

吉田の日々 赤裸々。

『ファイナルファンタジーXIV』は
なぜ新生できたのか

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ファミ通 責任編集

YOSHIDA **U**NCENSORED.

HOW WERE WE ABLE TO REMAKE FINAL FANTASY XIV?

NAOKI YOSHIDA

“A Candid Preface”

My name is Naoki Yoshida, Square Enix Executive Officer, Business Division 5 Executive, and *FINAL FANTASY XIV* Producer and Director. Those are my official titles. I joined Square Enix 12 years ago. The company has its strengths and its flaws, and taking both into consideration I’d say that it’s a company where “you get what you put in.” As an aside, “Executive Officer” is simply one of the titles that can be given to a full-time employee. Please remember that...

“*FINAL FANTASY XIV*” (hereafter abbreviated to “*FFXIV*”) was announced as a follow-up to one of the first console MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), “*FINAL FANTASY XI*”, which took the world by storm. It promised to be a revolutionary MMORPG. However, as it drew closer to the September 2010 release date, alpha tests and beta tests went by with players and the media expressing doubts about the quality of the product. *FFXIV* was released nonetheless, eliciting disappointment and criticism from many outlets. Some people even proclaimed that “*Final Fantasy* [was] dead.”

In December of 2010, Yoichi Wada, the president of Square Enix at the time, announced to the players that the development team would be restructured, which eventually lead to the currently-operating *FFXIV: A Realm Reborn* (hereafter abbreviated to “*ARR*”). This book will “candidly” detail what went on in Square Enix and the *FFXIV* development team between the original *FFXIV* and *FFXIV: ARR*.

...Or so I say, but actually this is a novelization of my biweekly “Yoshida Uncensored” column in Weekly Famitsu. This book covers the 44 entries leading up to the completion of *ARR*, plus one bonus story. (The series itself has already reached 60 entries; perhaps we will publish a sequel?)

Moreover, this column came about when Famitsu approached me right after *ARR* was finished, asking “Could you write a column for us about the path leading up to *ARR*?” I told them “I won’t get paid for this, and I’m very busy with development and management so it’s not possible.” “Okay then, what if we always allot 4 pages or so in the magazine to *FFXIV* for as long as the column continues?” “Now we’re talking; I can’t do it every week but biweekly is doable.” That’s the kind of “candid” writing I’m talking about. For the record, I don’t earn any royalties from this book (our company prohibits side jobs).

I’ve noticed that a lot of people read the “preface” and “afterword” of a book these days, so I want to make a disclaimer from the very start that this book gets derailed a lot. The game development and PR stories aren’t so bad, but some of the entries are more like essays than columns, and there’s a lot of digressing and meandering around. Please keep that in mind as you read, although it’s not like warning you will allow you to avoid it...

Also, there are notes explaining terminology that the general populace may not be familiar with. These are also written by myself, Yoshida, so they are probably quite subjective. I take no responsibility for their correctness, so please be aware of that before blindly believing them 100% and talking to other people about them. They're probably about as accurate as what Google will tell you (so, surprisingly good?).

Now then, up until there was 545 words. I think that's sufficient for a preface, but what does Kikuchi-san¹ think? As for the rest of you, I'll see you again in the afterword!

Translator's Note:

The Japanese title of this book translates to "Yoshida's Everyday Candid [Stories]", which is why you will see the word "candid" a lot. I put the title as "Yoshida Uncensored" because that was the English translation shown on Live Letter presentations, making it at least slightly official. Aside from that, this will be a fairly literal translation because of the nature of the subject matter. Some parts have been slightly modified to match Western terminologies (for example, we often refer to the re-release of FFXIV as just "2.0" or "ARR". Also, Yoshi-P often flips between first-person and third-person, but I changed it to consistently be first-person.

Anything not marked with "TL Note" is present in the original book. This book was published in 2016, so there are a few statements that are now out of date. Anyway, please enjoy!

Disclaimer: This is an unofficial fan translation and I am not in any way affiliated with Square Enix or other rights holders. I think it is unlikely that this book will receive an official localization (hence why I'm doing this), but in the event that it does, please cease distribution of this file. If you're interested in purchasing the original book, it's available on Amazon Japan and ships overseas:

<https://www.amazon.co.jp/dp/4047331546> (Please note that Yoshi-P does not get paid royalties)

If you have any questions or feedback regarding this translation, you can contact me on [Twitter](#) (shininyan) or [Reddit](#) (Shini-tan).

¹ Opone Kikuchi, an editor for Famitsu. Said to be a huge fan of FFXI, FFXIV, and the Metal Gear series. In charge of the FFXIV articles in the magazine, and always puts up with my messy columns... I'm sorry.

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#1: “Please Look Forward to Yoshida’s Next Work!”

Published in combined 2014/01/09 and 2014/01/16 issue

Greetings to all Famitsu readers, and all *FFXIV: ARR* players. My name is Naoki Yoshida, Square Enix Development Corporate Executive and *FFXIV: ARR* Producer and Director (that’s long!).

Famitsu gave me an enticing offer: “We’ll dedicate pages to *FFXIV: ARR* every week, so write us a column, even if it’s only every two weeks!” So, here I am, writing this column. (The world revolves around give-and-take.) I plan on writing candidly about the circumstances behind *FFXIV: ARR*, the online game industry, other game-related things, and some non-related things.

...But regardless of what I write about, I think I should start with a self-introduction, so this time I will be writing about myself and a bit about my experience with online games. I was born in Sapporo in 1973, and this year I will be past the age of 40, making me the “middle-aged gamer and game developer Yoshida.” Just like you, I was once a mere game-loving gamer, but when I was in 6th grade, I proclaimed in my graduation essay “I will become a game developer!” with baseless confidence. I kept running along, and before I knew it, I was interning at the then-thriving Hudson Soft. It’s already been more than 20 years since then. (I’m getting old...)

I’m currently both producer and director for the MMORPG *FFXIV: ARR*, but my history with online games runs longer as a gamer than as a developer. My first online game was one of Blizzard Entertainment’s classics, *Diablo*, which was released in 1997. *Diablo* is a historically-significant game that established the “hack-and-slash online game” genre. In this game, you make your way through a 13-floor dungeon, gathering items and defeating the demon lord Diablo. The dark setting, high-quality graphics, and engaging 4-player gameplay captivated gamers around the world.

I still remember seeing the small pictures printed in a PC game magazine, and eagerly looking forward to the game’s release after reading that article. (By the way, the game got delayed over and over after that article, so it was quite a long wait...) At the time, Blizzard Entertainment said, “We won’t release the game until we’re satisfied with it as gamers,” like a stubborn old man that had too much pride in his work. Meanwhile, the players were impatiently waiting for more news.

When the game was released, we used our company’s internal LAN to play to our hearts’ content, completely ignoring our work! (Oi!) Before long, our *Diablo* group, myself included, was running out of space to hold our items, and fretting about where to store them. There, my senior came up with an incredibly reckless idea! He started up a game world on a company PC with a character named “CHIKYU²”, and exterminated all of the monsters on each floor so that we could store our items there. That PC was kept running 24/7 *laughs*.

² TL note: “CHIKYU” means “Earth”

With an “Ooh, floor 5 is mine!”, I also left many of my items on the ground there. Thirteen weeks later, that PC suddenly froze, and a heartbreaking email was sent to the company, subject line “Notice: The Earth was Destroyed”... (Naturally, all of the items were lost.)

And so, my life as a game developer and my life with online games both began at around the same time. While working on games, I was always a dedicated online game player. In future columns, I hope to write more anecdotes about the games I’ve played, and the transformation of genres in the online game industry.

It’s been over 15 years since I encountered *Diablo*, and in that time, I joined Square Enix and achieved my old dream of working on *Dragon Quest*. I worked on an arcade game, an online game, and HD games, just working away regardless of the device or hardware. However, I hated talking to the press (Am I allowed to say that here?) and declined all interviews...

Everything changed on December 3rd, 2010. The original *FFXIV* had been officially playable for about three months, and on that day, complete control over the project was handed over to me. *FFXIV* was the highly anticipated successor to *FFXI*, a game that made big strides in Japan’s online game industry. However, the game was received extremely negatively for its poor quality, and was being criticized even further for beginning service despite its glaring issues.

It’s been about three years since then³, and so much has happened. I express my heartfelt thanks for the players who continued to support us, and though it may only be biweekly, I want to tell you all of my stories, in chronological order from *FFXIV 1.0* to *ARR*.

I don’t think this column will be of much use to anyone, but I hope you will find it humorous enough to keep reading. I pray that I won’t be saying “Please look forward to Yoshida’s next work!” within the next few weeks...

³ This column began in December 2013, so presently it has already been 5 years (2016) since I took over *FFXIV 1.0*. I’ve also turned 43. I’m too old. This column was published 2 years ago, and I’ve been writing biweekly ever since.

#2: “The Importance of Knowing What We Didn’t Know (Not an Important Column)”

Published in 2014/01/23 issue

As I announced last time, I’ll be delving into the end of 2010, when *FFXIV* was transferred to me. I’ll be writing rather candidly, so if my serialization suddenly gets cancelled, please assume that it gave me a really bad reputation, the company decided to eliminate me, or all of the above. (Ahaha)

Now, in order to differentiate between them, the original *FFXIV* that released on September 30th, 2010 and had all servers taken down on November 11th, 2012 will be referred to as “(*FFXIV*) 1.0”. *A Realm Reborn*, which launched on August 27th, 2013 will be referred to as “*ARR*” or “2.0”.

On December 10th, 2010, we announced the restructuring of 1.0’s team, however, the other company divisions were only informed of this on December 2nd. In fact, it was only decided that I would take over the game on November 27th, merely two weeks before the public notice. The reactions to the announcement were extremely simple: “Huh? Yoshida? Who’s that?” (Nowadays, they say “Yoshida?” in a different way...⁴)

FFXIV is an MMORPG, and although the *FF* series has an MMORPG called *FFXI*, I never really played it. At the time, there was an online game called *EverQuest* (*EQ*)⁵, the pioneer of 3D MMORPGs and the ultimate hardcore game. Square’s Hironobu Sakaguchi, the father of the *FF* series, was really into *EQ*, and *FFXI*’s development began when he said “Make an *FF* version of this!” Of course, I was playing *EQ* at the time too, and I couldn’t keep up with two MMORPGs simultaneously, so I vowed to only “take a look” at *FFXI*. From that, I saw *FFXI*’s genius-level memory usage, and I still consider the texture tiling of the walls and floor to be the greatest in the world (my level 1 character is probably still staring at a wall in Jeuno *laughs*).

Honestly, in September 2010 when I saw people online bashing *FFXIV 1.0*, I thought, “MMORPG launches are tough in any generation, huh? Well, it’s the *FFXI* staff, so they’ll pull through somehow.” I saw it as someone else’s problem (thinking about it now, that was a false assumption). At the time, the internal alpha version of *Dragon Quest X Online* (*DQX*) was completed, and the company had told me, “Step away from *DQX* and propose a completely new title.” So, I was busily putting together proposals for two new games. On one of those new titles, I had the current *ARR* assistant director Hiroshi Takai, Kazutoyo Maehiro who would later become a main scenario writer for *ARR*, and Hiroshi Minagawa who had just finished work on *Tactics Ogre: Wheel of Fate*. Additionally, the concept artist was Akihiko Yoshida, who was beginning his sketches for me.

⁴ And now (May 2016), it’s more commonly heard as “Yoshidaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

⁵ *EverQuest* was released in 1999 by Sony Online Entertainment. Many players loved it for its vast world, story, and lore. Its difficulty and addictiveness spawned many a tale.

At that very moment, the *FFXIV* team requested to borrow Minagawa for user interface (UI) improvements and Takai for battle system management and tuning. Minagawa has worked as game director and art director before, but he's the best of the best when it comes to UI. Meanwhile, Takai was in charge of *FFXI*'s VFX (visual effects) and was recognized for his efforts during *FFXI*'s initial release. (Takai is also versed in game design and was the proposer of *FFXI*'s "Skillchain" system.)

As the director and game designer for this new project, I only thought "Well this is problematic," and gave them the OK because the company's decision took priority. I sent Takai and Minagawa to the *FFXIV 1.0* team with a "Check out the situation first," but they came back that night saying that the situation was indeed dire. At the same time, Square Enix's CTO (Chief Technology Officer) Yoshihisa Hashimoto, who had been assigned to *FFXIV 1.0* for technical assistance, also got involved, so the two I sent over returned as a group of three. Then, Project Manager M who was helping the *FFXIV 1.0* team also joined in, making it a light party all of a sudden.

They told me, "There are so many problems that we don't know where to start" (it's actually very important to know what you don't know), so in order to clearly define the problems, I instructed them to investigate what problems the game had "as an MMORPG". For the next while, I would spend my daytime hours working on the new project, and my nighttime hours picking out *FFXIV*'s problems in our group of five, and then giving them the next day's instructions. Thinking about it now, that may have been the starting point for *ARR*.

Around five days into the investigation, we had a grasp on the severity of the situation (although looking back now, I think we still didn't know just how bad it was). On October 9th, I went directly to Yoichi Wada, the representative director at the time (and the current president and representative director of Square Enix), and told him that "If we don't treat this as a company-wide emergency, we won't be able to recover!"... Oh, it looks like I've run out of space, so the rest will come next time! (I wonder how long this serialization will go on for...)

#3: “There’s No Guarantee that Yoshida Is Right.”

Published in 2014/02/06 issue

Last time, I wrote about how even though I was ordered to come up with a new project, the *FFXIV 1.0* team stole my coworkers Hiroshi Takai and Hiroshi Minagawa, and in my indignation, I went straight to President Yoichi Wada (41 words done already⁶).

The outrage at losing my staff members was a joke, but I honestly could not understand why they released *FFXIV 1.0* to the public in that state. To make things worse, even though I hadn’t received any official requests for help from anyone at the time, I still had to run around frantically dealing with things for some reason, and I was sort of pouty about it. (Seriously!)

Moreover, when I talked to Takai and Minagawa who had worked on numbered *FF* titles before, they told me that “Every *FF* game’s development ended up as a company-wide emergency. That’s why they become so powerful.” So I questioned Wada, “Why isn’t *FFXIV*’s current situation being treated as an emergency?”

Of course, Wada was at a loss too, and it was very difficult to come up with a solution when considering the company’s line balance (the balancing of manpower and workloads with regards to production lines) and revenue... However, I was the type of unkind person who would think that “it’s the president’s problem; he has to do something about it” so I kept pressing him, “What are you going to do?” I felt very impatient at the time, because the official service had already begun, and every second mattered. I thought that if we didn’t make a decision right away, it would become a fatal wound to our reputation, the customers’ trust, future updates, and our profits.

MMORPGs are a difficult “business.” They typically require 4-5 years or more of development time, hundreds of people working on them, database and game servers, maintaining a management team, and so on. It’s a huge investment of billions of yen. And unlike standalone games, it’s not finished when the game is released (although lately DLC⁷ is a thing); you still incur update and maintenance costs. In return, players are charged for subscription fees⁸ or microtransactions⁹, which is how the investment is recovered and profit is made. It’s difficult to make an MMORPG in Japan, despite many being developed by foreign companies. There is a reason for this, but it’s a long story, so

⁶ The magazine column has a length requirement of 2000 characters. (TL note: In Japanese, Yoshida has already used 109 by this point. Unfortunately, there is no good way to estimate the English word count equivalent.) However, I always go over that, so it causes trouble for the layout designers...

⁷ DLC (Downloadable Content) is additional content released for a finished game, such as new maps or stories. Sometimes it’s free, sometimes it’s paid. It’s pretty much the norm these days. It can also be considered a way to reduce the risk of used games being resold.

⁸ Paying a monthly subscription fee to play the game. Many MMORPGs begin with a subscription model.

⁹ Buying things such as items and in-game currency for small amounts of money (e.g. ¥100, ¥300). Games that use a Free-to-Play (F2P) model often have microtransactions.

I'll try to cover it in a future column. (I did try writing it but I went over the character limit, so I tearfully deleted it.)

