

Nº: 9

By Lodi

# FRAMING



## SOUTH PARK IN FORTNITE? STORM MECHANICS MIGHT FLIP

Final Fantasy IX Character Designer Toshiyuki Itahana Leaves Square Enix

ARC Raiders Will Match Players by Playstyle, Embark CEO Confirms

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DIRECTEUR DE PUBLICATION : ADNANE BENCHAKROUN  
NUMÉRO RÉALISÉ PAR : MAMOUNE ACHARKI  
ÉQUIPE DE RÉDACTION : MAMOUNE ACHARKI - MOHAMED AIT BELLAHCEN  
ALIMENTATION & MISE EN PAGE : MAMOUNE ACHARKI  
WEBDESIGNER / COUVERTURE : NADA DAHANE  
DIRECTION DIGITALE & MÉDIA : MOHAMED AIT BELLAHCEN

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# SOUTH PARK IN FORTNITE? STORM MECHANICS MIGHT FLIP

New details have surfaced around an alleged South Park mythic item coming to Fortnite, and the headline claim is huge: it may “completely change” the Storm Circle. After years of successful crossovers—from SpongeBob SquarePants to Naruto and adult-animation staples like Family Guy—Epic has every reason to keep pushing collabs that feel like events, not just skins.

## Fortnite's crossover playbook: memes, mechanics, and momentum

Fortnite has trained its community to expect the unexpected, but messing with the Storm Circle is still the nuclear option. According to the latest leaked details, a South Park-themed mythic item may arrive that alters the storm behavior entirely. If true, this wouldn’t be just another crossover cosmetic drop—it would be a fundamental rules tweak that reshapes rotations, endgame positioning, and how squads plan engagements.

The Storm Circle is Fortnite’s invisible director. It sets the pace, forces conflict, and determines whether a match feels like a chess game or a scramble. That’s why any item that changes the storm’s properties instantly becomes top-tier, possibly controversial, and definitely meta-defining. Depending on implementation, a storm-altering mythic could create new safe zones, shift circles unexpectedly, delay movement, or introduce temporary storm immunity. Even the mildest version would influence pro-level decision-making and casual chaos alike.

Epic has experimented with mechanics tied to collaborations before, and that’s the key context here. Fortnite collabs aren’t just branding; they’re often systems. The game has hosted anime abilities, special movement tools, and mythics that temporarily redefine combat flow. The community tends to love these moments because they turn the season into a shared story—something you remember as “the time X took over Fortnite.” Crossovers with animated series have proven especially sticky, spanning childhood classics like SpongeBob SquarePants, anime hits like Jujutsu Kaisen and Naruto, and adult cartoons including Family Guy and Bob’s Burgers. Each one reinforces the same lesson: novelty drives engagement, and engagement drives more collabs.

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# FINAL FANTASY IX CHARACTER DESIGNER TOSHIYUKI ITAHANA LEAVES SQUARE ENIX

Toshiyuki Itahana, a veteran character designer best known among fans for shaping the look and feel of *Final Fantasy IX*, has officially left Square Enix after roughly three decades with the company. His departure closes a long chapter in modern JRPG history, one defined by bold silhouettes, expressive faces, and character designs that could communicate personality before a single line of dialogue landed.

*More than FF9: the quiet influence of a veteran designer*

In games, “character designer” can sound like a narrow job title—concept art, turnaround sheets, outfit variants, done. But anyone who’s played the classics knows better. Character design is story design. It’s the visual grammar that tells you who a character is, how they move through the world, and what kind of tone the game is aiming for before you ever pick up a controller. That’s why the news that Toshiyuki Itahana has officially left Square Enix hits harder than a typical staffing update.

Itahana spent about 30 years at Square Enix, a stretch that covers enormous shifts in how RPGs are made: from the late-era pixel and pre-rendered backgrounds to fully 3D pipelines, HD remasters, and today’s hybrid workflows where concept art, 3D sculpting, and in-engine iteration blur together. Fans most often tie his name to *Final Fantasy IX*, where the cast’s warm, storybook-like proportions and expressive faces helped define the game’s identity. *FF9*’s designs didn’t chase realism; they chased readability and emotion. Vivi’s oversized hat and glowing eyes tell you everything

about fragility and wonder. Zidane’s tail and confident posture communicate mischief and charm. Steiner’s bulky armor isn’t just “knight gear”—it’s a visual metaphor for duty, rigidity, and the slow process of learning to bend.

But calling Itahana “the *FF9* character designer” is, as your prompt suggests, only scratching the surface. Long-tenured designers at companies like Square Enix rarely live inside a single box. Over decades, they contribute to character concepts, monster direction, promotional art, UI-adjacent illustration, visual development, and the kind of internal mentorship that never shows up in credits breakdowns but shapes the studio’s taste. RPGs especially rely on that institutional memory: what reads well at a distance, how to balance fantasy detail with silhouette clarity, and how to design characters that still look “right” when they’re translated into models, animations, merchandise, and key art.

