

Roundtable with Wilbert Roget, M.J. Gallagher, and Pat Holleman

ABSTRACT In this roundtable conversation, we discuss the soundtrack to *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* with composer Wilbert Roget, prose writer M.J. Gallagher, and video game developer Pat Holleman. Each member brings their own unique experience to this conversation, as they have all been influenced greatly by both the game and soundtrack to *Final Fantasy VII*: Wilbert Roget notes Nobuo Uematsu as a great influence on his work, M.J. Gallagher has written the unofficial novelizations of *FF7*, and Pat Holleman has analysed the development and design of *FF7* in his book *Reverse Design: Final Fantasy VII*. In this conversation, we examine narrative meaning within the soundtrack, compositional techniques within the *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*, and RPGs more broadly, music's relation to lore within *FFVII*, as well as musical diegesis within the game world. **KEYWORDS** *Final Fantasy VII*, *FFVII*, *FF7*, *Remake*, Nobuo Uematsu, *Crisis Core*, *Compilation of Final Fantasy VII*, *Mortal Kombat*, leitmotif, main theme, diegesis, narrative, composition

The editors of this special issue conducted a roundtable interview with composer Wilbert Roget (“Will”), writer M.J. Gallagher, and video game developer Pat Holleman to discuss their thoughts on Nobuo Uematsu’s music for *Final Fantasy VII* and the *Remake*. In doing so, we hoped to gain an insight into how Uematsu’s music has inspired prose writers and game developers, as well as current video game composers in the field.

ON MAIN THEMES AND NARRATIVES

RICHARD ANATONE: I’d like to start with Uematsu’s main themes in the *Final Fantasy* series, which often seem to represent the game’s central narrative. Do you think that’s true for *Final Fantasy VII* (hereafter *FF7*)?

M.J. GALLAGHER: I think the main theme of the story has always been life and death. Hironobu Sakaguchi conceptualized *FF7* some time after his mother had passed away. It’s tied up with the idea of death, how he was grieving and how he processed it. Within *FF7*, a lot of characters are orphans and that sort of reflects how Sakaguchi himself may have been feeling at that time.

In terms of the main musical themes, I do feel that there’s a lot of the Lifestream music, which plays a large part in the themes. Even in the main theme, I’ve felt that there are two elements to it. The first element is quite melodic and hopeful, which transitions into what I think is best described as uncertainty. Maybe it’s representative of loss and the grieving process. I think they go hand in hand, that

sense of life and death, loss, grieving—loss of hope in particular. Then in the cycle of the music, that hope returns.

PAT HOLLEMAN: I saw that interview where Sakaguchi was commenting that life and death were the themes of *FF7*.¹ But as my English teacher would say, “that’s not a theme [just like] love is not a theme! Man’s inhumanity to man is a theme because it’s more specific.” It’s not that I think Sakaguchi is wrong, but that life and death is not specific enough. For me, the theme of *FF7* is survivorship, or what happens to people when they’ve lost everything that gave them their identity—if they’ve outlived the world or the people or their environment, or the social conditions that made them who they are. That idea of survivorship I think permeates the narrative pretty thoroughly.

[This is encapsulated in] the same section that MJ identified in the “Main Theme” (about 4:15). There are steady downbeat quarter notes in strings, and then it resolves really beautifully into those big brass chords that are reminiscent of [Dvořák’s symphony] “From the New World,” or something like that. That seems to me the moment where you’ve come through, you’ve survived. You discover on the other side of your struggle how you’re going to live in a world—a new world—where the world that you belong to has passed away. How are you going to survive? And the key for me to figuring that out was the Nibelheim flashback in the Lifestream where Cloud takes off his helmet, and those big brass chords play. He reveals, “Oh, it was me the whole time! I was here—I’m the person I claim to be.” And actually that’s one of the very few scenes in the game where the message speed is locked so that you will see the messages from Tifa saying, “Cloud, you were there!” at the exact moment those brass chords play.

I’m a big believer that Uematsu was always a narrative-focused composer. I don’t think you *have* to be one to be a great VGM composer. For example, his contemporary [Yasunori] Mitsuda was more lyrical, [focusing on the] emotions of what it’s like to be in certain places. He’s really successful, but he’s not trying to encapsulate the story in his tracks. He’s just trying to get you to *be* there, while Uematsu is trying to *say something* about the narrative arc of the game.

WILBERT ROGET: As a composer, I have a different interpretation from how ludomusicologists might analyze themes. We have a tendency as listeners to assume that composers meant to do something that was often more like a happy accident. Or, we assume that they were talking about one thing, but really they were trying to talk about something else. We sometimes forget that they were just people like us experiencing this game for the first time.

And so that’s the lens that I like to look at Uematsu’s music *now*. Back when I was first experiencing it, this all made sense. But I do want to point out that the biggest change between *Final Fantasy VI* and *FF7* was the hardware. I can’t emphasize enough the importance of going from eight channels to twenty-four. It allowed him to use more complex harmonies and chord progressions, which is why jazz plays such an important part of *FF7*’s soundscape.