Anyway, the reason why I was impatient was because if the game is bad, most of your customers will quit. When they quit, your monthly earnings decrease, you can't make back your investment, and you can't afford the additional investment of employing people to work on updates. However, when an MMORPG has launched, it is not easy to shut it down. This is because the players' character data and assets are more than just data made up of "0s and 1s". They represent memories, time spent, hardships, and friendships. Not to mention, the minimum PC specs to run *FFXIV 1.0* were quite demanding, and at the time, many customers had spent over ¥200,000 on PCs to play the game.

Shutting down the game without any regard for the customers' data and PC investments would hurt even more than the monetary costs did, and cause unfathomable damage to the company's reputation. If the consumers saw us as a company that would just shut down the servers and throw away their data, we would lose more than just the investment in this game—we would lose profits on every future game we released as well. If it were me, if such a company released a new online game, I wouldn't even give it a chance. And above all, this was a "numbered" *FF* title. Square Enix *especially* could not afford to betray the players' trust when it comes to *FF*. (For the record, we can't afford to betray trust in any other game either. Just to be clear.)

Basically, I was terrified of the downwards spiral of "players quit, we lose trust, we can't make money, risk of having to stop operations increases" which was becoming more and more likely with every passing second. But what I actually proclaimed to Wada was even worse: "It's not even at the point where you can sell in-game items." I think I made him even more stressed out (I'm sorry). But of course, there was no guarantee that my declarations were correct.

In the end, it took about 50 days of discussion, getting opinions from many staff members, and financial analysis to come to the decision to restructure the team and put me in charge. The idea of "rebirth" was also a result of these 50 days. If an immediate decision were made, it probably would've been "take down the servers temporarily, then resume service after improvements are made" instead of "destroy the world and start anew." As for why... you'll find out next time!

#4: “Yoshida?”

Published in 2014/02/20 issue

The discussion on whether to treat *FFXIV 1.0* as a company-wide emergency began on October 9th, 2010. If the decision had been made at that time to restructure the development team and its management, I would have advised to apologize to the customers, pause service temporarily, and resume after the improvements were made. There are many reasons why.

First off, during the alpha and beta test periods, much of the player feedback was along the lines of “add more content, fix the interface, and improve server stability before launch.” Many of the players were long-time *FFXI* players, and I think there was a lot of anger, but above all, they were very concerned about the fate of *FFXIV*.

Also, it hadn’t been too long since the official launch, and the 30-day free period wasn’t over yet, so we could apologize for releasing the game before it was ready, and restart service after improving the quality of the product. I believed this would tell the customers that “Square Enix finally sees this situation as a problem” and somewhat quell the bad press, which would only continue to spread if the servers were kept up. Of course, this would only work if the improvements were solid. I also thought that if we paused service at this time, then we should honour all refund requests as well. In the end the servers stayed up, but this ideology became the basis for legacy rewards, suspension of subscription fees for over a year, and free copies of the remade client for legacy players.

However, the internal decision to restructure¹⁰ was not made until November 27th at 4 a.m. We began scrambling to contact each department, but the development team was not notified until December 2nd, and the public announcement to our customers was on December 10th. By then, it had already been more than two months since launch. Login numbers were decreasing by the day, but there were still some tens of thousands of people playing and continuing to strengthen their characters.

At this point, players were divided between “those who got fed up and quit” and “those who continued playing, trusting in future updates.” My original idea of temporarily suspending service completely disappeared from my head as a viable option. If we did that, then both groups would yell at us, “It’s too late! If you were going to shut down the servers, you should’ve done it earlier!” Instead, I moved on to the next option: seeing how much we could fix while keeping the servers up. This led to our first decision point—whether to revise the core game, or work on its continued operations. (The decision point that led to the idea of “rebirth” will be covered in future columns.)

¹⁰ The “*FFXIV* development team restructuring” refers to the announcement made on December 10th, 2010. It was posted on the old version of the player community site “The Lodestone” and sent to all players via email.

In order to write this column, I looked at my emails and schedules from back then, and they're so bad that I feel nauseous *bitter smile*. Every day there were over 200 emergency alerts about servers crashing and restarting. In February 2011, there were around 400 emails a day on average of communication with staff. My agenda is crammed full of text, and to make matters worse, it's full of overlapping appointments. I don't remember how I dealt with that *bitter smile*. I couldn't talk about it back then, but after the restructuring, I forced all of the *FFXIV 1.0* staff to take time off until the end of the year, except for the people who were working on Patch 1.2. (They took a break later on.)

Taking breaks is crucial if you want to get work done (Ahh, I think the *ARR* staff are going to throw rocks at me). In game development however, instead of taking regular breaks, people tend to work nonstop when it's crunch time, and then use all of their break time at once. (Of course, this is not the ideal situation... Nooo, not the rocks!) There's no "complete answer" when it comes to games—the more work you put in, the better they get. That's why it's part of the producer and director's job to say "Okay, we can stop here!" Especially when you're making an MMORPG which receives large updates on a regular basis, it often devolves into a game of cat and mouse with your schedule, and the staff truly go through a lot of hardships. (But being able to see the customers' reactions directly makes it all worth it!)

Back then, the mood of "pursuing an unknown goal", the bashing from the customers, and the (candid) criticism from within the company made for an incredibly exhausting experience. And when the complete restructuring of the leadership was announced, I'm sure there were many staff who actually dreaded it because it meant that they'd have to keep going. Our development team and operations team are human beings just like the players are, and stress leads to fatigue. I determined that if we were going to rebuild *FFXIV*, the most important part would be proper rest. And on the other side of all this, if the healthy leadership toiled away to create a precise plan for implementation while the other staff members were resting, then the work would be done more efficiently and we would be able to deliver improvements to the customers faster.

As an aside, when the restructuring was announced, the fact that no one knew who I was ended up causing trouble for someone else in the gaming industry who had the same name Naoki Yoshida. However, after seeing nothing but negative feedback ever since *FFXIV*'s release, the internet's reactions to that felt like the first time people were "laughing" in a non-negative way. I'm a positive thinker, so when I saw the reactions, I thought "Ahh, I lucked out." (I truly apologize if he was offended...)

Looking back at the end of 2010 now, it was when we began to proceed with remaking *FFXIV*, after all-too-many tremendous decisions that had to be made. To be continued! (I'll also talk a bit about other games.)

#5: “Ideal - Reality = Problem”

Published in 2014/03/06 issue

On December 10th, 2010, the *FFXIV* development team restructuring was announced, and we immediately began working on various changes. On January 1st, 2011, with the start of the new year, we presented the players with four keywords representing the reform that would take place (“FUN”, “LIVE”, “REBOOT”, and “REBUILD”), a survey to take, and a mysterious four-line poem which has now become sort of a tradition. (Since they called me “Poet Yoshi¹¹” for a while after that...)

According to my old emails, these keywords and the translation request for the poem were completed along with the survey preparation on December 17th, so everything was decided rather quickly.

To be honest, my memory of this time period is hazy. (Oi!) I’m normally pretty confident in my memory, but even when I look back at that stuff, it’s like I have amnesia—I can’t recall what day and on what basis those decisions were made. (Are you OK?) The poem made it seem like I’d already been floating the idea of “destroying the world and beginning anew”, but I’m certain that I only meant it as “big system changes and a new story”, and *not* “remake the entire game”. But there’s also some stuff that seems related to the meteor plot, so uh... The human brain works in mysterious ways, huh? (Don’t act like it’s not your problem!)

It’s hard to explain in words, but it’s kind of like, “I was concentrating so hard that the memories got buried too deep inside my brain”, or “I tried to burn it into my memory, but the light was so strong that everything went white”. Yeah. If anyone has experienced something similar, please send me an email. (You’re making others do it for you!?)

Now then, after granting the development team a special vacation, the “core members” worked at an accelerated pace. This core team has grown a bit over time and is still the crux of *FFXIV* today. I hope to write about their efforts again later on. Going back, these core members split up between different departments to conduct a thorough analysis. This round of investigations went on until December 28th at 8 p.m.

Meanwhile, I worked on what you could call the complete opposite task—putting together documents detailing the “minimum requirements in designing a new *FF* MMORPG”.

¹¹ I have been given many affectionate(?) nicknames by players throughout the years. Yoshi-P, Poet Yoshi, Liar-P, Skip-Brag, Yoshi’tē, soul without a body, etc. (TL note: ‘Poet Yoshi’ came from the 4-line poem he included in his New Year message after taking over *FFXIV*, which mimicked Mezaya’s *Divine Chronicles* in the game. Players debated about interpretations but ultimately there was no clear answer. ‘Liar-P’ came from supposedly frequent contradictions in interviews. ‘Skip-Brag’ is explained in Column #21-22. ‘Yoshi’tē’ came from Yoshida having miqu’tē makeup done on him during an event. ‘Soul without a body’ is what Yoshida described himself as in his blogs about other MMOs during the 2000s. He acknowledged it in a live letter before. Everything on the internet is permanent...)

I requested different types of analyses depending on the department, but they generally covered the following:

- **What are the critical issues caused by the current implementation?**
(e.g. Memory leaks)
- **Why is the current implementation obviously not behaving right?**
(e.g. What is causing the UI bugs?)
- **Why is the current implementation not meeting specifications?**
(e.g. You can't click icons with the mouse... What!?)

The actual contents were a lot more specific with regards to individual departments, but at any rate, in order to determine *how* to change *FFXIV*, we first needed an accurate understanding of the current situation—that is, to narrow down what exactly was going on. This was the core members' task, and they also began research on other things like a new UI middleware.

On my end, the game design document was looking something like this:

- **How should the worlds be set up?**
(Partially worldless, completely worldless, etc.)
(TL note: "Worldless" is sort of like "cross-server", except "completely worldless" would be having everyone on one big server.)
- **Battle system**
(Real-time? GCD-based? Targeting? No targeting? Action?)
- **Party matchmaking**
(Automatic? Dedicated UI? Relying on player chat?)
- **Leveling process/content**
(Through quests? Grinding dungeons? Overworld mobs?)
- **Guild system and factions**
(Is a guild mandatory? Some kind of light/dark attribute? Divided into the 3 cities?)
- **Required types of content**
(Public? Instanced?)

Of course, there were other things like number of zones, cutscene quality, amount of voiced content, and so on, but putting cost aside, I put together what people would absolutely expect to see from a new *FF* series MMORPG. Basically, it was the “absolute minimum ideal.”

Then, at 8 p.m. on December 28th, we began to compare the “reality” that the core developers had investigated with the “ideal” I had put together. Written as a formula: Ideal - Reality = Problem. By doing this, we could get a clear picture of the problems at hand (although we’d be screwed if my design was wrong). Now, we finally had a starting point.

Up until then, I had never done so much theorizing, or worked so minutely or earnestly (!?) before. (Really?) The process wasn’t any different from my usual work, but *FFXIV* was on a completely different scale. There were many driving factors here, such as the pressure of absolutely not being allowed to fail, the efforts of the core developers, and the fact that I was working on an MMORPG for the *FF* series that I loved so much. So, there’s a high chance that the final result was just a fluke.
laughs

Still, I think the “Ideal - Reality = Problem” concept could be applied to any other division’s work, or even self-diagnosis. Essentially, if you come up with how something should be, perform an accurate analysis of the current situation, and make improvements (no matter how gradual), you should be able to make steady progress towards your goal. Back then, I thought “in the end these are all obvious things,” but at the same time, I realized that sometimes, “the obvious things” are the hardest ones of all.

“Now then, we’ve gathered up all the problems! We’ll earnestly make our way through these obvious things!” we vowed at 11 p.m. Upon closer inspection, there were over 10,000 problems listed out, and the disparity from the ideal was such a shock that I broke out into a 40°C fever that night *laughs*. When you’re that disturbed, of course you’d want to bring down a meteor or two. “Go, Dalamud¹², with all of your unpleasant memories!” (A stolen punchline!?) To be continued...

¹² Dalamud was once one of the moons orbiting Eorzea, the world of *FFXIV*. It was present in the sky during 1.0, but began to fall because of Project Meteor. Just before it crashed into the ground, the primal Bahamut appeared, who had been sealed inside the moon. This was how Eorzea was destroyed, and the calamity was called the Seventh Umbral Era. You can watch it here: [“End of an Era” Trailer](#)

TL note: The quote Yoshi-P uses here is originally from *Mobile Suit Gundam: Char’s Counterattack*.

#6: “It Doesn’t Even Have to Be FFXIV! (Huh?)”

Published in 2014/03/20 issue

After the big shake-up in December, January 1st had come. Struck with fever, I huddled in my kotatsu at home with my laptop, fueled by coffee and tobacco. I was poring through the contents of the giant list of problems with *FFXIV 1.0*. The TV was on for once, and a New Year’s special was on air.

Typically, I don’t watch TV.¹³ The reason is simple: I don’t have the time. In the past, I loved watching dramas, and I could spend hours upon hours watching pro baseball. By the way, despite being born in Hokkaido, my father was a diehard [Hanshin] Tigers fan. Meanwhile, I’d been watching the [Yomiuri] Giants ever since I was old enough to understand what was going on, so naturally, I became a Giants fan (we spent our days fighting over whether Egawa or Kakefu was better).

I’d say it’s been around 14 years since I stopped watching TV. At the time, working and playing MMORPGs were as much of my daily routine as breathing was, and TV was pushed out of the way to make room for those.

14 years ago, I was working for a very small company. I’d draft game designs by myself, promote our products to clients, make budget estimates, and lead projects—I was basically a jack of all trades. I’d be in the office 14 hours a day, a workaholic that couldn’t differentiate between work and fun (although it’s even worse now *laughs*).

Perhaps because he pitied me, the director allowed me to bring my personal PC to work (of course, I couldn’t connect it to the company intranet), so that I could play my beloved MMORPGs at work under the guise of “research”! (Such a blessed arrangement.) I built a PC and placed it at my desk, so that I could stay logged in even from work. It was like a dream. I would focus on my work, tapping away at my keyboard, but also monitoring my gaming PC in the corner of my eye. If I saw a rare monster spawn, I’d swap to the other mouse and keyboard at the speed of light! (This is what you call a “deviant”, right?)

After work, I would log out of the game world for only the 30 minutes it took to get home, where I would immediately log back in. My guildmates¹⁴ would already have a party formed, with just one spot open, waiting for me. I think MMORPGs are the only places where you can make a lot of friends that will await your return *laughs*. I’d cast buffs on the party and run around looking for enemies while eating dinner from a tray in front of my computer. If it was a PvP game, then our

¹³ Even now in 2016, I still don’t watch TV. That means I don’t know anything about TV stars or voice actors. Now I’m wondering if that’s a problem as a producer.

¹⁴ Guilds are player-made in-game organizations. They can also be called clans. In *ARR*, they are called free companies (FCs). Activities vary depending on the guild, ranging from laid-back to hardcore styles. You can also create more “unique” ones, like “only lalafell lovers allowed”.

enemies would also be players from somewhere in the world. When we spotted them, I'd immediately shove the tray aside and engage in battle. After they were defeated, I'd go back to eating... hobbies are a fearsome thing. (I flipped that tray over so many times...)

The way I talk about it might make some people think that MMORPGs are terrifying. (It's too late to deny it now!) However, I'm sure everyone has lots of experiences with being immersed in work, hobbies, or club activities. Playing sports until you're dead tired every day, falling asleep right after eating (or *while* eating), waking up early for morning practice, sleeping during class to restore your energy, then going all-out for evening practice...

MMORPG is a genre under the "video game" entertainment umbrella, but in my opinion, it can also be considered a hobby of its own. Just like saying "My hobby is playing video games" (I wish you could say this confidently on a date), saying "My hobby is playing MMORPGs" also holds a lot of depth—it's not just having fun; it also involves painful and sad times. That's why an MMORPG is like "a world where my other self lives" and can be enjoyed long-term as a form of *entertainment* that is also a *hobby*. If you've never played an MMORPG, I encourage you to experience it at least once. It doesn't even have to be *FFXIV*! (Oi!)

Even *FFXIV 1.0* was born as an MMORPG. As I said earlier, MMORPGs aren't only fun and games, which is why they become powerful experiences. And at the same time, it's like living an alternate life. However, before all of that, an MMORPG is a stable source of long-term fun, where you can experience moments that are only possible in an online game world. *FFXIV* was the "newest numbered *FF* title", so I felt that it needed to be a world like that, just like *FFXI* was. (*ARR* is still like a chocobo chick taking baby steps in that direction.)

