The Final Fantasy MMORPGs

by Damien Bosman

(The success of FFXI, the failure of FFXIV, & the hope of FFXIV Reborn)

I?m not a fan of MMORPGs. In general, the time required and game mechanics put me off. The lore and story don?t interest me. For a long time I dismissed them as belonging to a certain subculture of gamers. And then came Final Fantasy XI (FFXI).

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I?m a Final Fantasy diehard and I gobble up pretty much everything associated with the series. If anything was going to get me into MMORPGs it would be Final Fantasy. It took me a while before I succumbed, but finally I started playing. The lore was interesting, the story was OK (not the best, but passable), the combat was fun (at first), but what kept me around was that the game had that ?Final Fantasy feel?. It?s hard to describe what that means to non-Final Fantasy fans but in general terms it means having chocobos, moogles, recurring monsters/summons, recurring classes, airships, wonderful worlds, well-developed characters and dramatic storytelling. Not every game in the series ticks every single box, but usually they have most of the elements. FFXI certainly did, and it kept me addicted for about a year.

FFXI (and Final Fantasy, in general) is an interesting variation on traditional roleplaying genres. It takes the core medieval tropes and mechanics from games like D&D and alters them until they?re almost unrecognizable. There are paladins and monks, but there are also dragoons and gun-wielding corsairs. Alignment systems and player choice are absent in favour of a more structured story. Combat is very different, with Magic Points instead of spells slots, and battlefield strategies are far more simplistic and inflexible. This puts off a lot of traditional roleplayers, who deride the gameplay as being too simplistic. JRPGs in general are thought of very negatively by a lot of Western roleplayers but I tend to think of them as completely different beasts. Comparing the two is like comparing apples and oranges, and it is possible to appreciate both for what they are.

Lore is another key difference. D&D has always thrown in different mythologies (ninjas in a pseudo-European medieval world, anyone?) but I would argue that Final Fantasy has even more varied lore. From Shiva to Ragnarok, and mecha to tonberries (little fish-men who come at you slowly with a big, freakin? kitchen knife!), it is a bizarre yet fascinating world.

Races in FFXI are a frustration, however. There are humans and elves, but there are also the mithra (catgirls) and galka (hunkin male meataxes). Both races play into sexist tropes and a limited and rigid sense of gender: women are small and flirtatious, men are muscular and monosyllabic. Also, you have the lalafell who are supposed to be cute, little people (I would have preferred moogles). Another point of contention was the lack of significant advantage or disadvantage to playing a certain race. One thing I like about D&D is that every race has unique features (eg. darkvision, immunities, ability bonuses). In FFXI your choice of race is mainly about aesthetics.

After about a year of playing FFXI, my initial enthusiasm wore off. Final Fantasy XI was definitely a success from a fan & financial perspective (Square Enix made a bucket load of money from it) and it had all the right elements of a Final Fantasy game - however, the trappings of the MMORPG genre really started to bug me. Combat was slow and repetitive. Level progression was mind-numbingly boring (grinding). You couldn?t do anything in the game without a

party. Finding party members could take hours. Nor could you take a break when in battle or exploring with a party: after all, you?d already wasted time finding members and now you just wanted to play the game before someone buggered off! And finally, the nail in the coffin: other players.

In MMORPGs, just like in social media, you have to deal with the realities of unfiltered communication. People have anonymity, therefore many people feel they can say whatever bigoted crap they feel like without repercussions. Or they can simply be mean, arrogant or judgemental. God help you if you don?t have the optimal DPS! Players will nitpick you to death if you don?t play your character the way they would. Total strangers will pass you by and say in the chat window: ?Oh, I can?t believe he is using that weapon combination. Ugh.? I tried to solo as much as possible, but even then it was almost impossible to avoid these nuisances in FFXI. So I quit, determined that I would never play a MMORPG again.

Then along came Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV).