1. Staff Writers, “*Final Fantasy VII: An Interview with SquareSoft*,” *Computer and Video Games* 191 (October 1997): 54

I also think there's a sense of combining the old fantasy world of *Final Fantasy* with this new world of sci-fi. For instance, every track up until you leave Midgar blends both fantasy and sci-fi elements by combining both orchestral timbres with electronic instruments. This is especially evident in the first reactor missions. Even "Aerith's Theme," which is heavily inspired by fantasy through its heavy use of woodwinds includes the vibraphone, which you wouldn't normally expect from fantasy.

Regarding the "Main Theme," I don't think he was necessarily writing it for any particular character. Some people think it's Cloud's theme, but I completely disagree. I think he was trying to create a theme that expressed just how big this new world was: how much more grandiose, and how much bigger the stakes are. And now that he has twenty-four channels to do it, he was able to create a bombastic six-minute-long piece of music.

And I do agree that he wanted to have some sort of a narrative outline of the story within that theme. You can almost trace minute-by-minute the contour of the story with that E minor section that that we just talked about with the plodding chords. I think this section reflects the beginning of the third act where Meteor is summoned, signaling the apocalypse. Of course, they come out of it with a triumph.

RICHARD ANATONE: One of the criticisms I've come across regarding *Remake* is that we hear the self-titled "Main Theme" while still in Midgar. This runs contrary to the original *FF7*, which doesn't play this track until you encounter the world map.

PAT HOLLEMAN: There are three or four different versions of that main motive—in Sector 5 ["Underneath the Rotting Pizza"]. There's also "On That Day, Five Years Ago." It shows up about three or four times before you get to the self-titled *main theme* on the world map for the first time. So you hear that hook a few times before the world map music.

JAMES DENIS MC GLYNN: It's interesting that Will aligns Uematsu's composition of the main theme with the sense of scale and possibilities of the new technology and hardware of the era, especially when, in the original game, you first hear the theme when you open up the (3D) world map for the first time. Will mentioned that shock of the sense of scale when you first experience it. You're no longer confined to the pre-rendered backgrounds through which you've been experiencing the whole narrative up until that point.

RICHARD ANATONE: This is the first game where you don't encounter the world map for hours, right? In *FF7*, you're in Midgar conducting bombing missions and exploring the slums for four or five hours before reaching the map, where you finally get this sense of just how big the world of *FF7* really is. Will's perspective doesn't strip away narrative meaning. But you also need to look at this functionally as well—not even from the ludic perspective, but from a hardware perspective.

Another criticism I've heard is that Uematsu spends too much time transforming the main theme. I've heard this especially from fans discussing *Final Fantasy V*. The argument is that too much of the soundtrack relies on that single theme, and that it almost becomes a compositional crutch. From your perspectives, how much time do you think should be spent on developing and transforming the main theme before it becomes a tired device?

PAT HOLLEMAN: I work with mostly the same composer [Tyler Mire] on several different games, and he and I are usually pretty practical and straightforward about what we want to do compositionally. I know just enough about music to give him frustrating instructions, I'm sure he would tell you. But generally, the process is like, "Here are the arcs for the game, this is the villain, here is the first mention of the villain, here's the second mention of the villain, here's somebody who's connected to villain, but you don't know it yet, and then here's the villain." I'm going to have one leitmotif that goes across that arc.

So there are three or four arcs to the plots in a very basic way. And he, without knowing the plot, just composes that way. I'm just guiding him and he does great work. It's a matter of what the themes are, and he'll frequently quote the main theme of the game because I guess that's a traditional thing to do. But he also likes the challenge of the constraint. I'll tell him to try to include the main theme in three or four different themes, and he'll do seven or eight because to him, that's a challenge that keeps the process interesting.

Is that for him or for the audience? Yes, to both. I can't speak for all of the developers, but I give him the storyline that I want him to follow and set up, and then he also strives for various motivic transformations as leitmotifs throughout the game because he thinks it's cool, and it gives him something to structure his own compositional process.

WILBERT ROGET: There are essentially two different approaches. The more common modern AAA blockbuster Hollywood approach is to spend a lot of time perfecting the game's main theme. That's often the first thing that you write. Sometimes—and this is not really well known—the main theme is the demo. Some companies will send a brief out to several composers for a demo, and whichever piece is selected ends up being the main theme, with the composer hired for that game.

For instance, the main theme of *Mortal Kombat II* was my demo. I think that's what the draw is: it gives players something that they can easily identify with that entire score. Listen to *God of War*, and you'll notice that the choir is a defining characteristic of the franchise. And this works very well in modern games, when there's so much competing for the players' attention, including the complex gameplay, interactive music, sound design, and voiceovers. So, if you have something very simple that's played fifty times over the course of the game, players will latch onto it. Whereas in a game like *Final Fantasy VI*, you hear the same forty-second loop over and over again in every area that you're in. We don't really have that anymore. A lot of games don't even have loops because they want to be less obtrusive and more interactive with the scoring. And so, composers and developers are looking for any way they can to add more cohesion to the score.

