

Final Fantasy XIV: Rising Like a Phoenix from the Ashes

On September 30, 2010, Square-Enix (SE) made a decision so catastrophic it would leave the developer struggling for years to repair its reputation. This decision was releasing Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV), the 14th title in the line that saved the previous company SquareSoft from bankruptcy in the late 1980s. Final Fantasy was supposed to be the swan song of Square. The final project before the doors closed and the developers sought employment elsewhere. However, the game was an immediate success and would become the title that would make Square synonymous with the RPG genre. However, despite the failed launch FFXIV was able, like the mythological phoenix, to rise from the ashes and thrive.

Final Fantasy XIV is SE's second Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) game. Its predecessor Final Fantasy XI (FFXI) had been out in the US for nearly seven years when FFXIV launched. Taking its considerable player base into consideration, FFXIV was made to look like the younger sibling. The races that were so familiar in FFXI were reborn for FFXIV. The hulking Galka were present under the new moniker Roegadyn, and still only available as male characters. Continuing to cover the feminine base was the cat-like Miqu'te which replaced the Mithra. The Humes, Elvaan, and child-like Tarutaru were also reborn as Hyur, Elezen, and Lalafel respectively.



A Miquo'te from FFXIV and the Mithra from FFXI that it evolved from.

The character design was intended to bring back players who had quit FFXI for greener pastures such as World of Warcraft (WoW). It created a feeling of nostalgia; even iconic hairstyles made their way into the new game. This time with an entire color palette available rather than the two colors per hairstyle offered in FFXI. Final Fantasy XIV is still arguably the most visually stunning MMO on the market. World of Warcraft may have a much larger player base, and

after 12 years has had some much needed graphical updates, but it is still the cartoony game it launched as.

However, neither the nostalgia nor the graphics could save FFXIV. After a long-running alpha phase (which is like a pre-beta phase with a limited user base), and a beta phase that was delayed, partly over negotiations with Microsoft over X-Box Live use, FFXIV was released. The disaster of the launch was not due to the beta participants failing to do their job. They warned the developers of the multitude of issues, such as being able to sell items one at a time. I don't mean one type of item at a time. I mean one at a time. If a player wanted to sell 35 gyshal greens, they would have 35 separate transactions. In addition, the transactions were also clunky. Selling those items went like so: click the item, move the mouse to the sell option, move the mouse to click the confirmation option. The confirmation box would always appear in the middle of the screen, so selling required three considerable mouse movements per item. Selling items in WoW requires the player to right-click the item in their inventory. Super simple, why SE didn't model that is beyond me.

This issue is one of many interface problems. Beyond that, the beta testers also advised that the game was too heavy, even players with systems that met the recommended specifications had a hard time running it. Players whose computers met the minimum requirements but not the recommended could play, but only on the minimum settings, and with great difficulty. In addition, the developers were warned about many other issues but chose to ignore them. What do the players know? The developers even responded to criticisms in beta with an if you don't like it, don't play it attitude.

During its launch week, FFXIV did well as most Final Fantasy games historically do, however, the reviews that would follow brought the issues from beta to SE's attention. 1UP.com said, "playing Final Fantasy XIV is like playing with a toy stuck in the plastic bag: it can be fun for a while and you can get the general idea, but you can't appreciate the full experience." Before the year was out SE would issue a formal apology to their customers; they acknowledged that they had essentially released a beta game and they couldn't in good conscience charge people to play. So, FFXIV went free to play (F2P), something that is typically reserved for companies that need an immediate return on their investment. In addition to going F2P SE brought in Naoki Yoshida as director, producer, and designer. Yoshi, as he's known to the fans, has a long a successful history with SE and was committed to turning the game around. Part one of that turn around was firing the entire development team. With a new team and a desire to learn from the players, they were able to turn the game around. Patches were added regularly, and the players were able to see the game slowly transition from the hot mess they bought into something they were excited about.

On November 11, 2012, the FFXIV servers shut down with a world changing in-game event. The game would relaunch nearly a year later on August 27, 2013, as Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn. The world was irrevocably changed, the event that would be known as The Calamity ended FFXIV 1.0 and changed the face of Eorzea. Central Coerthas Highlands, a previously lush green hilly zone, became covered in snow. An area in Western Thanalan which was occupied by high-level enemies was now a starting character area. The game was nearly indistinguishable from its former self. Computers that had issues running 1.0 on medium-low settings were now running the game on high with zero issues. The graphical quality had not

decreased, it was as beautiful as ever, perhaps even more so with a cleaner interface. Players who had continued to play the game during all of the fixing kept their characters and the work they put into it. These legacy characters were given an identifying mark: on the base of the back of the neck exists a tattoo. This tattoo cannot be removed, and no new characters can add it, even if the account was active during 1.0.

One of the series' defining characteristics is an immersive story. Square-Enix brought their A-game when creating the new lore for FFXIV. A particularly nice feature of the main story quests is how the main story quest (MSQ) icon is different. The quest icon made popular in WoW was modified, and an "!" resides inside a meteor.



This one change makes the MSQ easy to follow, so players can keep up on it while not getting lost in the plethora of side-quests that are available during the leveling experience; a handy feature when doing the MSQ and side-quests concurrently. The game receives regular updates, typically about every four months, and these updates always add a considerable amount to the MSQ. And much to the player's ire, the stories typically end on a cliffhanger. Leaving them waiting like a junkie for their next hit of lore.

As PCgamer.com stated, "Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn isn't just the greatest comeback story in the history of MMOs, but arguably in the entire history of gaming." Video games – especially MMOS – typically get one shot, and there are no shortages of titles that have failed abysmally. Square-Enix has done what many thought would be impossible. They

damaged their own reputation by releasing the travesty of FFXIV 1.0. However, through hard work and intensive collaboration with the fanbase they were able to re-release and maintain a thriving game. Sure, FFXIV may not have the numbers that WoW did during its heyday, but they have demonstrated the loyalty of their fans. The Final Fantasy fans are a forgiving lot; we just need our game developers to show that they respect us. Like anything, without the customer, there is no product. Gaming is no exception. Now in the wake of its annual Fan Festival, SE is preparing the second expansion: Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood, which is set to release in early summer 2017, right after graduation. Excellent timing.