

Mrhappy Interview w/ Kenji Sudo

First, I just want to say thank you for taking the time to do this interview! I'm sure Yoshida-san has you hard at work making the next Ultimate fight!

1. The Unending Coils of Bahamut (Ultimate) is undoubtedly the hardest encounter the game has ever had. How does the development process for something like this begin? It almost seemed like everyone pitched ideas for the hardest combination of mechanics they could think of for the three bosses!

Kenji Sudo:

The development process for this started with two overarching ideas: a rough overall structure of the fight and a focus on the type of game experience we are determined to bring to the players.

In terms of the overall structure, I first considered the flow of the battle—for example, I knew I wanted players to confront Bahamut alone at the end of the fight, and begin the battle with Twintania. When you think of Bahamut, I'm sure you think of the Seventh Umbral Era and the Calamity, so I aimed to use that to create a sense of drama in the structure. Thanks to that, there was a request* from Yoshida that I would have never expected, though....

In regards to the gameplay experience, the various "Trio" attacks and the Grand Octet fit this drama we hoped to create. I wanted players to experience the fun, the difficulty, and the overall cinematic elements of the Ultimate tier through these combo attacks unleashed by their foes. I ended up asking members of the development team who played the "Binding Coil of Bahamut" when it first came out during the 2.x series what the memorable mechanics (not necessarily difficult) of that content were, and picked out abilities that would be appropriate for these combo mechanics. I remember the work that went into taking the feedback and information and trying to piece it together like a puzzle in my mind.

I was happy to hear during the early planning stages that both the level designer and programmer who worked on the original "Binding Coil of Bahamut" were going to be joining me in the development of this new raid. I feel that because we were able to get some of the best staff members once again to build this new Coil, we were able to design a more elaborate level of difficulty.

*His request was the Phoenix resurrection element of the battle.

2. One particular mechanic players encountered was what is known by the community as "Nael's RP mechanic". This is where Nael performs a pattern of skills shortly after speaking and players had to discern which pattern of attacks were coming based on what the text says. While plenty

of mechanics have text that accompany them in the game, this time it was the only indication. What led to the decision to design this mechanic this way?

Kenji Sudo:

FFXIV version 1.0 also had a similar mechanic in the “The Raven, Nevermore” battle—the Nael in that battle would also unleash different attacks dependent on dialogue. We incorporated this mechanic directly from that battle into this new Nael fight.

I think players would agree this is a mechanic that defines Nael’s origin. However, the one concern we had in implementing this was we felt this might be received negatively by players. The mechanic was very hard to distinguish, and would never have been suitable for a normal difficulty boss battle. I still remember Yoshida’s and the battle team’s concern when I explained the idea to them. Yet I felt it was in Nael’s character to act in this way—quickly and without hesitation—and it would not be a true Nael fight if there were no memorable battle mechanics such as this. In the end, I took the chance and included it!

3. How did it feel when you had heard that the encounter had been cleared for the first time?

Kenji Sudo:

I was filled with quite a few thoughts when I heard the news: I was amazed by the group who was able to be the first to clear it, happy that the content I made was successfully bested, and thankful to those who were challenging it.

We took great care with the Unending Coil of Bahamut when it came to balance—more than any other content released until now—and I can imagine it was very dramatic for the world first team in the lead up to their victory.

I honestly had conflicting feelings, though. Of course I was pleased, as I said, but the developer in me couldn’t help but think, “So... it has finally been beaten.” This wasn’t so much a sense of defeat, but it was more of a sadness that I felt. It was the fact that the world first race was over, and having been involved from the early planning phases all the way up through the implementation and balancing, I felt like the job had finally been completed. Then again, maybe I wanted to bask in the tension for just a bit longer... It’s really quite difficult to put these feelings into words.

4. Yoshida explained before that initially Titan was going to be the first Ultimate encounter but that you really wanted the first Ultimate encounter to be Bahamut. Other than player nostalgia were there any other reasons you felt Bahamut needed to be first?

Kenji Sudo:

When I first heard about the “Ultimate” raid concept from Yoshida, there were two things that I felt I had to make a reality. The first was simply to ensure the fight was truly at an ultimate level of difficulty. The other was to project the feeling of an

“ultimate-class” boss to those playing the content, building excitement for what awaits the challengers through the enemies, environment, battle flow, music, and overall gameplay experience. As the first chapter in the Ultimate series, I thought there was no way I could have anything other than a Binding Coil of Bahamut related encounter, and so I pitched that idea to Yoshida.

