An Exclusive Interview Commemorating the Release of *Final Fantasy VII International*

Finally Free to Speak: All About *Final Fantasy VII*
Final Fantasy VII's Developers Speak Candidly About the Game

We present to you an urgent round-table discussion with Kitase and six other members from *Final Fantasy VII*'s development staff. In addition to secret stories from *Final Fantasy VII International*'s development and revealing talks about the game, don't miss an additional interview with Uematsu, the man responsible for *Final Fantasy VII*'s music.

The Passionately Outspoken Development Staff of *Final Fantasy VII*

Director: Yoshinori Kitase
Profile: Chief of development staff. Joined Square in 1990. Worked as director for *Final Fantasy VII*, overseeing all aspects of the project. Has also worked on other games, including *Final Fantasy Adventure*.
Scenario Writer: Kazushige Nojima
Profile: Returned for *International* to take charge of newly added and extended events and scenarios.
Planner: Yasushi Matsumura
Profile: Took charge of battle planning. Has had a hand in numerous hit games.
Planner: Masaru Oka
Profile: Joined the company in 1994. Took charge of *Final Fantasy VII*'s map design.
Planner: Masahiro Katoka
Profile: Joined the company in 1993. Took charge of battle planning along with Matsumura.
Graphics: Hitoshi Sasaki
Profile: Joined the company in 1992. Took charge of *International*'s newly added movies.
Programmer: Kazumasa Fuseya
Profile: Joined the company in 1992. Took charge of *Final Fantasy VII*'s battle scenes.

Working Toward an Enjoyable Story

Interviewer: I'd like to start off by asking about *Final Fantasy VII International*, which just hit shelves the other day. This time we've got a handful of changes that have been made to the base game. I'm hoping you can tell us how these came about. If you don't mind, let's start with the newly added events.

Nojima: Zack ended up being quite a bit more popular than we expected [laughs]. He barely showed up in the game, though, so we decided to give him some new material.

Kitase: It's true. We received tons of feedback from players talking about the mysteries still left over with him. I can assure you that wasn't our intention when we made the game [laughs]. So this time, we presented an answer of sorts to that mystery by showing what really happened. But Nojima also felt like he had some unfinished business with Zack.

Nojima: That's true [laughs].

Kitase: The background for Zack's character and the conclusion of his story could to some extent be found in the dialogue and in-game texts, but this time we really wanted to bring it home.

Interviewer: Additionally, it looks like two new Weapons[1] make an appearance this time. Were these written in specially for *International*?

Kitase: That's right. Their inclusion has to do with the materia system. When you break away from the story, you can enjoy the challenge of developing your materia, but in the base game, there's nothing waiting for you once you've done so. Therefore, we decided to make some stronger enemies and add them in to test the results of all the materia growth.

Interviewer: What are the battles like with these new Weapons?

Kataoka: We set these new enemies up to be confronted once you've developed your materia, but there's more to it than that. It's not a simple matter of growing your materia and equipping them the right way. I can't tell you more than that right now [laughs]. Think of it as a big secret to look forward to.

Interviewer: Speaking of Weapons, I hear we get to see a new movie with them this time around.

Sasaki: We made a new movie for Ultima Weapon, which you also get to battle in the original *Final Fantasy VII*. We wanted to create something that would really capture its intensity. Plus Tifa turned out to be quite popular, so we figured it wouldn't hurt to give her a little more screen time [laughs].

Interviewer: A major feature this time around is the increased ease of play.[2] Encounters have been lowered and arrows have been added to the field maps, leading to a less frustrating experience and making the game feel simpler overall. Did you introduce these changes with the game's Western release in mind?

Kitase: We didn't simplify the game specifically for foreign players. In fact, foreign players don't really go for simple games like that. It was more that we wanted to make the story easier to enjoy. To do that, we decreased the encounters and worked to ensure the overall flow of the game remained uninterrupted.

Seeking to Eliminate RPGs' High Entry Barriers

Interviewer: So apparently you've made a few changes to how things are displayed on the battle screen as well.

