

Bra★Bra Game Creator Interview

The Age of *Final Fantasy VII*

February 26, 2018

Final Fantasy VII Director: Yoshinori Kitase

Profile: Born in 1966, Kitase is currently working as producer for *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. He's been an active part of the *Final Fantasy* series ever since *V*, making his directorial debut with *Final Fantasy VI*. Since then, he's supervised the production of numerous titles in the series as director or producer. Noteworthy works include *Final Fantasy V*, *VI*, *VII*, *VIII*, *X*, *X-2*, *XIII*, *Mobius Final Fantasy*, and others.

Final Fantasy VII Scenario Writer: Kazushige Nojima

Profile: Joined Square Enix Holdings Co., Ltd., in 1995. During his time there, he took charge of scenario writing for *Final Fantasy VII*, *VIII*, *X*, and *X-2*. After retiring from the company, he worked as a freelancer and wrote the scenarios for *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*, *Mobius Final Fantasy*, and *Kingdom Hearts I* and *II*. Additionally, he's published three novels that link up with his work on games. He's also participated in a number of projects in various other fields, quietly building out his career. Over the past few years, he's been busy with work on *Final Fantasy*'s 30th anniversary, spending his days exploring distant memories. In his private life, he indulges his profound love of heavy metal music. He's built up quite a collection of electric guitars but isn't exactly an accomplished player.

Bra★Bra Executive Producer and *Final Fantasy VII* Composer: Nobuo Uematsu

Introduction

Interviewer: Thank you all for coming out.

Uematsu, Nojima, and Kitase: It's a pleasure to be here.

Interviewer: Bra★Bra Final Fantasy is now in its fourth year. With the theme of this season's live performance being *Final Fantasy VII*, Nojima and Kitase have graciously joined us to talk. First, I'd like to ask you two for your take on Bra★Bra Final Fantasy.

Kitase: Of course. I think that like the crystal that symbolizes it, *Final Fantasy* is a series with a well-established brand that gives people a sense of high quality and clarity. That's the aspect of the series that Distant Worlds [a live orchestral *Final Fantasy* performance that's been ongoing since 2007] emulates, whereas Bra★Bra has this image of coziness and intimacy with the audience.

Nojima: Like this feeling that everyone's doing what they want to [laughs]. When I was working with Uematsu on a video game music concert called Press Start: Symphony of Games,¹ he would propose all sorts of fun-sounding ideas, but it was just about impossible to get them implemented [laughs]. I get the impression he's executing them all now. Uematsu was always saying how

you've got to be one with the rest of the team. I'm glad he's found a place where he can make that happen!

Interviewer: Have you had a chance to see the performance?

Nojima: Not yet [laughs]. I'm afraid if I go they'll drag me on stage [laughs].

Interviewer: Well, please be sure to come to this next one! [laughs]. Now a question for you, Mr. Uematsu. This is the first time Bra★Bra has narrowed the scope of its performance to just one title—*Final Fantasy VII*. Was there anything you found different this time around compared to previous years?

Uematsu: I was really worried about how I should order the songs. In the past, like with *Best of Final Fantasy*, regardless of whether the first song came from *VIII* or the last one came from *III*, the basic approach was to order them based on melody. But working with *VII* alone like this, I had a really tough time putting the set list together, wondering whether it might be a good idea to perform the tracks in an order that lines up with the story. Since fans of *Final Fantasy VII* would no doubt be attending, I decided it was best to have the first song be something like “Opening - Bombing Mission” that would conform to the basic flow of the game's story, though there are places here and there where the order has been switched around to match melodies. Worrying about that kind of thing was something I hadn't experienced before.

Interviewer: You inevitably get that initial image of the train pulling into the station. Back to Mr. Nojima and Mr. Kitase—what are you two looking forward to in this year's live performance?

Nojima: I'm a fan of heavy metal music, and lately veteran bands have been giving performances where they play music from only one album. At first I was a little dubious, but when I actually went it turned out to be a lot of fun. I thought to myself, “Wow, Uematsu must already be a veteran if he's giving concerts that draw from just one title” [laughs].

Uematsu: [Laughs.] When I travel abroad for Distant Worlds, *VII*, *VIII*, *IX*, and *X* are far and away the most popular. For some reason, *VII* is up there with those other ones. I'm not sure what it is that attracts listeners to it, but you can't argue with the facts. So that gives me some sense of confidence that *VII* is a good one to focus on.

Interviewer: After *VII*, will we get dedicated concerts for *VIII*, *IX* and *X*?

Uematsu: It's a possibility, though I haven't given the future all that much thought [laughs]. First we'll have to see how this one is received. If it's this stressful every year, I don't know if I could keep it up. Maybe next year I should take a more relaxed approach [laughs]. A greatest hits mashup from our previous programs or something like that. In the meantime I could think about what to do for year six. If I have to do something new every year, I won't be able to catch my breath [laughs].

Why *Final Fantasy VII*?

