

Xenosaga Episode II - Weekly Volume III: Act 1

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[Act 1]

The men in control of the project speak: The days of developing "Episode II"

Compared to the last game, this project was unusual in that it was a new work made mainly by younger staff. What was it like behind the scenes? To begin with, we tried asking those who had various roles in controlling the project.

Making "Xenosaga" just by themselves The hardships and the technique of reconstruction

Interviewer: First of all, please tell us what your respective tasks specifically were.

Hagiwara: The producer's work is basically to organize the materials needed to create the game. I do things such as creating a good [work] environment and making arrangements with external staff.

Arai: The director's role is bringing everything together. Since this is such a large-scale game, each section has a collection of talented people, and tying all of them together is my role. In addition to deciding on a plan and concept [among other things] in the initial stages of development, I was somewhat involved in balancing the game.

Yonesaka: I wrote a script that could be used for the actual game based on Takahashi's original plan.



Interviewer: How do you feel now that the release of "Episode II" is approaching?

Hagiwara: Actually, now that some time has passed since the end of development, I'm quite feeling quite settled. Now I'm busy [lit.: in the middle of] thinking about the next thing, so...

Arai: I've also got my head full of "Episode III" stuff. (Laughs)
But the whole team is just back to work after having some time off, so we're still taking it easy.

Yonesaka: Funnily enough, I'm also pretty stressed out right now. (Laughs)
If the scenario isn't done, we can't decide on things like maps and characters, so I have to provide one as a top priority. But just because I started early doesn't necessarily mean that it'll be done quickly... After that [writing the script] there's voice recording, adjustments relating to turning the scenario into a game, and all kinds of other work that continues on.

Arai: Takahashi's original plan for the scenario has an extraordinarily complex vision of the world, and that's good, but when it comes to knowing enough about and controlling that from the production side, it can be quite... It's a part [of development] we really have to put all of our strength into. Since it's been entrusted to us, this is an absolutely essential part. We decide how to put together what we call the "game parts" as part of our duties, but I really think we [also] have to take the utmost care to handle the feel of Takahashi's treasured characters properly.

If we keep that in mind from the first stages, and do a clear reconstruction, everything becomes easier to understand than what Takahashi showed us in the beginning. [I'm a bit uncertain about this sentence, but that should hopefully be the main gist of it. Sorry about that]

Yonesaka: This was my first experience of doing things this way. Since it was necessary when I presented my own interpretation of the story and characters and my reconstruction of the world vision as the scenario, I often went to Takahashi's study groups in the early days of development. We didn't have very many of them during the second half [of development], but I felt I had to keep going [lit.: do it] anyway, so... Honestly, even

now I still worry about my interpretation of the characters.

Hagiwara: In order to hear everyone's [collective] opinion during development and to avoid fundamental errors, [Takahashi] held study groups with everyone, not just Yonesaka. Still, when you have this many people involved in making the game, some mistakes will always be made towards the end [of development]. Yonesaka corrected these.

Arai: The actual presentation method needed various adjustments in terms of things like time and cost, and the responsibility for that was entrusted to us. But by holding the study groups, [Takahashi] also had the goal of getting us to talk frankly and without restraint to each other from the beginning about the parts that constituted the "soul" of the project, and what things each [member of] staff most wanted to do. On Takahashi's part, there were also things he wanted to do, so he had to tell us early on. We'd have a problem if he started telling us later, after all. (Laughs)

Yonesaka: Both back then and now, I'm thinking about nothing but Xenosaga, when I go to sleep and when I wake up, so it's probably already become a part of my life (Laughs). Since I've been making the concept for "Episode II", and also been allowed to write the scenario after "Episode I", I have a special affection [for the series]. [Lit.: A particular affection boils inside me]. I feel that the world of "Xenosaga" is something deeper than [just] fantasy. I still don't understand all of it, and I think it might take me years to arrive at Takahashi's level of insight.

Arai: Really, no matter how hard we worked on the game, I don't think it's possible for Takahashi to tell us the reasons behind everything he's thinking. That's how grand it is. But in turning it into a game, that's only a small part of the whole organization. (Laughs) [I know this sentence feels a bit off, but as far as I could tell this should be close to the meaning]. But the fact that he has just that energy is what's charming about Takahashi, and I was very aware that this was the driving force behind this game.

Interviewer: When it comes to things like the organization and sequence of the story, who decided what?

Arai: Rather than being a game scenario, Takahashi's original work was just in the form of reading matter. Reconstructing this into an actual game was Yonesaka's role. It's kind of similar to how they make a movie from an original work. But as for story organization, Yonesaka handles directing the story. When it comes to directing camera angles and things like that, we mostly decide on that after discussing with the people in charge of storyboarding.

In the beginning when Yonesaka had written the scenario, he consulted with the graphics people, and Hagiwara when the situation called for it, to decide where to have gameplay parts and what parts would be cutscenes. At this [early] stage, when looking at the game as a whole, I was thinking about tempo and atmosphere. Actually, even if we had a new organization, it probably wasn't that different from before. On the last game, Takahashi was the one who brought everything together, but this time each section had a big framework, and we were told to use our own judgement within that framework, so... So that was how it was organized this time, with those adjustments. [Slightly unsure about this sentence, but that should be the gist of it]

The limitations that came with the project "Doing our utmost" under those conditions

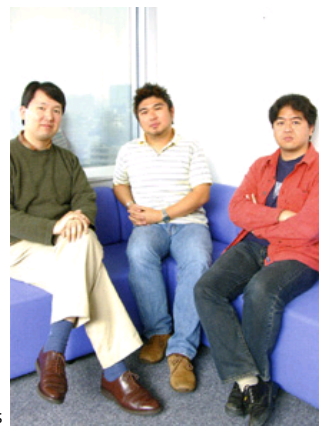
Interviewer: Hagiwara-san, what were you thinking about as producer?