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# ARC RAIDERS WILL MATCH PLAYERS BY PLAYSTYLE, EMBARK CEO CONFIRMS



Embark Studios CEO Patrick Söderlund has confirmed that ARC Raiders uses multiple factors to place players into lobbies, one of them being playstyle. The idea is simple: group players who approach the game similarly, so each match delivers more of what players actually came for.

## **Why extraction-style games live or die by lobby composition**

Matchmaking has always been a loaded word, but ARC Raiders is aiming at something more nuanced than pure skill-based sorting. According to Embark CEO Patrick Söderlund, the game considers multiple factors when assigning lobbies, including how players tend to play. That's a meaningful statement, because "playstyle" is a different target than "rank" or "K/D." It implies the game is watching behavioral patterns—how aggressive you are, whether you prioritize objectives, how you move through spaces—and using that data to shape the kind of encounters you get.

In theory, this is a quality-of-life win. One of the most frustrating experiences in competitive PvE games is loading into a match hoping for tactical scavenging, only to run into squads treating every minute like a highlight reel audition. If ARC Raiders can separate the hard-pushers from the methodical planners (at least some of the time), it could reduce the emotional mismatch that makes players churn. You don't necessarily mind losing; you mind losing in a way that feels like you never had the kind of match you signed up for.

Extraction and sandbox shooters are especially sensitive to lobby composition because their tension comes from uncertainty. A good match has multiple "stories": a stealthy run, an ambush, a last-second escape, a scramble over loot. If everyone in the lobby plays the same way, the story collapses into a single genre. But if the lobby is too chaotic—mixing ultra-optimized hunters with casual explorers—you risk turning the experience into a farm for the most ruthless players.

That's where Embark's approach gets interesting. Söderlund's framing suggests a curated balance: by placing players with others who play similarly, the game can deliver more consistent fun. It's almost like choosing a playlist without explicitly selecting one. The challenge will be transparency and trust. Players tend to dislike hidden systems when outcomes feel unfair, and "playstyle" classification can sound like the game is psychoanalyzing you mid-match.

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# FORTNITE'S 2026 TRELLO ROADMAP IS LIVE

Epic Games has quietly made a very loud move: the Fortnite roadmap Trello page has been updated with what appears to be the full release schedule for 2026, including when players can expect content patches and season launches. For a live-service game that thrives on surprise, putting dates on the calendar is a rare nod to predictability, and a sign that Chapter 7's bigger systems shift wasn't a one-off.

Chapter 7 proved Epic will rewrite the rules, not just add skins

Fortnite has always lived in the tension between routine and spectacle. You can usually count on weekly quests, rotating shop bundles, and periodic balance passes, but the truly game-shaping changes tend to arrive with little warning—often alongside cinematic trailers and an update you discover by getting eliminated to a weapon you didn't know existed. That's why Epic updating the official Trello roadmap with an entire 2026 release schedule is notable: it's Epic choosing, at least in part, clarity over chaos.

The timing makes sense. Fortnite is now in its seventh chapter and its 35th full season, a scale that basically guarantees operational complexity. Chapters are the heavyweight releases—the moments where Epic is more likely to alter core systems, rebuild major tech, and reframe what "a normal match" looks like. Season launches still matter, but chapters are when Fortnite tends to reintroduce itself. By publishing dates for patches and season rollovers, Epic is giving players, teams, and creators a way to plan their time instead of reacting to it.

That planning matters more than ever because Chapter 7 Season 1—also known as Pacific Break—didn't just decorate the island. It reportedly modified foundational elements, including how players land and how Battle Pass pages are unlocked and redeemed. Those aren't cosmetic tweaks; they touch the first 30 seconds of every match and the core motivation loop that keeps players logging in. When Epic changes the landing flow, it changes pacing, early engagements, and the skill expression around drop decisions. When it changes Battle Pass redemption, it changes the "why" behind play sessions: how people prioritize quests, how quickly they feel rewarded, and whether progression feels like choice or obligation.

A visible 2026 calendar also shifts community expectations. When players know roughly when patches land, the conversation changes from "is an update coming?" to "what's in the next update?" That's great for content creators planning videos, stream schedules, and collab events. It's also huge for competitive players and tournament organizers who live and die by patch timing.



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# FINAL FANTASY XIV: YOSHI-P TEASES MORE CUSTOMIZATION



Final Fantasy XIV director and producer Naoki "Yoshi-P" Yoshida has once again signaled that the dev team is listening, this time around character customization. In a recent discussion, Yoshida said more options are being considered, while also acknowledging player-requested features like updates to Explorer Mode for future patches.