On the flip side, I recently scored an indie game called *Anew: The Distant Light*. And for that one, I actually didn't write a main theme at all. It never came up, and we didn't think we wanted any music on the opening menu at all; we just wanted a very ambient sound design. But as I kept writing, there was a certain leitmotif that kept coming up as the mission theme, which can be considered the theme for humanity. And as I kept reusing this theme, it became more naturally relevant as the game progressed. I then realized that *that* is the game's main theme—I just didn't realize it

until after I had already referenced it several times. And so, I went back and wrote a very subtle main menu theme, which the developers included.

Those are basically the two extremes of it. Just for context, with *Call of Duty: WWII*, we spent about a month working on the main theme, and then the rest of the one-hundred minutes of score was completed in about five months from there.

RICHARD ANATONE: So, you inadvertently wrote a main theme?

WILBERT ROGET: Pretty much, yeah.

RICHARD ANATONE: If this happens again, and you discovered—while composing the score—you had used a theme several times without realizing it, would you then begin to manipulate it in different ways with more dramatic intention?

WILBERT ROGET: Yes! And this is why I hate the idea that people out there walk the earth thinking that composers do everything intentionally [*laughs*]*—*we don't! Sometimes we respond to things the same way that players do, and sometimes it's a post-rationalization.

Another example: I had written a theme in *MKII* that was initially for the Earthrealmers (Jax, Sonya, Cassie, and Johnny Cage). I then wrote different versions with different instrumentation based on each character. For example, Jax comes from the military tradition, so I used French horns, whereas Sonya and Cassie were represented by acoustic and electric guitars. But the more I kept playing with that, the more I realized that this wasn't really a theme for any character—instead, it was actually a theme that represented the concept of *family*. “Family” was every character's motivation: Sonya and Johnny Cage wanting to protect their daughter, Jax wanting to protect his daughter, and so on. There was actually a moment later in the game where Scorpion comes to grip with his own motivations: he used to think of himself as evil, and simply killing for revenge, but it turns out that he was only doing it to protect his daughter and his wife, who were murdered in the past—that's his only motivation. And while I had initially written some different music for Scorpion, the music editor replaced it with one of my “family theme” cues instead. It was almost like they intentionally created this new theme and attached this new meaning to it, which works *so much* better in context.

And it's something that I didn't even consider when I first wrote it. But, it's fascinating to see how you can completely recontextualize music by reusing it in unintended scenes. For example, Pat mentioned earlier that there's a big triumphant moment in the main theme to *FF7* that's used in a flashback when Cloud takes his helmet off and reveals that it was him all along with Tifa in Nibelheim. I strongly doubt that that was written with *that* intention. I think it was just very clever music editing and music placement, and that it was just a perfect moment of triumph in a track that Uematsu-san had already written.

PAT HOLLEMAN: At the time in SquareSoft [...] they had sound engineers. I think they had one guy who did field maps and sound engineering, and they had one scene director, probably [Yoshinori] Kitase, and they had Uematsu. So, you could be entirely right that it was Kitase who was just like “I like this. I'm gonna sync this music.” And this is [music Uematsu wrote] which has a much broader contour to match the scope of the game. On the other hand, composers were actually editing

and [engineering] their own music through at least the year 2000, because production teams were so small. I recognize that compositions are routinely used in ways that would surprise even [the composers].

ON REMAKE AND NOSTALGIA

ANDREW S. POWELL: *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (hereafter *Remake*) has prompted much discussion about “remakes.” From your experience, how do these remakes balance the need for elements of nostalgia with your own opportunities for liberty, either as a means of interpretation or providing an entirely new story?

M.J. GALLAGHER: I loved the approach that the *Remake* took. *Remake* itself has expanded on the narrative, characters, and everything else going on during the Midgar scenario quite extensively. By extension you would expect that it would do the same thing with the music.

And I love this idea of taking slight variations within the gameplay. [For example,] the transition into a battlefield is [specific] to whichever environment that they happen to be in. The [two] tracks are always running simultaneously, and they transition back and forth.

I really enjoyed the blend between nostalgia and something totally fresh. But it still managed to capture the feeling that we all had playing *FF7* the first time around. One of the chapters in the book *The Psychology of Final Fantasy* addresses the idea of the forty-second loop.² One of the reasons our generation has such a deep love for *Final Fantasy* has to do with the music and its repetition. Repetition plays into nostalgia because years later, you can still remember the tracks just because of the nature of repetition. They captured the nostalgia while still introducing the whole idea of, “OK, now we’re going to expand on it the same way that we’ll expand every other element.”