Kitase: Right now I'm in the middle of producing *Final Fantasy VII Remake*. Although Uematsu has been involved in all sorts of games, I haven't had a chance to work with him

directly since *Final Fantasy X*. When I first went to Uematsu to ask if he'd do music for the remake, I was worried he might shoot me down seeing as he'd already left Square Enix and was thriving with his own projects.

Everyone: [Laughs.]

Kitase: That's what I thought at least, but I guess the word "*VII*" is a powerful thing. He got this twinkle in his eyes [laughs], and I could tell he was extremely interested in doing it. But that's speaking about the game. As for Bra★Bra, I've been feeling really motivated working with *VII* this time, so when Uematsu asked me if I could find time in my schedule to help out with the production, I gladly accepted.

Interviewer: Since *X*, you say. So it's already been 16 years.

Uematsu: Right, because that was 2002. Man, it feels like just the other day. Until *X*, I'd been really closely involved with the games' music production. I have unique memories of each one, but *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy X* had a feel and lore to their worlds that was rare for the day. With most games you might start with a basic story like rescuing a princess. By comparison, the way *VII* ponders the nature of life and *X*'s uniquely Japanese world and setting feel overly ambitious for the medium. When you really get down to it, it's that sense of anticipation that gaming is being pushed to the next level. I'm hoping that Square Enix will once again step up and take that challenge on.

Kitase: [Laughs.] Back then, that world setting and lore originated from [*Final Fantasy VII* producer and *Final Fantasy X* executive producer Hironobu] Sakaguchi's concept of the "life of the planet." Nojima then expanded on that idea to give us what we have now, so in that sense he's a vital member of the team [laughs].

Nojima: There was that initial world premise Sakaguchi thought up for *Final Fantasy VII* about "life cycling the planet." When it came time for *Final Fantasy X*, I wanted to depart from that somehow, so I considered all sorts of alternatives. But somehow I came full circle and realized the foundation was really the same [laughs]. Since then, I've come to recognize how amazing Sakaguchi is [laughs]. I figured, "Well, I should stop trying to do things differently." It was like he improved on the Western Lariat and came up with the Neckbreaker² [laughs]. I was totally taken aback when it hit me.

Uematsu: [Laughs.] They did strike me as almost identical. I feel like it's a good thing for his ideas and values to be somewhere inside the games. After all, it wouldn't be *Final Fantasy* without them—and then you wouldn't be able to sell anything! [laughs]. I hope you'll take that tack again with the next new *Final Fantasy*!

The music of Nobuo Uematsu

Interviewer: This is a question for Mr. Nojima and Mr. Kitase. Which of Uematsu's *Final Fantasy VII* compositions would you say has left the strongest impression on you? I'd also be very happy to hear about any other experiences you had with the music from other games.

Kitase: *Final Fantasy V* was my first time working with Uematsu. The song that surprised me the most was “Musica Machina,” which plays in the Ronka Ruins. I’d never heard music like that in a video game before. The song did an incredible job of bringing out imagery of the gears you see in these ruins, which are floating in the air thanks to some ancient mechanical technology. I marveled at how music could sync up so well with the environment. My experience with *VII* was totally different, though [laughs]. I still remember how surprised I was as someone now doing the work when I first tried matching the music to the images.

Interviewer: You must have been thinking how amazing Uematsu is. How about *VII*, though?

Kitase: Well, before that let me talk about *VI* [laughs]. In that one, there’s an opera scene: the “Opera Maria and Draco.” The songs sort of conjure up the lyrics for you. With those, we got the tunes down first and then added in the words. *VII*’s music ended up being pretty middle-of-the-road, but I do like “One-Winged Angel.” Also, while we’re on the topic of production, back then we were working on the game while the music was still incomplete, and there was that scene in the second half where we find out who Cloud really is. There was a song Uematsu had already written, and without knowing what part of the game it went with, I decided, “Oh, this one will work,” and stuck it there. It turned out it was the world map music [laughs]. That measure of gentle melody that plays right when Cloud takes his helmet off is what made me decide to use the song. I remember when I realized what I’d done later. I was like, “Is that okay?” [laughs]. As someone who helped produce the game, I have a strong attachment to the songs I personally applied to certain scenes. Though the process may have been somewhat arbitrary, in my mind they matched the visuals.

Interviewer: Mr. Uematsu, would you say you had a firm grasp of the game’s world and lore, such that you were gearing certain songs toward certain scenes?