## **Explorer Mode: a small feature with big community energy**

If there's one thing Final Fantasy XIV players love almost as much as raid clears and glam hunting, it's the never-ending quest to perfect their Warrior of Light. So when Naoki Yoshida says the team is considering more character customization options, the community immediately leans in. The catch: he didn't elaborate on what those changes might be, which means we're in that familiar FFXIV state of "excited, but cautiously."

Customization in FFXIV is a deceptively deep topic because it touches everything: identity, roleplay, screenshots, and even social presence in hubs like Limsa Lominsa. Adding new options isn't just about sliders; it can involve animation rigs, gear compatibility, lighting behavior, and the sheer complexity of supporting multiple races with distinct models. That's why even vague confirmation matters. It tells players the conversation is active internally, and it suggests the team hasn't closed the book on expanding how characters look and feel.

The second part of Yoshida's comments is equally telling: he said some player-requested features have been noted for future updates, including updating Explorer Mode. On paper, Explorer Mode is niche—a tool more aligned with tourism, screenshots, and content creation than progression. But in practice, those "non-combat" features are a major pillar of why FFXIV has such broad appeal. A huge chunk of the playerbase engages with the game as a social world. When you improve features that support photography, machinima, or simply enjoying environments without pressure, you're investing in the game's culture, not just its combat pipeline.

The big question is what "considered" really means. In Yoshi-P language, it can range from "we're brainstorming" to "we've begun planning but can't commit publicly yet." FFXIV's community has learned—sometimes the hard way—that not every idea survives scheduling constraints. There's also a practical reason for caution: announcing specific customization upgrades too early creates a wishlist effect, where players mentally lock in a feature set that might change or slip.

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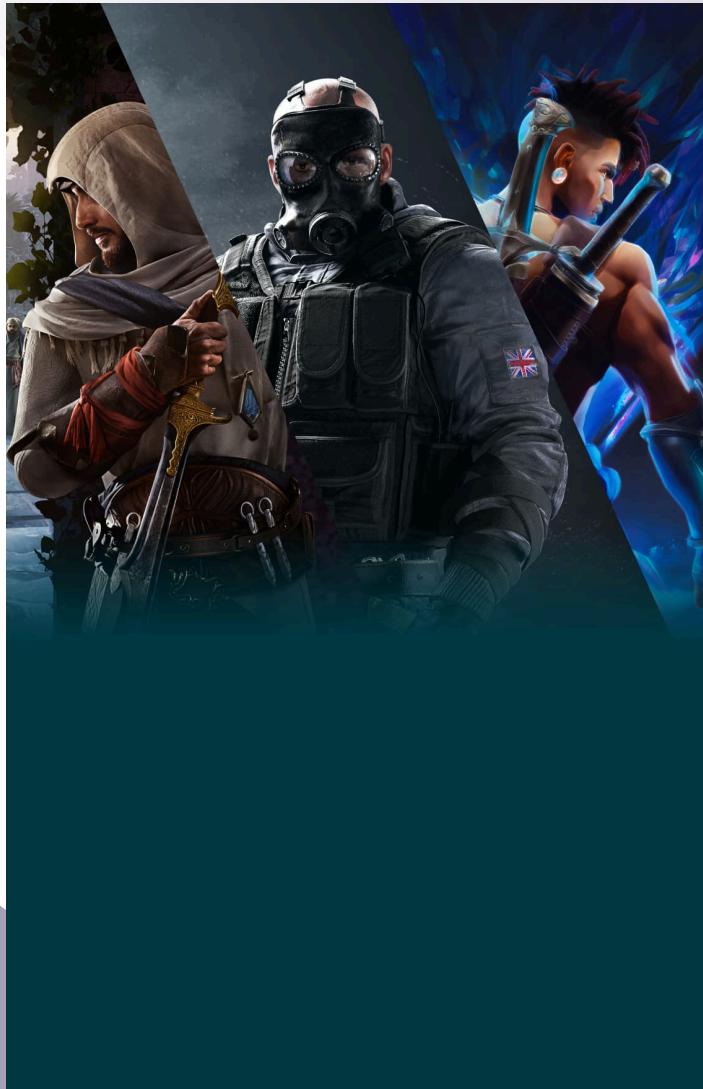
# UBISOFT'S NIGHTMARE WEEK ISN'T OVER YET

Just days after Ubisoft brought Rainbow Six Siege servers back online following a late-December security incident, players are now reporting sudden bans allegedly tied to another hack. With “67-day bans” spreading across social media, the community is asking the obvious question: is this a new breach, or fallout from a system that never fully stopped bleeding?

