

## The History of *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*



Part 4: MonolithSoft and Nintendo

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### Part 4: MONOLITHSOFT AND NINTENDO

#### Takahashi's reuse of the "Xeno-" name

This last section will merely make a few remarks about Takahashi's decision to continue using the "Xeno-" prefix for his future games. As these games have nothing to do with *Xenogears* or *Xenosaga*, it is not my intent to cover the history and development of these games as they are of little interest to me. However, as the "Xeno-" prefix causes them to be confused, and as we've had access to and collected information that could shed light on many subjects, I still felt the urge to preserve them here so they are not lost.

#### Takahashi's position

While Takahashi had dropped "the heavy-sounding job of executive vice president" of Monolith Soft, as Sugiura put it in the 2003 interview, it has been unknown who has been President of Monolith Soft since then. One assumes that Sugiura has always been CEO of Monolith Soft. At any rate, the *Xenoblade* interviews revealed that Takahashi was at this time, once more, President of Monolith Soft, while Sugiura was listed as CEO/Representative Director on the official Monolith Soft website. It is unknown when Takahashi took back his position.

Tetsuya Takahashi had stated that after *Xenosaga* he felt like doing a variety of different things, like a high fantasy themed work, or something that takes place in the present day, or something for younger people, including children. It seems he eventually settled on the latter.

**"Actually, I feel like trying to do something for younger people, including children. After all, if we don't recruit younger users, I fear the entire industry will go under sooner or later. That might go against the image of Monolith Soft in peoples' minds, but someone has to do it, so..."**

- Tetsuya Takahashi, *Xenosaga II Weekly: Vol. 3 interview* (2004)

After coming up with the concept for a game set on the bodies of two giant gods, he finally had his concept for this game aimed at younger people. Although the story was more of an afterthought, Takahashi went with a boys' manga type of story, and wrote it together with Yuichiro Takeda along with some input from Nintendo's Yurie Hattori. Tetsuya Takahashi and the game's director Koh Kojima explains in a video interview:



Tetsuya Takahashi and Koh Kojima in NOE's *Xenoblade Chronicles* Feature "The Origin of an Epic" (2011)

**"We wanted the game to be like a boys' manga where a classic storyline is loaded with swists. This is what boys' manga are known for."**

- Tetsuya Takahashi (*NOE's Xenoblade Chronicles Feature "The Origin of an Epic" - Part 4, Directing the details*)

Kojima continues, "For instance, the game starts with a boy getting the Monado sword, and this changes the world. So the story is pretty far-fetched right away, like something from an anime. Japanese animation has certain defining characteristics, such as tempo. Besides that... well, maybe people should experience these characteristics for themselves in the game (laughs). We started out hoping that people overseas would play it too. With this in mind, we incorporated these traits of Japanimation as much as we could so that users everywhere could experience them."

**"This game was unusual because the story was added later, like a postscript."**

- Tetsuya Takahashi (*NOE's Xenoblade Chronicles Feature "The Origin of an Epic" - Part 1, Achieving our vision*)

A lot of *Xeno* team members returned to work on these games - except Koh Arai, Junya Ishigaki, Tanegashima Takashi, Tsutomu Terada, or KOS-MOS' designer Kouichi Mugitani. The core team that controlled *Episode II* and *III* of *Xenosaga* - Tomohiro Hagiwara, Koh Arai and Norihiko Yonesaka - left to work on Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros.: Brawl* released in 2008.

#### **Xeno staff involved with *Soma Bringer* (2008)**

Tadahiro Usuda  
Makoto Shimamoto  
Hiroshi Uchiyama (modeling)  
Toshiaki Yajima (Programming)  
Yasunori Mitsuda  
Soraya Saga (scenario)  
Tetsuya Takahashi (producer)  
Shingo Kawabata (Director)

Shingo Kawabata had worked on *Xenosaga III* with Battle & Menu Planning. *Soma Bringer*, a Nintendo DS game, was not released in the West.

#### **Xeno staff involved with *Monado* (2010)**

Tadahiro Usuda (2D Art Design - Characters)  
Makoto Shimamoto (Lead Battle Design)  
Yasuyuki Honne (Kyoshin & Kishin Concept Model)  
Kunihiko Tanaka (Image Art)  
Norihiko Takami (Art and Cinematics Direction)  
Yasunori Mitsuda (Ending theme song)  
Yuichiro Takeda (Writer)  
Tetsuya Takahashi (Writer, Executive Director)  
Koh Kojima (Director)

It is perhaps not surprising that two of MSI's Battle designers, Kawabata and Kojima, would serve as director for *Soma Bringer* and *Monado: Beginning of the World* respectively, since MSI had begun a new design philosophy that favored game play over story.