However, *FFXIV 1.0* wasn't even remotely close to my hypothetical game design. As I went line by line through the list of problems that had been brought to light, I found myself beginning to think, "We might not be able to do anything with this unless we scrap it and remake it."

Still feverish, I idly smoked a cigarette and glanced at the TV that I almost never watched. Phrases like "The world will end in 2012!" and "The secret of the Mayans is finally revealed!" were flashing on the screen. World destruction... the Sixth Umbral Calamity... "Wait, could this be!?" ...To be continued!

#7: “Where Fantasies and Wild Ideas Lead.”

Published in 2014/04/03 issue

January 1st, 2011. Whether my fever was caused by a virus or plain shock, I don’t know, but I was huddled in my kotatsu with my laptop, grappling with *FFXIV 1.0*’s “Problem List.” The table was decorated with four ashtrays’ worth of cigarette butts and a coffee cup stained brown. Though I almost never watched TV, on that day I’d tuned into a New Year’s program while I worked, and glancing at the screen, I saw the “2012 Doomsday Phenomenon.”

The program was about the ancient Mayan calendar, which when translated to the Gregorian calendar, would end on December 22nd, 2012, bringing the end of humanity with it! (*spoken like Kibayashi¹⁵*) In true variety show fashion, it pretended to be scientific with its selective interpretations, making it seem like it actually could be real.

“Ohh, so the world is going to end in 2012. If we don’t rebuild *FFXIV* by then, all of our hard work will have been for naught,” I half-grinned to myself as I watched the program. But then, one of their predictions for ways that humanity could end was “a meteorite crashes from space, wiping out all of humanity,” and I instinctively thought “Oh, a Meteor [spell], huh?”

“Hmm... Personally I have a lot of emotional attachment to MMORPGs, so if we’re going to remake the world, I think it could have a lot of impact if the story actually does lead to the world being destroyed. And using a “meteor” to do so would be very *FF*-like... and then the world would be reborn anew! That might work!” (Wild thinking)

In the *FFXIV* world of Eorzea, next to the moon was another—red—satellite orbiting the planet. It could be seen clearly in the in-game night sky, and it spurred on my idea. (At the time, this satellite¹⁶ did not yet have a name.)

FFXIV 1.0 had many issues and flaws compared to other MMORPGs, but I believed that we could use the entire in-game world to tell a story of world destruction and “battling the inescapable despair” that no other game could. It was meta in a way.

The planet would be destroyed by a moon (Meteor) falling from the sky, and in-game you would be able to see it gradually coming down... The Warriors of Light would try to stop it, but in real life, the announcement of the *FFXIV* remake would mean that there was no hope of saving the world.

¹⁵ TL Note: Probably an obscure reference for non-Japanese readers. Kibayashi is a character from the manga “Magazine Mystery Reportage” which is about myths and conspiracies. The character is modeled after the manga author Shin Kibayashi, and made a cameo appearance in the “Great Teacher Onizuka” anime.

¹⁶ The red moon did not have a name yet, and was hastily given one to go along with the Meteor plot. In Japanese it is named “*Daragabu*”, but in English it is named “*Dalamud*”, which is modified from “*Bahamut*”.

I thought that this kind of “end of the world” would be a very *FF*-esque plot.

“Alright, let’s bring that moon down! Eorzea will be destroyed and then reborn as a new world... And if we make the moon come closer every few months with the patches, we can show the destruction drawing nearer in real-time. But wait... it’s not very interesting to just see a meteor come down. I guess we need some crazy plot twist... “a falling meteor” ... “round” ... “ball” ... “egg” ... wait, an egg? Could there be something inside...?”

And thus, that was really all it took to decide on the direction that *FFXIV 1.0* would take. *The moon Dalamud begins to descend towards Eorzea. However, right before it hits the ground, Bahamut breaks out from inside and burns the world to a crisp with Megaflare. Afterwards, the world is mysteriously revived.*

Gamers reading this may think “It was that simple!?”, but I’m sure that most people in the game industry are propelled by these sudden, momentary inspirations (I apologize if I’m wrong). And I’d like to make a point that while “wild ideas” are wonderful in that anyone can have them, on the other hand, it’s hard to determine whether or not you should try to turn them into reality.

I’m not trying to say “Hey guys, aren’t I amazing!?”; instead, what I mean is that work experience isn’t all that important when it comes to designing games. What really matters is how much you know about games, and how serious about them you are.

For example, when you were a child, did you ever fantasize with your friends about what you’d do if Doraemon was real?

- **What gadgets would you want from Doraemon?**
- **If you could only pick one, which would it be?**
- **Wouldn’t the “What-If Phone Booth” be the strongest?
(Nobita never succeeds with it though...)**
- **Using the “Anywhere Door” to go to Shizuka-chan’s house while she’s bathing is also an appealing idea**
- **Using the “Pass Loop” to get into a bank safe...
But how much can it “pass” through?**
- **What about using the “Time Machine” to fix your mistakes?
You’d probably get caught by the Time Patrol...**

Now, how far did your imagination take you? Most of the time, you'll come to your senses partway through, thinking "This is stupid! If Doraemon really existed, there'd be more important things to worry about!" However, some people might keep going with their fantasies and delusions, and at the end, feel like it was satisfyingly *fun* to do so.

Then, they might think "Wouldn't it be fun to share these ideas with others, so that we could enjoy them together?"—I think that this kind of person is very suited towards making games. So how about it?

If this resonates with you, *FFXIV: ARR* is currently hiring developers. We especially need planners (for those of you who are confident in your ability to design monsters). Experience is not particularly required—we would rather have someone who could say "I love games more than eating three meals a day! I'm confident in my gaming skill! Even starting out as a part-timer is OK!" For more information, please see our recruitment site, which will be revamped in the near future. *grins* (So the joke is that "fantasies and wild ideas lead" ... to recruitment¹⁷?)

¹⁷ As of May 2016, Business Division 5 is currently hiring. If you're reading this and think "That's me!", please do apply!

#8: “The Virtual World and the Real World, Part 1”

Published in 2014/04/17 issue

I thought for sure that the editorial department was going to yell at me for using the last column as a recruitment drive, but I seem to be in the clear for now. Does that mean I should push it even harder...? (Probably not.) This is issue #8 of my biweekly column, and we’ve finally moved from December 3rd, 2010 to the beginning of 2011. It’s been kind of like a diary so far, but there are a lot of development-related stories from this point on, so I plan on quickening the pace (it’s just a plan, though). Now, the story this time will be a bit of a detour. (What happened to the plan...?)

There is a game called *Ultima Online (UO)*. It launched in 1997 as the world’s first large-scale MMORPG, and it is still in service to this day. I was new to the gaming industry back then, but prior to its release, I’d hear rumours all around me going “*UO* is apparently really good.” My senior at work and I decided to participate in the beta test¹⁸. I didn’t know about the concept of a beta test back then, so I was needlessly excited about it. *laughs*

I was selected for the beta test, and after creating my character (the style of which looked odd to Japanese eyes), logged into the world of Britannia. Just as the rumours promised, I was overcome with surprise at this alternate dimension. Many characters were running around the tile-based isometric view, and English letters were popping up everywhere. Words can’t describe the emotions I felt when I realized that these were all players just like me, logged in from somewhere in the world. I know I sound like I’m exaggerating things, but I was honestly moved. I’m sure everyone felt the same way the first time they stepped into an MMORPG world! However, my wonder only lasted briefly—half an hour later, a player with a red nameplate appeared on my screen, and as I walked closer to greet him, he shot 50 or so spells at me, killing me instantly. It was my first time being PKed. *laughs*

UO was part of the *Ultima* series, but it had similar themes of “virtue” or “karma” as other series, so it really was a game where you could do *anything*. You could aim to become a hero, pretend to be an ordinary citizen, devote yourself to villainy, and so on. Some people may think “How do I know what to do, then?”, but at the same time, the freedom meant that many people were immersed in the roleplaying. Of course, I was one of them.

After the beta test, things got busy at work, so my debut in the official release of *UO* was pushed back by about two months. I met up with my friends from *Diablo* in the world of Britannia. We formed a guild with me at the helm and set out to make money so that we could purchase a guild house. I ran into the finest(?) scam in online gaming! It was extremely clever! (It earned my respect.)

¹⁸ Online games often hold “beta tests” prior to release. At the time, it was completely foreign to me. They’re mainly used to test each server’s startup, server loads, and game balance. “Closed beta” is where players have to apply beforehand and be selected to participate, while “open beta” is where anyone can participate. Open beta is similar to a demo or free trial.

At the time, there were two main methods of making money in *UO*...

- 1. Kill deer, use their skin drops to make leather armour for females, and sell to NPCs**
- 2. Mine scrap iron from mountains, refine it into ingots, and sell to players**

UO's NPC vendors have an "inventory" and "restock" system where the item prices fluctuate at fixed intervals. When their inventory decreases, item prices rise. Method #1 was a steady way of making money, where you'd want to go around looking for the NPC with the highest purchase price. However, Method #2 yielded much better profits; at the time, an ingot could be sold for 11 to 15 gold.

This was my first time being a guild master, so I leveled up my mining skill plus the skill to turn scrap iron into ingots. As a grandmaster miner, I diligently worked every day to make money (mainly by connecting to *UO* from the office). I mined for about two weeks, fending off other players who wanted to steal my ingots, until I'd accumulated 4,000 ingots. Even at the minimum expected price of 11G, I'd be able to make 44,000G. "This'll prove my honour as a guild master!", I grinned to myself as I headed back to town. There, I shouted in English, "Selling Ingots 4000! 13G-15G each!!" and an English-speaking player sped over to where I was, telling me he would buy all 4,000 ingots for 16G each. What a great deal!

I immediately brought up the trade window. My heart was pounding as I placed the ingots in and saw a pile of gold placed on his side. Upon mousing over the icon, it displayed 64,000G. Just as I was about to hit the "OK" button, the trade window suddenly closed. I was confused, but the other player apologized, saying he misclicked. I placed the 4,000 ingots back in the trade window right away, saw him place the pile of gold in again, and this time, we both hit OK and the trade was successful! Woohoo, 64,000G! I told him in broken English, "Thanks, let me know if you ever need more ingots!", and he simply said "Thanks!" and sped out of there astoundingly quickly.

"Huh, that guy was sure in a hurry..." I thought to myself as I opened my bag, only to freeze in shock at what I saw. The gold I'd received from the trade was indeed in my bag, but when I moused over it, it only said 6G...

"Is this a bug? Huh? What's the meaning of this?" My head was in a panic. How could this happen? I checked the amount myself! At this point, I still hadn't realized that I'd been scammed. Now, how do you think he pulled it off? It was a clever manipulation of *UO*'s system... Find out next time!

#9: “The Virtual World and the Real World, Part 2”

Published in 2014/05/01 issue

This is the continuation from last time. Now then, in the world’s first large-scale MMORPG known as *UO*, I had just been scammed for the first time. I thought I had traded my ingots for 64,000G with another player, but there was only 6G in my inventory... I’d been cheated out of 63,994G. How do you think this happened?

In *UO*, all items are displayed as icons. Even money is considered an item, so it gets placed in your inventory and has to be carried around. Most players store their money in the bank in case they are attacked by PKers (player-killers), so it’s a fairly realistic game since people only carry as much money as they need on their person. Basically, the scammer made use of this icon system to swindle me out of 4,000 ingots with only 6G.

At the time, *UO* had several different icons to represent gold. 1G would be 1 gold dot, then 2G would be 2 dots, and so on... until 6G and above, which were displayed as a pile of gold (just like the icon from the game *Road Runner*). The scammer used this system to trick me into thinking his 6G pile was 64,000G.

When players trade items with each other in *UO*, it’s done through a dedicated trade window. The window has two sections, one where you drag and drop your items to, and one where you can mouseover your trade partner’s items to confirm the contents. If you are satisfied with the exchange, you click the “Accept” button. If both sides accept, then the items are exchanged and transferred to the corresponding inventories. Of course, after someone clicks Accept, the other person won’t be able to modify their items without automatically cancelling the accept status. If you see your partner confirm the trade, then you know they won’t be able to switch their items.

So what this scammer did was first confirm that I put 4,000 ingots in the trade window. Then, he placed a pile of gold containing the correct payment amount of 64,000G on his side of the trade. When I moused over the icon, I confirmed that it was 64,000G and clicked Accept. If he clicked Accept on his side too, then the exchange would’ve gone swimmingly, but...

Instead of accepting, he clicked Cancel. The trade window disappeared, and my ingots were returned to my inventory. At the same time, he said “Sorry, I misclicked,” and without thinking too deeply into it, I just thought “Oh, he misclicked” and opened the trade window again. I put the 4,000 ingots up again, and this time, instead of a 64,000G pile, he placed a 6G pile.

The icons looked exactly the same. In the first trade window, I’d confirmed the value of the gold. However, since it was fine the first time and I was so anxious to finish this trade and get the money for our guild house, I clicked Accept without checking the amount again.

...Naturally, I was mortified. I think cheating is wrong, but *UO* was truly a world where “anything goes.” Consequently, I was shocked at the psychological manipulation that this player used to scam me. Surely there wasn’t any other game where you could put that much thought into how you played it. (But cheating is wrong, okay?)

The 4,000 ingots that I’d sacrificed sleep and work breaks for had been reduced to a mere 6G. I couldn’t bear to face my guild members, and I thought I’d have to work my way back up from scratch. But the most frustrating and shocking part was that I didn’t think I’d be able to solve it by myself. At the time, there was a large player-run forum for Japanese *UO* players, where people talked about everything—game mechanics, PK incidents, PKK (PKer-killing) methods, monster farming strategies, ways of making money, etc. I wrote about my experience being scammed there. I was devastated, but I also wrote about how amazing *UO* was as a game. The next day, I’d received many sympathetic and encouraging responses, as well as agreement on my opinions about *UO*, but there was one comment in particular that I will never forget.

The comment was from the guild master of a large Japanese guild: “A few months ago, a retired member left his funds to us, and we’ve been using them to help players who were the victims of PKing or scams. Would you be all right with meeting up in-game?” When I met him in-game, he said, “Yes, that was definitely a scam. And you were working so hard for your guild members... I hope I’m not being too forward here, but I’d like to reimburse your losses with the funds from our retired player. How about it?” I was bewildered. What? Even though I’m a complete stranger? And we’re not even in the same guild? He then said to me, “The world of Britannia is harsh, but it has many kind residents. I believe that you’ll continue to work hard to support your guild members, so I want to help you.” I humbly accepted his offer. In addition, he even gave me an extremely expensive set of crafted plate armour to use for myself. I treasured that armour forever, only wearing it for special events. I also maintained my friendship with that person until I stopped playing *UO*.

This happened in an MMORPG more than 17 years ago, but I still remember it like it was yesterday. And the other day, as the 18th year was passing, I was doing a live stream for *ARR*, and that very same person saw my character name in the stream comments and contacted me! He’d been an avid player ever since *FFXIV 1.0*, still remembered that event from *UO*, and couldn’t believe that Yoshida was the person he’d helped back then *laughs*. We talked about how we should go out for drinks in the real world sometime, and for me it was both exciting and embarrassing.

MMORPGs do have their frightening aspects, but they are also games where you can make memories that last a lifetime. I implore you all to make some memories, and I’ll do my best to make Eorzea a world where you can do that! The end.

#10: “The Work of a Producer”

Published in 2014/05/22 issue

This is the 10th issue of this column, but I don’t plan on changing up the formula, and will write candidly again. If I remember correctly, this issue goes on sale on May 8th, 2014, so my work-filled birthday will have passed, and my PR work in Sydney will be done, so I’ll probably be all worn out. (Golden Week? What’s that? Does it taste good?)

Ever since I became producer and director for *ARR*, there’s been a sudden increase in opportunities to go overseas. At any rate, I hate airplanes and have vowed that I would never pay to use one, so even in my private travels I avoid airplanes at all costs. *Insisting voice* There’s no way that lump of metal can fly!

One time when I said that, someone told me, “Airplanes fly using the power of faith. An airplane can fly because all of the people inside strongly believe that it will fly, so you must not board the plane with them because people like you increase the risks of crashing.” They were a mean friend, but they did have a point. I can’t relax inside airplanes so I act suspiciously, calling for the flight attendant all the time and never sleeping. People probably see me as someone dangerous.

