



Sprouting Roots

Series producer Masaru Oyamada talks with Oscar Taylor-Kent on nurturing the long-lived RPG series to sprout anew with **Visions Of Mana**

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VISIONS OF MANA

The Mana tree features in every game in the series.



VISIONS OF MANA



Most 18 years will have passed between the launch of *Visions Of Mana* and the last main entry in the series, PS2's *Dawn Of Mana* – a game that didn't even receive a European release. It may have been a long time, but that's not to say the garden that surrounds this Mana tree has become wild and overgrown. Rather, the team behind Mana has been taking the time to make sure the soil is ready for something new to sprout.

After getting the chance to play the game (see last issue for our first impressions!), we sat down with series producer Masaru Oyamada. His history with Mana stretches back beyond working with Square Enix. "I've been there right from the beginning, back from 1991," he says about when he first started playing. Working on the titles, though, began back in 2006 when "I worked with Mr Koichi Ishii, the creator of the Mana series, on mobile versions." These Japanese-exclusive titles included *Mana Mobile* and *Friends Of Mana* for feature phones, devices popular with Japanese commuters.

BOTANY CLASS

Then, in 2014, he took over the role of series producer. It was then that the seed of *Visions Of Mana* was planted. "When I took over the stewardship of the Mana series, I realised that all of the classic Mana titles weren't available to play on the current generation of hardware," says Oyamada. "At that point, I did want to make a new game, but I felt that we needed to prepare for it first by bringing back



- 1 Exploring needn't take an age – with Pikul on hand you can quickly go from A to B.
- 2 *Visions Of Mana's* world is designed to make you want to run out and explore it.
- 3 You can open up certain parts of this bug boss to taking even more damage.

the older games, doing a series of remakes and remasters." Nurturing the series in this way, they could also plan for the future of Mana at the same time. "While we were working on those we could start preparing and looking towards doing a new game rather than just jump straight into it."

So came *Adventures Of Mana* for PS Vita in 2016, a 3D remake of the classic *Mystic Quest* (which was *Final Fantasy Gaiden* in Japan – Mana technically started out as a spinoff before becoming a series in its own right), followed by a similar 3D remake of *Secret Of Mana* for PS4 in 2018.

But while 2020's *Trials Of Mana* for PS4 was also a 3D remake, the team experimented with making more changes. "We actually went quite in depth into that and did it in a slightly more involved way, [...] rather than just brushing over the top," says Oyamada.

"People seemed to really respond to that. I was very happy to see that there was a great reaction to that game." With fast-paced real-time combat, and a more zoomed-in camera you could control, it felt like a big overhaul. While combos made its scraps exciting, you could pause time to make more careful decisions as well – systems that would be elaborated on in *Visions Of Mana*.

After *Trials*, the team put out a survey for fans "asking them about the future of the Mana series,"



Oyamada tells us. There was an "overwhelming amount of support, of people asking for a completely new Mana game". It was a challenge the remakes had helped the team prepare for, especially with the adjustments to *Trials'* mechanics.



“We thought this was really going to be a solid base to start work on a new game,” says Oyamada, of seeing Trials’ gameplay come together midway through development. “That’s when we kind of

saw the direction we wanted to go with development.” With that confidence, and players asking for a new title, the leaves in the canopy had aligned: “That’s when we felt we were in the right place and should probably start working on the next big new game.”

FOR THE TREES

Technological improvements have made some aspects of development easier, but for Oyamada “what’s

recreate the atmosphere and the feeling of that classic artwork from the cover of the original Secret Of Mana, which Mr Hiroo Isono drew,” says Oyamada. The box promised a fantasy world worth getting lost in as soon as you picked it up. “The Mana tree, with that really lush background of the forest. [We want] to recreate that kind of area and that kind of feeling for the world.”

Beyond the Mana tree itself, nature is integral to Visions Of

“I felt that we needed to prepare for it first by bringing back the older games.”

really important with [Mana] is the visual identity – the world, the characters, the look of the games,” and with more technical power they’ve been able to “make those depictions that much richer [...] It does evolve it”.