Fuseya: We've added in target markers and a pause indicator that appear above the characters.[3]

Interviewer: I also hear the materia system has been streamlined with the addition of a quick command.[4]

Fuseya: For the materia system, we received feedback from players that it became more and more of a pain to swap around materia as the number of characters increased. And so we bit the bullet and decided to redesign it.

Interviewer: How about minigames?

Kitase: There definitely were a lot of people who complained the submarine game was too difficult. Initially we figured it wouldn't be a problem, since we designed things so you could proceed with the main game regardless of whether you won or lost. But when you're faced with a challenge like that partway through the game, you really want to succeed and get past it, you know? So we decided to lower the difficulty of that minigame a little.

Interviewer: I understand you can use your save data from the original *Final Fantasy VII* with *International* as well.

Kitase: That's right. My guess is people will make use of that feature mainly to do things like battle the new Weapons we've added.

Interviewer: So it sounds like even people who spent serious time playing the original *Final Fantasy VII* will still have new content to enjoy in *International*.

Kitase: There's essentially no content from *Final Fantasy VII* that isn't included in *International*, and in that sense this game is all you need. Therefore, as far as data compatibility goes, the transfer from *Final Fantasy VII* to *International* is a one-way process.[5] But I think there are a variety of ways you can go about playing the game.

Interviewer: Would you mind sharing a message to players for whom *International* will be their first exposure to *Final Fantasy VII*?

Kitase: The PlayStation is continuing to sell well, so I think there are a lot of people who only just recently have begun to use it. What we've created is a title that can also be enjoyed by casual players like these. In some ways, RPGs can be long and difficult and hard for players to approach. However, *International* was made with the intention of eliminating these steep entry barriers. Therefore, I'd like those who haven't yet experienced *Final Fantasy VII* to play through to the end and not give up the challenge partway. I know there are people who've steered clear of *Final Fantasy VII* after being told by their friends it's time-consuming or something else to that effect. My hope is that even these players will feel at ease and enjoy what the game has to offer.

Coming to See What Needs to Be Done in the Next Title

Interviewer: I'd like to take a step back and talk about the original *Final Fantasy VII*. What are your thoughts looking back on it?

Kitase: Basically there aren't really any parts in *Final Fantasy VII* that I feel were left unfinished or that I wish had been done differently. Even with aspects of the game that bug me a little, I wouldn't say I regret them being there. Rather, fixing those mistakes will be something

we can implement in the next game. If I absolutely had to say, I had hoped to make things more cohesive.

Interviewer: How do you mean?

Kitase: For instance, with story mysteries, our intent isn't to explain things after the fact in interviews or by following up with animated sequels and such. Rather, we want to give players a seamless product in which all the answers are provided. But things should be arranged such that those who want to explore without spoiling the mysteries can explore away, and those looking for answers to all their questions can find them so long as they search hard enough.

Interviewer: So, games that can be enjoyed in various ways depending on who's playing.

Kitase: I feel like with games, if you just coast through once, you'll be left feeling like there are still tons of mysteries to uncover. And that's what gives rise to so much debate [laughs]. But the more you immerse yourself in the game, the easier it is to find all the answers. I think that experience is something unique to video games.

Interviewer: What about battles? Do you have any thoughts on how you'd like to approach them next time?

Matsumura: I personally think *Final Fantasy VII*'s combat falls a bit short for those with more experience under their belt [laughs]. That said, I do feel like the high number of battles has been successfully addressed with *International*.

Kataoka: I think that by implementing the materia system, we did a great job injecting a feeling of addictiveness into the game. That's something I'd like to dig into more in the future. I hope fans will look forward to it.

Interviewer: Are there any aspects of the programming you think could be improved upon?

Fuseya: With *Final Fantasy VII*, we were kind of flying blind when we started work on the game, not knowing to what extent the system memory would be able to read in what we programmed. Therefore, when I start work on the next title I'm involved with, I'd like to do a good job leveraging the knowledge I gained from *Final Fantasy VII*.

