SQUARE ENIX’S STUBBORNNESS KILLS FINAL FANTASY XIV

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Square Enix is a video game company located in Japan that formed after the original company, Square, merged with another gaming company called Enix in 2003. Square Enix has produced such notable games as Tomb Raider, Hitman, Deus Ex, and of course the Final Fantasy series that began long before the merge. Square was the original producer of Final Fantasy, a game known for its lifelike graphics and moving stories. Final Fantasy got its name when Square hit a rough patch and was on the brink of shutting down. The game’s creator, Hironobu Sakaguchi saw it as one last chance to make a successful game before the company went under, thus Final Fantasy seemed appropriate. It was largely successful and ended up saving Square from bankruptcy. They have continued producing the games for years now and have as passionate of a fan base in Japan as football does in the United States. Each Final Fantasy game has sold an average of 5-9 million copies worldwide¹ and are hugely profitable with each successful launch gaining new fans.

In 2009, Square Enix decided to latch on to the success of MMORPG’s (massive multiplayer online role playing games) like World of Warcraft and League of Legends. World of Warcraft at its peak had 12 million players worldwide². Since Square Enix was at a comfortable position economically and Final Fantasy was always a best seller, they decided to try something new. Thus Final Fantasy XIV Online was born.

¹ Statistic from vgsales.wikia.com
² Statistic from www.statista.com/statistics
Operating under the codename *Rapture* in 2003, Square Enix formed a team of about 200 employees that would develop Final Fantasy XIV Online. They worked on the game for 6 years before releasing the alpha to a select few in early 2009 and the beta shortly after. In those six years, they created a new game engine from scratch (Crystal Tools) and spent years developing lore, characters, classes, quests, cities, objects, hairstyles, armor, weapons, attacks, enemies, and environments. When the game was finally released in September 2010, fans rushed to buy the game. In just two months Square Enix sold 603,000 copies worldwide\(^3\). However, many loyal fans and new players were disappointed with what they got.

As the reviews poured in, it was looking to be one of the worst games they’d ever made. The average rating was a 4.5 out of 10. Some players couldn’t even run it on their PC. The graphics were so rich that most computers just didn’t have the capability to run the game in all its glory. Players also complained about a confusing menu system that was insanely difficult to navigate. There were no tutorials on how to play or how to do anything in the game for that matter. If someone was new to the game or MMO’s in general they had to figure it out fast or be prepared to exit the game and look up how to do things on the internet. The servers were a major problem, there were about 400 server crashes a day. Another flaw in the game was that it was a pain to play. A player could only level up a certain class (lancer, warrior, etc.) by getting levequests. Levequests are side quests in the game that grant a player experience points upon completion. To level up in the game a player had to reach a certain number of experience points that increases as you reach higher levels. This takes away from doing the main story quests in the game which gave a player zero experience points. It also leads to mass frustration as players had to grind for hours to level their character up so they could continue with the main story quest. To put this in perspective, it’s like being in college and needing to take a certain class, but the class has a prerequisite class and the prerequisite class has a prerequisite class and on and on. To a player, it makes them feel like the game is against them and the entire point of a game is to

\(^3\) Statistic found on Final Fantasy XIV’s Wikipedia page.
let go of reality and get lost in it the fantasy. With all these flaws, it made it very difficult to play, not because the game itself was hard, but that the gameplay and the menus were impossible. In an interview with Polygon, the director of Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn stated that, “… [another] reason for Final Fantasy XIV’s failure was Square Enix's mindset that every problem could be patched. The game had major flaws in its design from the start, but they believed that once it was up and running, they would be able to figure out a solution within that framework one way or another. It was a lack of planning.”

With all these flaws, it was clear to the community that the game was not finished upon release. It was too buggy and patches came out constantly that only fixed the problem on the surface, not the root. This is a perfect example of firefighting. If they had found and fixed all these problems during the alpha and beta testing phases, these issues would have been taken care of before launch. It was Square Enix’s stubbornness that was the nail in the coffin for the game. In alpha and beta testing, players reported many issues that Square Enix said would addressed, however they decided to address them after the launch to keep everything going according to schedule. The root of the problem was lack of knowledge. The team that put all of this together had little to no experience with making MMO’s as their previous games were purely a single player experience. This meant that they did not take player commentary seriously because they didn’t see the problems that the players saw. Simple things like being able to jump in the game were overlooked because Square Enix decided they simply didn’t have the time or didn’t think it was necessary to gameplay.

