns out [laughs]. Though, it will take somewhere around 40 hours to reach the game's ending, so I'm sure there'll be some repetition. But we do want to make things feel as cinematic as possible.

Interviewer: So, Uematsu is doing the music? Does that mean the rest of the staff will be the same as in previous games?

Sakaguchi: Yep. Amano is doing illustrations for the overall image of the game, including the world and setting. If there's a mural or something somewhere in the game, you might see one of Amano's illustrations drawn right on the wall.

Kitase: We'd actually planned to include Amano's illustrations previously. We wanted them to appear as pictures Relm⁶ draws. For the game's ending, we considered finishing things by having Relm paint a single mural depicting all the heroes who'd helped save the world.

Sakaguchi: I'm sure we'll get his stuff in there this time or the next.

Interviewer: You started to talk about the game's sound. Will the characters be voiced?

Sakaguchi: That's a secret for now. Lots of alternatives have been proposed.

The main theme of *Final Fantasy VII*'s story

Interviewer: By the way, what's the theme of the game this time?

Sakaguchi: It's very much still a character-driven drama that follows each member of the cast, but there is an underplot.

Interviewer: How would you describe it?

Sakaguchi: It has to do with the life of the planet and the life of the cosmos. It probes what things might look like if the mystery of life—a force that mediates all sorts of phenomena—were unraveled by science.

Interviewer: Huh... that sounds pretty deep. I'm also wondering if you could tell us whether airships and chocobos will make an appearance this time.

Kitase: As a general rule, we're making sure to keep all the good stuff in.⁷

In addition to *Final Fantasy VII*, more than 20 other major titles are set to appear

Interviewer: Apart from *Final Fantasy VII*, what other sorts of titles is Square planning to release in the future?

Sakaguchi: Well, for starters we have *Final Fantasy VII* releasing in December. In addition to that, we're currently developing several other titles. We want each of them to be in tip-top shape before they go on sale, so I'm not sure which will come out first. It depends on where they are in development, so I can't give a firm answer on what's releasing when.

Interviewer: So does that mean *Final Fantasy VII* might not be the next project on Square's list?

Sakaguchi: We're actually hoping to release a few games at the beginning of autumn, before *Final Fantasy VII* comes out.

Interviewer: Could you put a name to any of them?

Sakaguchi: They're still a secret for now. But we're planning to release around 20 titles for the PlayStation in the one-year period between this fall and the end of '97.

Interviewer: So if we do a rough breakdown, that means about two titles every month. Would those happen to include games from popular series like *Mana*, *Front Mission*, and *SaGa*?⁸

Sakaguchi: Essentially all of Square's mainline titles are slated to be developed for the PlayStation. We'll announce more information as soon as things firm up.

Interviewer: Is there any possibility you'll tackle new genres, such as 3D fighters?⁹

Sakaguchi: We're still not sure yet. But we would like to focus on simulators as well as our traditional RPGs. I'd be very happy to see a high-selling game come out of something like that. Apart from those, we're also working on some oddball titles that don't really fall under any current category [laughs].

Kitase: I'd like to try developing some challenging games that we can only release now that the cost is so low.

Interviewer: The other day you announced you'd be releasing some software on Windows 95. Does this mean we can expect PlayStation games to be ported to Windows 95 as well?

Sakaguchi: No, it'll basically just be software that was released on the SNES. I'm guessing our PlayStation software will be ported to Windows 97.¹⁰ But keep in mind these products will be specifically geared toward the U.S. market.

Some passionate messages from the game's developers

Interviewer: Last but not least, would you mind sharing a message for players out there awaiting the release of *Final Fantasy VII*?

Kitase: My plan is to create a title that will excite players and leave them with a true next-gen RPG experience. Though now that I've actually seen that ideal taking shape, I'm kind of nervous about releasing it [laughs].

Sakaguchi: Personally, if I'm thinking about what I wanted out of this most, it was to be able to make games on CD-ROMs that sell at ¥5,800. Realizing we could do that really made me happy. I hope fans will play not just *Final Fantasy VII* but all sorts of other titles Square is planning to release at a low price. After all, if those newly sown seeds don't sprout, Square's creators will wither with them.... At any rate, now that I'm in a position to do what I wanted, I'll make sure to give it my all, so please look forward to what comes next.

