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Xenosaga II, Developer's Interview

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Producer

**Tomohiro
Hagiwara**

Producer for this game.
Monolith Soft employee.
Mainly in charge of
collaboration with external
staff. He was production
manager for EPI.

Director

Kou Arai

Director for this game.
Monolith Soft employee. He
was in charge of dungeon
and town planning for EPI.

About the themes of the work

"What is right, and what is wrong" and the like
As a rule, I think that's hard to judge (Arai)

First of all, I'd like to ask you about the subtitle for "Xenosaga Episode II" (EPII from here on), "Beyond Good and Evil [lit.: The Equinox of Good and Evil]".

Arai: Just going by the meaning of the words, it means something like "the boundary of good and evil". But I think what Takahashi (original plan/director) wanted to convey was how hard it is to judge "what is right, and what is wrong". That is to say, it's about how what is "right or wrong" for a person to do might change according to that person's viewpoint and the values of the time.

For example, Albedo lives according to his emotions, and resolutely causes trouble for others [that way]. But in all honesty, isn't that the most human way to live your life? That is one way you could look at it. Jr. is also under a lot of stress from his feelings, but since he has unshakeable convictions, he reconciles himself to his feelings...

But I don't think it's a simple matter of being able to say that "Albedo is evil and Jr. is good".

Was there agreement within the staff about how to interpret that subtitle?

Arai: The subtitle was something Takahashi decided on, so we talked about its contents with him at an early stage. But basically, I think this [subtitle] was something Takahashi intended to apply not just to EPII, but to "Xenosaga Episode I" (EPI from here on), and everything to do with the world of Xenosaga from here on out. I think he intended this not just to refer to the trio of Jr., Albedo and Gaignun who will take center stage this time, but to include characters whose stories still haven't ended, and to be something he'd like you to reflect on when the story comes to its final conclusion.

Does this apply to the "The Will to Power", the subtitle to EPI too?

Arai: Yes, I'd say so. In my opinion, "The Will to Power" applies to the whole story. Naturally, since it has that subtitle, it's important to the story of EPI itself, but at the same time it is something that applies to the entire story.

So in the context of "Beyond Good and Evil", the ones who formed the core of the story were Jr., Albedo and Gaignun?

Arai: We focused on those in EPII, so if pressed I'd say that's right.

In Takahashi's original plan, there were some characters who were going to be mains, and we felt the Zohar was central to them, so they ended up being like souls with various connections tying them together. In the process of undoing those connections, this time we'll [focus on] those three and Sakura, who got tangled up with them. That close relationship between Sakura and MOMO is where the form of MOMO's relationship with Ziggy comes from. Actually, in that way we decided it made sense to end [lit.: cut] EPII that way.

We also had some reflections from EPI, where it ended as everything was proceeding as usual. We heard from all the people who played it that it was [a] hard [decision] to understand, or that it was a good place to end it. Compared to that, the way we did it this time made the story composition clear and easier to understand in my opinion.



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We wanted to make [the graphics] more expressive so we could make the characters real (Arai)

In EPII, the characters' looks have changed dramatically, so could you explain why?

Arai: The Xenosaga games place the emphasis on story, so emotional expressiveness is very important. In EPII in particular, there are many places where characters such as Shion and Jr. express their emotions directly, so we wanted to strengthen their ability to do so. When we were considering about that, we thought that aiming for a slightly more realistic style compared to EPI would increase that expressiveness, so we settled on that kind of style for this game.



I suppose the influence of Takahashi-san's intentions can also be seen in that area?

Arai: When it comes to the work of turning the scenario into a game package, he basically leaves it to the developers. Considering things like the volume of the scenario and the way the content unfolds, Takahashi's original plan is a bit too grand. (Laughs) But that's Takahashi's forte, and in my opinion a very good thing.

When you're making a game, you definitely need to think about how to "consolidate" everything, but the first thing I want is to spare Takahashi from having to think too much about that. (Laughs) My stance is that I ask him to please just tell us frankly what he wants to say and do. That is to say, we divide it as if it were a novel (=original plan) and movie (=game), so he doesn't give us strict direction about things like character style.