The scenario in both games differs from Takahashi's previous works in the sense that previously the scenario was written first and the gameplay was made to fit into the scenario. This time they worked on the gameplay first, and based on what kind of dungeons, locations and stuff they wanted the player to experience as part of the gameplay, the scenario was then developed to maximize the gameplay and locations as well as give room for story.

A trailer for *Monado: Beginning of the World* premiered at American E3 on June 2, 2009. It showed a lone warrior chopping through an army of robotic warriors with an outsized Cloud Strife-like energy sword. A few were surprised that such a "standard JRPG Hero's Journey" concept would be developed for the Nintendo Wii, but overall the trailer didn't get a lot of attention.



Original Trailer for "*Monado: Beginning of the World*" (2009)

### Reason for using the "Xeno" prefix?

*Monado*, as is now well known, was then renamed to "*Xenoblade*" (*Xenoblade Chronicles* in the West). Why this decision was made has remained rather vague with various interpretations. What is clear, however, is that despite the use of the *Xeno*- prefix, the game has nothing to do with *Xenogears* or *Xenosaga*.

"The world setting, story and other elements have no relation [to past *Xeno* games], it's a completely new title," Takahashi said in an interview with Famitsu magazine. Takahashi suggested that players consider the "*Xeno*" part of the title to be just a symbol. "I wanted to to have some sort of common point with the games I've made." He was a little shy in fully explaining the *Xenoblade* name to the magazine. "*Xeno*" has the meaning of "different nature" or "uniqueness," he explained. As for the "Blade" part, Takahashi asked that we refer to the game's ending to find out, even though it seems an obvious reference to the *Monado* sword.

At the time of *Xenoblade*'s unveiling there had been a statement by Satoru Iwata, President of Nintendo, supposedly saying that they (Nintendo) decided to name the game *Xenoblade* to "honor" Takahashi. This soon started spreading as "fact" on the net, but supposedly Iwata had never actually said such a thing:

***"That was a very poor translation of what Iwata actually said. He said that the game was previously announced as Monado at E3 last year, and has been renamed Xenoblade. He then goes on to confirm that it is Tetsuya Takahashi's new game which he has poured all of his strength into making, with a side note that Takahashi is the man behind the Xeno series. Then he says the game will be released in Spring 2010 in Japan.***

***There is no mention of why the name change was done, or any reference to it."***

- Duckroll (NeoGAF, 01-30-2010, see [forum post](#))

I believe the main reason for the name change to a *Xeno* title lies with Takahashi himself, and that he isn't lying when he said that he wanted a common point with the games he's made. However, I believe that's a very brief and incomplete explanation, since he didn't give *Soma Bringer* the *Xeno*- prefix. One can perhaps explain away this by assuming that Takahashi only considers games he's written and/or directed to be given this prefix, but it still doesn't feel entirely satisfying as an answer. It seems obvious that the game was originally not going to have the *Xeno*- prefix in that it had the title *Monado: Beginning of the World* and was not meant to be a successor to his previous works. In fact, in a 2012 interview he had stated that *Xenoblade* was merely an experiment, but we'll get to that later.

The actual impression I get, from reading the various interviews, is that Takahashi renamed *Monado* to "*Xenoblade*" for two main reasons. The first being that *Monado* was the first game he actually completed thanks to Nintendo pushing him on. Takahashi had originally wanted to finish work on *Monado* sooner, accepting that they would probably have to cut corners like always, and I have no doubt that it would probably have stayed as "*Monado*" had it been released in 2009. But when he ended up going all the way he probably felt he should acknowledge this somehow by giving it a more worthy title. I will cite Takahashi from the Iwata Asks interviews:

***"With Xenoblade Chronicles, partway through the development process, I had accepted that we would have to cut corners to keep the initial completion deadline. However, when Yamagami-san was good enough to tell me to see it through to the end, we somehow managed to get the job done properly. In that sense, I'd say that this title differs from the other titles we've made at Monolith Soft, and I mean that in a good sense. But having said that, I think that it is still imbued with Monolith Soft's distinctive character, and I'd really like***

**players to see this for themselves.**

***We created this title with the intention that players should invest a lot of time in it, and become thoroughly absorbed in the game world. Even if you've completed the game a single time, there will still be plenty of things you won't have been able to do yet, so I'd say you definitely need to set yourself the target of getting through it again. You are bound to discover new things that you didn't notice the first time round, be it in the story, the battles or the quests. I think we've made a game that won't betray the player's expectations.***