WILBERT ROGET: Absolutely. I think the game is trying to recapture every way that they had innovated in 1997, but for the 2021 audience. And in terms of the music, what I was not expecting was how much brand-new music there was that had nothing at all to do with the classic *Final Fantasy*. For instance, we hear an entire cabaret scene with new music, and we hear other scenes that sound like *Ace Combat*—and then it turns out that they hired the *Ace Combat* composer to do the “Valkyrie” theme. Then, there’s all of that music that sounds like it’s from *Final Fantasy XIII*, and I loved it. I love the fact that it was so diverse. I think that goes really well with the universality that we heard in the original *FF7*. I almost get the sense that Uematsusan didn’t really increase the, shall we say, fidelity of the samples that he was using by that much between *Final Fantasy VI* and *FF7*. But instead, the score was just much more diverse, across the board with so many different styles. It’s almost like every conceivable music style found its way into *FF7*.

Here’s another example: in order to make *Remake* seem like the real world, there’s an interesting middle layer between diegetic and non-diegetic music that seems to live *inside* the game. For example, you go see Choco Billy, and he’s got that banjo music

2. William Gibbons and Julianne Grasso, “‘And So It Goes, On and On’: Repetition in the Music of *Final Fantasy*,” in *The Psychology of Final Fantasy*, ed. Anthony M. Bean (Fort Worth, TX: Leyline Publishing, 2020), 43–60.

playing in the background. For a player, we're not sure if this is background music, or if it's coming from there, reflecting his way of life. This is why I love "Hip Hop de Chocobo," that terrible SoundCloud rapper who's just hanging out in the slums. I thought that was brilliant; it was like Choco Billy's banjo—it captured the feel of what they were likely listening to.

In fact, there's a mission towards the end of the game where you literally have to find local music for some side mission. But that's the feel that I think *FF7* in particular has always had—that music is emanating from the world itself. And they nailed. I think that because they had a big picture concept, they had the freedom to approach it differently from the *Final Fantasy VI* pixel remaster, which was a simple 1:1 ratio that made the music sound a little better, though it's basically the same piece. In *Remake*, they were able to expand on just about everything that they touched with only some exceptions.

And they had a great balance between the nostalgia factor that gave you music exactly as you remember it with completely new versions of the music because the context has changed. We see this with the treatment of the different "phases" of Jenova's music.

PAT HOLLEMAN: Then there was the new music, where they really did something totally new, [...] like the dance number at Honeybee Inn. I felt like it was the first moment in the game where they were really having fun in a *Final Fantasy* way. I felt like the game just didn't have a lot of fun with itself at points. And that was a scene where I was like, "Ah... this is *Final Fantasy*." They have the serious and the comic together [...] you've got something that's new, and yet it feels like the thing that is old: you have the new piece of music, but it feels like the fun, corny joke in the middle of a serious story, *Final Fantasy*-type thing that we always love, and it's connected to the music. So, I think that's a great example of the new and the nostalgia connecting. I think the arrangements—the 1:1 things that Will was talking about was actually really well done. I thought they were tastefully arranged and Hamauzu is really good at that, but I thought that the A, B, C, and D versions of things [with minor variations, like the Mako Reactor] just sounded like bad Hans Zimmer at times. But I also know that composers don't want to compose that way. They're told to. I've told people to do that—not because I wanted to, but because the client wants it. Probably, when you're in game, you don't notice it as much, but when you're listening to the OST, you're just like, "Man, there's a lot of texture A, texture B versions of everything," and that threw me out of my nostalgia, too.

JAMES DENIS MC GLYNN: In a soundtrack that is so heavily tied to a pre-existing work, I often think of the combination of different types of reworkings, remixes, and quotations of pre-existing music as being part of a sort of all-embracing set of *musical remakes*. Do you think the same kind of balances need to be struck with music as with aspects of narrative and visuals, as we were addressing earlier?

PAT HOLLEMAN: When you're remaking something, typically a new generation of people remake it. That is not what happened with *FF7*. Most remakes of things are inherently a criticism, even a positive criticism of the thing that was original, right? Like to go all the way back, the *Odyssey* is a criticism of Greek heroic myth, right? The music was often very wonderfully done, and awesome, very wonderfully added

to, but I never felt like there was a piece of music in the game that was a criticism even, a loving one, of the music that pre-existed. [We don't hear a track that's] a transformation of some piece of music that exposes what video game music was at the time.

[It doesn't say] "Here's my deconstruction of Uemastu. Even though he's great, he existed in a historical context where he had limited resources, time, memory, space. And I'm going to pull apart what he did, show you what he did, and how it could have been done."

I didn't see any music in the game that was like that, [even though] that's typically what art does when it imitates or deconstructs earlier art. I just didn't see that, even though the music was often very good.

WILBERT ROGET: In the context of the music, could you explain that?

PAT HOLLEMAN: The *FF7* original OST is incredibly piano-like, right? There're a lot of examples of Alberti basses in instruments that don't play Alberti basses typically. Typically, you don't hear a shakuhachi playing an Alberti bass that would normally be in the left-hand of the piano, but in *FF7*, you do, probably because Uematsu was a pianist. And most of his musical work is very piano-inflected up through *Final Fantasy VI*. And then *FF7* [he] starts doing much more arrangements more organic to the ensembles that the [samples] are impersonating. But nowhere in the *Remake* score did I ever hear those Alberti basses being featured in a way that said, "Hey, remember this?" This is the thing that really characterized the *FF7* soundtrack, and we can do it in an affectionate way that points it out, and says, "This was the moment that Uematsu existed in, and this is the musical strategy that he used, that seems quaint, although was great, but seems quaint to us now because we use full orchestras for music in these games." I do not think it is a flaw [in the original], but it's noticeable, and very characteristic of him, and I didn't see anyone taking that and sort of handling it in a way which I think could have been done lovingly.