Uematsu: Keep in mind the game wasn’t in a fully assembled state. I got to see the backgrounds and the characters, but I didn’t know how the drama would unfold or how we arrived at a given scene, so I had to work with whatever scenario I’d been handed. If it was a hit, good—if not, then I had to rethink things. The first song I wrote for *Final Fantasy VII* was that world map theme Kita-chan [Kitase] mentioned earlier. When I made that track, I thought, “Alright, this’ll do.” The set piece was a log cabin in an American prairie. There’s a family living there, but the members are all separated due to various circumstances. After all sorts of drama, they return to the house, and it ends with this recognition that ultimately there’s nothing more wonderful than family. That’s the sort of mood I was after when I wrote that song [laughs]. When I made it, I thought if there were one song that could symbolize all of *Final Fantasy VII*, it would be this one. In it, I was able to include a range of joys and anxieties people feel over the course of their lives—sorrow, happiness, a sense of things turning out as they’re meant to. I thought that if I could just get a song like that in the bag, the rest would be easy. The battles were more... [mimes playing the guitar]. Just wailing away got me most of the way there [laughs].

Nojima: Uematsu had actually written “This’ll do” on the sheet music [laughs]. I used to visit his room all the time without asking so I could relax and smoke cigarettes. And he’d put the sheet music above his keyboard, and it had that written on it [laughs].

Uematsu: Yeah, I think I used to write those sorts of comments.

Nojima: I don't know how to read sheet music, so "This'll do" was the only thing I could understand.

Interviewer: So, Mr. Nojima, which song would you say is your favorite?

Nojima: I also have fond memories from development, but for me it's the synthesized³ version of "Prelude" that's used in *Final Fantasy VII*. That track wasn't included till the end of development, right when [*Final Fantasy VII* art director Yūsuke] Naora was showing off a demo build of the final release. At that time I was super busy. It was extremely fun and all, but sometimes it could be grueling, and I'd sort of lose the thread of what I was doing [laughs]. But then that song started playing....

Uematsu: It's soothing, isn't it? [laughs].

Nojima: Yeah. When the strings drifted in, I felt this sense of healing—like I was being cheered up. I thought, "I'm creating something incredible. I just need to put my head down and try a little harder." I know I'm spilling my guts here [laughs]. I've loved music and listened to it as long as I can remember, but I'd never experienced anything like that before.

Uematsu: Oh, was today the big confessional? [laughs]. No, but that song was actually supposed to be played with higher-quality sounds. The capacity of these game consoles is constantly expanding, you know? The sound quality gets better, the picture sharper. But pretty sounds inevitably need time to load, and I wasn't having that. Imagine being like, "Final boss, let's go!" only to see: "Loading...." So I spoke with the programmers and we decided to use the built-in sound source.⁴ A system that lets you play without frustrating interruptions even when the music changes! "This is it!" I thought, and I plunked "One-Winged Angel" right down in that Sephiroth battle. And so the time came. "Final boss!" I thought. The music started playing right away... but there was no picture [laughs]. The screen was pitch black [laughs].

Everyone: [Roars with laughter.]

Uematsu: After a few seconds the picture finally came back [laughs]. I was like, "The hell did I do all that work for? What a let down!"

Kitase: The visuals couldn't keep up [laughs].

Uematsu: They used so much damn space! [laughs]. That's why *Final Fantasy VII*'s sound quality is kind of poor compared to other PlayStation games. It's incredibly compressed.

Interviewer: But it seems like you increased the range of sounds you were using. [Takanori] Sunagawa, a trumpet player in the Siena [Wind Orchestra], mentioned how difficult it's been. Would you say your use of brass instruments increased?

Uematsu: It definitely became easier to bring out those brass sounds than it had been.

Interviewer: When I talked with the Siena crew, they also said they're dealing with more woodwind sounds than before.

Uematsu: I didn't really have any choice but to use the sounds that worked best with the hardware. But hey, I chipped in with reducing the load times by having everything compressed [laughs]... not that anyone ever gave me credit [laughs]. I used up quite a lot of space in *Final Fantasy VIII*, though [laughs]. *VIII* sounds pretty damn good!

Kitase: I had no idea [laughs]. This is the first I'm hearing of it.

Nojima: That reminds me... When Uematsu had finished building out the framework for "One-Winged Angel," he let us have a listen. I remember the smug face he made. The song hadn't even started playing yet and he was already wearing that look.

Uematsu: Seriously? Man, I had confidence, huh? I always made sure to put my all into the final boss music. I approached it hoping to make the new track better than the last—*VI*'s better than *V*'s, *VII*'s better than *VI*'s. *VI*'s final boss track was super long, and I divided it up into four different songs. I knew one-upping it in *VII* was going to be a tough task, so I decided to change the whole way I approached it. Every morning when I got to work, I'd boot up my PC, picture Sephiroth in my mind's eye, and key in whatever musical phrase came to me on the synthesizer. It would be something short—three or four measures. If nothing came to mind, I'd stop trying for the day. After about three weeks of continually doing that, I'd amassed quite a few phrases, so it was time to begin the work of permutations and combinations. I chose an intro for the song, then chose a phrase to attach to it. That's how I built it out, with a sort of experimental music approach. I'd done such a clever job of stitching everything together that the average listener wouldn't have any idea where one phrase ended and the next began—or at least that's how I felt. I think I must have been really puffed up about using that compositional method and including a chorus in one of my tracks for the first time [laughs].