Then, what are the hardest parts of making that original plan into a game?

Arai: Definitely the times when we can't cram all of Takahashi's ideas into a game. (Laughs) At the end of the day, that sums up the greatest difficulties with the Xenosaga series. When we're organizing it all, our basic way of looking at it is to make sure we don't leave out the things Takahashi wants to say or do the most, and then try to flesh things out from there.

For example, if there's a character that's particularly important to Takahashi, or rather, the fundamental principle of that character's behavior, I think that's it's absolutely vital that we don't get it wrong. On the other

hand, with the portrayal of more minor characters, we let the developers decide on the best way to proceed.

It's clear there's also been an evolution in the game system, so is there anything you'd like to draw attention to [in that regard]?

Arai: To be honest, what I'd like the fans to think about and feel when they get to play the game is all of it, so I can't really highlight anything in particular. But I thought we should just evolve the concept naturally. Whether it's on the systems side or the direction side, I wanted to make it "easier to understand and flashy". Other than that, I feel the first thing we did was to increase the tempo across the board.

When you get to see the next game, I will show you something even better (Hagiwara)

The battles in particular have really been sped up.

Hagiwara: Yes, I think we've got a system that feels very tricky. It's very different when you pay attention to the [particular] points.

Arai: Yes. If you call it a normal evolution, it tends to end up being [fairly] conservative, but there's also some cases where you have to innovate. I especially wanted to do that for the battle parts, to make them more mentally stimulating, so I spoke to the battle director, and we decided to go in that direction.



I wanted to include things you wouldn't expect to see in the world of Xenosaga (Arai)

Apart from that, you had the G2 campaign this time, and I felt the townspeople had stronger personalities this time around.

Arai: Yes, absolutely. When it comes to townspeople in role-playing games, their role is usually just dispensing information for the purposes of world building. That's an important purpose in itself, but we definitely told those creating them to "give the townspeople some love". (Laughs) All of them being given their own name stems from that line of thinking too.

Regarding characters, there's been a tendency recently to focus on their image, but originally, it means "personality". We have to include this in our principles for our operations, and we wanted to show what it'd be like to "live" in the world of Xenosaga, so that became our concept for the G2 campaign.

Speaking of minor characters who made an impression, Hakase stands out for me. And Erde Kaiser asked about your hobby, didn't it, Arai-san?

Arai: Ah, that's right. Something funny within all the seriousness. But the thing is, I wanted to include some things that don't feel like they fit within the world of Xenosaga, without going far enough to destroy [the feel of] the original story...it's another world, right? I'm the one who wants to do this kind of thing and asks for it, but the ones who actually realize it are staff like the modeller Doumoto and the motioner [animator? motion capture specialist?] Kabe, who do what I ask them to without raising an eyebrow. (Laughs)

About the characters

Shion begins to decide her actions by her own will

Maybe it's a hint of things to come...? (Hagiwara)

Please tell me about your impression of each character. Starting with Shion.

Hagiwara: Ah, Shion is a fighter, isn't she? (Laughs) That's the main impression I'm left with. The other party members have various abilities, but since Shion is a normal human made of flesh and blood...she's done well to survive this far, right? (Laughs)

We also got to see a new side of Shion this time, didn't we, when things got chaotic and she lost her composure?

Hagiwara: Takahashi said the same thing back when EPI came out, but Xenosaga is basically a story about Shion gaining her independence, or starting to decide her actions by her own will. With that in mind, I'd say that scene might be foreshadowing for something.



It's very important to us how everyone feels [about our work], so please do your very best (Arai)
[That seems to be the meaning as far as I can tell, but it feels a bit off to me. Maybe he said that to the other developers or something?]



I heard Jin is a very popular character, so what do you think the reasons for that might be?

Arai: Well, maybe the fans were able to see how he is one of the symbolic entities that are part of the Xenosaga world Takahashi has inside his mind?