The goalposts were set up in the 16-bit era. “One thing we very much prioritised and really wanted to achieve with Visions Of Mana was to essentially

Mana’s world. “It’s surrounded by lush nature, and the elementals exist as living, breathing creatures within [it],” says Oyamada. “We came to the conclusion very quickly that we needed to make it a very broad, expansive world, but also have a very high verticality as well.”

Not only are the inhabitants of the world in tune with nature as part of their daily lives, but the elementals become a part of Val and company’s RPG journey through their usage in





1 Treasure chests are hidden off the beaten path, waiting to be uncovered. 2 As they journey the large world, Val and friends will grow closer as a team.

» battles and exploring the environment. Oyamada highlights that director Ryosuke Yoshida (a former combat designer at Capcom) wants to “focus on and underline the idea that this is a living world, and that in the lives of the people in this world the elementals play a very important part”.

GO, HENSHIN

Befriending the elementals will reward the party with vessels to unlock special powers. Equip a character with one, and they’ll not only be able to use that skill on a cooldown in battle (such as dropping a whirlwind into the fray), but their class will change depending on the character using it. The windy sylphid boomerang, for instance, transforms Val from their basic



elemental to have their space to shine. “I really wanted to create that feeling you get from classic RPGs that I loved playing in the past, both old Mana series games and other RPGs, where the idea [is that] you’re on this journey around the world,

aided by Pikul, a wolf-like creature they can ride. Elemental powers can be used to reach out-of-the-way treasure, and also to progress in the dungeons – rearranging rocks to create a bridge of floating platforms using wind powers, for example. It’s somewhat prescriptive, but adds some flavour to rooting around.

“[We aim to] recreate the atmosphere and the feeling of that classic artwork from the cover of the original Secret Of Mana.”

guardian class into a runic knight, but dragon-like oracle Careena becomes a dancer when she wields it, and for the feline Morley it unlocks the nomad class.

“To be able to really leverage and exploit those actions the player has to the most, the world needed to be structured in that way,” says Oyamada on having to create variety in order for each

you visit lots of very different locations, and do cool things in each of them. And they all feel different.”

Which also means a mix of types of exploration, from open zones filled with side-quests and hidden treasure to more linear dungeons that still have their fair share of secrets. Oyamada tells us it’s a “good mix” of the two types of areas. Val and co have a lot of mobility when running around, able to jump all over the place, and are

GREEN HOUSE

Exploration has, after all, always been key to the Mana series. Where its contemporaries often divided the line between their open worlds and battles, Mana has always been about immersing you in one seamless experience where you clash with enemies in real time as you pick your way through beautiful environments, from before PS1 was even released. It’s given the series a unique identity, though it’s a space other games have become more comfortable in.

So what makes the series unique today? “I think there’s obviously a

Friends of Mana

The pals you won't want to leaf

Hinna

Having grown up alongside Val in Tianeea, she's quite close to him – and she's also more than aware of Val's sense of adventure, and how he yearns to protect those he cares about. She attends the village's Faerie festival with him, where she is selected as the latest alm to journey to the Mana tree and restore power to its life-giving roots. But it's a potentially perilous journey and she's glad to have Val step up to help as her Soul Guard. Currently, we've not seen her partake in combat, but she's nonetheless a presence you feel on the path.



Val

The ever-optimistic Val grew up in the Fire Village of Tianeea, always curious about the wider world. Every four years the Faerie arrives at each village to appoint an alm to journey across the land to the Mana tree and help it recuperate its energy. When Val's best friend Hinna is selected for the honour, it's only natural that Val should step up to become her Soul Guard and accompany her on the quest. A versatile fighter, his classes can assist in protecting the friends he cares for, including with a big shield as an Aegis.



Careena & Ramcoh

The oracle Careena hails from Longren in the Vale Of Wind, and has the draconic features to match – though she lost one of her wings in an accident. Meeting up with Val and Hinna, who are on the same journey to the Mana tree, she's no-nonsense at first but warmer with those she can trust.

Among them is Ramcoh, the sacred beast cub she's rarely seen without. In combat, some of her class skills see her twirling around and riding Ramcoh into the fray to bust skulls.