RICHARD ANATONE: You're saying they missed an opportunity for nostalgic recall by not bringing back and paying homage to the sounds and idiosyncrasies that Uematsu is known for.

PAT HOLLEMAN: Right—that's the essence of nostalgia: to look at something from the present and have a different emotion than you had back then. Nobody looked at the quirky Alberti bass, and said, "I'm gonna just slip a little bit of this in there because I love it, even though we don't do that anymore." That's the essence of one generation's art to the next, right? "We don't do this anymore in my generation but if I do it, everyone will know I'm talking about my predecessor whom I had adored."

WILBERT ROGET: Well, during the first gameplay area after meeting Aeris and escaping the church, you escape through a scarpyard accompanied by "Underneath the Rotting Pizza." And what's funny to me about that track is [there's] a sound that resembles an anvil. This is one of the silliest things I heard all the time back in the early 2000s, especially in SquareSoft RPGs. In the year 2000, all my game composer friends were trying to figure out how they made this sound. And I figured out that it's not an anvil at all—it's actually a tambourine that's been slowed down, like, three octaves. One of the most fun things in that piece in *Remake*, is that it uses that same

exact sound, probably with a little higher fidelity. That's just one example of *Remake* repurposing a technique from the original *FF7* as a wink and a nod to the past. And on that same piece in *Remake*, I remember the bassline being clearly influenced by the original version, only more modernized and with a really cool timbre. It's similar to how the original *FF7* straddled the line between sci-fi and fantasy, only *Remake* straddles the two sound worlds of the past and present.

M.J. GALLAGHER: [One example] has to do with the narrative again, and it's the rearrangement of the "One-Winged Angel." It plays when you fight Sephiroth at the end of *Remake*. The actual song itself is literally rearranged; it's almost as if parts of it are going backwards or the sections themselves have been rearranged [...] it's almost as if it's to do with the reversal of the narrative, where Sephiroth is taking the existing power and existing memories of Meteor in the future, and reversing that back into his own power and restoring his own identity and the memories. Kind of the behind the scenes narrative from *On the Way to a Smile* and things like that. So, I would expect that the reason for the rearrangement of "One-Winged Angel" has to do with how Sephiroth is taking different parts of his identity and putting them back together.

JAMES DENIS MC GLYNN: It's interesting that "One-Winged Angel" is used at the end of *Remake*, making it a prominent bookend for the game. The choral part of that piece is interwoven with *Remake's* opening iteration of the Lifestream motif (in the cue "Midgar, City of Mako") before you arrive at the game's title card and the introductory bombing mission gameplay.

And "One-Winged Angel" bookends the original game, too: during the opening cutscene with the starry visuals, you hear this very faint, muffled, reverb-heavy iteration of the choral part from "One-Winged Angel," which you don't hear again until after maybe fifty hours of gameplay in the final boss encounter. This would be easy to overlook if you weren't already familiar with the narrative, yet that seemed to be the main thread they pulled on for the opening pan over Midgar in *Remake*. This raises questions about the expectation for citation and playing on people's pre-existing knowledge of the game. People experiencing *FF7* for the first time in 1997 wouldn't have been aware that they were hearing the choral section from the final boss music at that point. But for contemporary audiences, we hear several minutes of music at the start of *Remake* in which the antagonist's theme features before the narrative even begins.

RICHARD ANATONE: This was *our* childhood, but people in their teens and early twenties, who never played the original game, want to play because they've heard so much about it. Was *Remake* supposed to be for a bunch of thirty- and forty-year-olds, or was it supposed to build something off the original so that the next generation can have something like a retelling of it? We could compare it to the *Legend of Zelda* series. Fans are relatively OK with many of the *Zelda* games being narratively unrelated: every *Zelda* story is essentially a form of retelling of the Link and Zelda mythology.³ With *Remake*, we have developers on one hand wanting to

3. For those interested in this perspective, see Anthony Cirilla and Vincent Rone, eds., *Mythopoetic Narrative in the Legend of Zelda* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

acknowledge the fans of the original game. But on the other hand, these games are for the younger crowd as well, and they're not going to know that the opening of *Remake* combines the music for the Lifestream with "One-Winged Angel." To us, it's a *known* foreshadowing, but to the younger generation they're completely unaware of its narrative significance.