Despite that, I’m still a game producer, although *FFXIV* is my first time being one. When the *1.0* team was restructuring, I’d intended on taking on the role of director, but for various reasons I ended up being assigned to producer as well:

- 1. Swift judgement and decision-making would be necessary for fixing and rebuilding the game**
- 2. Time would be lost if the producer and director’s opinions clashed**
- 3. Yoshida was the leader of the investigation into *1.0*, so we might as well keep it that way**
- 4. It was Yoshida’s idea to put PR initiatives on ice until the fundamental revamping was complete**
- 5. Lastly, Yoshihisa Hashimoto (Technical Director) and Hiroshi Takai (Assistant Director) suggested it**

The ones who disagreed were Hiroshi Minagawa (Lead UI Artist) and one other person. Their reasoning was that “Yoshida is already working long hours and making decisions at an exceptional rate; if you put the producer work on him too, he’s going to die,” and I was very grateful for their words.

On the contrary, Hashimoto said “It’s fine; if the decisions are made faster then development won’t take any extra time, which really helps us out. Besides, it takes time for a producer and director to come to a mutual understanding, so splitting up the roles would make it take even longer.” And Takai said “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.” (On what basis?) In the end, even President Yoichi Wada agreed, and that was that.

I'd observed the work of my close friend Producer Ryutaro Ichimura before, and at first I objected, saying "You're underestimating the job. I can't do that!" Nonetheless, I ended up being appointed as producer anyway, because things certainly would move faster that way.

Still, despite being appointed as both producer and director, I wasn't really sure what kind of work a "producer" did. It's probably the hardest position to define, because in all industries, not just the gaming industry, different producers have different scopes of responsibilities and different methods of producing. Are you readers also wondering what exactly a producer does?

For a "definition stickler" like me, who would assign a definition to everything and worked by accomplishing at minimum what was defined, this was a problem. Even when I tried to define it, I didn't know what to put.

- 1. Come up with a business model to maximize profitability**
- 2. Create budgets to allocate funds, approve product development allotments**
- 3. Decide on the product's PR plans and policies, work with advertising agencies to refine promotional tactics**
- 4. Be familiar with the product's selling points, work with the director to make adjustments to suit the market trends**

Listing out every little task would literally take forever, but I presumed that the gist of it was as above. That being the case, I decided that while working on the game, I would also check things such as how much money *1.0* used, how much it would use monthly from now on, what the required operating costs for the infrastructure were (server hardware, electricity costs, physical space for the servers, etc.), where the break-even point was based on subscriber numbers, whether our business model was correct, whether we had distribution channels in place to support that model, etc.

FFXIV 1.0 started off in a negative state, so changing the development team structure by itself wasn't going to suddenly fix everything. From the above points, I determined that #3 would only have negative effects if carried out before the current pressing issues in the game were fixed, so I put it on hold. (I'll cover "communication between the players and the developers" in another column.)

#1 wasn't a problem because I had past experience with it from making project proposals for a small company, and I was rather good at it. As for #4, as Hashimoto and Takai had said, this was the most efficient part of holding both positions at once, and I believe it produced remarkable results, including the decision to remake the game. It was highly unlikely that this unprecedented idea of re-developing the same title would've been readily accepted if the producer role were assigned to a separate person. There would also need to be countless adjustments needed afterwards when determining the direction of the project.

So the main issue was #2. I'm not good at detailed monetary calculations. And I'm especially bad at budgeting and accounting! When I was a student, I attempted Level 3 of the Bookkeeping Test three times. Even though I heard that the test is difficult to fail, I somehow failed three times! I'd be adding up the numbers, but my accounts receivable and accounts payable would be off by ¥10,000, and then I'd recalculate it and they'd be off by ¥100,000... (I gave up and left in the middle of the exam *laughs*) So anyway, it's my job to establish the policies! And even today, all of the fine calculations are firmly in the assistant producer's hands. (I'm eternally grateful.)

It's been three years since I became producer and director of *FFXIV*, and I've been rushing forward like my life depends on it ever since. Even now, I'm still sprinting with all my might. And it's a lot of fun!

However, right after finishing my lecture at GDC 2014¹⁹ in San Francisco, I had to get on the plane to Los Angeles and then Haneda. Inside the plane, despite chugging down alcohol, I couldn't fall asleep or even get drunk, so I gave up and started writing this column. Then, I suddenly thought to myself: Becoming both director and producer... Hmm... Yeah, I guess I was tricked into it... *laughs*

¹⁹ GDC: Game Developers Conference. An international conference for game developers that takes place in San Francisco.

#11: “There’s a Limit to How Oblivious You Can Be”

Published in 2014/06/05 issue

It’s the end of May. This is when signs of the May blues begin to appear in the year’s fresh graduates, who have started working and are now saying things like “It wasn’t supposed to be like this...” Those working on console game development in the industry have finally escaped the hellish trauma that comes with the end of the fiscal year, and are probably now thinking, “Maybe I should get some work done... but that sounds like a pain...”

Going back three years, in 2011 at around this time, I was going through the most difficult period of my life. It was seriously stressful enough to give me an ulcer. This time, I’ll be talking about how excruciatingly far away we were from the ideal game.

Back then, the main *FFXIV* tasks we were performing concurrently were:

- **Game design work for the remake**
- **Creating an improvement plan for 1.0**
- **Creating official forums and changing our community interaction policy**
- **Drafting plans for updates**
- **Implementing grand companies and restructuring the main scenario**

For example, if we take a look at the improvement plan for 1.0, it involves a wide scope of problems. If we don’t plan it out as a whole before we start fixing things, there is a great risk of things becoming haphazard. There needs to be a single axle for everything to pass through, so the implementation was not done until everything had been planned out. Basically, the process was as follows:

- 1. What kind of battle content and party content do we want to have in the end?**
- 2. Decide on a basic plan for instanced raids/dungeons**
- 3. Decide on how the party system should work**
- 4. Decide on how the battle system and actions should work**

This is the proper process to go through during the initial stages of development of a game, but since 1.0 was already in service, actually putting it into practice was like walking on a tightrope. Normally you would go in order from #1 to #4, but we couldn’t delay updates for too long because the game was already up and running. So, we released the patches in the reverse order from #4 to #1. Putting #1 and #2 together gave us the instanced raids “Dzemaal Darkhold” and “Thousand Maws of Toto-Rak”, which were the dungeons that we were able to release at that time.

I worked with the battle system leads at the time, Matsui²⁰ and Gondai²¹, to devise the foundations of the battle system for *ARR* and see how much of it we could apply to *1.0*. All of the job actions, including the ones after the job system revamp in *1.0*, were pretty much created by Gondai alone. (It was really a lot of work...)

Up until patch 1.16 in March 2011, the maximum party size in *1.0* was 15 players, so battles ended up dull no matter what we did. Large-scale battles certainly are easy to enjoy, but they also allow for extremely unconventional party compositions. So no matter what kind of boss battle we made, it was hard to stop it from just being burned down. Plus, the game was so poorly balanced that you could spam Cure III without running out of MP...

I also remember having a difficult time deciding whether to make the party size in *ARR* 8 players or 6. A full party is required to clear content, so party size directly affects the enjoyability of the content and the ease of assembling a group of players. At the time, the MMORPG market was maturing and the community was declining. We observed that content requiring tens of players did well at launch but was neglected two months later.

Based on the current trends, 6-player parties seemed appropriate, but if we went with 8, then we could make an additional denomination of 4 players, making for three categories: solo, light, and full. So, we decided on 8-player full parties and 4-player light parties. As we were chipping away at the specifications, we determined that additional battle content wouldn't be enjoyable either way if the interface was bad. Thus, we decided to prioritize UI improvements for the first half of 2011.

However, the focus on UI updates was making the players impatient. I was painfully aware that they all wanted new content to play, but there were too many things that we had to change before we could make that new content *fun*. If we had let the criticism get to us and neglected these changes, then the improvements would not progress well. In the end, we made the players wait and wait...

- **April 2011: Patch 1.17 Release (Party size changes from 15 to 8)**
- **May 2011: Patch 1.17b Release**
- **June 2011: Patch 1.17c Release**
- **July 2011: Patch 1.18 Release (All actions revised, instanced raids added)**
- **September 2011: Patch 1.19 Release (Battle system changes completed, Ifrit fights added)**

There was a lot of backlash each time patch notes were posted. The game balance was really bad at the time (or at least I thought so), and we'd make seemingly obvious changes like revising MP

²⁰ Akihiko Matsui: Current *FFXI* Producer. Back then, he was the Battle Director for *1.0* after the restructuring.

²¹ Mitsutoshi Gondai: Current *ARR* Battle Director. Back then, he was the Lead Battle Planner for *1.0* after the restructuring.

costs (because you'd think that MP management would be a staple aspect of RPGs) only to be met with angry responses on the forums ("I keep running out of MP! What are you going to do about this!?").

That was when I realized something about human nature. When people spend a long time becoming accustomed to their environment, changes to that environment are very stressful, regardless of whether the changes are good or bad. I deeply regretted leaving the game in such an unbalanced state for so long. It takes a lot of courage to make changes—they cause stress for the players and can lead to criticism. Ideally you could avoid all that, but being too scared to make changes comes with its own great risks.

So, when players are enjoying the game, they are naturally sensitive to "momentary" excitement or stress. However, the development team, including myself, can't help but think in the long-term, and this is the biggest contributor to the rift between the players' and developers' views. The two sides will never fully agree, but in order to close that gap wherever we can, we hope to exchange feedback with the players and balance their opinions with ours!

By the way, my stress tends to disappear into thin air after a night's sleep. But when I went for a physical examination last winter, they told me "There were traces of an ulcer, but it seems to have healed on its own." It was a very difficult time, but I guess it didn't show any noticeable symptoms, huh? *Extremely oblivious*

#12: “My Hands Were Shaking”

Published in 2014/06/19 issue

This time, I’m writing this column on the bullet train back to Tokyo after finishing up the “Full Active Time Event in NAGOYA”. Thank you to everyone who attended! (I was able to eat Taiwan-style ramen before I got on the train!)

During this event, we held the 14th “Letter from the Producer LIVE²²”. It’s thanks to the support from the players that we were able to make it to this special number, and I am truly grateful for that.

Nowadays in the gaming industry, live streams from developers or producers are a common PR move, but our first Live Letter (to be exact, the first part of a two-part Live Letter) was held on October 4th, 2011. If you exclude pre-release PR, it was more or less unprecedented by other games, and at Square Enix it was our first time experimenting with it. Since we reached this milestone number today, I’d like to use this column and the next to talk about how the Live Letter came to be.

Since *FFXIV* had such a troubled start, one of the major management policies that was pushed after the restructuring was “proactive communication with the players.” After all, if we wanted them to continue playing the game, it was vital for them to know what was going to change in future updates, what the current issues were, and when and how they would be addressed. We started with “Letters from the Producer”—text-based posts on the community site that later transitioned into forum posts. The letters continued for about nine months.

We had been working on the new *FFXIV* in parallel with *1.0*’s improvements, and by October 2011, it was about time to make the announcement. I came up with the idea for an unscripted “live” letter where I would answer the players’ questions directly, on stream. (Even today, I get the jitters right before the stream begins. It makes me sad when people tell me “You don’t look nervous”...)

When I proposed this idea, even the administration team was hesitant about it *bitter laugh*. We could get away with airing a pre-recorded video, but in a live stream there would be a high risk of verbal slips (which still happen today...) or ambiguous explanations leading to misinterpretations. Furthermore, at the time, Square Enix had a reputation for being “secretive and high-handed” (direct quote from a foreign publication), and there were many people who were angry about *FFXIV*, so we had absolutely no idea how people would react.

²² Letter from the Producer LIVE: A live streaming program where I answer questions from the players (received in advance through the official forums, Twitter, etc.). The test broadcasts are notorious for not really involving any testing. As of May 7th, 2016, we are currently on part 29. Also, my answers to the questions are not scripted.

However, that was precisely why I thought I should use my own words to tell them about the current state of *FFXIV* and the future vision for a “reborn” *FFXIV*. Just as I am grateful for our players, I am equally grateful for the staff who understood my intents and fully supported me with the stream.

I planned for this two-part Live Letter to mark the start of our PR campaign for *ARR*. In the first part, I would again address the current issues with *FFXIV 1.0*, make sure that the development team—myself included—and the players were on the same page, and explain how we would fix them, or which ones were troublesome to fix. Here, my goal was to show that Square Enix understands what the problems are, and point out the “major problems that can’t be resolved.”

Then, before the second part, we would surprise the players and the media with a “*FFXIV* remake project” announcement to make them think, “He did talk about fundamental revisions, but it’s a complete remake!?”

By the way, the *ARR* site was unveiled on October 14th, 2011. I chose to do it on the 14th to correspond with the game’s title. After that, we ended up being very particular about the number 14 at PR events *laughs*. It’s a good luck charm and a play on words, but also, *Final Fantasy* has such a long history that I thought it might be getting hard to tell which number the newest game is—so I wanted to really emphasize the “14”.

I was still (technically) a regular employee, so I needed the company’s permission in order to do an ad-lib stream. I also thought that President Wada would have to appear on the second part, so first I explained the gist of my plan to him and got his approval. Then, I had to discuss it with the PR and legal departments. But instead of being opposed to my risky plan, everyone was extremely enthusiastic about the *ARR* announcement and PR. It truly felt like the entire company was working together as one. I’m still so indebted to both of those departments...

When I watch that first live letter now, and see my past self’s hands shaking with nervousness, I feel so embarrassed that I want to die... It was Square Enix’s—and the industry’s—first foray into that kind of stream, and fortunately it was well-received by the players... although there were still some rough patches... More on that next time.

#13: “Past and Future.”

Published in combined 2014/07/03 and 2014/07/10 issue

This time, I’ll be continuing to talk about the “Letter from the Producer LIVE”. After our very first broadcast on October 4th, 2011, we announced on October 14th that *FFXIV: ARR* was in development, did our media tour, and got a lot of response.

Although... I felt like people in Square Enix were looking at me rather coldly. (Should I be saying that? *Awkward laugh*)

Before I was given the reins to *FFXIV*, I hadn’t even worked on any *FF* derivative works, let alone numbered titles. Just like most of you, I was merely a fan of the series. Thus, after the live letter, although no one said it to my face, I could sense that some of my colleagues were thinking “Yoshida (or the *FFXIV* team) is being reckless again.” I think that was a normal reaction, though.

The larger the scope of a company becomes, the harder it becomes to even share information, let alone come to a mutual understanding. Of course, there are various strategies to combat this, but you’ll never achieve 100% information flow. When you carry out an unprecedented “new experiment” in this kind of environment, if its significance and intent are not conveyed, it’s only natural for it to be seen as something *alien*. Plus, my outward appearance (and the character I portray) makes me seem kind of flashy or gaudy, and I don’t really look like someone that can be trusted (*self-deprecation*), so I guess it was to be expected...

Though I may have deserved those impressions, it still stands that *1.0*’s release had a huge impact on Square Enix. As the head of the *FFXIV* team, I needed to rebuild trust with not only the customers and the press, but with the company as well.

Come to think of it, on October 14th when we announced the remake, I recall that the media representatives who attended our presentation seemed to be thinking, “Is he insane?” *laughs*

Sometimes I get the chance to talk about that event with people from the press who were there. They all say “It was so unheard of that I had no idea what to ask.” (Well, yeah.) On October 15th, I went to North America to explain our “rebirth” project to foreign media outlets. I desperately reassured them that Square Enix was serious about this.

Fortunately, despite all of the tension (I’m sure the players were anxious as well), the live letter went well. Though only the two parts were originally planned, it ended up becoming a recurring series with no end in sight.

I was insistent on the live letters being delivered from the “development site” whenever possible, so typically they are broadcasted from my office²³ at Square Enix headquarters. Lately there have been more spin-off editions, hosted from events like Niconico Chokaigi²⁴ or E3²⁵, but I still want to preserve the “streaming live from the workplace” feel of it.

However, thanks to that concept, the broadcasting is chaotic in some ways. Our lunches are strewn about with the equipment, and the technicians are half-forced into volunteering (by going around the company’s network division and saying to people “You’re into this stuff, right?”)... The acoustics are carefully controlled by Masayoshi Soken, our sound director. We have someone from PR in charge of commenting, and the community team in charge of reading questions and putting them together. It’s truly a “handmade” production *laughs*. We recently began streaming on Niconico too, so Dwango has also been present...