Interviewer: What are your thoughts on the summons? It seems people have various opinions about it.

Kitase: In terms of visuals, I do regret that some people are under the impression they're movies.[6] Despite the backgrounds and characters being different, players still mistakenly assume this because of the fact they can be summoned anywhere. That's one area I'd like to address going forward.

Interviewer: I've heard some people complain that the summoning animations last too long. How would you respond to that?

Kitase: If we were to change it, I'd like it to be in a way where players could participate while the summons are being used, as opposed to just idly looking on. Plus that way, people won't have any excuse to mistake them for movies [laughs].

Interviewer: Mr. Oka, I understand you were in charge of maps. What are your thoughts looking back?

Oka: I used to get called up by friends all the time asking how each dungeon was laid out or what places they could walk to [laughs]. And so I made a few modifications with *International*.[7] But for the next game I help make, I'd like to construct things such that players can recognize what is and what isn't a path without the need for arrows. I'd also like to strive for more immersive maps.

Interviewer: Could you elaborate on that?

Oka: In *Final Fantasy VII*, you've got all these pointless passages and rooms that don't give you anything. I'd like to make maps that leave more of an impression on players.

Interviewer: As the man in charge, what are your thoughts on *Final Fantasy VII*'s scenario?

Nojima: On the whole I feel satisfied, despite the numerous criticisms it's received [bursts out laughing]. They're just minor things, though—"Tifa shouldn't be talking like this" or "Vincent's got a different personality here." Stuff like that.

Interviewer: From what I've heard so far, it seems like you have some picture of what you'd like to make next now that your work on *Final Fantasy VII* is finished. What are your thoughts on an upcoming title?

Kitase: Right now I still haven't got any [laughs]. I've only just wrapped up production on *International*. I'm sure all sorts of ideas will surface once I get to working on it, but currently I'm afraid I don't have anything to share. I suppose you'll just have to look forward to more news in the future [laughs].

1. Two new Weapons - *International* features two brand new battles with Ruby Weapon and Emerald Weapon.
2. Increased ease of play - The number of battles has been reduced and players are now less likely to get lost on field maps, allowing the game to progress more smoothly.
3. Target markers, pause indicator - During battle scenes, the target of an attack will be indicated by a target marker, and when the screen is paused, the word "Pause" will be displayed.
4. Quick command - Using this allows players to exchange materia with members not currently in the party, a shortcut not available in the original *Final Fantasy VII*.
5. Data transfer is a one-way process - With International, you can load up your *Final Fantasy VII* data and play from whatever point you like; however, the reverse is not possible.
6. Summon visuals - Apparently, some players thought these were pre-rendered movies that were playing, when in fact they're calculated and drawn in real time.
7. Modifications - Uninitive passages and pathways on field maps have been improved with arrows that display when the select button is pressed.

[Image caption:] What is the nature of Cloud and Zack's relationship? Zack's remark here is very intriguing.

[Image caption:] A big feature of International *is the more generous approach it takes with indicating things to players, as seen here.*

[Image caption:] Popular minigames are an essential ingredient to keeping RPG players from growing bored.

[Image caption:] There are answers waiting to be found in the story's mysteries as well. Try playing through it multiple times.

A Lengthy Chat with Uematsu, the Father of *Final Fantasy VII*'s Sound

<u>Sound Lead: Nobuo Uematsu</u>
Profile: Joined Square in 1986 after working in commercial music production. Has helped compose music for over 20 games. Responsible for the music in every *Final Fantasy* game to date.