- Tetsuya Takahashi (Iwata Asks - Xenoblade Chronicles 2010, Vol. 3: The Development Process, 1. Seeing it Through to the End)

The second reason for the name change was likely his little competition with Hironobu Sakaguchi and *The Last Story*, a game which evoked memories of Sakaguchi's old *Final Fantasy* franchise. It is possible Takahashi wanted his own "brand name" similar to how Sakaguchi had "*Final Fantasy*." By renaming his latest game to something like "*Xenoblade*," Takahashi would thus hype himself and his game up in a similar fashion to what was going on with *The Last Story*. I think this interview excerpt from Iwata Asks gives this impression:

***Sakaguchi: Now that you mention it, the release date for both titles was delayed, wasn't it?***

***Takahashi: We'd often talk about which game would be the first to come out. (laughs)***

***Sakaguchi: I used to be faster, but this time I was beaten to the punch. (laughs)***

***Takahashi: Something I've felt recently is that a lot of people of our generation have taken on roles as producers, and that they've actually been too hasty to distance themselves from the actual game development process. If you look at films or animation, people in their fifties or sixties remain very active. If we retire from actually making games, that spirit of craftsmanship won't be handed down to the next generation. That's why I think it's better that we maintain a hands-on role in the game development process.***

***Sakaguchi: Right, I really felt like I'd gone back to the coalface this time. By getting involved in the day-to-day creative process, I think that the determination and tenacity I possessed came into play and may well have changed the way the team worked together.***

***Iwata: At the very least, if Sakaguchi-san hadn't been the director, or if Takahashi-san had put distance between himself and the dev team, those titles would not have become the games they turned out to be. The younger team members really reaped the benefits from the determination and craftsmanship you both possess.***

While the renaming of the title "*Monado: Beginning of the World*" to "*Xenoblade*" would perhaps have been understandable from a marketing standpoint, since the only games MonolithSoft has ever made that have sold over 100,000 are the *Xenosaga* PS2 trilogy (and *Xenogears*), there is no proof that it actually was a marketing strategy behind the title. Furthermore, while the game got great reviews, became the top selling game in both Japan and Europe (it was only released in North America later) in its first week and won the award of excellence at *Japan Game Awards* in 2011, *Xenoblade* would ultimately only sell around 156,095 copies in Japan and much less in Europe, which is only slightly better than what *Xenosaga III* sold in Japan during its first weeks.

So it should be clear by now that *Monado* changed name to "*Xenoblade*" because of the creator's whim pretty late in development. Because of this, the name change has been difficult to justify, even for Takahashi himself. While *Xenoblade* was enjoyed by some of the old fanbase, the game mostly engaged a new and different crowd. For that reason, the constant comparison with *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga* or questions about a connection have been just as annoying for *Xenoblade* fans as the title have been for older fans.

Jeremy Parish of 1UP's RPG Blog, who had an email Q&A session with Tetsuya Takahashi, would state in his article on *Xenoblade*:

***I was surprised by Takahashi's response to my question on how, if at all, Xenoblade fits the other Xeno titles he's worked on (Xenogears, Xenosaga). It's a very different work from its predecessors; in fact, in the beginning it was completely unconnected and was first revealed under the title Monado, not Xenoblade. It's a broad, open, free-form adventure that doesn't lean too heavily on themes and motifs cribbed from Western religion, and frankly it bears little similarity to Takahashi's previous work. But it turns out there is a connection -- a thematic one.***

***"The common theme in the Xeno series is the creation of the world," he tells me. "I didn't want to just present an attractive story; I wanted players to be able to play more freely in the world of that story."***

This answer from Takahashi suggests to me that as Takahashi looks back on his games, it was the original desire to make a game completely in 3D that has been the common theme in his works. *Xenosaga* was originally to have a rotatable camera like *Xenogears*, and *Xenoblade* emphasizes the 3D open world environment more than ever before.

***"Players always want more innovation, not just in RPGs, but in all games," Takahashi writes. "If players don't get as much of a sense of innovation from RPGs, that means that the genre is aging and dying and that we***

**need to rouse ourselves into more intense action. However, we don't believe that RPGs are dead yet. RPGs give you the chance to experience saving the world (albeit in a simulated way). I want to believe that this experience has meaning in our modern world, which is so difficult to save."**

- Excerpt from Takahashi interview, Jeremy Parish's *Xenoblade* article

### Reactions to the name change

In general, the reaction of *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga* fans to the name change was that it felt like a slap in the face. The reaction of most long-time *Xeno* fans can pretty much be summed up in the following quote:

**"Xenoblade? What's next -- Xenosword, Xenosharpstick. The Xeno name essentially means little to nothing now"**

The renaming of the title "*Monado: Beginning of the World*" to "*Xenoblade*" was an unpopular move with hardcore *Xeno*-fans who felt that it was pretty lame of them to slap the "*Xeno*-" prefix on what looked like a pretty traditional and unoriginal product. It further felt like a "sell-out" of the "*Xeno* brand" by having it attached to something that seemed to lack the originality and literary substance of the original *Xenosaga* vision, of which Takahashi had originally wanted nothing in common with *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy*. And *Xenoblade* would fit almost perfectly into Square's old repertoire by following a very conventional template; being a game before it is a story; having a huge "sandbox" to play in; action-driven writing rather than character-driven writing; a clearly defined conflict in the set-up and obsessively hunting the game's villain for hours.

Moreover, debating the relationship between two "*Xeno*-" series' had been draining enough, but now there were 3 different works with the "*Xeno*-" name. And unlike *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*, due to their acknowledged relationship - both works which could be ascribed to a type of "Xenoverse" for complementary relation and analysis - now there was a "*Xeno*-" game that *really* didn't fit into that universe, yet with the same creator attached to it. Accordingly, many people assumed it was the next *Xenosaga* game or a new "reboot" of that universe.



KOS-MOS: "Are these graphics an upgrade...?!" (*Xenoblade* Promo flyer, 2010)

### The new design philosophy

"Most of the RPGs we've created had their main focus on story and cutscenes, but I think that approach has reached a dead end," Takahashi said in an interview with Famitsu magazine in early 2010. "This project [*Monado*] got its start because we wanted to return to basics -- we just wanted to create a fun adventure. We're trying to give the player a lot of freedom without having them feel lost."

Soraya would give a similar sentiment in the interview with Siliconera, stating that "With the technological advances, RPGs have remarkably become beautiful and dramatic, but we learnt from our own experience that games shouldn't be something just to watch. It's not that games don't need good stories, it's that we developers should think first of what gamers are looking [for]. Now we're trying to get back to basics, to provide sheer enjoyment of games again," and "now we realized that too heavily orienting toward visuals and stories would ruin the fundamental reason for the existence of games."

Another thing that should be touched on is the goal Takahashi and Takeda had to create a main character who wouldn't be hated by the player, something that often happened in *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*. The reason why many gamers hate the main characters in *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*, as well as other RPGs, is usually because the hero goes against the player's wishes, by saying something the player didn't want them to say, or betraying the player with some action they didn't want to do.

In other words, the new design philosophy is more or less *accommodation* - giving gamers what they want. With *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga* the ambition had more to do with Takahashi's personal desire to "express himself," as we have explored in the other parts, and as he mentioned in an interview:

**"When I was younger, my sole aim was to express myself. If I enjoyed it, and could give the players a product that reflected my own taste, it was enough if it appealed to those players who understood what I was doing. I was compelled by the belief that this was where the appeal lay in an RPG.**

**[...] When you're young, you're brimming with creative energy after all, and it is a path everyone goes through. Among young game creators today, there is no shortage of people with the same approach I had, making games solely for those players who will understand what you are trying to achieve. I think that this sort of game is necessary in the video game industry.**

***But now, when I ask myself if I still have that drive, which was in a sense rash and reckless, the answer is of course that I don't. At the same time, I now have a better view of the overall shape of things, and I feel that my creative range has increased. Recently, especially since becoming a father of two, I've been thinking more and more about how to make a game that will be enjoyed by a large number of players and that will strike a chord with them."***

- Tetsuya Takahashi (Iwata Aks - Xenoblade Chronicles 2010, Vol. 3: The Development Process, 1. Seeing it Through to the End)

Soraya Saga continued her sentiments about pleasing the player more than expressing herself, stating in the *LuminoMagazine.com* interview, "Games, particularly RPGs are kind of like a journey, and game designers are like tour guides. Always be with players, walk a little ahead of them, but never leave them behind. Your work will be completed when players clear the final stage."

So, with all this accommodation, what does Tetsuya Takahashi actually think of *Xenoblade Chronicles*? How passionate was he about the game? How proud of it is he when compared to his previous works? And what does his older self-expressive works mean to him now? Did he get any more enjoyment from accommodating gamers this time than when he was doing something that appealed more to his own taste? These are questions we haven't got any answers to, but Tetsuya Takahashi has said a number of interesting things regarding *Xenoblade* once the game was out for a while, where he almost seems a bit surprised by the amount of praise the game has received. Almost as if he's a little frustrated that a shonen story and a bunch of gaming carrots like action points and customization is all it takes to satisfy gamers:

***"...there are times when I want people to be more critical."***

- Tetsuya Takahashi, Iwata Asks: In Conversation with Takahashi & Sakaguchi (2011)

***"...in terms of my own personal goal--my vision of an ideal game--I'd honestly have to say that it's barely 5% of the way there."***

- Tetsuya Takahashi, Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi (Nintendo Power, 2012)

***"To be honest, there are times when I think I've atrophied as a writer since the Xenogears era."***

- Tetsuya Takahashi, Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi (Nintendo Power, 2012)

***"I often find myself thinking, 'One of these days, I'd love to free myself from these sorts of restraints and write whatever I truly want to write'"***

- Tetsuya Takahashi, Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi (Nintendo Power, 2012)

***"I couldn't figure out why they would care so much about a game like Xenoblade Chronicles when they had so many superior RPGs to choose from in the West."***

- Tetsuya Takahashi, Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi (Nintendo Power, 2012)

***" [I'm] grateful for the game's positive reputation, [but I and my team] didn't set out to make Xenoblade Chronicles into the company's magnum opus. It was made to be an experiment"***

- Tetsuya Takahashi, Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi (Nintendo Power, 2012)

***"I know that this is a pretty radical idea, but I think the future of the genre is world creation that is good enough to be the equivalent of reality."***

- Tetsuya Takahashi, "Sharpening the 'Blade" - Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi (Nintendo Power, 2012)

Tetsuya Takahashi has stated such ambitions as wanting to "re-create the world itself." He and Koh Kojima also stated, in an interview on MSI's official site in 2011, that now the time has come when game creators can do anything and make their dreams come true. Takahashi said that he would like to see people on the development team who is primarily a player and interested in games. Maps for their Wii U game are said to be similar to *Xenoblade Chronicles*, and that *Xenoblade* was just a trial for this project - what is possible to do today with JRPGs and how the world will respond.

### **Differences between Xenoblade and Xenogears/saga**

Despite the rather obvious differences, there have been some arguments that *Xenoblade* is still similar to the previous *Xeno* games. However, I find the differences to be far more numerous and striking than the similarities. For the most part I identify gamers identification of "similarities" to be a misinterpretation in perception filtered through their JRPG experiences. Since our experience tend to be filtered through layers of pictures from the past (what psychologists refer to as object relations or object-image), this has in many gamers and *Xeno* fans developed, in conjunction with a sense of familiarity with superficial aspects - which forever bears their imprint of previous games and characters - a template through which they experience the whole of every new game or story they encounter. This impression, pieced together from elements from the past, buffers us from what is really going on and distorting and causing many to misinterpret what they perceive.

For example, a person misunderstanding the merits of *Xenogears* will reduce its story to the basic concept of "killing a false god" and "gaining freedom" by controlling a hero who is a teenager. Reduced to such gross simplicity, *Xenoblade* will not seem to be all that different. However, as explored in other sections on the study guide, this is not even touching upon what *really* makes *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga* good. So, rather than going

into detail and repeating things I've already written elsewhere, I will merely post a brief chart that details the basic merits and some other details in the writing/approach, and how *Xenoblade* differs. It might also help explain how Takahashi feels he has atrophied as a writer since the *Xenogears* era:

<b>XENOGEARS:</b>	<b>XENOSAGA:</b>	<b>XENOBLADE:</b>
Ethical issues, fight for freedom	Ethical issues, fight for freedom	Ethical issues, fight for freedom
Science fiction / fantasy	Science fiction	Fantasy / science fiction
Historical epic (pseudo)	Historical epic	
Literary allusions	Literary allusions	
Religious themes	Religious themes	Religious themes
Psychological themes	Psychological themes	
Use of modern psychological "science"	Use of modern psychological "science"	
Character study	Character study	
Strong elements of romance	Strong elements of romance	
Use of modern physics "science"	Use of modern physics "science"	
Theme of grief	Theme of fear	Theme of "embarking"
Social commentary and "messages"	Social commentary and "messages"	
Sociology and anthropology theory	Sociology and anthropology theory	
Features giant robots	Features giant robots	Features giant robots
Play in giant robots	Play in giant robots	
Tight plot and narrative	Tight plot and narrative	Plot diluted with exploration
Labyrinthine story	Labyrinthine story	Complex story
Character and action/plot-driven writing	Character and action/plot-driven writing	Action/plot-driven writing
Multiple plot-twists	Multiple plot-twists	Multiple plot-twists
Deep, poetic imagery	Deep, poetic imagery	
Poetic language, playing with words	Poetic language, playing with words	
Symbolic foreshadowing	Symbolic foreshadowing	
High intellectual discourse	High intellectual discourse	Basic entertainment with some substance
Primarily aimed at female audience*	Primarily aimed at female audience	Primarily aimed at male audience
Staff: "a mirror that reflects truth"	Staff: "hopefully a masterpiece"	Staff: "a shonen story"

\* What Takahashi was implying is basically synonymous with "character study" earlier in the chart as he believes women are more interested in the characters personalities and "mental parts." We must also not forget the strong elements of romance in *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*. With 'Blade being more of a shonen story (shonen = boy) there is less focus on characters personalities and their depth. Instead, as Takahashi assessed about the preference of male audience, there is rather a focus on characters external appearance.