Everyone: [Laughs.]

Uematsu: But at first the song was poorly received by the development team. They were like, "We don't really get what you're going for here."

Kitase: Right, I remember.

Uematsu: Back then it was easier for people to understand heroic melodies. This song started with a rather distressing $\flat 13^5$ chord, and there was no fluid melody anywhere, you know what I mean? I was a little shocked when they told me they didn't get it. But then a few days later, they came to me and said, "We finally understand! This track is amazing!" At that point I figured the song must be a little hard to wrap your head around. It can take time to get used to jarring or strange-sounding music.

The idiosyncrasies and methodologies of creators

Nojima: This is something I've been thinking about in hindsight after helping make several *Final Fantasy* games. When people would tell me "This won't work" or "I don't quite understand this," if I stayed confident in myself and held my ground, the detractors would gradually stop saying anything about it. And now after 10 or 20 years, those parts of the games are what everyone remembers, you know? They've really stuck with fans.

Uematsu: You're what we'd call an eccentric [laughs].

Nojima: You think so, huh?

Uematsu: I think you've got to have peculiarities like that. People like to remove those sorts of burrs,⁶ you know? To smooth things down. Refining what you have is all well and good when it

comes to creating a product, but when you cut out the things that give it charm, you end up erasing the individuality of the people who made it. You don't want to sanitize every last thing. I think it's better to leave those odd bits and bobs—those parts that make people consider the motivations of the people behind the game. In today's world the works you see lack individuality. There's no charm or quirkiness to them—everything is the same. And I think there's an insidious sort of connection there with that process of refinement.

Kitase: As we create the remake for *VII*, we're seeing all sorts of opinions being expressed online. So the development team is paying a lot of attention to realism and continuity with things like the scenario, just really making sure everything is consistent. Or do you think fans don't actually care about that at all? [laughs].

Everyone: [Laughs.]

Nojima: Directors and programming leads like to say that a game's no fun if it isn't all airtight [laughs]. But I'm like, "If the protagonist acts all normal, it won't be interesting. It's this weird way he acts here that qualifies him to be the main character!" You get those sorts of conversations all the time at various companies [laughs].

Kitase: I get what you're saying. The world is filled with all types of people. Some of them like crazy, incoherent stories, and others prefer tight narratives with good consistency.

Interviewer: Would the same apply to setting and backstory?

Kitase: I think it holds true there as well. I mean, isn't your biggest objective with a mystery story to make people feel like things are strange? If you want the audience thinking along those lines, then adding in all sorts of backstory is bound to detract from the mystery [laughs]. There are moments here and there where we'll feel satisfied when people feel a sense of mystery, if only briefly. But gradually those get more and more spoiled. That's how I see it at least.

Nojima: You know that Kubrick film called *The Shining*,⁷ right? That movie is chock full of mysteries, none of which gets answered, so you have various people with various interpretations of it. And apparently those interpretations have themselves been made into a movie [Rodney Ascher's 2012 *Room 237*]. That's really interesting to me. Stuff like, "What is this design or pattern that keeps cropping up?" I sort of aspire to that kind of thing [laughs].

Uematsu: Yeah, I get that sort of stuff.

Nojima: I've suddenly realized I'm always explaining things. Both me and the protagonist [laughs].

Uematsu: That's totally how it is these days, isn't it? You know [game creator] Yoshirō Kimura? He was around back in the days of Square. He made this game called *Million Onion Hotel* and brought it to me to playtest. And so I played it, but I had absolutely no idea what I was doing [laughs]. There was zero in the way of exposition. When I told him so, he was like, "Yeah, that's what I was shooting for." With today's games, you can see what they're doing right out of the gate. Don't you think games like that are kind of boring? Well, I guess it's not my place to say [laughs]. But maybe there are other people out there right now who think the same way.

The music of Nobuo Uematsu, revisited

Interviewer: Circling back... [laughs]. Are there any other songs that have proven memorable for you?

Nojima: I thought Uematsu's arranged album, *Final Fantasy IV: Celtic Moon*, was really fantastic. Back when I was listening to it I was still just a fan of the games.

Uematsu: I started recording that one in Dublin, Ireland, right after my work on *IV* was finished. It was a little too early for its time, though. Celtic music hadn't yet come into vogue. Back then, nobody had any familiarity with the whole sound and experience of Irish music, so at first it didn't do so hot with the folks at the company [laughs]. But there were people who played *IV* back then and started making Irish music⁸ in a similar vein after listening to that album. Those artists are now active at the top level of the industry in Japan. When the staff of *Untitled Concert*⁹ interviewed them during a special on Celtic music, they all mentioned my name, after which the show staff rushed over to interview me as well [laughs].

Interviewer: I'd expect no less.

Nojima: I think I must have listened to music from Gary Moore and Thin Lizzy¹⁰ for the same reason, thinking, "Man, these Irish melodies are so cool" [laughs].