1. An exposition held by Silicon Graphics, Inc., in Los Angeles, USA, during August of last year. It was here that a CG clip was shown hinting at the upcoming *Final Fantasy VII*. The video was also uploaded to the internet via Square's website.
2. A high-performance machine made by Silicon Graphics, Inc. These workstations have seen widespread application in areas such as PlayStation software development.
3. Evidently, some companies will even put completely different teams in charge of the gameplay and CG movie portions of their titles.
4. The company responsible for James Cameron's CG work. They provided the special effects for films such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *True Lies*.
5. A special effects studio founded by George Lucas. Naturally, they also do CG work. They've provided special effects for more films than we can list here.
6. A young artist who appears in *Final Fantasy V* [sic]. Here's hoping her unrealized event finally comes to fruition!
7. As you can read in the column on the left-hand page, it seems like chocobos and such are here to stay. And if you're interested in the combat system, be sure to read the article on page 102!
8. An RPG with a multi-scenario system one might argue is perfectly suited for the PlayStation. Could the fourth entry finally see a PlayStation release?
9. The PlayStation is already home to many 3D fighting games, including *Tekken* and *Battle Arena Toshinden*. The battles in *Final Fantasy VII* are reminiscent of these.
10. The successor to Microsoft's Windows 95. It's rumored that it will handle 3D graphics exceptionally well.

The prelude to *Final Fantasy VII* unveiled in August of last year

In August of last year, a global computer graphics exposition called SIGGRAPH was held in Los Angeles, USA. There, Square exhibited a 3D CG video created on a 64-bit computer

manufactured by Silicon Graphics, Inc. The video included a sensational battle scene between a monster and three characters from *Final Fantasy VI*, replete with dynamic shots and changing camera angles. The presentation sparked rumors of a *Final Fantasy* game being made for the Nintendo 64.

Terra's explosive attacks

[Image caption:] The much-rumored CG demo. Could Final Fantasy VII's combat really look like this?

Bahamut appears as well

[Image caption:] There's also a scene where Terra casts a summoning spell.

Will chocobos and airships make an appearance?

With *Final Fantasy*, the world and story differ from one game to the next, but there are certain elements that recur throughout the series. Chief among these are chocobos, a popular and beloved mascot, and airships, which have become a selling point for the games. Although it hasn't yet been confirmed whether either of these will appear in *Final Fantasy VII*, it's hard to imagine a *Final Fantasy* game without both. For now, we can only await further news and look forward to seeing these series staples brought to life with amazing movement and scene direction.

What will the chocobos be like?

[Image caption:] In addition to acting as vehicles and summons, chocobos have also played a role in event scenes.

The much-awaited airship

[Image caption:] How are they planning to dazzle us with the airship?

Will the audio get to shine thanks to CD-ROMs?

Final Fantasy's graphics aren't the only thing that sets the series apart. The sounds of Nobuo Uematsu also help lend color to the games. *Final Fantasy VII's* CD-ROM release also promises big changes for its audio. With *Final Fantasy VI*, we got to experience the sounds of an opera house. Will *Final Fantasy VII* also include a music-related event? Also, assuming chocobos return in *Final Fantasy VII*, we're curious to hear their new theme. After *IV's* samba, *V's* mambo, and *VI's* techno, how will the song be arranged this time? When it comes to sound, there's no end to what we can look forward to in the next game.

[Image caption:] Final Fantasy VI's opera house event was incredibly impressive. What awaits in Final Fantasy VII?

[Image caption:] Final Fantasy VII's chocobo theme arrangement is something we're curious to hear.

Sequels for series other than *Final Fantasy*?

In addition to *Final Fantasy*, Square has announced titles for other series including *Front Mission*, *Mana*, and *SaGa*. If *Final Fantasy VII* is coming out on the PlayStation this time, there's a good chance these other Square games will be released on the same system. It's exciting just imagining *Front Mission* and its polygon wanzers fights.

[Image caption:] Is the day close when we'll see polygon wanzers roaming around?

[Image caption:] We get the feeling a Mana game would make for incredible boss fights.