In particular it was *Xenoblade's* cheesy and one-dimensional cartoon villains, resembling *Star Wars'* General Grievous, that really made fans notice the difference in the quality of the writing, and many long-time fans of Takahashi felt they had grown out of this sort of thing. But then this is only natural, since the story was not aimed at them, but at a younger audience. But that's why the *Xeno-* title is so deceptive.

### Gaming militates against being "art"

Before I leave the subject of Takahashi's other games and new design philosophy in order to return to *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*, I will repost some of the comments and examination on where gaming is headed, since I don't know where else to put it. This study guide is not interested in gaming or these works as games. This study guide would have liked to have experienced *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga* in non-interactive visual media or as novels. And that sentiment is also partly shared by the creators themselves who have said:

**"If we put it all to print and save it, maybe someone will turn [Xenosaga] into a work many decades from now. Like with Stanley Kubrick's movies (laughs)."**

- Hirohide Sugiura (A Word with the *Xenosaga* Developers interview, 2003)

**"... there was a ton of unused ideas, maybe we could have put them in if it were a seasons-long TV series or something like that."**

- Soraya Saga (Interview with *Siliconera*, 2010)

The great achievement of *Xenoblade* lies only in its geo-architectural venture, technologically a feat that deserves praise, with a rich aesthetic treatment, much thanks to Norihiro Takami. Beyond that, however, the

interactivity is mainly "fluff." There is not much you can do as the player save for hitting the one button for an art and jumping. Sidequests are monotonous in terms of tasks, the hyped "heart-to-hearts" are surprisingly shallow, and customization is, as *MetaGame* puts it, "a pointless experience with little semantic depth or emotional breadth."

***"A ludomaniac is someone who is addicted to a game, playing it compulsively even as such brings about great harm to him/her. What else would you call someone who plays to clock hours and hours and hours and hours of endless grinding, quest solving, trophy collecting and customization, only to build up stats in virtual worlds, whilst getting nothing in return? Videogames like the ones I cite were built from the ground up to engage such people, to deceive and manipulate them with psychological hacks that are also used (surprise!) in marketing. Mechanisms such as experience and action points, gold coins, affinity bars, and all that are nothing but red herring skinner boxes, elements which were not idealized in some naive, genuine way of enriching an interactive experience, by expressing emotion or thought, but indeed were conceived as elaborate ways to deceive people into thinking they are being rewarded and fulfilled for their time. Newsflash: they aren't. It's just meaningless hedonism.***

***It's not a question of there being a game, but more of a game about what. What is Xenoblade, as an interactive artifact, about? When it is a game of building relationships, helping strangers, understanding new cultures, exploring beautiful new worlds, I think it is a game about something worth knowing and feeling (though others have done it far, far better). When it is a game about tactical combat for hunting game and killing monsters, or a videogame about building stats, collecting trinkets or buying better armory, it is a pointless experience with little semantic depth or emotional breadth. Not only that, but it is, above all, completely redundant in videogame history. Do we really need another game about fighting and grinding? I say we don't. Given this is the major focus of the game, it is a point of vehement criticism.***

***It's not about story. It's about what the whole experience is about, what it expresses and conveys to us players. This is through a story and art and interaction gestalt. [...] A game about killing monsters, leveling up, with overbearing HUD, thousands of gamification carrots to keep you addicted, complying to practically every genre trope known and even taking various successful elements from popular games of the past -- how is that not safe? How many times must we see the same things over and over again?***

***Diversity is lacking in the medium because there is only ONE valued archetype, which audiences, critics and authors uphold. Only one single set of values which everyone holds as true for everything. And even worse, it is a culturally inept set of values, result of a society which has long forgotten what little historic memory it had for the word Art, and has too a compulsive focus on remembering another word called Money."***

- ruicraveirinha, *MetaGame - The Blog where Videogames are seen as Art* (2011.10.15)

It is perhaps not surprising the game became rather popular, then, considering gamers usually militates against art and are seeking a form of pleasure and instant gratification through any game's action. Fans of *Xenoblade* tend to be against progression, making comments such as:

***"People are happy they went back in game development instead of moving forward. Grinding is the highlight of this game and being overpowered."***

- Gamer and *Xenoblade* Fan

Soraya Saga even held off working on her own self-expressive manga, "*The Stones*," saying that "I'm not sure if its overlying dark tone fits with the times. Mainly because it's deeply influenced by deaths in my family I experienced back then. I presume more uplifting messages would be the needs of the age today."