Uematsu: My first exposure was Enya,¹¹ and I remember thinking to myself, "Wow, Ireland's got music like this?"

Nojima: I also remember we had our marketing lead putting titles to the songs on the soundtrack. When I invited him to come out for a drink, he was just in the process of thinking up a title for "One-Winged Angel." I wanted to hurry up and grab drinks [laughs], so I said, "Why don't you just go with 'Sephiroth's Theme?'" to which he replied, "But then everyone would find out the final boss is Sephiroth" [laughs]. The soundtrack went on sale at the same time as the game, you see.

Uematsu: Amazing.

Nojima: There were actually a few times he couldn't come drinking because he was stuck like that, squinting at Excel trying to come up with a name for each track [laughs].

Uematsu: The title suits the game, though, doesn't it? I'm glad it's not "Sephiroth's Theme."

Nojima: I'm really glad it isn't [laughs].

Uematsu: Well thank him for adding it to the track! Kenny Omega, who competes in the New Japan Pro Wrestling league, and who's now my number one wrestler, has a signature move called the One-Winged Angel¹² [laughs].

Kitase: Is there some connection there? [laughs].

Uematsu: I suppose there must be. Anyway, these days I can only perform that song as an encore [laughs]. The audience won't go home until we play it. That and *X*'s "To Zanarkand" are SOP at this point.

Nojima: "To Zanarkand" is another song I remember well from *X*. But that's because whenever I tell Uematsu what a good song it is, he always says something like, "Yeah, I just slapped that one together easy peasy" [laughs].

Uematsu: No, no, that's not how it went with "To Zanarkand." I was asked to write that one for a flutist named Kazunori Seo so he could play it at his big homecoming recital after touring in France. But I figured such a sad melody wouldn't suit a victory celebration like that, so I decided to file it away. Then one day, Kita-chan was like, "Hurry up, I need a song" [laughs].

Kitase: [Laughs.] So that song was meant for the flute, huh?

First encounters on the eve of *Final Fantasy VII*

Interviewer: Thank you all again for being here. Mr. Uematsu, at the time, you'd been at Square [now Square Enix] the longest. What impression did you have when you first met Nojima and Kitase?

Uematsu: I want to say I first saw Kita-chan on *Ebi Ten*. He was one of the guys on there [laughs].

Kitase: Whenever I talk with someone who was around back then, I get to take a walk down memory lane [laughs]. A while back there was this show called *Ikasu Bando Tengoku* where amateur bands would perform. Later, they made a version of the show for filmmakers called *Ebizori Kyoshō Tengoku*,¹³ and I was a contestant on it. I still get teased about that all the time [laughs].

Uematsu: Because of that, I've always thought of him as someone who wants to make movies. Even now, that image hasn't changed. You are a big movie fan, aren't you?

Kitase: That I am. Though I haven't had the chance to watch many lately.

Uematsu: I don't really have any memories of you from when we were making *V*, though....

Kitase: Sakaguchi and I were both in charge of events, but since Sakaguchi was at the helm, I never had any direct communication with Uematsu.

Interviewer: He was kind of on a higher plane, huh?

Uematsu: No, no, it wasn't anything like that [laughs]. The first time I worked with him was on *VI*. We made "Opera [Maria and Draco]" together. And then starting with the next game, he suddenly shot up in terms of importance [laughs].

Kitase: Come on, no I didn't [laughs]. Sakaguchi's scenario for that opera scene was really brief. He'd written only one sentence: "Various things happen at the Opera House, ending with Celes being abducted" [laughs]. I thought I'd expand on that, so I got together with Uematsu and the art director at the time and we came up with a plan, which I then explained to Sakaguchi. After that, he told me I should check out a real opera performance.... In the end, I never got the time to go see one [laughs], but I still managed to make that event based on my own imagination.

Uematsu: The great Kōichi Sugiyama used to play *Final Fantasy* games all the time, and he said to me, "You wrote that scene without knowing anything about opera, didn't you?" He saw right through us [laughs]. I wonder where we slipped up [laughs].

Kitase: [Laughs.] I was actually inspired by a Hitchcock movie for that scene, and designed it with the Royal Albert Hall in mind. With the 2011 Distant Worlds concert, I got to see it

performed at the actual Royal Albert Hall.¹⁴ I was finally able to experience a real opera 15 years later. I'm truly grateful to Uematsu for making that happen.

Interviewer: How about Nojima?

Uematsu: I took notice of Nojima less at work than when we were out drinking beer. He was a guy who could go all night when it came to beer, rock, and pro wrestling [laughs].

Nojima: There was a CD shop at the top of the hill when you left the company building,¹⁵ and Uematsu would always be there without fail [laughs]. I was like, "Is he the owner?" There wouldn't be anything I particularly wanted, but I figured I may as well buy something seeing as I'd come all that way. So a lot of the time I left with some CD I didn't really understand [laughs]. But my first encounter with him at work was when he asked me to explain *Final Fantasy VII*'s scenario to him. I already knew who he was, of course, but I hadn't realized he was such a big rock fan. His office was packed with rock CDs, plus all these instruments and books on the occult I didn't really understand [laughs]. I was like, "Man, this sure is a nice office." After that, I started popping in all the time and making a nuisance of myself.