Getting Closest to What Uematsu Imagined

Interviewer: The game's newest music CD, *Final Fantasy VII: Reunion Tracks*, was just released. Were the included tracks selected by you personally?
Uematsu: No, that's not what happened. They were chosen based on the responses we got via mail-in questionnaires included with the previously released *Final Fantasy VII: Original Soundtrack*.
Interviewer: So they were chosen by people who listened to those first CDs.
Uematsu: That's right. Then on top of those I included a few tracks I'm personally fond of.
Interviewer: Were there any occasions where work you felt confident in drew less favorable reviews from those who listened to it?
Uematsu: As far as the songs on this CD go, I didn't feel like including "Rufus's Welcoming Ceremony" till the last minute. If I'm being honest with you, it's really not that great of a track [laughs]. But I guess it must have left an impression on everyone after they had to sit around listening to it for so long. It scored so high on the questionnaire that we had no choice but to include it. I absolutely love the Honeybee Inn song, but was shocked to find it didn't even crack the top 20.
Interviewer: I see there are three songs with orchestral versions on *Reunion Tracks*. Why did you choose these three to get that treatment?
Uematsu: Those three songs are also ones that I'm really fond of.
Interviewer: Are you confident with how they turned out?
Uematsu: I am. This time, we changed how we handled production for the orchestral versions. Previously, I'd just hand over a tape and the written music and ask them to have at it, but this time I teamed up with a specialist and had the music put together while in close communication with them. As far as realizing the image I had in my head, the process we used this time was much more effective. Please be sure to give those tracks a listen.
Interviewer: *Final Fantasy VII International* features some newly added movies. How did you handle the sound for those?
Uematsu: I included the sound effects you hear there. They're presented in a different way than before. I've already begun coming up with new methods to use for the next game.
Interviewer: Could you give some specifics?

Uematsu: No dice. Trade secret and all [laughs]. I mean, it's nothing game-changing. For instance, with a booming explosion, you'll hear not just the sound itself but the noises of the surrounding environment. The idea is to express the sound with more nuance. That's how I'd sum it up, at least, though it isn't quite so simple.

Interviewer: It's been eight months since *Final Fantasy VII* went on sale. Are there any aspects of the project you can tell us about now that some time has passed? Any things you wish you'd done in certain places?

Uematsu: I feel like I could have throttled down on the music a little more. I was conscious of this even while the game was being made, but when I actually played it, there were multiple places where I realized it would have been better to leave out the music.

Interviewer: Do you plan to leverage those sorts of experiences with the next game's music?

Uematsu: *Final Fantasy VII*'s word delivered something no one had ever done before—and not just in terms of music. It packed in all that CG, all those movies, a sprawling story. Whether or not that made for an entertaining game is a separate question.

Interviewer: So whether it be visuals or something else…

Uematsu: Right. We don't know where any of it will go from here. There's no one to show us the way. We have to go it alone and grope along in the dark. Having made *Final Fantasy VII*, we now have to make something that will top it. It's tough work, but work worth doing because no one's ever undertaken it. It's for that reason I think *Final Fantasy VII* is brimming with so much essence. We just couldn't figure out how to package it. That's why I don't feel like it's much of an opus in terms of ranking. The content itself is satisfying, but whether it holds up as a marketable product is another matter. Whatever the case, I can't deny I got plenty out of this experiment. I think next time we'll really be able to produce something solid.

Interviewer: In terms of music as well as everything else?

Uematsu: That's right. I think what we have with these titles is a diamond in the rough. We've still got a lot of hard work to do and problems to sort out, but we're going to get in there and really polish things up. I hope you'll all stay excited and stick with us.

[Image caption:] The Honeybee Inn music is one of Uematsu's favorite tracks.

Enjoy New Versions of *Final Fantasy VII*'s Songs!

Final Fantasy VII: Original Soundtrack has been an unprecedented video game music hit, with 170,000 copies sold. *Final Fantasy VII: Reunion Tracks*, a best-of album featuring the 19 songs rated highest by listeners, will go on sale October 22nd. You won't want to miss the CD's three orchestral arrangements—majestic reproductions into which Uematsu has poured his heart and soul. This new album is a must-have for any fan.

[Image caption:] List price: ¥1942 (tax excluded). A special sticker will come enclosed as an early-purchase bonus.