So, how about KOS-MOS?

Arai: This time, we can't really talk too much about the background parts of her personality, but I feel we got to see her really show off in a more flashy way. Oh, and it was pretty cool to see her riding the Tabu bike.

Next, I'd like to ask you about Ziggy, the Vodafone game he starred in, and the circumstances around that if you don't mind.

Hagiwara: Ziggy's story itself was always part of Takahashi's plans, but we hadn't decided on what form to present it in. At that time, we unexpectedly got word from Namco's mobile phone content division that they wanted to do a mobile version of a Xenosaga game. Then they said "sure, go ahead with that story", and it was decided that Monolith Soft would be in charge of the scenario. (Game available now)

Could you please tell us what that story will be about, even just a little?

Hagiwara: We showed a few bits of it in EPI and EPII, but it's the story of Ziggy's life as a human. You'll learn more about why he killed himself 100 years ago, among other things. For example, this time we had a scene where Ziggy was furious when he saw Voyager, and the reasons for that is one such thing. I think you'll get an answer to various mysteries surrounding him.

Allen-kun works very hard, and he's really thoughtful. (Laughs)
(Hagiwara)

Speaking of mysteries, chaos is still pretty mysterious, isn't he...?

Arai: Yes, he is. He's...I don't really know how to put it. (Laughs) He's determined to chase the truth. Mm, Takahashi's scenario has very firm plans for chaos from here on out, so...

Hagiwara: Nope, we can't talk about that. (Laughs)

How about MOMO? This time she fights using a bow, right?

Arai: We decided to give her a bow because, while her true age and character design haven't changed, she really a lot more visually adult this time, so [her old way of fighting] felt out of place. On the battle system balance side, we also thought it'd be good to have someone wielding a bow. I'd say the battle section staff had strong opinions about that.

And by the way, how about Allen-kun?

Arai: There's a lot of character in Xenosaga who hide traumas and broken hearts and things like that, and everyone has a facade and a true face, but Allen-kun is just really honest. (Laughs) That's probably what makes him charming. He's very human, and I like him.

Hagiwara: Yep, if you're around him, he's definitely going to try to help. He works very hard, and he's really thoughtful. (Laughs)

Who's the most popular character among the staff?

Arai: Hard to say, there's really no consensus. [I think, a bit unsure about this one] By the way, my favorite is Jr. He takes center stage for the story in EPII, and I really like simple people who mean well...that's probably why I like Allen-kun too. (Laughs) Jr. is also very human compared to those around him, and he's very frank and straightforward.

Hagiwara: I like Ziggy...probably for his stoicism. That, and he's the only one who still looks like he did in EPI. (Laughs)



About the next game

Since Xenosaga is Shion's story, I think [it's natural that] she'll be at the center of it (Hagiwara)

Please tell me about your views on the next game.

Arai: I think we'll be able to give a satisfying conclusion to the characters everyone have gotten to know while playing EPI and EPII up to now.

Hagiwara: And since the Xenosaga story itself really is Shion's story, it'll be about how she gets to the point where she's able to walk her own path. Putting it that way, Shion becomes the main pillar of the story, I'd say.

Arai: Yes, the main pillar is a good way to put it. Basically, there is a point of connection, which is all the characters connected by the Zohar, so while it's not just the ending to Shion's story, she'll definitely take center stage. But you might just say that "Shion's story = KOS-MOS' story" anyway. (Laughs)

Finally, do you have anything you want to say to our readers?

Arai: It's very important to me how everyone will feel while playing the game, so instead of going into detailed explanations about the things I've worked on, I just want you to play it. So I'm very happy that all of you who have bought this strategy guide will be able to play it soon. Bringing everything together, including the elements for challenge runs has been hard work, so please do see the game through to the end. (Laughs) [A little unsure about this one, sorry]

Hagiwara: If you've bought the strategy guide, you've obviously bought the game too, so...thank you very much. (Laughs) Xenosaga will continue to evolve in the future too, so when you get to see the next game, I want to show you all something even better.



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