Soraya Saga (2011)

This seems like an all too common Japanese cultural flaw, with the majority of their anime focusing on cuteness, kitsch and fan service more than substance, when it's now more than ever that we can't just turn a blind eye to reality. I would argue that *Final Fantasy VII* would not have been the popular game it became if it was not for the darker and more serious mood which likely resulted from the death of Hironobu Sakaguchi's mother, which he has acknowledged was an influence. And turning a blind eye to the state of society does not make for good story telling, and does not help the masses be aware of what is relevant. It is no wonder, then, that games aren't classed as art by most. Yet Soraya seems oblivious as to why:

***"While it has gotten a broader population than before, it still seems to remain in a sub-cultural category. It***



**may take some more time for games to be classed as art."**

- Soraya Saga, "Ghost in the Machine: Getting to Know Soraya Saga" interview, 2011)

Well, duh. And if they keep up their current design philosophy then it is not likely to ever happen. Art is about provoking the audience, sometimes educating them, not to please or accommodate the masses. Even the positive reviews of *Xenoblade* have pointed out that nothing about the game is genre defining or pushing the envelope on what makes an RPG what it is and that it sticks to "a tried and true formula." Takahashi may feel that his creative range has increased, but what's the point of having gained so much experience only to limit his personal creativity and, as Soraya put it, think first of what gamers are looking for? It may be new ground for him, but as far as the specific genre or video games in general go, this is as sticking to the formula as it gets:

**"In conclusion, *Xenoblade Chronicles* is a proper epic JRPG. One that will take you many play sessions to complete. It's a great game, one of the best on the Wii, and a must have for RPG lovers. None of its short comings are the game's fault, but ultimately hardware limitations. Nothing about it is genre defining or pushing the envelope on what makes an RPG what it is, but on a system perceived to be mainly a casual console with only a handful of games left in its life, it's reassuring to see an honest hardcore game backed by a tried and true formula that has stood the test of time grace Nintendo's Wii."**

- *Xenoblade Review, NintendoKnow (Sep 27, 2011)*

However, the actual reality may be that attempting to make games into anything other than "simulation practice" or "fun toys" may be futile. In fact, this study guide will go as far as to claim that gaming simply isn't a medium that will ever lend itself to serious artistic expression, and that's why it is not interested in games or the game aspects of *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*. As with pornography, adherents to the medium don't want "art" but gratification and pleasure. And any time someone tries to take it further they're labeled as "pretentious."

The analogy of pornography I find apt due to the similarity in pleasure-focusedness, and pornography has existed far longer than cinema, or even language - yet it has never been recognized as art, even though there have been artists and film makers who have attempted it. Film critic Roger Ebert wrote a famous article in 2010 where he stated that games can never be art because "One obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game. It has rules, points, objectives, and an outcome. Santiago might cite a immersive game without points or rules, but I would say then it ceases to be a game and becomes a representation of a story, a novel, a play, dance, a film. Those are things you cannot win; you can only experience them."

Ebert makes one mistake in this comment, ignoring that a game can also be more fairly judged as a story and art and interaction gestalt. While Ebert is well-versed in cinema, he has no experience with games like *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*, so he simply doesn't have a place at the table of this discussion. An immersive game can also have a story attached to it that can be experienced as art, giving it more than just one dimension. As Sawaduki You said of *Xenogears* in his essay:

**"Games are usually considered kids' fare, but this is way beyond in scope and imagination, and it utilized technology in sound and graphics that were not possible in a game years ago. It will probably have quite an impact on the players. Many will ask: Why did *Xenogears* have to be in a game format? What are the players doing with a controller for tens of hours? So some will wonder if it needed to be a game at all.**

**But the question has no meaning. *Xenogears* could have been a novel, anime or whatever, the story would have been told anyway. But *Xenogears* is a game, with a story the player can interact with. This is the most important element, I think."**

- Sawaduki You (*Xenogears: Perfect Works, 'The Xenogears Experience'*)

However, Sawaduki You's notion is ultimately flawed. As time have shown, *Xenogears* has suffered more from being a game than it has gained, and, in a sense, was very much wasted on gamers. One of the problems not addressed is that in order to experience an interactive game, unlike with other works of art, you need access to a number of - sometimes tedious - additional elements. The main ones being time, money, the right system, and patience/endurance.