Interviewer: You'd go just because you felt like it, even if you didn't have a meeting scheduled?

Nojima: Yup. And he always warmly welcomed me [laughs].

Uematsu: Were you there in the studio that time I was jamming with [former Square Enix game creator and guitarist Michio] Okamiya and those guys?

Nojima: Yeah, I was. You played "Highway Star."¹⁶

Uematsu: Oh yeah, that's right. So long as you've got rock, beer, and wrestling, what else do you need in life? [laughs]. We haven't had a drink together lately, though.

Nojima: I think we've already had this discussion before, but I'll talk about it again anyway [laughs].

[Editing department note: Hereafter, an exchange about pro wrestling spiraled into a heated debate about the differences between martial arts and showmanship fighting. Although it proved the most exciting part of the conversation, it digressed so far from the main thread of the interview that we regrettably had to omit it.]

Final Fantasy VII: A beast that threatens to swallow its creators

Interviewer: Okay, back to *Final Fantasy VII* [laughs].... I'm sure you've been asked this plenty of times before, but could you share what *Final Fantasy VII* means to each of you today, more than 20 years after it was released?

Uematsu: I think it was the first *Final Fantasy* to reach a global audience. And I was happy to see that the game's content was correspondingly challenging. It wasn't the same old fantasy we'd seen up till then. Like I said before, it had a more philosophical slant in the way it explored the nature of life. It brought me pride seeing a game with a uniquely Japanese worldview be recognized around the globe. It led me to realize the things that resonate with people all over the world.

Kitase: I worked on the original in real time, so to me it's just one of the many games I've helped make over the course of my career. However, a lot of the staff working on *Final Fantasy VII Remake* were children at the time, and they experienced its impact as players. So I feel like for them, *VII* is this sort of deified title. I'm really grateful for the acclaim fans have brought to the game and for the attachments they've formed with it. That said, speaking as a producer, I'd like for them to keep in mind that we're working with a living, breathing story. If you sacralize it too much, you'll lose that feeling of animation and adaptability. In that sense, I think it's become an incredibly difficult title to work with. For people who were born in that generation and grew up and joined the game industry, I think it's only natural. Like Uematsu said earlier, this is a game that has established itself over 20 years. But in order to deliver a masterpiece to our audience, we must not hesitate to roll up our sleeves and get to work. We need to strike a balance between that sense of divinity in the source material and the feeling that we're working with a live canvas.

Interviewer: I can hardly wait! Moving on to you, Mr. Nojima.

Nojima: How many years has it been? 1997... so that makes 21 years. "What a scenario that must have been to write, having such a tragic heroine!" Someone tells me that at least once a year [laughs]. I'm like, "Alright, I get it already" [laughs]. But I guess it was just that memorable for people. At the end of the day, I was on the inside looking out, so I really don't know how to evaluate the game. I really couldn't tell you what it is that makes it so good. I get plenty of chances to look back over the scenario here and there, and there are lots of places where I think, "Oh, I should have done this instead." But I'm pretty sure that if I'd fixed those parts, things wouldn't have turned out as well.

Interviewer: It would have removed those burrs Uematsu mentioned, right? The parts that bear the person's individuality?

Nojima: No, well, I can't really distinguish the unique touches from simple mistakes [laughs]. But this game is like a monster I'm always fighting. Sometimes it seems like it'll swallow me up.

Uematsu: It's true. Those of us creating the game on the inside couldn't objectively tell you what it was like. We just made it as we were told [laughs].

Kitase: As you were told, huh? [laughs].

Uematsu: [Laughs.] We were told, "Here's the scenario, here are some pictures, this is the world and setting" [laughs]. And from there you don't really have a choice but keep on trying your hardest every day until the game is completed, you know? You don't get a chance to step back and take everything in.

Secret stories from production

Nojima: There's no question I thought it was all interesting while I was making it. But I was quite a different person back then [laughs]. Now I look back and wonder why I thought some things were a good idea.

Kitase: Up till Nojima joined us to help out with *VII*, Sakaguchi had been writing the scenarios, and I feel like what changed most was the heroine. I think with male scenario writers, the heroine is where their thoughts and sensibilities come out the most. Maybe this isn't the best analogy, but Sakaguchi's scenarios had this really heroic heroine with a strong will and sense of inner fortitude, along the lines of Nausicaä.¹⁷ But with Nojima I feel like that changed.

Nojima: So, around the beginning of production, when I asked Kitase to read over the dialogue for some scenes with Cloud, Tifa, and Aerith, he told me, "It's like I'm hearing your voice in all of them" [laughs].

Kitase: [Laughs.] I said that?