Another feature of our live letters is that we bring in various guest speakers from around Square Enix. Our first guest was then-president Yoichi Wada, and he was so focused on the housing content that he earned the nickname “Mr. Housing” (via a certain textboard). The current president, Yosuke Matsuda, likes FPS (first-person shooter) games, so he became “Mr. Head Shot” (a dangerous name...). By the way, these two nicknames were even added to the credits roll for *ARR* *laughs*.

Our PR representative had an afro perm so people called him “Annie-senpai” (why *senpai*?), while *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy* producer Ichiro Hazama appeared in an eccentric(?) get-up and haircut as punishment for losing against me in *Theatrhythm Curtain Call* at an event. Veteran *FF* producer Yoshinori Kitase has also joined us on stream.

The frequency of the live letters has gone up and everyone is cheering for us now, which is also thanks to all of the players who tune in. Once again, I resolve to bring you up-and-close streams! And I will do my best as Square Enix’s comedy specialist. (Wait, what?)

²³ My office is located on the 18th floor of Square Enix’s headquarters in Shinjuku East Side Square. Half of the walls are covered in whiteboards so that we can do briefings at any time, while the other walls are taken up by huge windows. It’s the worst possible work environment for someone who’s afraid of heights. At 8 p.m., the blinds automatically come down on their own. What a strange setup...

²⁴ TL note: Niconico Chokaigi is a big event in Japan hosted by Niconico (a Japanese video site similar to YouTube), basically covering everything in Japanese internet culture including games, anime, etc.

²⁵ E3 stands for Electronic Entertainment Expo. It is the largest game exhibition in the world, held annually in Los Angeles, USA.

#14: “End of an Era”

Published in 2014/07/17 issue

Ever since *Diablo* came out in 1997, I lived the life of an MMO junkie (at the cost of getting work done). The game I played for the longest period of time was an MMORPG called *Dark Age of Camelot* (DAoC)²⁶. I started during beta and continued playing for about six and a half years. My entire lifestyle revolved around DAoC, and I would forget to eat meals because of it.

DAoC touted the concept of Realm vs. Realm—it was a game focused on large-scale PvP. Players flooded in from around the world to partake in the war between the Arthurian realm of Albion, the Celtic realm of Hibernia, and the Norse realm of Midgard. Excepting the PvP server²⁷, players could not enter the homelands of opposing factions, and fought fiercely in the central frontier zones. Back then, I was busy with work and found it difficult to return to *EQ*, so I quit and moved to the new world of DAoC. (I got more addicted to DAoC than I was to *EQ*, so it may have had the reverse effect...)

At the time, DAoC was developed and run by a company called Mythic Entertainment. They had a popular PR representative named Sanya, who actively communicated with players and provided information. For example, she’d pick up questions from external forums and post developer responses on the official site (although there were a lot of lies, so she got nicknamed “Lying Sanya” *laughs*). I remember it felt very novel. My written and live letters are heavily influenced by that experience.

Mythic was a very good-humoured company. After the beta test ended and the game officially launched, there were still many things that had yet to be implemented. For example, the level cap was 50, but none of the classes’ level 50 abilities were in the game yet, so your character wouldn’t learn anything when it reached 50 *laughs*. I was part of Hibernia, and when I unlocked Hibernia’s level 45 dungeon, it didn’t drop a single item (because it didn’t have any). At the time, it was fairly typical for MMORPGs to lack high level content and items. The players were used to it, and despite saying “Hurry and implement it”, they would patiently continue to play. (I’m a bit jealous of that era *laughs*)

In order to fight in PvP, it was important to get equipment from PvE content, so Hibernia’s lack of high-level dungeon drops put us at a disadvantage. However, each class had a special set of level 50 “Epic” armour, so you could equip that to make up for the difference. Still, we really needed the level 50 actions in order to fight at full force.

Mythic released a patch the week after launch. They announced that they were working on the actions with utmost priority and requested that we please wait two more weeks. Two weeks later, the

²⁶ *Dark Age of Camelot*: An MMORPG developed by Mythic Entertainment that released in 2001. It was modeled after *EverQuest*, but was also a three-faction Realm vs. Realm game. Even today, I sometimes feel the urge to go back.

²⁷ A special type of server where PvP is enabled in public areas. While fighting monsters in the overworld, you’ll often find yourself battling with other players before you know it. It’s a popular server mode overseas. *FFXIV* does not have one.

patch notes only said “We ran into difficulties with development. The head programmer is working on it like his life depends on it, so please give him two more weeks.” Yet another two weeks later, “It will take one more week. We’re really sorry.” Patch notes are generally supposed to contain an itemized list of updates, so it was rather amusing. The players remained optimistic, thinking “Well, it’ll just be a bit longer”...

And then, in the following week’s patch notes: “The programmer in charge of the level 50 actions was incapable of meeting deadlines and has been dismissed.” (It’s true *laughs*) Additionally, “The new programmer says that they’ll be done in about 7 days.” The players were surprised, but surprisingly accepting. Sure enough, the actions were implemented in the next patch. I don’t know any company besides Mythic who would write such a thing in their patch notes. *laughs*

When I took over *FFXIV*, I got to know *DAoC*’s producer and game designer, who told me that all of that was true. They didn’t have any money, so they remodeled a house for all of the staff to work in. Their main server programmer was a 16-year old genius (This was a shock!), and the development team knew my character name and the guild that I created (since I did so much PvP...). It was a very nostalgic chat, and we still keep in touch.

However, after *DAoC*, Mythic’s next large-scale MMORPG was scrapped during development, and the company was bought by EA around the time they released *Warhammer Online*, becoming EA Mythic. EA Mythic maintained *UO* in addition to continuing to work on *DAoC*, but right before the last E3, EA announced that Mythic would be closing down.

This unique, cozy company that started out of a garage continuously provided us updates for years. I found out about their closing from a foreign MMORPG news site. It’s truly a shame. The foreign press know that I used to be a hardcore *DAoC* player. The title of the news article included the phrase “end of an era²⁸”—was that just a coincidence?

The MMORPG industry is very small, and everyone there loves MMORPGs—not just the developers, but also the players and the media. Though our positions and companies are different, we all motivate and inspire each other.

It’s because I love MMORPGs that I played so many online games and am now in charge of *FFXIV*. It’s sad that Mythic closed down, but the gaming experience they gave me will never fade away, and I will treasure it forever. That article felt like it was telling me, “Keep doing everything you can, without stopping.”

²⁸ “End of an Era” is the title of the trailer released at the end of *FFXIV 1.0*, showing the world being destroyed.

#15: “My Mother and China, Part 1”

Published in 2014/07/31 issue

We were moving at an alarming speed. High-pitched car horns rang out incessantly. Even though the expressway was a straight line, the car snaked left and right—like a serpent slithering between the trees in the Black Shroud—in order to push ahead of the other cars...

Well, that was a hard-boiled start to the column, but I was actually only describing a scene from a taxi ride in Shanghai. I know I made it seem cool, but in reality, the taxis in both Shanghai and Beijing were absolutely terrifying.

What was so scary, you ask? The packing tape holding the car together, the holes in the seats, the mysterious worn-out metal bat next to the driver’s seat, and the poor vehicle being forced to go 120 km/h while swerving around the other cars. The taxis around us were also part of the expressway race, adept at cutting each other off. My driver slammed the horn nonstop as he drove. Sir, that’s not a first-gen *Street Fighter* punch button...

Anyway, I’m writing this manuscript on the flight from Guangzhou to Tokyo. Yesterday, we held an event for the upcoming Chinese release of *ARR*. I was surprised by the Chinese players’ enthusiasm and the high quality of the cosplays. I’ve been to Shanghai and Beijing nine or ten times for work, but this was my first time visiting Guangzhou.

The first time I went to China was in January 2011, soon after the unforgettable restructuring announcement for *1.0*. Before I joined the *FFXIV* team, there was already a contract in place with a major Chinese publisher, Shanda Games. In accordance with the development team restructuring, I paid a visit to China to greet them and discuss the future of *FFXIV*.

When my trip to China had been confirmed, I casually mentioned it to my mother. She told me, “I heard that Japanese businesses get attacked there, so you might not be able to come back safely.” What a thing to say! ...But it’s true that the news reports were scary. Even today, political issues and past wars get brought up in the news, but the majority of our Chinese players don’t seem to be bothered by it. In fact, when I talk to the Chinese players, I find that we all hope our countries can resolve their disputes soon. First, we need to set our prejudices aside, especially when it comes to doing business.

When I did business with Shanda Games, I felt China’s hunger and passion. Unfortunately, I don’t feel this level of passion from today’s Japan. As you are all aware, China’s economy is growing at an incredible rate, which has led to an extreme income disparity. However, thanks to the low labour costs, many countries have made investments in China, and now a lot of fields are flourishing. It’s

possible to work your way to the top with skill or knowledge, which is part of how this level of hunger and passion came to be.

My opening account is another example of this. China's taxi drivers race to hit the gas pedal first because of their desire to win against the other drivers and pick up the next passenger as soon as possible. Although when I saw that dented metal bat next to the driver's seat, I did recall my mother's warning... (I still have no idea what that bat was for.)

To be honest, when I visited Shanda Games, they doubted us. Even though it was a large-scale contract by nature of being *FF*, the global version of *1.0* was under fire, and right after giving a technical explanation of how it was going to be addressed, the development team was restructured with an unknown producer (me) at the head. They had no idea what was going on. Also, China is the world's largest market for online games, and Shanda had fought and succeeded in that fierce market. It was only natural for them to be critical of ratings and public opinion.

The population of China is approximately 1.3 billion. There are still a few nations living in remote regions, so to be precise, it is probably greater than that. Meanwhile, the population of Japan is about 130 million, which is an order of magnitude smaller... Internet cafés became popular in China early on, and people could play online games there in an environment similar to Japan's arcades.

Since China's market developed around internet cafés, they started with a usage-based payment model, i.e. you pay for the amount of time that you played. It's similar to how telephone charges used to work (I guess this example doesn't mean anything to the current generation...). Basically, if you play for 1 minute it costs this much, if you play for 1 hour it costs that much, etc.

With this kind of system, even low-income players can go to a net café and play games. The cafés provide amenities as well, so it's easy to understand the explosive growth in the online game market. China already had a large population—add a fondness for online games to that and they quickly became the largest gaming population in the world. In China, it's common to have 300,000-400,000 players connected to a game at the same time (most F2P games achieve that these days), and there are several games that have surpassed 1 million concurrent players before. In the online game industry, we say that you can't call your game a hit if it doesn't operate in China.

Now then, *1.0* had to enter a market like that, and a lot has happened up until now... but I'm out of space, so the rest will have to come next time! As an aside, lately my mother often asks me "Isn't it about time for you to go to China again?" I'll talk about that next time, too. *laughs*

#16: “My Mother and China, Part 2”

Published in 2014/08/14 issue

“#@*\$(@\$&#*\$*@!!!”

It was an extremely angry voice. She spoke quickly and in a foreign language—while I couldn’t understand what she was saying, she was clearly very mad. The one who *could* understand her was another woman who was trying to dissuade her. Judging from her expression, the angry woman’s shouting contained words not suitable for TV...

Spring 2011. I was in Shanghai as *FFXIV* producer and director, meeting with our business partner Shanda for the third time. Our meetings took place over several days and were important in deciding the game’s fate.

There were two main points in the outline. First, I gave a presentation on how we were going to fix and improve *1.0*. Next was the adjustments to Square Enix’s existing contract with Shanda Games.

My presentations took two whole days. It was endless explaining of how MMORPG content and UI are supposed to be, and the changes that I would be making as the new person in charge. Shanda’s head of game quality would ask me questions, and I would give immediate answers.

This meeting was my third time visiting China, but it was the first time I got a clear grasp on the extent of China’s passion. Basically, they were even more hell-bent on making *FFXIV*’s Chinese release a success than Square Enix was. So, I continued drawing diagrams and listing points on the whiteboard without rest, explaining the core parts of an MMORPG. Fortunately, my own passion seemed to get across to them, and they agreed to wait until I was satisfied with the game before proceeding with the Chinese release.

...The problem was on the contract side. From what I could tell, the contracting officers from both companies were being very aggressive with each other’s legal departments... to the point where it was kind of shameless. (Yeah, someone from legal is going to yell at me...)

From my point of view, Square Enix was bringing less to the table than Shanda was. After all, even though *1.0* was undergoing intense work, the patches didn’t reflect that yet, and the ratings from players and the media were still terrible. But despite that, our legal representative was being stubborn. They just would not come to an agreement.

I was really anxious the whole time, thinking that we should compromise since we were the ones at fault. But I was told “No, we have a prior agreement and that is not changing. Not right now, at least. We need to go back and re-examine it properly.” Umm, their legal rep is looking awfully scary...

Shanda's contracting officer was a very pretty woman, dressed in a suit and stylish makeup—the very image of a businesswoman. Her name stuck in my mind, since it was the same as a certain restaurant chain in Japan. Anyway, she had quite the temper...

She came close to snapping during the meeting but managed to control herself. But in the evening, when we had dinner together, I said “We aren’t conducting business right now” and she spoke her honest thoughts after that. Still, nothing that she said was wrong. I’m sure that what she said was driven by her passion to make the project a success. (Although I think her personality had a big influence on it too. *bitter laugh*)

When this woman really reached her limit, her dissent would come pouring out, sprinkled with the aforementioned profanity. However, the Square Enix representative would ignore it without even flinching. I was impressed by the skills of a true professional, and the contract went well. Two years later, I enviously said to our rep, “I can’t believe you were able to brush that off,” and they told me “No, whenever I’m in Japan and I see that restaurant with her name, my trauma comes back” with a dry laugh. *laughs*

Thanks to the efforts of these strong people, the Chinese version of *ARR* is about to launch. I am so thankful to everyone.

I have endless stories to tell (about Chinese food, toilets, etc.) but I’ll have to leave them for another time. I hope I was able to convey the power I felt from China, and how they’re just as passionate about games as we are. Love for games and the *FF* series goes beyond borders. I’ve traveled around the world in these past four years, and that shared love is what made the biggest impression on me. Gaming culture is truly amazing.

Oh right, the first time I went to China, I bought a souvenir for my mother who was worried about my trip. My schedule was so packed that I had no choice but to buy something at the airport, and after mulling over it for a while, I decided on shochu made in China.

My mother is in her 70s, but she is still in sound health. I thought it’d be all right, since she likes to drink. In the end, she was (much) happier about my safe return than the souvenir. However, when she drank the shochu, she said: “Wow... China is a great country! When are you going back?”

Look, this is my fault for not looking at the price when I bought it, but that alcohol was about ¥20,000... I do go to China every now and then, but I’ve sworn not to tell her much about my travel plans anymore.

#17: “Product = Service? No, It’s Not Necessarily a ‘Service’, Because Development Is Required”

Published in 2014/09/04 issue

Now then, this time I’d like to talk a bit more seriously about online game business. It’ll take a while, so it’ll be split into two parts again. I’m sorry. (I know it’s hard to read when it’s biweekly...)

I travel to countries around the world to promote *ARR*, and each time, I see the PR that other online games are doing. No matter where you go, online game PR is always focused on you, the players. Typically, each game invites players to join their special commentated event, where you can try out the game for yourself. They use the cheers and excitement to grab other players’ attention.

In the past, this approach was used by certain FPS (first-person shooter) games, and exhibition matches in RTS (real-time strategy) games like *StarCraft*. However, it was *League of Legends (LoL)*²⁹ and the MOBA³⁰ genre it represents that truly popularized it. On that note, *ARR* held its first PvP event at gamescom 2014³¹ in Germany, complete with an MC. It was a very exciting PR event.

Due to the popularity of MOBAs, mainly *LoL*, I find that more online games are leaning towards F2P models. In the MMORPG genre, subscription-based business models have been mainstream for a long time. Japan’s *FFXI*, *DQX*, and *FFXIV*: *ARR* use this model, as well as the foreign examples of *WoW* and *Blade & Soul*.³²

Subscriptions and F2P are nothing more than business models—neither one is better than the other. I believe you should choose what works best for your game design, although there are times when I feel that the current era leans towards F2P.