Hagiwara: I think the staff always wanted to pursue new possibilities. We had to make some preparations to be able to do that, and that was my job. Rather than "An unchanging Xenosaga", I wanted to aim for "A constantly evolving Xenosaga". If you restrict yourself to one method, you'll get worse results [lit: dwindle] in the long run, so I also think it's important to use a method where I do things I haven't tried yet. I don't think you can progress without doing that. Of course, there's also cases where you'll need to use traditional methods to finish things up, so... But from my position, I can't authorize things that aren't possible within the schedule that's been decided, can I? (Laughs)
Instead, if there are things we can do within the schedule, I want to apply as much effort as possible towards that.

Yonesaka: When I was working on that...wasn't that also when I was doing "Xenosaga Freaks" at the same time? Those days were probably the hardest of all. I'd be at the office until late at night working on "Episode II", and then I'd be writing the scenario for "Freaks" once I got home.

Arai: At the moment, Yonesaka is our main scenario specialist. It's become a quite big responsibility [for him], and that could lead to problems, but there's no one else as capable. To understand, organize and revise* Takahashi's world is an extremely important job.

* The word "revise" here is a bit tricky, so I want to elaborate a little on it. The word he uses, "naosu", usually means "cure", "fix" or "repair", so it could be interpreted as saying he fixes or corrects Takahashi's work. But it can also mean



"convert" or "transform", which at least to me makes more sense here. "Revise" kind of blends both of those meanings, so that's why I chose it, but it could be interpreted differently.

Hagiwara: By the way, how did the "Xeno Komi" part of "Xenosaga Freaks" get so big? (Laughs)

Yonesaka: Before I knew it, it'd become something cool. (Laughs) It was [a result of] something I said myself, so I got what I deserved. It began with Hagiwara telling me to write an interesting story without minding if it was on the small side, but I just kept writing without thinking about it, and eventually it ended up at that size. I got carried away working all night, so I couldn't restrain myself.

Arai: [Working on] the scenario is hard, isn't it? If we're not excited about it, other people won't think it's worth making either. But on the other hand, if we get too excited, the more we do the more trouble we'll get in [lit.: have our necks wrung]. It's a universal feature of design, I guess. I shouldn't be saying this, but there's a lot of instances where I think "If only we had more time...".

Hagiwara: Each [member of] staff has a lot of things they want to do, I think. But when you're thinking about finishing a product, you have a rather limited amount of time to make it in. If you're making a work of art on your own, you can take 5 years, 10 years... But on the other hand, seeing what kind of presentation you can make within those kinds of limits I was talking about, that would be a show of skill in my opinion.

Arai: I'd say it's a matter of having to reconcile reality and ideals at as high a level as possible. I don't mean to brag about our own work, but we have some confidence we've done that well. Of course, we had to deal with some dilemmas, but...

I want to aim for a continually changing 'Xenosaga' (Hagiwara)

"Handling the characters' personalities and the vision of the world [properly] is the most important thing" (Arai)

"Even now, Xenosaga is all I'm thinking about" (Yonesaka) [Lit.: "Even now, still, no matter if I'm sleeping or awake, 'Xenosaga'"]

Interviewer: Roughly how many people were involved in making "Episode II"?

Hagiwara: The internal staff was about 60 people. We had a lot of external support too, so all in all it was probably more than 100 people. The development period was a full 2 years, so this was as we'd planned it in the beginning. We didn't go over budget or over time, so we did very well. We absolutely benefited from our experiences and reflections on [making] "Episode I".

Arai: We really didn't have any big problems, and it almost went frighteningly well! (Laughs) I'm grateful towards all the staff!

No matter what kind of project you're aiming towards, there's always new challenges

Interviewer: Are you enthusiastic about any future projects apart from "Episode III"?

Hagiwara: As I said earlier, no matter what kind of game I make, I want to be challenged by new things. Even if you're making an orthodox RPG, if you add something new game-wise or production-wise, then... For instance, graphics people used to be able to try their hand at design and planning too, and in my opinion that was a good thing. Since I think people have various capabilities, I'd like them to always strive to find ways to get things done instead of thinking "this is what I can do and that's it".

Arai: Since I've been involved with this project for such a long time, I think I want to do something totally different after "Episode III"... Of course I like this project and I enjoy working on it, but if you keep doing the same thing you can start getting dissatisfied with the monotony. I have a lot of good junior staff working with me who'd provide a lot of new strength, so I want to try my hand at various challenges.

Yonesaka: I know what I'm enthusiastic about [ie., Episode 3]. The product preparation stage is really stressful, so I'm working hard to somehow get everything in order for "Episode III"! [I'm a bit uncertain about this part, especially the first sentence, but I think this should be the main gist of it]

Hagiwara: Each section really gave it their all for "Episode II", so we're putting the finishing touches on a game that's high-quality in every aspect. The character graphics have changed significantly, so some players may be confused in the beginning, but I think we're clearly conveying what we're aiming for. Please pick up the game and give it a try. And look forward to "Episode III" too!

Here are the characters they like!



Among the main characters, Hagiwara-san's favorite is Ziggy, and among the sub-characters it's Citrine. There's certainly no love lost between those two!

Arai-san's favorite is Jr. But actually, he's a huge fan of the professor and Erde Kaiser too!



Among the cast that play an active role in 'Freaks', Allen is Yonesaka-san's favorite. Maybe Allen will play a big role in the next installment!?

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