Nojima: And so I completely changed the way Aerith and Tifa spoke. At the time I thought I'd gotten a certain flow down with what I'd written, so I was like, "Ugh, why did you have to tell me that now?" [laughs]. But because of that, I came up with those two very polar ways Aerith and Tifa have of talking. Aerith speaks very strangely, but back then everything was just text, so people could sort of internalize her voice as they played. When I listen to how fans of Aerith try to emulate her speech 10 or 20 years later, I think, "Wait, that's not right" [laughs]. They all say how great some scene was and read the text, but then they each use a different speech pattern. It's really interesting.

Interviewer: It's really a subjective sort of game, isn't it?

Uematsu: But the way characters spoke was really important to how I went about creating their theme songs. All I had to infer the feel and personality of the characters were the scenario and the pictures Tetsu [*Final Fantasy VII* character designer Tetsuya Nomura] had drawn.

Kitase: Did you already know the tragedy that would unfold when you were composing "Aerith's Theme"?

Uematsu: No, I didn't. There's this scene in the game where her mother is waiting for a train at the station. I think the track is used there. I wrote that song based on that scene and the little note [*Final Fantasy VII* event planner Motomu] Toriyama—who made the event—had attached to it.

Nojima: All we had back then was the text, so you could tell which character was speaking just by reading it. So with [the masculine first-person pronoun] *ore*, for instance, I'd differentiate by using hiragana, katakana, or kanji. Of course that made debugging a pain [laughs]. Also, when I first saw Aerith's 3D model, she seemed to have this sort of rigidity to her, so I figured she must have a particularly brisk, assertive personality [laughs].

Kitase: That's because she was made of polygons [laughs].

Nojima: And then when I saw her in *AC* [*Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*], I realized, "Oh, so she's got this sort of gentle vibe to her" [laughs].

Kitase: Of course she does [laughs].

Nojima: It was a real shock. She has a very feminine build.

Interviewer: Do you find yourself rereading the scenario or repeatedly consulting visuals as you write your songs?

Uematsu: No, I don't spend that much time looking at things. I just glance at them. If I'm really strapped for time I'll just read the scenario as I make the music. This is when I really don't have the time. And I'll get right to making it [laughs]. I'll be playing notes as I read.

Interviewer: So it sounds like Nojima's scenario is important.

Uematsu: It's super important.

Nojima: In the past I'd write the scenario as I worked on the game, and I'd sprinkle in so many mysteries that I wouldn't be able to resolve all of them [laughs]. I'd be like, "Oh man, how am I going to bring this all together?"

Kitase: Back then Nojima wasn't just writing the scenario but doing the actual work of implementing it into the game. Under normal circumstances he'd write all the way up to the conclusion and then share what he had with everyone else, but we were forced to start making the game before he could get to that point [laughs]. It proved to be really tiring work.

Nojima: Yeah, it was pretty rough. Uematsu and the other people involved with the sound get their work done fast, don't they? And they know the games best. Whenever I come to Uematsu for advice he'll bring all sorts of things to my attention. He's the first to give me feedback and point stuff out.

Uematsu: For the last month or so I'll constantly be playing the game. I'll prop my feet up on my desk [laughs]. But I make sure to have plenty of toilet paper on hand. For all the crying I do [laughs].

Everyone: [Laughs.]

Uematsu: I always cry when I play *Final Fantasy*.

Kitase: When you're playing, are there ever times when you think, "This isn't the right song for this scene"?

Uematsu: There are. I swap things around sometimes. Just a bit here and there.

Nojima: Here and there? More like all the time [laughs]. See, at first we won't have song titles, only file names, so there's no indication of what scene the song is for. And so the person in charge of an event scene will just stick in whatever song sounds right to them. Then as they continue working, it becomes impossible for that event lead to consider having any song other than the one they chose. It's at that point Uematsu will say, "Oh, hey, mind swapping out this track here?" [laughs].

Kitase: But it's already linked with the picture they have in their head [laughs].

Nojima: You'll realize why he did it when you take a look later on, but in the moment...

Interviewer: It just feels off?

Nojima: Exactly.

The rise of the young creators

Interviewer: Beginning with *Final Fantasy VI*, you had this period where young creators like Kitase, Nojima, Nomura, Naora, and Toriyama were all rising to prominence. What was the general atmosphere back in those days?

Uematsu: With all the young people, you mean? Well, up until about *VI*, I'd work all-nighters with Sakaguchi, but I think around the time of *VII* he took off for Hawaii.¹⁸

Kitase: Yeah, it was right around then.

Uematsu: And so he wasn't really a part of our team anymore. Were people like Tetsu there back during *VI*?

Kitase: It was around *VI* they started to play a noticeable role.

Uematsu: But so Sakaguchi was suddenly no longer there. The cat was finally away and the mice could play [laughs]. And the energy felt pretty good after that, didn't it? I think *VII* really isn't a Sakaguchi *Final Fantasy* world—in a good way.

