

Rewind to E3 2015. The stage goes black, the screen flicks on and a familiar, haunting track begins to play. Creeping slowly into the blood rushing through every fans veins. Familiar characters and set pieces begin to flash on screen, it was the city of Midgar. It also sounded like the voice of Angeal from '*Final Fantasy: Crisis Core*' was narrating the trailer, speaking of the promise that had been made, the promise of a reunion. At the end we were treated to the backs of two of the most beloved characters in the Final Fantasy franchise. Cloud Strife and Barret Wallace. The infamous Buster Sword passed down from Zack Fair to Cloud was strapped to the soldiers back. The sight made fans around the world tremble with excitement and anticipation. When would be the next time we would see the Remake?

Flash forward to June 10th, 2019 to Square-Enix's E3 presentation. The stage begins to glow a beautiful green-blue color, the color of the *Life Stream*. The starting menu for the original classic Final Fantasy VII comes on screen, with three options available to choose from. New game, continue or REMAKE. The cursor flicks down to Remake and the presentation begins. After years of waiting for something more to see from this treasured game, Kitase-San and Nomura-San did not disappoint the fans expectations. We see Cloud riding atop the train, just like in the original game. The visuals are stunning, looking better than they did at the first reveal back in 2015. The opening track that plays in the original game is also playing in the background, in all of its remastered glory. Even for the fans watching back at home you could feel the excitement from that stage in your bones.

A few moments later we are treated to a barrage of footage. From gameplay to characters reveals such as the beloved brawler Tifa Lockheart (a character that i was looking forward to seeing the most". We were also treated to a better look at the games main antagonist, Sephiroth.

Now, gameplay was something that fans had been begging for, for the longest time and Nomura and his team did not disappoint. The combat of the Remake is real-time, action oriented combat. That means that every action you perform happens in real-time. No turn taking or flipping through large menus to find the items or abilities that you want, like the formula for most Final Fantasy games in the past have been. With the exception of *Final Fantasy XV* in 2016.

You can command Cloud to perform any action with the press of a button. Dodge rolling, guarding and attacking all have their separate buttons. Making the combat feel dynamic and giving the player multiple options to choose from. Spells, items and the like are attached to your *ATB* bars. You build up *ATB* by attacking the enemy. Once one or both bars are full you can choose to perform a skill (braver, triple slash, blunt slash etc), use *Materia* or use an item. This makes the combat flow run smoothly while making the player think about what their next move will be. You can't afford to just stand still and spam the same commands, like in *Final Fantasy XV*. Some of Cloud's skills are best used for staggering, some for heavy damage and others for quick hits. Each skill has an exact purpose in combat.

In Remake players also have the option to switch through party members on the fly. With the press of a button you can change from Cloud, to Barret, to Aerith and to Tifa. Allowing to formulate different strategies in combat and make use of everyone's unique abilities and play styles. Not a single character plays the same, which was something that had worried a lot of fans. Barret is the long-ranged gunman. Allowing him to deal damage to enemies from a distance and also enemies that do not fall into Cloud's limited melee range. His skills like *Focused Shot* can deal multiple hits to help stagger the enemy. Aerith is the healer of the group. She can focus strictly on healing up party members consistently, or she can mix in magic use to help deal extra

damage from the backline. Now Tifa is a character that I feel fans will love using the most. She is an in your face, beat 'em up character. She can deal heavy damage in multiple, quick hits. With skills like *Punch and Omnipunch* she pummels the enemy and can even launch them into the air and off walls for combo extensions.

That is what I love so much about this combat system. It gives the player the freedom to choose how they want proceed in battle. If you do not want to switch characters, that is fine! You can simply command your other party members to perform the actions that you want them to perform. Making chaining combos for big damage or healing up simple and extremely fun. Some fans are upset by the fact that the turn based format has taken a back seat in Remake, well fear not. With *Tactical Mode* you can freeze time essentially. It allows you to take breather and decide what you want to do next. Giving you so much time to flip through the menu's, shortcuts etc. Basically it allows you to go into turn based mode if that is how you want to play the game. Kitase-San and Nomura-San really took every fan into consideration when building this system. *Limits* are also returning as well. Cloud can still perform *Cross-Slash*, Barret can perform *Big-Shot*, Tifa can perform *Beatrush* and Somersault and Aerith can perform *Healing Wind*.

It is nice to see that even though this game is a remake of the original, they are still staying true to what Final Fantasy VII was and what it means to the fans. Every scene shown during the demo and presentation was 1:1 from the original. They turned the fight against the *Guard Scorpion* into this amazing, heavy action boss fight. With explosions and fire everywhere on screen. Even the interactions between the characters during combat and exploration is fantastic. They are truly just like we remember them in the original game. Their attitudes and personalities are still very much intact. Cloud is still a stoic, cold jerk at the start of the game.

Barret is still very much outspoken and aggressive. Tifa is still just as strong and caring as well. It is such a relief to see that the new voice actors have captured who these characters were. I cannot wait to see and hear more about them and the rest of the cast.

With everything that Square-Enix had shown during this presentation, it gets me very excited what else they have to show us in the coming months leading up to Episode 1's release. I hope to see more character interactions. Everyone talking with each other, fighting together and exploring Midgar together. That is kind of stuff that I love most about RPG's and Final fantasy as a whole, the character relationships. perhaps they can show us more of Midgar and just how much of it is explorable as well? More gameplay and everything I just mentioned are sure to come up as we get closer to release. It is very reassuring to see that Episode 1 is two discs. Simply because the Midgar section is so large. That means that they are really going in-depth with the relationships between the characters, elements of the story and really opening up this first part of the game in a way that they just could not do in the original game.

Fans have a little bit longer to wait as Final Fantasy VII Remake launches on March 3rd, 2020. Be sure to get your pre-order's in and pick up Final Fantasy VII on Nintendo Switch, Xbox One and Playstation 4 while you wait. The reunion will be open us soon and I for one am I excited to see what else that it brings. As the black feathers fall from the sky, the promise of their return resonates in all of our hearts. Be sure to let me know what you are most excited about when it comes to Final Fantasy VII remake.