## Why mass bans are especially scary in competitive shooters

Rainbow Six Siege is no stranger to turbulence, but the latest reports feel uniquely disruptive. Players claim they've been hit with bans lasting 67 days, and many are linking the wave to another hacking incident affecting Siege's multiplayer ecosystem. The timing is what makes this story land like a flashbang: Ubisoft only recently restored Siege servers after taking them offline on December 27, following an earlier hacking attempt. Whether we're looking at a new attack or lingering exposure from the previous incident remains unclear, and that uncertainty is fueling the community's anxiety.

In any competitive shooter, bans are not just a slap on the wrist—they're a reputation event. Siege's ranked grind, seasonal progression, and long-term account value mean that even a temporary ban can feel like a major loss, especially if players believe they were incorrectly flagged. The phrase “67-day ban” is also oddly specific, which has led some fans to speculate about automated enforcement rules, compromised backend systems, or exploit-driven behavior that triggers anti-cheat or moderation pipelines.



It's worth separating what's confirmed from what's claimed. Right now, the strongest signal is player reporting: screenshots, anecdotes, and threads describing similar outcomes. That doesn't automatically prove a hack, but it does point to a shared experience that deserves a clear response. In these moments, silence becomes its own kind of headline. If bans are legitimate, Ubisoft needs to explain the criteria and reassure players that enforcement is accurate. If bans are erroneous—or if attackers are manipulating systems to get innocent accounts penalized—then speed matters even more, because every hour amplifies distrust.

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# GAME OF THE WEEK



**DuneCrawl came out this week on the 5th January:**

**DuneCrawl is an open world action-adventure game, where you take to the sandy seas atop a gigantic crustacean festooned with black powder cannons. Play as a solo Crab Keeper, or with a crew of up to three other friends in local and online coop.**

# QUICKIES

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## Apex Legends January 2026 Patch Notes Reveal Big Changes

Respawn Entertainment has published patch notes for Apex Legends' upcoming January 2026 update, confirming the launch of the Winter Wipeout Event alongside significant balance changes. The headline adjustments target Octane, Newcastle, and Crypto, a trio that can heavily influence team tempo, survivability, and information control.



## Cyberpunk 2077 Director Says a Longer Act 1 Wouldn't Have Improved the Game

Cyberpunk 2077 Creative Director Igor Sarzyński has pushed back on a common critique: that the game's first act should have been longer. According to Sarzyński, extending Act 1 wouldn't have made Cyberpunk 2077 better, because its opening was always intended to be as brief as it is in the final release.

## Amazon Prime Gaming Confirms 10 Free PC Games for January 2026

Amazon Prime Gaming has confirmed that subscribers will be able to claim 10 free PC games in January 2026. While the newly announced lineup doesn't appear to be packed with blockbuster "must-plays," it's still a solid value drop—especially for anyone who picked up a new PC over the holidays and wants to grow a library quickly.



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# POKÉMON AND BUILD-A-BEAR ADD PONYTA TO THEIR PLUSH LINE, SLEEPER INCLUDED



Pokémon and Build-a-Bear have expanded their long-running collaboration with a new Ponyta plush, giving collectors a fresh addition that leans into both brands' strengths: recognizable characters, customizable-style presentation, and limited-run urgency. The plush includes a sleeper outfit as part of the purchase, and with Pokémon drops often moving fast, fans may want to act before supplies thin out.

## **Availability pressure is part of the Build-a-Bear playbook**

Pokémon and Build-a-Bear are keeping their partnership rolling with a new release aimed squarely at collectors and longtime fans: a Ponyta plush that's now available for purchase. For a collaboration that's already delivered multiple Pokémon favorites over the years, Ponyta is a smart (and slightly unexpected) pick, less saturated than perennial headliners like Pikachu, Eevee, or Charizard, but still instantly recognizable to anyone who's spent time in Kanto.

This new plush arrives with a sleeper included in the bundle, a small detail that carries outsized weight in the Build-a-Bear ecosystem. For many buyers, the brand's appeal isn't just the plush itself; it's the "complete package" feeling of getting a character plus a themed outfit that makes it look display-ready straight out of the box. In a collector space where presentation matters, shelf aesthetics, Instagram shots, and convention haul photos included, an included accessory can be the difference between "maybe later" and "buy now."

Ponyta is also a character that benefits from plush form. Its design is clean and readable, with strong visual identity even when simplified: the horse silhouette, the energetic mane, and that classic Pokémon charm that translates well into soft goods. It's the kind of pick that appeals across age groups, nostalgic for older fans and visually "cute-cool" for newer ones. And while Ponyta isn't typically at the center of Pokémon marketing, that can actually work in its favor here: it feels like a "deep cut" compared to the usual mascot rotation, which can make the drop feel more special.

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