Early information on FFXIV offered a promise of beautiful graphics (which it delivered), a great story, engaging and varied combat, ability to solo play, that ?Final Fantasy feel?, and more moogles than you can poke a stick at it (not that you would, because they?re so damn cute). It had me interested. Perhaps this was a Final Fantasy MMORPG I could get into, long term. I planned strategies for dealing with the inevitable idiots, and my excitement rose as the release date approached. Surely, this would be the online Final Fantasy game of my dreams! And then?.oops. There was nothing to do. I enjoyed it for a while but it was clear that Square Enix had released the game half-finished. The story was dull and went nowhere. Quests were few and far between. Getting a party together when needed was a nightmare. The combat was enjoyable but laggy. Monster difficulty changed enormously from patch to patch. Most of the time was spent grinding rather than actually engaging in the lore and story.

There were some bright spots, however. I really enjoyed the move away from traditional Final Fantasy jobs like Monk, Warrior, and Mage. Instead, FFXIV tried a unique approach by having Pugilists, Marauders, and Conjurers. This made it feel different from FFXI and other Final Fantasy games before it. The allowance for players to play solo was much appreciated, as was the ability to navigate boss fights using diplomacy (albeit a very simplistic form of it). Teleportation for everyone was extremely welcome (only White Mages could Teleport in FFXI) given the annoying amount of time it takes to walk places in MMORPGs. Unfortunately, the game was still a case of the bad outweighing the good and these positives were not nearly enough to make the game worthy of a true Final Fantasy title.

It was clear from the reviews that it was a flop. Reviews are always subjective but when every review rating is around 3/10 or D-, it is hard not to believe there is an objective truth about the game. Square Enix had to do something. First, they tried extending the free trial period. Then, they tried assuring the consumers that the problems would be fixed as quickly as possible. In the end, customer satisfaction/confidence was so low that they did what I believe no game company has ever done before: they took a huge financial risk and decided to scrap it and rebuild it entirely from the ground up. Many of the staff involved with the game were sacked or re-assigned. The director ?stood down? and a saviour emerged from the ashes: Naoki Yoshida (?Yoshi-P? to the community). His resume was sorely lacking, but what he lacked in experience he made up for with charisma, passion, and dedication. His openness to fan feedback and keeping the community informed along the development cycle has made him very popular. His ideas and philosophy about making FFXIV the game it should have been all along are inspiring. The game will be re-branded as ?A Realm Reborn: Final Fantasy XIV? (ARR) but I imagine eventually it will go back to just being called ?Final Fantasy XIV? (once everyone forgets the nightmare of the original release). The game is currently in beta testing and the release date is set for August 27th.

From trailers and interviews, ARR looks amazing. Combat is fast, finding a party is super easy, there are quests aplenty, and it has that ?Final Fantasy feel?. I?m very glad to report that there will be catboys and female meataxes! Also, limit breaks are making their Final Fantasy MMORPG debut. Limit breaks are an interesting concept in which you gain the ability to perform a super powerful attack when you are near death. They are common in traditional Final Fantasy games but have never been used in the online games. It will be interesting to see how they integrate into the MMORPG world; my concern is that they will be too powerful. Taming and summoning monsters also makes its return

after being absent from the original FFXIV release. One of my favourite aspects of the Final Fantasy series, summoning allows the player to defeat a god-like being and then recruit it to fight for you. There is nothing like being on your last legs and then summoning a big powerful lava-creature to save you.

In terms of technical details, ARR will also boast a re-designed interface capable of running on both low-end and high-end computers. The original FFXIV release needed a powerful machine in order to function properly, so this is a welcome addition. There will also be more servers worldwide to deal with lag issues. Previously, all servers were located in Japan. Now there is also a North American data centre which will spread the load and allow players to connect to their closest geographical server.

All my issues with MMORPGs in general and the first FFXIV seem to have been addressed with ARR. It is looking like it will be the online Final Fantasy game of my drea??.oh, wait, I?ve been here before. A certain phrase about ?chickens? and ?hatching? now comes to my mind. Oh well, at least ?hope? and ?eternal? are somewhere in there too.

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