For one thing, playing a game takes *time*. *Xenogears* is a 60-80 hour long game. And even if you have time to experience it one time, will you have time to experience it again if you liked it? If it was a great work of art? Many artists do want you to experience their work a second time, and in order to fully understand *Xenogears* a second time is pretty much required of you. With a movie you can just watch it without the interactive "fluff," and it doesn't suck away all your time.

The problem of money is that games are far more expensive than literature or movies. Not only do most games cost more than a film on DVD, but you also need to shell out money for a system to play it on. And unlike VHS, DVD and BluRay, the system needed in order to play new games keeps changing every 4-5 years or so. You may also need more than one system per generation in order to play all the games, or "works of art," that you want to experience. This is one of the major factors why Ebert couldn't even be bothered to check up on a few of the recommended games. This also means that games easily get outdated and become harder to get ahold of down the road.

The third main problem is that even if you got all the time and money in the world, you still have to enjoy the interactive parts enough to even make it through the "artistic experience." In addition to this, sometimes there

is much skill required of you, and there's always somebody who simply gives up. So while a story and art and interaction gestalt may seem acceptable as a good way of making a new kind of special artistic expression in theory, in reality it is more problematic than superior to old forms of expression.

Add to this the pleasure-focused nature of gamers, who, like consumers of pornography, want the highest gratification. And while both games and pornography can, in theory, achieve the status of art through a toning down of their gratification-focus along with a sophisticated storyline experience, in reality this idea is constantly shot down as "pretentious." It is then naturally followed that gamers are looked down upon. Games and pornography both needs the addition of something outside of their fundamental nature in order to become recognized as art, while art doesn't need the addition of interactivity or hardcore sex to enhance its artistic expression or cultural superiority. Thus games will likely always struggle to be recognized as art.

## **Xenogears and Xenosaga news**

Currently there have been no news about the possibility of a continuation of the *Xenosaga* series. Hirohide Sugiura said in May 2004 that he'd like to revisit *Xenosaga* in five or ten years time. It remains to be seen whether or not Sugiura will stick to that in 2014, but few believe a continuation is possible due to Takahashi's new design philosophy as well as MonolithSoft now being first party developers for Nintendo.

## **Appendix: Links to referenced articles, interviews and sources**

[Xenogears: Perfect Works ~The Real Thing~](#)

[Xenogears Original Soundtrack Liner Notes](#)

[Interview with Xenogears staff \(1998\)](#)

[message of "xenogears" director \(1999\)](#)

[The Play's interview with Monolithsoft and Tetsuya Takahashi in \*The Playstation\* \(1999\)](#)

[Q&A with Square Enix's Richard Honeywood at squarehaven.com \(2006\)](#)

[Amber Michelle's "Xenogears: A History" article \(2004\)](#)

[Xenosaga -Official Design Materials-](#)

[Takahashi's interview with GameSpot \(1\) \(2001\)](#)

[Takahashi's interview with GameSpot \(2\) \(2001\)](#)

[Takahashi's interview with Famitsu \(2001\)](#)

[Xenosaga - first trailer keywords](#)

[Xenosaga "Leaked Information" translation](#)

[Xenosaga - Dengeki interview with Tetsuya Takahashi \(2001\)](#)

[Viljans Makt \(The Power of Will\), translation of Martin Johansson's Xenosaga article in \*Super PLAY\* magazine \(2002\)](#)

[Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi on Sony's Website \(2002\)](#)

[A Word With the Xenosaga Developers - Famitsu Episode II Interview \(2003\)](#)

[Xenosaga II, "Who" \(2003\)](#)

[Xenosaga II Weekly interview: \[1\] Hagiwara, Arai, and Yonesaka \(2004\)](#)

[Xenosaga II Weekly interview: \[4\] Tetsuya Takahashi \(2004\)](#)

[Interview with Koh Arai and Tomohiro Hagiwara \(2004\)](#)

[Soraya's FAQ from Fringe \(2005\)](#)

[Takahashi and Takeda interview for Xenosaga I-II on namco-ch.net \(2006\)](#)

[Soraya's interview with Siliconera \(2010\)](#)

[Articles and interviews on Xenoblade's unveiling in Famitsu \(2010\)](#)

[Iwata Asks - Xenoblade Chronicles interviews \(2010\)](#)

[Iwata Asks - In Conversation with Takahashi & Sakaguchi \(2011\)](#)

[Ghost in the Machine: Getting to Know Soraya Saga \(2011\)](#)

[Sharpening the 'Blade - Interview with Tetsuya Takahashi \(2012\)](#)

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