Morley

The enigmatic Morley comes from the Luna Land of Etaern. Haunted by a tragedy that struck his home town when he was a child, he's found himself having to shoulder the responsibility of the moon elementals, though questions whether he's worthy of handling such responsibility. Used to being alone, teaming up with the rest of the party allows him to finally tackle his past. A deft swordsman in some classes, able to use charged strikes, in others he's able to dual-wield daggers to fight even faster.



VISIONS OF MANA



1 Battles happen right on the field, often with cute beasties you feel a smidge guilty for slaying. We're sorry, little guys! **2** Hiroo Isono's *Secret Of Mana* artwork directly inspired the return to the series with *Visions Of Mana*. Appearing on the box in the '90s, it remains one of the most evocative pieces of box art from the period. **3** Careena is on her own quest to the Mana tree. The elementals and the tree itself are vital to the daily lives of people all across the world. **4** The elementals are a core part of *Visions Of Mana's* ecology.

» lot of differing opinions and people will see different things of what makes the Mana series distinct and special," says Oyamada. "But from my perspective, I think it is that idea that you can enjoy it as an action game, but you can also enjoy it in terms of being an RPG as well and level up your characters and get through any of the challenges if you play like an RPG, [with] that option of enjoying it both ways."

FEET PLANTED

The fast-paced action feels great in the hands as we hot-swap between characters and pull off combos and special moves, pausing only to give ourselves time to heal a damaged fighter or carefully line up a fireball with a large boss' vulnerable limb. But it's also a game you can take more slowly, if you want, and you can grind a little to become strong enough to trounce monsters. We mention we used to do this in some harder old RPGs, and Oyamada grins: "Yeah, I had exactly the same experiences! I think there'll be a lot of people out there like that, so we wanted to leave the option in our game as well."

Oyamada nods to a rise in action RPGs that champion challenge as well. "That's great, people love those games," he



says. But "there are people out there, and I'd probably include myself in that, who if a game is a pure action game, find it quite difficult to play and complete and see the end of the story. When I'm searching for new games to play, it's like, well, how easy is the action going to be on me?" Mana should be a world anyone can get lost in,

and tackle how they want.

Which includes those who want to chase huge damage and heady combos. It's true to the whack-happy classic Mana titles, just with a zoomed-in, third-person camera, more fluidity to the chains of attacks, and the ability to switch characters and pick out your moves adding a strategic layer.

It's not dissimilar to the revamped combat in *Final Fantasy*





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VII Remake and Rebirth, also from Square Enix. Which puts Visions Of Mana in fantastic company. And it’s something Oyamada has noticed, even though the similar combat system has arisen coincidentally. The Trials Of Mana remake, which was released at around the same time as Final Fantasy VII Remake, had a similar system as well.

“I remember looking at both those games, they came out at quite a similar time, there are a lot of

similarities here and we both went in quite similar directions. It’s not a deliberate thing,” says Oyamada, when we ask if there had been any collaboration between departments – though Visions is being developed by NetEase’s Ouka Studios. “There’s not really any shared technology [...] but we have gone in similar directions – that is quite clear.” Though he does note that, as a Square Enix team member and as an RPG fan, he keeps up to

date with the new Final Fantasy titles and shares his thoughts with the Mana team. The future is looking bright for action RPGs.

Even though the team have made sure that past Mana games are accessible on modern hardware in some form, and Visions Of Mana is deliberately evocative of the spirit of those classic titles, it still feels modern to play – the world just as much fun to run around as the colourful monsters are to bash. Importantly, it tells its own tale, and new players won’t need to have played the others first.

“We’ve deliberately designed this game to be easily accessible to newcomers. It obviously captures the essence, all the great things about the past games in the Mana series, and you’ll very much get that through playing this game,” says Oyamada, when we ask about players who might be intimidated by the nearly 20-year gap between main series releases. “But in terms of the feel of the gameplay, the controls, how easy it is to just get into the story and start playing, it’s all been designed with newcomers in mind as well.” One thing we do know: we can’t wait to play more – we’ve seen the forest for the trees, with equal parts charm and tricky combat this could flourish. ■