WILBERT ROGET: I think *Remake* is for both of us [and them] simultaneously, which is why it's such an astonishing piece of art that managed to make both players happy. The "Pixel Remaster" of *Final Fantasy VI* is just for us, and you can tell by the music. It's beautifully arranged, but it's exactly 1:1 with the originals. The same is true with the pixel art and the background: it looks like the original with modernized visual effects. This is why "Hip Hop de Chocobo" is so brilliant. It's like tapping into the modern zeitgeist in ways that would not be relevant to audiences from twenty years ago, but it's totally relevant now. The same can be said about the modern battle system and the way that saving is no longer used. All these different things are clear indications to me that it's for both of us—it's not exclusively for one side or the other.

PAT HOLLEMAN: [And because] there are a variety of younger people working on the project, right? And they have a different feeling about *FF7* from the people who worked on it originally. If there're two groups of people working on it, you are going to have a plethora of messages all going out saying different things about the same work of art.

ON MUSIC, DIEGESIS, AND LORE

ANDREW S. POWELL: I wanted to focus on the "Victory Fanfare." In the *FF7* universe, it has an interesting history. In the 1997 game, we only hear it following a player victory. In the 2005 film *Advent Children*, Tifa battles one of the Remnants, and she loses, and the fanfare is heard as her cell phone ringtone, so it becomes part of the world. But when we get to *Remake*, Barrett actually sings it multiple times, he can sing it in a cinematic, and he also sings it during gameplay as an actual victory fanfare. And so, the music moves from non-diegetic to diegetic. How does this fan service affect our immersion, as this item moves from strictly the players' reality to a shared element between the player and the game reality?

M.J. GALLAGHER: I can't get enough of the Easter eggs or lore background. *Remake* actually has the ringtone as well, after you battle Rude when Reno phones him, so that's an Easter egg of an Easter egg. I personally didn't find that in any way jarring. It's not quite fourth-wall stuff, but you're bringing to the attention of the characters this idea of a musical theme that they can now hear with Barrett sort of humming it.

The same thing actually occurs in the original game. In order to get Tifa's limit break, you have to play [the main] theme on the piano, so there's already a precedent. I don't in any way feel that it sort of removes me from being immersed and the story.

WILBERT ROGET: The explanation that I like to give for how a piece of non-diegetic music can become diegetic is that it's almost like a folk song that everyone just knows. And it's not just Barrett. If you defeat the Hell House in Wall Market, it does this cool thing with the victory theme [where it] is both diegetic and non-diegetic at the

same time: it's score music that's just playing as the "Victory Theme," but then the crowd is actually singing along briefly out of key. But it just shows that this is just something that people have heard their whole lives. It's just their version of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm." Especially with the "Main Theme," which again, I argue is not a character theme, but acts as a theme for the world itself. So, it makes perfect sense to be a folk tune that everyone with six polygons can bang out.

RICHARD ANATONE: In M.J.'s novelization of *FF7*, there's a section where he writes that the characters are listening to the radio, and "Parochial Town" begins to play. It's nice to see that a prose writer views much of the music as diegetic tunes in their own fictional universe. For M.J., "Parochial Town" was the number one hit off the Top 40 charts! I'm curious as to when you're writing these novelizations, how does music play a role in your retelling of these stories?

M.J. GALLAGHER: I always feel that the music tells you what the mood should be. And I always feel when I'm writing one particular scene that the music has already set the context of what this mood should be. The writing itself is obviously an unofficial novelization, so I can kind of take these types of liberties with it. There are a few opportunities over the course of the story where I throw in these little tracks.

The scene that you're talking about with "Parochial Town" is set in Seventh Heaven. I think the idea was that it was foreshadowing Barrett's connection with Seventh Heaven: one of the first encounters with the "Parochial Town" track is when you get to North Corel and Barrett comes up against the survivors of the Corel tragedy, so that that was the connection there: it was Barrett's link to Seventh Heaven and North Corel.

As much as I'm taking creative liberties, I do want to remain true where possible, because the majority of the people are already familiar with *FF7*, and so I want to recreate what they remember as far as possible. And I feel that one of the good ways to do that is to incorporate the mood produced by the music, because that's likely how they will remember it.

RICHARD ANATONE: It's interesting that you're including this music in your writing, but that you're also including Easter eggs of your own to foreshadow narrative events linked to particular characters and future event that describe that person's past.

M.J. GALLAGHER: I've seen that in *Remake* as well. There're about a dozen things that I included in my novelization years ago that also showed up in *Remake* just by pure chance. As far as I'm concerned, it's because that's the logical thing to do. You know, like Leslie Kyle? Because Leslie is a character that shows up in Nojima's book *The Kids Are All Right*, I incorporated him with a very minor reference. And the reference I was talking about also showed up in *Remake* as well. So, it's really quite interesting because to me it means that if Nojima's writing *Remake* then I know I must have got something right!

ANDREW S. POWELL: With these collectibles, these jukebox disc references that we've been alluding to, there are themes from Costa del Sol, Gold Saucer, Cosmo Canyon, Wutai—places that are musically referenced, but we don't have any connection to in *Remake*. Is the purpose to open up possibilities narratively, especially if it's taking the story in a new direction from the original game? Are we getting the sense of nostalgia and this idea of "folk song ideas" versus the functional role of music?