ARR’s cost for 30 days of play is ¥1,280 (before tax) for the cheapest entry-level subscription, and ¥1,480 (before tax) for the standard subscription. For a working adult, this is equivalent to two days’ lunch. You can play for as many hours as you want within those 30 days, and patches add new content free of charge.

²⁹ *League of Legends* is the world’s largest F2P game. Players control characters called Champions, using their combat abilities to fight each other’s bases. It has the most players of any online game (at the time of writing, July 2014).

³⁰ Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) is a genre that branched off from the RTS genre. Players are divided into teams, and work with their team to take the enemy’s bases. Unlike RTS games, you control much fewer characters (usually just one), and instead your character can be built up in a variety of ways, like in an RPG.

³¹ gamescom is the largest video game trade fair in Europe, held in Cologne, Germany.

³² *Blade & Soul* was subscription-based at the time of this column, but switched to F2P some months later. In January 2016 it was released in North America and Europe, but as a F2P model from the very start. It’s an example of the decline of the subscription model.

Personally speaking, I think it's a very reasonable price for entertainment... but when we did a market analysis on customers who purchased *ARR* but never subscribed even once, we found that the #1 reason was because it was "too expensive." On the other hand, F2P games can be downloaded and played for free, without paying any base cost or subscription fee. However, F2P games sell things like rare items and EXP boosters, and while they are cheap individually, they add up over time. Players who do buy microtransactions spend ¥3,000-5,000 per month on average (the industry average in 2014).

For those who are accustomed to monthly subscriptions, it's obvious that the monthly fee works out to be cheaper. However, the issue here isn't the amount of money, but the "perception" of the payments.

Subscription models have an evident drawback of having to pay for 30 days of playtime when you don't even know if you'll play every day. Instead of "paying for what you play", you "pay under the assumption that you'll play", which not everyone can accept. In an F2P game, even if your monthly total is several times the cost of a monthly subscription, you paid for what you wanted at that moment, so there's a big difference in how your mind perceives it. However, since it's a F2P game, the total charges can skyrocket before you realize it, so...

This difference in perception actually varies between countries. In Japan, there are many people who transitioned from usage-based phone and internet bills to "unlimited monthly plans", because they recognized that usage-based was more expensive and fixed-rate was a better deal.

However, China has a long history of usage-based payments, and its nationals strongly prefer "only paying for the amount you use." Even in America, the birthplace of MMORPGs and subscription-based games, the popular opinion has changed to "I only want to pay for what I use."

Even when we launched *ARR*, many foreign media outlets asked me provocative questions, like "Why are you releasing a subscription MMO in this day and age?" or "What makes you think you can succeed with a subscription model?" (The answer is long, so I had to prepare a separate essay for it...)

Of course, one of the big reasons why *ARR* uses a subscription model is because we promised the 1.0 players that it would. However, it's also linked to the relationship between development, game design, and business model.

Subscriptions and F2P are both business models designed to obtain money from customers. In order to get that money, you need to do what works best for the product. What will the customer buy? What are they comparing the price to? I believe that this has a big influence on the choice of business model...

#18: “Kikuchi-san, Please Take Care of It Somehow... (Commonly Referred to as ‘Passing the Buck’³³)”

Published in combined 2014/09/18 and 2014/09/25 issue

Continuing from last time, I’ll be talking about business models in online games. (This is a rather serious column.)

Last time, I talked about how subscription models and microtransactions (F2P) are simply differing business models. Neither is stronger or weaker than the other; it’s a matter of choice. You’re trying to make money from a “product” here—what should you base your decision off of?

If your online game doesn’t make money, you won’t be able to pay development costs for server maintenance and patches/updates, meaning that the game can’t go on. We developers have to make a living too, so on top of recuperating development costs prior to launch, the game has to show sustained profit, or else there’s no point in continuing. Even if I were OK with not making money, the company is a commercial business, not a volunteer organization. There’s no reason to invest in an unprofitable project, and doing so would prevent them from developing the next game. It may sound harsh, but that’s the principle you have to follow if you want to stay in business.

In other words, if we wish to give many players a long-term, fun gaming experience, we must also put all of our efforts into making money. This is the basis of the online game business.

Now then, what are the products that the customer buys, with respect to the two main categories of online games: subscriptions and microtransactions? In general terms, subscriptions are a “playing fee” and microtransactions are “item purchases.” However, the phrase “playing fee” is awfully ambiguous and is often used interchangeably with the concept of a “service.” I believe that this is an incorrect expression.

The way I see it, the “playing fee” in a monthly subscription is paying for *content*. In a subscription-based game, a player pays a fee to log into the game and enjoy it in whatever playstyle they want.

As I said in the last column, this means that instead of paying for only the amount played, they have to pay in advance without knowing how much they’ll play. It’s like going to a theme park: you pay an entrance fee upfront without knowing how many rides you’ll go on (though you can make plans).

³³ “Passing the buck” is the act of pushing a problem or task onto a third party, usually without coming up with a solution yourself. I am very sorry.

A theme park has many rides and attractions, and the MMORPG equivalent is “content.” In *ARR*, our rides are instanced dungeons, the Binding Coil of Bahamut, and Frontlines, while our field attractions are things like hunts and treasure maps.

If we want to invite lots of people to our *FFXIV* theme park, we need to have lots of fun and interesting attractions, AKA content. A theme park will regularly build new rides and attractions, and then promote them with TV ads saying things like “We’ve got a brand-new scream machine!”—it’s exactly the same concept as an MMORPG’s patches and updates.

On the other hand, microtransactions-based models mainly sell “items” (or ways to obtain them). In theme park terms, it’s like a park with no entrance fee. Since the management needs to make money, they sell merchandise (items) to visitors. Inside the theme park, there are lots of costumes you can wear to immerse yourself into that world. The fantasy setting compels you to make yourself look cooler or cuter—this is a commonly-used psychological tactic (and the reason why so many games include character dress-up). Social games are about either character popularity or obtaining powerful skills and equipment.

You may be wondering, “Why not just charge for individual rides and attractions instead of costumes, then?” This has been attempted in the past, however, it is still equivalent to paying before you try the product, so the perception is no different from paying an entrance fee. Also, taking out your wallet for every little thing gets annoying, so the current microtransaction model involves purchasing a lump sum of virtual currency to use for your purchases.

If you keep chasing the differences between these two business models, I think you’ll find that the difference in “products” sold by online games leads to completely different allocations of development costs. For subscription models, development costs are invested into creating a lot of new and fun *content* to cover as many interests as possible.

But for microtransactions, development costs are invested into creating a lot of enticing *items*. However, the theme park still needs to have decent attractions, so you have to invest in the content either way.

From the above, we can see that the hurdles in front of the developers and management are actually higher with the microtransaction model, which raises the question of why that model is gaining traction in real life. The answer is that people were able to explore methods of maintaining that model by changing the game design. Not making a large-scale game, not making overworld maps, only creating one type of content, having a revolving door of new players instead of welcoming repeat players, raising customers’ individual spending instead of gathering lots of players...

This is the reason why there are so many large-scale MMORPGs that wanted to get by on a subscription model but wound up launching under the microtransaction model instead. Of course,

even if a large-scale MMORPG focuses on *content*, it still needs to reward players with *items* for completing content and crafting and the like. However, these kinds of items have no direct ties to sales and are a secondary focus (although the players would obviously prefer to have a lot of them).

As a large-scale MMORPG, *FFXIV: ARR* is a constantly growing theme park, created with the hopes that players would enjoy a long stay in the new world of Eorzea. But on the other hand, since it is part of the *FF* series, the players are also expecting high quality items. They require a high level of detail, so each item takes a long time to create, and consequently, the development cost is high.

Instead of relying on items for revenue and neglecting content creation, we would rather use the money on developing content that directly ties into the game experience. This was the biggest reason for choosing a subscription-based model for *ARR*. So, the operations and development team are all doing our best to continue releasing engaging content. (Of course, there will still be people who say “It’s not enough!”, so all we can do is work as hard as we can.)

My conclusion was that you should select your business model in accordance with your game design and the gaming experience you want to provide, but there are many other choices, too. Hybrid models, purchases outside of the game, providing a choice of payment scheme, etc. Business models for online games are continuing to evolve, so I am always considering new possibilities. However, my fundamental belief is to provide the players with a fun and long-lasting gaming experience.

There’s still a lot I want to write, but I think it’ll have to wait for another time. That would be because I just realized that I’m past the character limit for this column (although I had an inkling that I was). Kikuchi-san from the Famitsu editorial department, I’d really appreciate it if you could do something about this! I couldn’t cut it any shorter...³⁴

³⁴ Editor’s note: What—Yoshida-san! How am I supposed to make it fit when you went 1,000 characters over... oh, it did fit. The font size is just a tiny bit smaller than the magazine’s guidelines, but I’ll keep it a secret from the editor-in-chief and send it in for printing. *laughs* – Kikuchi

#19: “The Definition of Humanities”

Published in combined 2014/10/02 and 2014/10/09 issue

This time, I’ll be taking a bit of a detour from online games.

“You can’t answer a question with a question.” For some reason, I always remember being told this when I was a student. Has anyone else had the same experience?

It wouldn’t be so bad if it were only a memory, but at this point it’s been imprinted on my subconscious as a rude thing to do. Ever since taking over *FFXIV* I’ve been doing a lot more talking with current players and press from around the world, and this thought sometimes gets in the way.

When someone asks me a question, I endeavour to provide a logical and accurate answer, but in order to do so, I need to “define” the question first. For example, let’s say someone asks me, “Are you going to make changes to black mage?” If we have no changes planned whatsoever, then I can just say “We have no plans at this time.” However, even if we do have changes planned, that doesn’t mean I should just tell them about it. That’s not necessarily the best answer for the asker.

If someone asks a specific question, there is an *ideal answer* that they are hoping for, even if they’re not aware of it themselves. In the above example, they didn’t ask “Are you going to make changes to the combat classes and jobs?”—they specified black mage, which implies that there is something about black mage that is bothering them.

Whether or not you are aware of this reasoning affects how you arrive at your conclusion, even if the answer itself is fixed. This changes how the answer is explained. I don’t mean to say that “the answer changes depending on the question,” but rather that you should strive to *understand their intentions and provide an answer they can find acceptable*.

If the asker feels that black mage is “weak,” then they will be more satisfied if my answer addresses the area where they think it feels weak, and vice versa for if they feel that it’s “too strong.”

I get a lot of questions at events where I meet the players. I try to give as many accurate answers as I can, but I can only devote a little bit of time to each one. As a result, sometimes I respond to a question with a question in order to figure out the asker’s intent. Please forgive my rudeness.

The act of clearly defining things is also extremely important in everyday life. It’s what I put all of my effort into when I was first charged with revamping *1.0*. At the time, there were problems with every aspect of the game, and players and media alike were calling it “poorly made.”

However, just knowing that it was “poorly made” didn’t tell me anything about what the problems were or how they should be solved. When the source of the problems is too vague, it can cause panic. If you run into similar hardships at school or work, I recommend that you first stop what you’re doing, and clearly define what the problem is. An effective way of doing this is to ask yourself questions and answer them.

When you ask yourself questions, your consciousness is working to analyze the problem and come up with satisfactory answers. It breaks down the root of the problem and identifies the detailed tasks that need to be done. I encourage you to try it for yourself.

Come to think of it, in society there is a mysterious divide between “science” and “humanities”. Sometimes, people ask me which side I’m on. I don’t really care so I’ve never been conscious of it, but I think people make the assumption that in the gaming industry, programmers are in science, graphics artists are in humanities, and game designers can be in either one.

When I ask them to first define “science” and “humanities” for me, they make a confused expression before explaining their theory. From all of the answers I’ve heard thus far, it seems that people equate writers and artists with humanities, and logical thinkers with science.

Anyway, when people ask me if I’m part of science or humanities, judging from the trends, I think 100% of them are in humanities (I have my reasons for thinking this, but it’s a secret). As a result, if I answer with my personal definition of “science”, then I can change my answer without changing the conclusion.

In these cases, I say “Sorry, but I don’t think I’m in humanities.” Thus ends my story about how communication is a difficult thing.

#20: “Something Candid”

Published in combined 2014/10/16 and 2014/10/23 issue

I’m writing this column on the night of the final day of Tokyo Game Show (TGS) 2014. A shocking number of players came to our TGS booth, and though I didn’t have much time, I was able to speak with hundreds of them. Many of the players were repeat visitors from last year’s TGS, so it really did feel like a year had passed. Thank you for coming!

Also, at the Japan Game Awards 2014 held at TGS, *ARR* won an Award for Excellence. We could not have achieved this without all of the players who have been continuing their adventure with us. I’d like to use this space to express my heartfelt gratitude.

TGS is the largest video game event in Japan and takes place at this time every year. It began in 1996 and has been held almost 20 times now. My career in the gaming industry also began at around the same time TGS did, so I’ve been watching it and creating games all this time.

My first flight was to TGS for my very first business trip, back when I didn’t know how terrifying airplanes were. It’d been a long time since I’d last been to Tokyo—the last time was for a high school trip—and TGS was brimming with energy... Internet access wasn’t so widespread back then, so gaming magazines were the biggest source of news back then, and TGS was a true showcase of the cutting edge of gaming.

TGS attendees would plan their route around the venue in advance, making predictions for each company’s “secret weapon.” It doesn’t happen much nowadays, but in the past, one of the best parts of TGS was the announcements that came as a total surprise.

Also, every company was ridiculously enthusiastic with their PR. The speakers blared with promotional videos trying to overpower each other, and the aisles were packed with lines of players eager to try out the newest games.

Months and years passed, and I’m not saying any of these were bad things, but the organizers put more stringent rules in place, customers’ needs became more diverse, foreign-made games broke into Japan’s gaming industry, and several years ago, our company had a serious discussion on the direction that TGS was taking and its significance.

On the other side of the world, the E3 event held every June in Los Angeles increased in scope, and Japanese game developers switched over for the titles that they wanted to promote globally. Even now, E3 is industry-only, and focuses on new game announcements and interviews (though it has gone through changes).

The present-day TGS gives off a very different vibe from what it used to, due to the rise of social games. Now that internet access is available to everyone, each game has its own community of core fans, and I feel that TGS has changed into a place where companies hold PR events directed at their existing customers.

TGS also has industry days, but it's still a very fan-driven event, and I hope it continues to be Japan's biggest public gaming event. I'll never forget the overwhelming passion I felt from the companies and gamers when I'd just joined the industry.

Looking over to Europe, their largest gaming event is gamescom, held annually in Cologne, Germany, and it is still expanding every year. We've been showcasing *FFXIV* there for three years in a row now³⁵, and we're still having PR battles with other companies—the gamers' passion adding to the chaos. It's certainly a powerful event.

I think that TGS should aim to rekindle that passion. This year, companies had multi-day live streams as though it was the natural thing to do, and it looked to me like the social game companies were all rushing to try new things. TGS has a long history, so I wondered if the companies who'd been there for a long time were prone to letting the event's history of regulations restrict them.

Certainly, having aisles packed with people leads to accidents. And if there weren't volume regulations on PR, then it'd quickly turn into a shouting match (it really did happen in the past... *laughs*). TGS used to be staffed mainly by volunteers and part-time employees, but now there are a lot of real(?) security guards stationed at the venue to block paths before they get too congested. I do think this is necessary to maintain an orderly event, but...

Thanks to evolving hardware, I think the gaming industry as a whole has a lot of momentum right now. That's why it's a good time to bring back the passion that once thrived. This year, we revised our TGS PR approach, and tried to "cut loose" a bit more. Next year, I think we'll try to make you go "Wait, are you allowed to do that!?"... and now it's almost 4 a.m. Hmm, I think a bunch of people are going to yell at me when they read this column (it's too candid).

³⁵ We also exhibited there in 2015, making it 4 years in a row. And we'll also be there this year, so it'll soon be 5.

#21: “Skip-Brag”

Published in 2014/10/30 issue

This column has gone pretty far off track. I spent nearly an hour trying to decide what to write about this week before I remembered that the main topic was supposed to be a behind-the-scenes look at the journey from *1.0* to *ARR* (I know I’m slow). So, let’s get back to that.

I had no prior experience as a producer prior to taking on the *FFXIV* project³⁶. Despite that, they gave me the dual position so that “decisions would be made faster.” At last, the development team had gotten itself together, and it was about time to start on PR—which was when I realized that I knew absolutely nothing about it. (Oi!)