5. Players are concerned that Bahamut being first may have set the bar a bit too high and that doing an Ultimate encounter on just a single primal like Titan couldn’t possibly feel as epic. Do you feel it’s still possible to produce an epic Ultimate encounter with only a single boss like Titan?

Kenji Sudo:

As you mentioned, it is definitely going to be a challenge to follow the Unending Coil of Bahamut with something like that. There are too many elements missing to have an encounter such as that fall in line with the concept of the Ultimate tier.

Just specifically with Titan, there are far too few elements that could be made more difficult than the Extreme version, and if we force it, we would lose the uniqueness of the Titan encounter. In my mind, Titan Extreme feels very complete—it would be difficult to dig any deeper. If we were to use Titan, I feel that somebody other than myself would serve best to create the content and bring a new gameplay experience to the players.

6. With the success of Ultimate, players are desiring content similar to it for other parts of the game, such as dungeons. Do you think or hope Yoshida-san would ever let you unleash one of your original dungeons creations before the balancing team does their work?

Kenji Sudo:

I don’t think Yoshida would allow it, but at the same time I don’t think I’d ever go seeking approval for that. If we’re going to be putting out content, refining it so that it appropriately matches the target audience and skill level is necessary. Truthfully speaking, the content is always impossible to clear before the balance team helps put in adjustments; we see it as an opportunity where us developers get to create wacky situations and laugh about it! (laughs)

7. This one is a bit more of a personal question. Yoshida-san himself has become sort of a rock star to FF14 and MMO fans due to his work as producer and director. Players are starting to respect your work in a similar fashion, with appreciation threads popping up on forums in your name. How does it feel as a developer to see players reacting in such a way to the content you create?

Kenji Sudo:

Something I always keep in mind when I’m creating content is to create something that players would remember—naturally, seeing reactions like these do make me happy.

However, it is impossible for just one person to make this happen, and this was only possible thanks to other teams within the development staff. The graphics team put up

with my crazy requests to create excitement through the amazing visual presentation and overall flow of the battle, the programming team constructed the complex battle mechanics, the sound team accommodated last-minute adjustments right up until the deadline—it was a collaborative effort between all of us. This being relayed to all of our players is really what makes me happy more than anything else.

8. Do you have anything you'd like to say to those players?

Kenji Sudo:

It has been four years since the rebirth of FFXIV, but I've helped create lots of battle content with Nakagawa (Mr. Ozma). Toward the end of 3.x, new members of staff were added, and now that 4.0 and 4.1 have been released, I'm sure more unique content that expresses our individuality will continue to be added, so I would love for people to keep an eye out for those and give us feedback. We will continue to bring excitement to FFXIV with our new teammates and you the players!

Thank you very much!

1. How does it feel when you see the work the balance team does? Do you even feel that certain content is toned down in difficulty too much when compared to what your originally envisioned?

Kenji Sudo:

Way more often than not, I feel I could've had more adjustments made beforehand. There are also times when I hear the points made by the Balance Adjustment Team, but I've noticed the same thing before they mentioned it, and so I feel I should've fixed it before it got to them. That's how much the Balance Adjustment Team thinks about how the gameplay feels and the overall balance, and they base their input on that thinking. I felt this especially with the Unending Coil of Bahamut. Had it not been for the Balance Adjustment Team, the DPS settings during the Golden Bahamut phase would not have been possible. I never felt that the content is toned down in difficulty too much. That's because from the planning stages, I think, "I'm sure it'll get toned down during the balance adjustment, anyway" as a come up with the content (laughs). That being said, as I work with the Balance Adjustment Team, there's no point in ruining the gameplay experience that I've initially imagined to be included, so I will debate with the Balance Adjustment Team in order to protect that element at all cost.

2. What is it particularly that you like about designing super difficult content? Do you prefer it over developing easier content?

In terms of super difficult content, if at all possible... I don't really want to make them (laughs). From the planning stages I'd have to fray my nerves to be careful; after implementation, I have to confirm a ton of things, like will the mechanics function as intended, or does it match with the picture; during adjustments, I would struggle with the intervals and numbers of the mechanics; after release, will people solve the mechanics as intended etc.; there would be a long period of

time where my heart will not be at rest! This struggle is very hard to bear! It's much more fun to create moderate-difficulty content that's not too high or too low on the difficulty level, such as normal versions of raids, or Extreme Primals (laughs).