M.J. GALLAGHER: Quite a few of the jukebox discs have little Easter eggs based on the connection. I'll give you three examples. The first one is the Chocobo track that appears in Chapter 6 when you're crossing the underside of the plate, and you can purchase the Chocobo track immediately prior to getting the Chocobo materia. The second one is when you pick up the Cosmo Canyon theme. You can get that in the collapsed expressway. But the vending machine that sells it directly overlooks the campfire where the bandits are. So, there's the [connection] between the Cosmo Canyon and the campfire.

[Third, there's the] Costa del Sol one [that] you pick up in a shop in the Sector 5 Slums; there're actually two potential references there. The first one is arguably the most obvious one. In the original *FF7*, you meet Johnny at Wall Market, and the next time you see him is at Costa del Sol. In Chapter 14 of *Remake*, the last time we run into Johnny is at the Sector 5 station. The other one is that in Nojima's novel *The Kids are All Right*, Kyrie Canaan is introduced at the beginning of Chapter 4 as humming the jingle to the "Costa del Sol" resort. When Cloud, Barrett, and Tifa go back into the slums, Kyrie is doing the speech. So, there's actually a connection there between Kyrie and Costa Del Sol as well.

Possibly it's just totally random, but I think there's actually a reason that if they wanted to include the Costa del Sol track, they thought about where the best place to put it would be, and while the connections are vague, they exist from a lore perspective.

PAT HOLLEMAN: *FF7* is a brand—the *strongest* brand, possibly, in console RPGs. And so they have to promise to the player, "Hey, we're going to get to these places." "Hey, we're gonna get to this part of this IP or wherever. We're gonna foreshadow, this trope is coming." That's just something you have to do in game development because the executives demand it, and not without reason. Having those musical allusions, I think, is for sensitive people to say, "Hey, we remember, and we honor that part of the game that you love. So, you know we're not forgetting it we just haven't gotten there yet."

RICHARD ANATONE: Aside from the issue of musically foreshadowing Sephiroth, the most striking narrative change for me involves Zack's fate during the last scene. It made me think of *Crisis Core*. *Crisis Core*'s soundtrack is stylistically really diverse: it has some heavy metal fight music, some beautifully lyrical solo piano music, some duets between strings, and piano. But it also relied heavily on the 1990s post-grunge rock style. For instance, its main theme uses a lot of acoustic guitar, paired with a heavier rock band, with lyrical melodies. This sound differentiates it from the original *FF7* soundscape. The concluding scenes of *Remake* have the theme song "Hollow" in this same '90s style. I can't help but speculate as to whether this is intentional, bringing back what is essentially Zack's defining musical style during that final scene where he passes by Aeris. If "Hollow" is *Remake*'s main theme, and reaches its stylistic climax during this final scene, is it an allusion to *Crisis Core*? And maybe a musical foreshadowing of Zack's return?

WILBERT ROGET: That's fascinating. I never really would have thought of making that connection. Maybe it's intentional because Uematsu-san wrote "Hollow." I think this is the only piece that he actually wrote himself for the new game. I think they

approached him and asked for a new theme song similar to how “Melodies of Life” was an actual song.

I think the reason—and this is me being needlessly reductionist—is that Cloud is not cool, but Zack is cool [*laughter*]. I’m dead serious! Zack is cool—you want to hang out with Zack. You don’t necessarily want to hang out with Cloud at the beginning of the game—at the end of the game, he’s alright, but he’s not cool, where Zack has been cool his whole life. And so, I think that that’s what influenced a lot of the “post-grunge” style. I heard a lot of “Amen breaks.” Have you noticed that there are “Amen breaks” in every single piece of action music in that game? So I think that’s an attempt to modernize the music to *FF7* because Zack is cool, and I think that they just rolled with that and developed the more guitar-based sound of *Crisis Core*.

I didn’t really see a connection with *Remake*, but I think that’s just because “Hollow” just fits so well and it just works so beautifully as a very cinematic ending. It’s like ending an awesome action-adventure movie with a licensed song that just works so well that I never really even considered that maybe this might have some connection.

RICHARD ANATONE: Yeah, because you hear “Hollow” in much of *Remake* in various stylistic presentations, but they saved that iconic rock version for when Zack passes by Aeris in the ending.

WILBERT ROGET: And you first hear it in Aerith’s slums as the background music there, and it does sound like a lot of *Crisis Core* background music. It does have that similar vibe.

M.J. GALLAGHER: And it also goes back to something that Pat pointed out, that one of the key themes of the original *FF7* was identity. And my interpretation of “Hollow” has a lot to do with Cloud and his crisis of identity. Cloud’s crisis is inherently connected to Zack, specifically to his death. So, in a situation where Zack is not dead in whichever realm that happens to be, then Cloud’s identities are further confused, which may result in this hollow identity or homeless sense of self.

Prior to joining Square Enix, Nojima worked on a Greek mythology video game series, *Glory of Heracles*, which was Greek mythology specifically. Prior to Nojima joining the *FF7* mainline series, a lot of the mythology that appeared within the games is based on *Dungeons and Dragons*. *FF7* is the first one where global mythology starts to play a role. Because Nojima has this background in Greek mythology in particular, I’ve always felt that *Crisis Core*’s story itself is different from the others.