I began working with the PR team to come up with a plan to properly explain the new *FFXIV* after the announcement on October 14th, 2011. My mindset was “I’m an amateur when it comes to PR, so I’ll think about what kind of information I’d want to hear as a player, and when I’d be expecting it.” After all, even if I bluffed about my PR prowess, there’s no hiding from the truth. *laughs*

FF is a global series that supports many languages. *ARR* would launch in Japanese, English, German, and French, so our PR plan had to incorporate gaming events across the world. Also, thanks to the popularization of the internet and online streaming, news from any country’s events would reach the rest of the world on its own. Since *ARR* is an MMORPG, we needed to be extra aware of online spreading of information.

Additionally, our PR plan had to be aligned with the development schedule. The PR team needed to get materials from the development team in order to know what information could be released each month, what kind of PR material would be available, and whether it was something that people would get excited about—otherwise they wouldn’t really be able to do anything. Foreign games usually have an extremely detailed list of milestones as part of the contract between the publisher and the development studio, but the situation in Japan is a bit different, and I’d like to touch on that another time.

When *ARR*’s development began, I laid out the tasks in greater detail than I ever had before and created the project schedule. The game client and UI system would be supported by the rendering engine, and the server system would be developed in parallel, with the game content being squeezed in last. As for how to do PR with this schedule, I broke it down into the following:

- 1. When to release a teaser trailer (PR begins)**
- 2. When to show the first screenshots (Game PR begins)**

³⁶ Details on my lack of experience can be found in Column #10.

- 3. When to show the first hands-off demo³⁷ (Gameplay PR begins)**
- 4. When to release the trailer (Content PR begins)**

First comes the teaser trailer (#1) that foreshadows the game. After that, we release in-game screenshots (#2), build up hype for the game, and then move towards videos (#3). The idea is that the screenshots in #2 are coming to life.

These aren't the rules of PR or anything; it was just a trend that I observed by myself as a gamer that follows gaming news. I decided to follow it and made a large-scale PR schedule that would match the development schedule.

The *ARR* PR team is not limited to Japan—they also have locations in North America (United States, Canada, and South America) and Europe (central base in London, with other PR teams in France and Germany), and information is exchanged in English on a daily basis.

The PR plans were drafted in Japan by me, the assistant producer, and the Japanese PR team leader (nicknamed Annie-senpai). We would hold a “Global Marketing Summit” two to three times a year, where all of the global PR teams and marketing staff would gather and discuss future developments (the meetings often lined up with major events like E3 or Tokyo Game Show).

We discussed the broad aspects of the plan, made adjustments to match the development and event schedules, and decided that I would be the one to judge the quality of the PR materials. In the end, the decision to make me both producer and director came in handy here as well. I knew the development schedule better than anyone, I could check the materials, and I understood the PR content. (However, I absolutely cannot recommend it because of the lethal workload...)

Now then, we began our PR for *ARR* by targeting the biggest game show in the world, E3 2012. Unfortunately, due to my lack of experience as a producer, I committed a grave mistake. The legacy players might remember what happened—it resulted in a certain textboard calling me “Skip-Brag³⁸”... More on that next time!

³⁷ A hands-off demo is when gameplay is demonstrated by the developers, often on a stage. Demos that players can try are called “hands-on.”

³⁸ When I notified the players that we wouldn't be releasing the PR content that was promised, I used the phrase “We're skipping the plans” and this term was coined. It still hurts to be called that (I reap what I sow).

#22: “Blackout”

Published in 2014/11/13 issue

Continuing from last time, let’s look back to E3 2012 when *ARR*’s PR was underway. *FFXIV* was my first time being a producer, and this was my first time showcasing a game at the world’s largest game show, E3.

This was the extent of my E3 knowledge:

- **AAA³⁹ developers make their biggest announcements of the year**
- **Gaming press gather from all over the world**
- **It’s purely a PR event, not a fan event**

I think I had the right gist of it. It was especially common for large-budget and flagship titles to kick off their PR campaign at E3. Thus, after announcing *ARR* on October 14th, 2011, we decided to use E3 2012 to show our first big steps to the world, and we began making preparations as such.

Early development screenshots and artwork would obviously be included, but I wanted an impactful start to our PR campaign, so a teaser trailer⁴⁰ was a must. I worked with Square Enix Visual Works⁴¹ to prepare a video.

At this point, *1.0*’s updates and *ARR*’s development were already being worked on in parallel. In turn, the information we gave to the players would soon be including both *1.0* patch contents and *ARR* status updates. So, I wanted to do something “unprecedented” since the game itself was, too.

I requested that Visual Works create two videos: the ending of *1.0* that was later named “End of an Era”, and a video called “New Beginning” that would bring us into *ARR*. I wrote the scripts myself (my drawings are too horrible to show anyone, so I never make storyboards) and made adjustments as work progressed on each scene.

ARR was created in an extremely short time span compared to any other large-scale MMORPG, so there was no time to make unique PR materials just for E3. But, in order for *1.0*’s story to lead directly into *ARR*, we were going to show the world being destroyed and then reborn.

³⁹ “AAA” is a generic term used to describe high-budget, high-quality games. It’s read “Triple-A”. Other example uses: AAA class, AAA title.

⁴⁰ A teaser trailer is a movie that foretells the start of something. It is often designed as a series of intriguing scenes instead of telling a story.

⁴¹ Visual Works (VW) is a division of Square Enix that specializes in creating high quality movies. They were also behind the teaser trailer for the *FFXIV* expansion pack, *Heavensward*, that we recently unveiled.

The two videos that Visual Works created played a crucial part in bridging the old and the new. Consequently, we came up with the idea of taking cuts from “End of an Era” (symbolizing the end) and “New Beginning” (symbolizing rebirth), arranging them to show “the future of *FFXIV 1.0*” and “a glimpse of the reborn world”, and showing this intriguing trailer at E3.

We hadn’t yet told the *1.0* players that the world was really going to be destroyed. Since it was something that I wanted the in-game story to reveal, spoiling it in the trailer would ruin the surprise. So, we created the E3 2012 trailer in a way where people could speculate but not be 100% sure.

Naturally, each region’s PR team was informed in advance about the PR materials, including the E3 2012 trailer, the *ARR* screenshots, and the *ARR* concept art. Everyone was on the same page. It was a tight schedule, but both the development team and Visual Works were able to complete their parts, and E3 was soon upon us. On May 1st, 2012, I went to America to hold a *FFXIV* Global Marketing Summit, where we would finalize our PR plans for 2012, including E3.

...However, when I arrived at the Los Angeles office, the North America PR team seemed oddly restless, and the office felt like it was on edge. When I began talking about the final checks for our E3 schedule, the PR manager suddenly said “We want to call off the trailer.” It was so unexpected that both I and the Japanese staff were lost for words. No one had suggested anything of the sort before, and I’d already told the players to “look forward to E3.” Why was he saying this now, only one month before the event...?

The North America PR team had a clear reason for not wanting to show the trailer. However, up until then, I’d been running at full throttle, trusting in myself and my team. This unbelievable situation made my vision go dark. (I remember being surprised that “vision getting darker” wasn’t just an idiom; it really can happen. *laughs*)

As the legacy players already know, in the end, we postponed the trailer that was supposed to be shown at E3 2012. Upon hearing the North America PR team’s reasoning, I had to force myself to accept that I’d made two big mistakes in creating the PR trailer.

I made the decision to postpone the trailer, knowing that the players would be disappointed. The reason, as well as the mistakes that I made, will be covered in the next column. PR is so hard...

#23: “Producer and Director”

Published in combined 2014/11/27 and 2014/12/04 issue

One month before E3 2012, on May 1st, I went to America to discuss our global PR strategy for *ARR*. On this day, my last birthday of my thirties, the North America marketing and PR teams said that they wanted to postpone the trailer that we’d planned for E3. What a wonderful birthday present...

This trailer was a compilation of a flashback of *1.0*’s world being destroyed and a flash-forward to a reborn world—a teaser showing the end and a new beginning. I had already promised the players that we’d be showing a new trailer at E3, and the North America team had been informed of this video months in advance. So why were they calling it off one month before the show...?

Their reasoning was very clear: “New players won’t have any idea what’s going on in this video.” (Exact quote.) We had provided information in advance and sent them the drafts. The development team and the movie creation team had slaved away to put together this PR on such a tight schedule, and this is what you say? Despite how I look(?), I rarely yell at people. But this time, I immediately flared up: “Why are you only saying this now!?” My angry outburst echoed across the meeting room.

The meeting continued into the night. How could this oversight happen? What do you mean by, “no idea what’s going on”? In order to decide what to do with the trailer, I had to spend time getting a solid understanding of their arguments. (I must’ve had a scary look on my face...)

E3 is the biggest game show and all of the world’s gaming media outlets are in attendance, so the announcements there get more attention than anywhere else. I understood that as a brand-new producer, but I was made to realize that my understanding was only superficial.

I wanted to make a grand announcement to *our players* at E3, but the North America PR team did not. They thought that we should be using this opportunity to market to *gamers*.

The *1.0* players already knew about the Seventh Umbral Era storyline that foretold the end of the world, and that a new *FFXIV* was in development. So, if they watched the teaser trailer, they’d be able to speculate about it.

But on the other hand, for the gamers who already had negative impressions of *1.0*, and the others who didn’t know much about the game, the video would not hold any meaning at all.

As I explained earlier, E3 is where game companies from around the world announce their biggest and best titles. There are so many trailers, announcements, and other PR materials flying around that gamers aren’t going to stop and look at every single thing. If they don’t immediately think

“Cool!” when they see it, they’ll instead think “I don’t get it, so this video sucks.” This is what the North America team was worried about.

Also, in the years leading up to this E3, many people had come to anticipate Square Enix’s games for their stories. We really didn’t want people to be able to guess a game’s story from its trailer, so I think there was a trend towards more enigmatic trailers.

This led to people—especially in North America and Europe—thinking that Square Enix’s trailers were too cryptic and hard to understand. *FFXIV* in particular was still affected by *1.0*’s negative reception, and the North America team wanted to avoid making things even worse.

In other words, the top priority at E3 was “making the world easy to understand, so that players will know what kind of game it is from a glance, as well as what kind of character they’ll be playing.” I learned that the best strategy was to draw attention with a CG trailer, and then release in-game footage at the same time to make people want to play your game. It’s not just about putting out good content—you need to have a strategic, logical, and *calculated* plan. This was when I first realized the true essence of being a “producer.”

However, I still had to wonder why they waited all these months to tell me. “If you’d said something earlier, we could’ve changed it!” (I had to maintain at least a little bit of pride.)

The North America team’s response was a simple (but meek) “We hesitated to give our opinion.” I had the full authority of “a numbered *FF* game’s producer and director”, and the staff could all see that I was hard at work fixing *FFXIV*. Also, the North America team was a subsidiary of our Japanese company, so they had apparently always felt hesitant about opposing the Japanese development team. (This is what they explained to me.)

In the end, the North America team debated amongst themselves whether to advise me to cancel the trailer showing at E3. They hesitated for quite a long time. The conclusion they came to was “Even if he gets mad at us, Yoshida should be able to understand” and “Yoshida is working himself to death; we can’t let him embarrass himself with this PR.” So, they asked me to call off the trailer.

Those were very generous words, and looking back, I feel nothing but gratitude and respect for them for making me aware of my own naivete. However, at the time, though my mind understood their reasoning, my heart was reluctant to agree. I put the decision on hold and went back to my hotel.

Later at 2 a.m., the Japanese staff were worried about me, and had come to my room to cheer me up. I made the decision to cancel the E3 2012 trailer. (Although I went to sleep extremely intoxicated *laughs*)

I feel that I was blessed to have such an amazing team. I was given a taste of how complex the job of “PR” is, and at the same time, it strengthened my resolve to reward the players who’d supported us since 1.0—by building a strong playerbase, raising profits, and keeping the world of Eorzea running for many years to come. But sometimes, you need to face the users as a whole, not just your players. That’s what it means to be both producer and director.

I am truly thankful for everyone who played our game. And for those who have yet to visit Eorzea, we’ll step up our PR and wait for you there! *A PR send-off*

#24: “Maintaining High Spirits”

Published in combined 2014/12/11 and 2014/12/18 issue

There is an English word called “retention.” You don’t really hear it in Japan outside of work, but it is extremely important for MMORPGs, especially those that use a monthly subscription model. Today, I’ll be talking about this retention, a topic that I usually can’t discuss (you’ll see why if you keep reading).

ARR held its first “Fan Festivals” this year, on October 18-19 in Las Vegas, USA, and on October 25th in London. When an MMORPG holds a fan festival, the management rents a large hall and invites its active players to come and participate in various events. It’s just like a real festival.

Since *ARR* is a global game, we can’t limit Fan Fest to Japan. Our policy is to treat all regions’ players equally, so we have to hold events in Japan, North America, and Europe, so that players from each region can easily attend. But of course, the venues have limitations, so we can’t accept everyone that wants to come...

At our first Fan Fests in North America and Europe, we announced *FFXIV*’s first expansion pack⁴², *FINAL FANTASY XIV: Heavensward*, and had activities and stage events set up for attendees to enjoy. The one in Japan will come last, taking place over two days on December 20-21 at Tokyo Big Sight. I’m looking forward to meeting the players!

Now then, the word “retention” with respect to MMORPGs means “users continuing to play.” *ARR* charges a monthly fee of about ¥1,500, but in return you can play for unlimited hours during the 30-day subscription period, and large updates come free of charge.

So, it’s important to think of retention in terms of months: how many consecutive months does a customer continue to play for? (It works differently in F2P and microtransaction models, but due to space restrictions I won’t cover those.)

Nowadays there aren’t many subscription-based MMORPGs anymore, but worldwide data from around 2010 suggested that the average retention rate for a single player was about 6 months (180 days). However, with the rise of F2P games and additional competitors in the market, by the end of 2012 the same study was already producing halved results, i.e. 3.5 months (100 days). By now, it has decreased to about 80 days.

⁴² An expansion pack is a huge update surpassing the scope of regular patches, and is sold separately on disc. It includes new maps, jobs, and story—equivalent in content volume to an entire game.
FFXIV’s expansion site: <https://na.finalfantasyxiv.com/heavensward/>

Of course, retention rate is greatly influenced by game design and quality, so I can't claim that it's solely a change on the customer side, but you can tell from the numbers that the *norm* is changing. Fortunately, *ARR* is currently above that average...

"How long a customer continues to play on average" is an important business metric, but it also matters to the customers. If many people stop playing, then the community will naturally get smaller, and if the company makes less money, then the patch cycles get longer and less content is added. This of course makes the game less appealing, which leads to more people leaving... It's a vicious cycle.

For *ARR*, we use our Live Letters from the Producer, F.A.T.E. events all across the country, and Fan Fests to share opinions with our customers, and the biggest reason is because we want to express our gratitude. But on the other hand, it's true that these are also retention strategies.

You could say that our development and operations teams share a common fate with our players. I think that if we can all get along and have fun together, then the game will have the greatest retention rate. At a large-scale event like Fan Fest with thousands of attendees, players can directly see that there are so many other people playing the same game as them. Even with our regular PR, I think people can go, "They're still spending money on PR, so they must be doing well!" The fact is that if we don't have a lot of players, then we don't make money and can't do PR, so the continuous PR events are proof that many people are staying with us.

The Fan Fest tickets are certainly not cheap. However, we have to cover the costs of the venue, equipment, activities, security, gift bags, and whatnot, so each event costs us about ¥100 million. If our only source of revenue from the event was the ticket prices, then we'd be in the red by several tens of millions of yen. *laughs*

Be that as it may, this MMORPG can only exist because of the players. *ARR*'s goal is to return its profits to the players and give them a fun experience while we expand on this game together. In my opinion, this is the most appealing aspect of my job.

People who know the word "retention" might think "for online games, it means profits." But I believe that at its essence, it actually means "maintaining high spirits between the customers and the business."

#25: “Lifeless Eyes”

Published in 2014/12/25 issue

Bonjour! Guten Tag! Annyeonghaseyo! Nihao! Hello everyone, this is *FFXIV: ARR* Producer and Director, Yoshida.

I started off this column with greetings from around the world. You may be thinking, “What’s up with this guy?”