If we look at how well Square Enix upheld the six objectives to a quality system in producing and maintaining the game, we can see that frankly they didn’t. The first of the six objectives is to minimize variation and maximize consistency. There was little consistency as the servers kept crashing. This means players can’t play the game that costs them a subscription fee every month. The second point is to focus on delighting the customers and employees. In Square Enix’s case, the customers were most definitely not delighted by the buggy, broken game. Their employees were also not delighted by the strict deadlines and obsessive attention to graphical detail. The third point is to remove waste, mistakes, delays, defects, and accidents. Final Fantasy XIV’s graphics were so rich that a flower pot had the same number of polygons and shader code
as a player’s character. This level of graphical quality meant that while the game itself was beautiful, this limited the player to only seeing about ten yards in front of them because their PC couldn’t fully render the environment. This wastes all the effort and work put into the environment by employees. The mistakes they made are numerous and fixable, the delays in patching up bugs that should have been fixed before release were infuriating, the defects were overlooked by management and the mistake was not listening to their customers, the players. The players are an MMO’s lifeblood. If they hate your game, you lose your subscribers. The fourth point is to actively improve, also known as the Japanese philosophy of ‘kaizen’. While they did release patches, this only improved the functionality of the game, not the game itself. Those problems were so deeply ingrained that they would need to do a complete overhaul. The fifth point is (from the manager’s standpoint) to empower those around you. The director at the time would not listen to his teams complaints about the fast approaching deadline. In doing so, he made his team feel powerless and their work suffered. The sixth and final objective is to take responsibility as a manager and as a team member. Square Enix did not listen to the voice of their customer. The problems were not fixed purely out of stubbornness and it caused their sales to plummet and put them in a dangerous place financially.

As time went on, the number of players dropped and what fixes they did make came far too late. However, this story does have a happy ending. After watching their game slowly suffocate under the weight of their prideful errors, the director of Square Enix appointed Naoki Yoshida as the new director of Final Fantasy XIV Online. Seeing that there was no way he could actually fix the game he decided to flat out destroy it. In the final patch he included the End Event. It was a worldwide event that all the players would attend on November 11th, 2010. It was advertised as the
final quest before the servers shut down for good. The End Event started with a red moon sized orb appearing in the sky and eerie music playing softly in the background. The moon got closer and closer and there was nothing anyone could do but watch. In the final moments of Final Fantasy XIV Online a cutscene played. It showed a giant dragon, Bahamut, breaking out of the red orb and destroying the world. It was epic. It was the most beautiful and moving five minute cutscene I have ever seen. If there was ever a way to gracefully bow out and admit that their game was awful, they did it and they did it with finesse. After this, the servers shut down and all players were left with was a white screen and ‘Every end marks a new beginning…’ in black font. The white screen faded to black followed by a new logo and the words Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn.

On August 27th, 2013, Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn was launched. It featured a brand new game engine, improved server structures, revamped gameplay and interface, and a new story. While the graphical quality was not as good as the original, that was the only ‘flaw’. Every issue was dealt with, every bug and problem fixed. They built a new game from the ground up but this time the focus was on the players, not Square Enix’s bottom line. As of July 2015, the number of subscribers has swelled to five million and the game hasn’t even been released in Europe. This number is strictly Japan, China, Korea, and the United States subscribers.

If we look at Crosby’s Maturity Grid, we can map Square Enix’s stages from Uncertainty to Certainty. In the Uncertainty phase, they were blinded by pride and stubbornness and did not fix their problems. After all, they were Square Enix and this was Final Fantasy! Allowing their pride to control their work hurt their overall quality. When issues were fixed with patches it was more like firefighting than prevention. Square Enix also lacked the knowledge to improve. Many employees had never played or worked on an MMORPG before, this caused confusion and misunderstandings when it came to player demands. We can see the shift into Awakening when the Director of Square Enix appointed Naoki Yoshida as director of Final Fantasy XIV. Replacing the old director with a new and more knowledgable director helped steer things in a better direction. However, there was still an emphasis on fixing what they had already built. Real improvements were made, however the damage had already been done.
This lead them to the Enlightenment phase. By announcing to their players that they would no longer be supporting the game and getting a whole new team of people who had the knowledge to create something better, they began to build a better game that their players would want to come back to, a game with the quality their fans expected. Naoki Yoshida and many others on his team obsessively poured over Final Fantasy XIV’s forums before they ended the game. In doing so, Yoshida and his team found the Voice of the Customer. Yoshida and his managers also held live streams to show fans what they were working on. Square Enix was originally concerned with showing their company’s inner workings but the fans loved it so much they still do a monthly live stream to this day.