The original game is an action game, *Advent Children* is an action movie for the most part, *Dirge of Cerberus* is a third-person shooter, *Before Crisis* [. . .] is an action game as well. As much as *Crisis Core* has that element of random battles and fighting, the actual scale of the story is slightly different; it’s not based purely on action. It’s more of a tragedy. It’s particularly around the story of Sephiroth, Genesis, and Angeal in that story arc. And I’ve got a theory—and I’ve got quite a lot of evidence to roughly back this up—that I think some of *Crisis Core*, Nojima has taken from the Trojan War and *The Odyssey* as well, and sort of played into this idea of the tragic war where the heroes all die exactly as Pat touched on. The better thing is to actually

just walk away and try and go home because the longer you stay in war, if you're in to be a hero, eventually you'll die.

I think a lot of the softer music reflects the tragedy-side of the things; there're quite a lot of violin pieces in *Crisis Core* and I personally feel that it more closely fits the tragedy narrative than it would in any other of the *FF7* compilation titles.

JAMES DENIS MC GLYNN: There's the very clear and inevitable debts to film scoring in *Remake* (compared to the original 1997 game) and the very cinematic approach that they took with Uematsu's original score. Yet, the original game also incorporated elements drawn from classical Hollywood film scoring, like leitmotivic structures. So, *Remake*, on the one hand, is attempting to look and sound like a film (because that's what contemporary AAA games can do) yet, at the same time, it is also simultaneously trying to recreate some aspects of the experience of a 1997 video game *alongside* this expectation for a very cinematic ideal. And within that, the original game was in itself quoting a kind of a cinematic idiom.

WILBERT ROGET: *Remake* tries to sound like a game, and the original *FF7* tried very hard to sound like a movie. In fact, if you remember the commercials for the original *FF7*, they advertised it as if it were a film trailer. You know, they said things like, "In a cast of thousands!" and they were trying very hard to make this into essentially a movie. Whenever I read about some of my Japanese classic game music composer heroes, they very frequently list a Western Hollywood film composer as their favorites in ways that you would never expect. For example, (Hitoshi) Sakimoto—his big inspiration for *Vagrant Story*, which is one of my favorite scores of all time, was the *X-Files*.⁴ And then in a recent interview, he was asked what game scores he's looking at now, and he said, "The new *Battlefield*," because Hildur Gudnadóttir did it,⁵ and so it has this musique concrète thing that she's been doing for quite some time and quite successfully.

But you'll often see that their musical heroes are on the other side of the Pacific, just in the same way that ours are over there. Just remembering my own experience back in 2000 or 2001 when I was just getting started—we had our limited resources, our general MIDI, but we wanted to sound big and epic and have this big Hollywood sound while still in the context of games. So, we went through a similar process, looking at what they were doing over there, and trying to imitate it. And I'm sure this is what composers like Uematsu and Sakimoto were doing in games like *FF7* and *Vagrant Story*.

You can hear that interplay in all of the tracks [in *Remake*], which to me, always sounds very playful. It always sounds correct for a *Final Fantasy* game. And I think they were incredibly successful in their efforts to appeal to nostalgic fans, new fans, and fans in both the East and West. They found a way to have chordal structures and harmonic progressions that work for both fields and production. And I didn't think

4. RocketBaby, "Interview with Hitoshi Sakimoto," *RocketBaby.net*, archived on *Square Enix Music Online*, April 2001, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.squareenixmusic.com/composers/sakimoto/apr01interview.shtml>.

5. Justin Massongill, "Interview: How Hitoshi Sakimoto Composed the Score of *Final Fantasy XII*," *PlayStation.Blog*, January 18, 2022, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://blog.playstation.com/2022/01/18/interview-how-hitoshi-sakimoto-composed-the-score-of-final-fantasy-xii/>.

it was possible for the game to succeed as much as it did. You know I was skeptical going in, but for me, it just surpassed all expectations. And that's what I appreciate about it. It's just like you said: it's both.

PAT HOLLEMAN: Composers entering [game scoring] now have a formal college education, grew up making OC [OverClocked] Remixes and listening to everyone else, being in forums and getting feedback. None of that existed when *FF7* came out. If it existed, it was brand new when *FF7* came out, so there was no forum for people to get feedback. There was no school that taught you how to do video game composition. There was hardly any heritage about what it was like to compose for a PS1 game because *FF7* came out within like a year and three months of its launch. Then the people who are making the *Remake* are musicians who grew up with the medium [...] they have all this formal education and all these venues where they could have mastered their craft and honed it, and all these tropes that have now been codified for VGM.

So, just consider the practical reality of composing for games in 1997 to 2021, and it's like night and day. It's an almost unimaginably different landscape, and so the fact that it sounds the same to anyone is a miracle, because it could have very easily gone off the rails from a practical production perspective. ■

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