Interviewer: But the underlying foundation is the same, isn't it?

Nojima: In my opinion, yes. Sakaguchi truly is one of the greats.

Interviewer: There were also plenty of composers among those young people rising to prominence.

Uematsu: Let's see.... Back during *VII* we had [Yasunori] Mitsuda, Itoken [Kenji Itō], Kiku-chan [Hiroki Kikuta], [Noriko] Matsueda, [Yōko] Shimomura, and [Masashi] Hamauzu, to name a few.

Interviewer: That must have been a blast!

Uematsu: It was one prodigy after another. I've got a pretty good eye for talent, after all [laughs]. Although Shimomura was already famous from her time in Osaka. Oh, and we had [Hitoshi] Sakimoto, too.

A message to all those attending

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time. To finish up, would you each mind sharing a few words with everyone in the audience?

Kitase: You'll hear a variety of songs performed, but no doubt everyone is looking forward to those major *Final Fantasy VII* tracks. If I might address the audience here, *VII* was groundbreaking in how it cast a corporation [the Shinra Electric Power Company] as the enemy, so I hope you'll keep an ear out for the various Shinra songs we've picked out for you.

Nojima: That's right. I'm also really looking forward to this *VII* concert and its wind orchestra arrangements. I'm planning to bring a trumpet for my instrument. I hope everyone has a wonderful time!

Uematsu: Since this is a *VII*-themed concert, I'm sure many people are expecting the songs to proceed according to the story. Due to constraints on time and what we're able to play, we won't be able to follow the story to a T, but I think that hearing this concert will transport you back to the world of *VII*. I hope you all have a great time!

1. Press Start: Symphony of Games - An orchestral video game music concert introduced in 2006, Press Start breaks free from console limitations and development constraints. The five

producers in charge are Taizō Takemoto (conductor), Masahiro Sakurai (game designer), Nobuo Uematsu (composer), Shōgo Sakai (composer), and Kazushige Nojima (scenario writer).

2. Western Lariat, Neckbreaker - Both are wrestling moves. The Western Lariat is a signature strike made famous by Stan Hansen.

3. Synthesized - Created through generated tones, as seen in electronic music. Also used to describe the process of creating data to play a programmed piece of music.

4. Built-in sound source - Game consoles feature a sort of built-in instrument (a synthesizer) that generates sound signals. With their built-in sound sources, the NES could play back three simultaneous notes while the SNES could play back eight. Although the PlayStation and later consoles came equipped with this hardware, they gradually shifted to a playback method similar to CDs. However, as mentioned above, *Final Fantasy VII* made use of the console's built-in sound source to cut down on load times.

5. ♭ 13 - One of the chord tensions. The ♭ 13 chord is one octave above the root chord.

6. Burrs - Protrusions that arise during the processing of material. They might be removed with a file or other tool.

7. Kubrick's *The Shining* - Stanley Kubrick's 1980 horror film adaptation of Stephen King's novel of the same name. Jack Nicholson's compelling performance and the movie's cryptic feel garnered much praise and speculation.

8. Celtic music, Irish music - In Japan, the music of Ireland and the other Celtic nations is often referred to collectively as Celtic music. However, because the genre includes music derived specifically from Ireland's unique native culture, some people like to avoid placing Irish music in the same category as music from other Celtic nations, such as Scotland.

9. *Untitled Concert special on Celtic music* - "A Relaxing Day of Celtic Music," broadcast on the morning of December 23, 2017. Performances included "Harvest" from *Final Fantasy V* and "The Forgotten Words" from *Grimms Notes*, composed by Mirai Kodai Orchestra, one of whose members is Taketeru Sunamori, the supervisor for this pamphlet.

10. Gary Moore, Thin Lizzy - Gary Moore (1952–2011) was a rock guitarist from Northern Ireland. Thin Lizzy is a rock band, also from Ireland, known for its twin guitars and incorporation of traditional Irish music.

11. Enya - An Irish singer with many tech-heavy compositions that have a basis in Irish music. Her song "Orinoco Flow" became an international hit.

12. Kenny Omega's signature One-Winged Angel move - Kenny Omega's finishing hold. Evidently it really was inspired by *Final Fantasy VII*.

13. *Ebitori Kyoshō Tengoku* - The successor to *Miyake Yūji no Ikasu Bando Tengoku* (also known as *Ika Ten*). Airing from January 12, 1991, to September 28 of the same year, this TV show featured amateur filmmakers who competed against one another with three-minute shorts of their own making.

14. Performed at the actual Royal Albert Hall - *Final Fantasy VI*'s "Opera Maria and Draco" continues to be a popular Distant Worlds song, and has been performed all over the world.

15. Company building - At the time, Square was located at the Meguro Arco Tower.

16. “Highway Star” - A hit song from the rock band Deep Purple.

17. Nausicaä - The heroine of the 1984 theatrical animated film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

18. Hawaii - At the time, Square also had a development studio in Honolulu, Hawaii.