In the Wisdom phase, Naoki Yoshida used the knowledge of their past failures to build a better game from the start. In an interview with Polygon they said, “He [Yoshida] streamlined the design process considerably. Yoshida estimated that he made around 400 core design decisions for A Realm Reborn, eliminating time lost waiting for approvals. He only gave lead positions on the project to the few developers who had experience with other MMOs, ensuring that they would be able to implement a long list of mandatory "standard" features.” After releasing the alpha for A Realm Reborn, they took the game offline and read through every single critique of the game, implemented changes and released the beta. The game had no set release date until after it was confirmed that every issue was taken care of. Doing this meant that there was no stress or pressure to keep things on schedule, which would create more problems down the line. This leads us to Certainty, the final phase of the Maturity Grid. Naoki Yoshida used the Kaizen philosophy to continuously improve their game. To do this, he formed a small team of dedicated fans and employees that would brainstorm new content and ideas. The only
purpose of this team was to generate new content and make the game better. The team has been largely successful and every few months since the initial release, new and free content packs are launched. Each content pack averages 2-4GB, which any other MMORPG would charge money for. A Realm Reborn is truly a love letter to all the fans, new and old, of Final Fantasy. It is a great big apology and a promise to put player satisfaction over their pride.

Using Crosby’s Four Absolutes, we can see that their standard of quality is based on how well it conforms to the needs their subscribers. When Naoki Yoshida took over as director for the game, he brought in a whole new team of software developers and programmers who all knew what they were doing. They created a new game engine that supported the graphical quality they wanted, without sacrificing gameplay, revamped the menu system and created tutorials for every aspect of the game, from leveling up to how to run. Square Enix obtained quality through prevention by learning from their past failures. The alpha and the beta were more spaced apart so issues could be fully addressed before the next phase. They took players comments seriously this time and instead of ignoring them, humbly accepting their complaints and fixing them. The price of nonconformance in this case is the loss of subscribers. When the game was released, it was made PC, Mac, Playstation 3, and Playstation 4. Not only does this mean more people can play, it also means that the processing power of the game is so minimal ANYONE can play it. This fixed the problem where the graphical quality was so high, only high end gaming computers and laptops could play it.

Finally, Naoki Yoshida showed his team that quality is free by maintaining the game at the highest level. If they kept the quality high and kept improving the game they will maintain their fan following. Yoshida’s team performs monthly server maintenance checks to keep them running strong and are constantly adding more servers. This allows more people to play and prevents the servers from getting bogged down. Their philosophy is now prevention instead of firefighting. Naoki Yoshida and his team built a great game architecture from the start and it shows. The average
rating for A Realm Reborn is 8.6 out of 10. Compared to the original rating of 4.5 out of ten, one could call this a breakthrough. It was named Best MMO of the year by Game Informer, ZAM, and Joystiq's Massively. AbleGamers honored it as the most accessible mainstream game of the year for 2013. RPGFan named it not only the best MMO of 2013, but also Game of the Year. Players named A Realm Reborn as the Reader's Choice at ZAM and Game Informer as well. At industry award shows, A Realm Reborn earned the Special Award at the 2013 PlayStation Awards and the Award for Excellence at the CESA's 2014 Japan Game Awards.

Naoki Yoshida has instilled a culture of quality in his team. He has met every requirement of the Juran Quality Trilogy. Quality planning came from identifying what the customers want and need by reading the forums. Quality control is maintained with the team of experts he has deciding what should be added to the game and what needs to be fixed. It also comes from the monthly server maintenance. Quality improvement is ingrained into the team through the philosophy of Kaizen. By continually asking fans what they want, and giving it to them and more, they have saved not only their MMO, but their Final Fantasy brand as a whole. Their fans are loyal and will continue to put money, effort, and time into the game as long as Square Enix supports it. The extreme turnaround for Final Fantasy XIV is legendary. Most MMO’s that lose that much support don’t have the financial backing to destroy and rebuild their game. Final Fantasy has a special place in people’s hearts. They started from a last ditch effort to make something amazing and they lost their way. Their focus was on graphics rather than functionality. As Crosby said, “Success seems to cause people to take their eyes off things that are really important.” Any experienced gamer will tell you that graphics don’t matter, story and functionality are the most important parts of a game. In an MMORPG the game must be functional, have a compelling story, and have an amazing community. All of which Final Fantasy: A Realm Reborn has. As long as they continue with this culture of quality, the players, and myself, will continue to love this game.