FFXIV is a global MMORPG, so we exhibit at gaming events all around the world, and throughout the year we’re always doing PR somewhere in some way. This time I’ll be talking about all of the events that we promoted *ARR* at before launch... but my perspective is probably pretty subjective, so if you were there, please refrain from shouting “It wasn’t like that!” *laughs*

I’ve already talked about E3—the largest game show in the world, held every June in Los Angeles—in previous columns, so let’s start with Japan Expo, which takes place in Paris every July. Japan Expo isn’t a game show; it’s an event that celebrates Japanese culture as a whole.

Japan Expo’s exhibits aren’t limited to just manga, games, anime, idol groups, and visual kei bands (is this considered old terminology already?). Kyoto Prefecture puts up a booth with a dancing maiko (presumably to promote the wonders of Kyoto), there’s a merchandise shop that looks like something out of Harajuku, the light meals in the expo hall are Japanese bentos, and so on. It’s utter chaos. Attendees come from all over Europe, not just France, and most of them are cosplaying!

I attended the past three years in a row for PR. The area in front of the event stage was especially full of enthusiasm. It was crowded with people who were tired from the event, relaxing in their own ways (for instance, reading manga on the cushions laid out on the floor). Some people were attending with their families, and I’d see parents doing mock sword fights with their kids in the open spaces. As a Japanese person, I always find myself smiling at this event.

Come to think of it, when I first did an autograph session here three years ago, I believe I was right next to the Dempagumi.inc members...

Next up is China Joy, which is held in the same month of July in Shanghai. China Joy is China’s biggest gaming event. In addition to game exhibits, they also hold a conference for game developers and management. It’s a very lively event.

China Joy must signify the arrival of summer, because I can vividly recall it being ridiculously hot. As you would expect from the biggest online game marketplace in the world, players were fervently going after the in-game items that were being handed out, and with all that energy going

around there was no way to avoid being drenched in sweat. Everyone seemed to be enduring it by changing into the T-shirts being distributed by each company. I think this event is also famous for the attractiveness of its booth babes?

This year, I joined in on the *FFXIV* exhibit, but I somehow ended up on stage in a basketball free throw competition. It was framed as a “Gaming Academy” of some sort. All of the companies competing with their ideas is a sight to behold. *laughs*

It’s not time to cool down from the summer heat yet, because gamescom is held in Cologne, Germany the next month. This is the biggest game show in Europe, and the booths exceed E3’s in both number and scale (based on my own observations). I’ve attended gamescom three years in a row for *ARR* too, and I can feel it getting bigger each year.

It’s not just the size of the booths that’s amazing. The event lasts for five whole days, from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.—it’s enough to make the staff weep (other events usually close at 5 p.m.). The attendees also have an impressive amount of energy (mainly the Germans, I think). There are a lot of extravagant giveaways, and it’s crazy how loud they get.

PC gaming is big in Germany, so a lot of the giveaways are PC-related products. The MC stands up on stage, hyping the audience as he calls out the name of a PC parts manufacturer and throws a CPU cooler into the crowd. It’s a spectacle that can only be seen at gamescom. Man, I really wanted that cooler... I think I’ll write about gamescom again in a future column.

After gamescom, in late September, comes Tokyo Game Show. I already talked about TGS in a previous column, but to reiterate, it’s a veteran gaming event that already has 20 years of history. It changes a lot every year, but perhaps that is one of its characteristic traits.

Then in November (i.e. last month), we have Korea’s largest gaming event, G-Star in Busan. Just like Germany, Korea is also heavily into PC gaming, so the venue is usually packed with native PC and smartphone games. However, this year, Sony Computer Entertainment (now Sony Interactive Entertainment) had a booth dedicated to the PlayStation 4, which reflects the changing market.

FFXIV: ARR will be launching in Korea in 2015, so we exhibited at G-Star for the first time this year. We had the #1 game streamer in Korea commentating for our booth, leading everyone into a “*Final Fantasy! FF!*” chant. At G-Star, you see elementary school students dropping by on their way home from school. The entire country is committed to games, and the Korean government even provides financial assistance for game development. The Japanese government is also supposed to have something like that, called Cool Japan, but I can’t help but envy Korea *cough*.

In Japan, at the end of the year we have Shueisha's "Jump Festa". In February comes the GDC in San Francisco (although it's not a game show), then in March there's PAX East in Boston, USA. Before you know it, we're back at the pre-E3 "Judges Week", and then the real thing in June...

In order to make 2014 "the year of *FFXIV*" (the number matches, after all), I went to gaming events all around the world and spent half of the year overseas. However, when I list them all out like this, I fearfully realize that next year is going to end up the same way... This is too much.

Man, gaming culture is really something. *lifeless eyes*

#26: “To My Comrades!”

Published in 2015/01/15 special issue

“We’ll dedicate pages to *FFXIV* every week, so write a column for us!” I nonchalantly accepted Famitsu’s offer since it was a great deal, but now I’ve already been doing this for a year...

I get tired of things quickly so I thought I’d stop at #14, but Famitsu really did write strategy guides for *FFXIV* every week (sorry for doubting you), so I couldn’t quit, and now here we are. Famitsu has been involved with *FFXIV* in a lot of ways during this past year. At Tokyo Game Show 2014, we held a Frontlines tournament against the media reps. I still remember Famitsu editor Saji-san’s triumphant grin when he came to the *FFXIV* booth afterwards solely to proclaim “I wrecked Yoshi-P!” Gah.

If I recall correctly, the original theme was supposed to be “the journey from *1.0* to *ARR*”, but I kept meandering along to get it done every two weeks. It’ll still take some time to reach *ARR*, so please be patient with me (but considering how candid this column is, don’t be surprised if it suddenly gets the axe). Well, I say that, but since this is the first anniversary of the column, I’d like to deviate from the topic! (Now it’s going to take even longer.)

The Japanese gaming industry is roughly divided into three “crunch seasons” (I named them that on the spot just now). The first one is finishing the gold master for games that are scheduled for release during the summer, many of which are targeted towards students up to high school age. The most physically and mentally grueling part of this process is typically around the end of May.

Game developers create a “master version” with all of the code and graphics resources for the final product. The target deadline to deliver this to the manufacturers is about two months before the release date. In the past, games were stored on ROMs instead of optical media, so three months were required due to longer manufacture time. It’s decreased since then, but nonetheless, the schedule is as tight as ever and development continues until the very last second. And of course, sometimes you think “It’s done!” and send it in, but it immediately gets rejected the next day because a bug came up...

Surprisingly, not many games are released during the summer. They’re actually outnumbered by the games releasing right now, around the New Year holiday. Other industries have an “end of year crunch”, but considering the aforementioned production schedule, completing the master right now would be far too late. The end of year crunch for console games is around the end of October.

So, the developers that are assigned to games releasing in this period should already have enough free time to be reading this issue of Famitsu at the office. (In theory...)

And then there are the “end of March” titles that align with the end of the fiscal year for most companies. This is the *real* crunch season. Incidentally, a lot of foreign companies end their fiscal year

in June. Games released at that time don't sell well because of the summer holidays, so companies instead focus on E3 announcements, and never rush to release something before the fiscal year end. In other words, the March flurry of releases is exclusive to Japan.

The March release is a tricky thing... Indeed, one month from now, many game developers will be hearing the agonizing cries from hell. These people are different from the previous category. If these guys screw up, they won't have the leeway to read Famitsu at the office—even if they did read it, it would only make them scream with irrational anger, "These people are so lucky to be able to release their game right now!" (Or perhaps, "I've been cursed!")

For the developers, there are two types of games that are released towards the end of March. The first is games that were originally planned to be released at this time, in which case it's a bit different from how I described it just now. If the tasks are managed properly, then the end is already in sight right about now, and they're probably entering the final debugging stage. They can (sometimes) get some proper rest during the New Year season.

But on the complete opposite end of the spectrum are games that targeted an end-of-year release, but due to various circumstances, got delayed to March. There, all hope is lost, and you have no choice but to deceive yourself: "I can just take my New Year holiday at the end of March, right?"

For Japanese businesses, making it in by the end of the term is a serious affair. Whether your sales fall under the current term or the next term is a matter of life and death, and it ends up having a big effect on game quality.

So long as you're developing games in this country, if you don't have money, you can't make the next one. If you want to make a new game, you first have to show the company some real profits. Game companies are businesses first and foremost; developers have no choice but to accept this and endure. So, it's not just about making something fun—you have to be thorough with task management, cost management, scheduling, and planning, in order to make a complete product...

I think a lot of different people will be reading this end-of-year Famitsu. Those who eagerly flip through the pages for news on upcoming games, those who are reading at the office and smiling at the articles on the games they worked on, those who read this column and think "Is this guy talking about me!?" (actually, this is what I do)... Everyone has their own way of spending the New Year with games, but I'm sure all of them do it because they love them.

The New Year's Eve bell will ring in a few days, ushering in a new calendar year. I pray that it'll be a good year for gamers and developers alike! And to my fellow crunch victims, this is the final stretch! (Yes, I know all too well that this is the longest part...)

#27: “Plans Are Uncertain, Not Set in Stone.”

Published in 2015/01/29 issue

Now then, it's long past New Year's, so I'll stop getting derailed and go back to the topic of *ARR*'s PR. We somehow got through E3 and made it to Summer 2012. *ARR*'s core systems were being developed concurrently, and we were starting to link them together.

FFXIV was an unprecedented project, where we were remaking a released game to re-release it under the same name. Since it was a unique situation, the PR schedule and methods ended up being quite unique as well.

Generally when you're promoting a high-budget title, you make vertical slices⁴³ or alpha versions⁴⁴ out of some of the preplanned milestones, and use those game clients for PR. The milestones prior to these typically have incomplete game systems, graphics engines, character models, and so on.

However, *ARR* was in a special situation where *1.0* was still in service, so in a way, “*ARR*'s development progress” was new content in itself. When we showed the first *ARR* screenshot at E3 in June 2012, we promised that we'd be able to show the game in motion next time. (Although before we showed the screenshot, people were saying “Come on, you're not *really* making it!”... Actually, people were still saying that even afterwards *laughs*)

Unfortunately, we were remaking a huge-scale MMORPG from the ground up and additionally releasing it on the PlayStation 3, and considering the remaining life span of the previous console generation, the clock was ticking. There was no time for trial and error with vertical slices. All we could do was follow the comprehensive plan, working on the graphics engine, server system, battle system, chat system, UI, quest system, VFX engine, level editor, and other tools all in tandem.

At the time, our development team trusted in the prediction that “as long as we adhere to the strict specifications for each system, development will go faster than regular game development up until it comes time to put everything together.”

Of course, we spent a lot of time putting these specifications together, and I had confidence in the experts on our team. However, doing large-scale development in such a way was a new experience

⁴³ Vertical slice: For example, in an action game, this could be a version of the game with only Stage 1 complete. If it's an original game design, then you can use this milestone to assess how interesting the game is before creating a large volume of assets. But for the developers, this is a paradox: “If we complete Stage 1, isn't almost all of the programming already done at that point anyway?” It's a trap.

⁴⁴ Alpha version: Basically the same thing as a vertical slice. For an MMORPG, it's usually more concerned with the basics of the basics, like server stress tests, party matchmaking, etc., rather than the quality of the game itself. Online games often have regular players help with the testing, under the condition of a confidentiality contract.

for everyone involved. Unlike the game designers, the programmers in particular weren't the optimistic types, and you could tell that they were expecting something to go wrong.

After E3 in June 2012, I went to France to promote the game at Japan Expo in early July. Meanwhile back in Japan, they were starting the first large-scale system merging test.

Up until then, only the graphics engine, basic UI, character system, and battle system foundation had been put together, so that we could show it to the press at E3. The next step was to combine the core battle system, VFX, quest system, equipment system, etc.—which had all been developed independently—into a single game.

Our programming team was fearsome. Naturally there were some small unexpected quirks, but it took very few man-hours to put all of the systems together. In August, at gamescom 2012, we were finally able to demo the *ARR* client in real-time.

We had an alpha build that we were working on to have players test for us, and it had just gotten out of debugging. We went ahead and used it on stage for our gamescom presentation.

This demo was connected to the server back in Japan, and we were able to demonstrate all of the server-client interactions: combat, UI, equipment changes, movement, and the party system. The server team provided their full support despite the time zone difference, and the presentation went smoothly.

This was our last stand: if we couldn't get it working properly now, then there was no way we'd make it in time for an alpha version. It was an intense summer for the *FFXIV* team, but fortunately, the demo was well received. Next was the event in Shibuya celebrating *Final Fantasy's* 25th anniversary. We had a live stream there, but the real critical point was that the demo was open for the public to try. Thus, we were able to take the first substantial step towards *ARR's* release.

After that was *1.0's* finale on November 11th, 2012, and then the final turning point for *ARR's* release: the closed alpha test. We then hurried into the beta test...

There are so many stories that I don't know how many more columns I'll need... *ARR* is releasing its first expansion pack this year, *Heavensward*, so I'd like to at least finish this before the end of the year (but plans are uncertain, not set in stone).

#28: “When This Battle Is Over, I’ll...”

Published in 2015/02/12 issue

Last time, I made it to the behind-the-scenes of our first *ARR* game client demo at gamescom 2012. This time, I’d like to touch on the *1.0* server shutdown that took place that same year, on November 11th.

1.0 had a bad start, with its disorderly launch and poor content. Nevertheless, players from around the world continued to support us, and we managed to endure long enough that “rebirth” was just one step away. However, in order to finish *ARR*’s development and also connect *1.0* and *ARR*’s stories smoothly, we needed to stop providing updates to *1.0* at some point.

The updates would have to stop anyway—we’d already reached a bottleneck in *1.0*’s server system, and it was getting to be too inefficient to implement new content.

We’d already decided from the start that story-wise, the crisis known as the Seventh Umbral Calamity would involve the ancient primal Bahamut burning the world to a crisp. Then, the world would be reborn, and the curtains would be lifted on a new era. So, we continued *1.0*’s updates towards that end.

The Garlean Legatus—Nael van Darnus—who plotted to bring Dalamud crashing down onto Eorzea through “Project Meteor”, was defeated by the players, the Warriors of Light. However, Dalamud’s descent could not be stopped... The anomalies afflicting Eorzea grew ever more severe, culminating with all of the city states being invaded by monsters. The end of the world was near.

MMORPGs require a ton of money and manpower to manage. It’s not rare for an MMORPG to shut down in a year if the launch was a failure. And the longer it runs, the harder it becomes to end service, because of all the players that love it. An MMORPG that has been around for ten-odd years becomes irreplaceable memories for the players who have spent so much time leveling their character and building up assets.

Titles that can no longer be supported are quietly abandoned, but it’s hard to end a long-running MMORPG. There is basically no way to handle a server shutdown elegantly. The ideology that led to our “end of the world” event was that we had to put everything into this—we should use it as a chance to create an unforgettable experience for the players that have supported us all this time!

The *1.0* update team eagerly drew up a plan to put this into action. The community teams and GM teams from each region got together and brainstormed monsters to summon and lines to say. While we did get some jokes out of it, this was really the start of a new ordeal...

First off, it was relatively easy for the GMs to summon monsters in arbitrary locations, with the help of the programmers. However, an issue came up where the summoned monsters would be stuck in place. The cause was that unlike *ARR*, *1.0* didn't have an automatic pathing system based on the map mesh. Monsters could only move on the predetermined routes set by the planning team.

Originally, these movement paths were manually drawn by the planning team after the maps were completed, and I heard that the work felt like torture *laughs*. The paths existed in field maps, but not in the city maps, because there weren't supposed to be monsters there in the first place. Two of the planners volunteered to draw the paths during their spare moments, and it eventually got done.

Now, the "Adventurers vs. GM Monsters" battles that had been taking place outside the city gates could finally extend into the city states themselves (although it was more like the monsters just suddenly appeared inside...). It quickly became a bloodbath. When the players came home from school or work in real life, they would log in to see dead player bodies all over the city streets.

Back in *1.0*, there were job-specific weapons (called "relics") that required an incredible amount of work to obtain. Now that the end of the world was coming, the deities of Eorzea granted a blessing upon the adventurers: if you slept at an inn, you could find a random relic weapon under your pillow upon waking up. It was a reckless system, but it came with the caveat that the weapons would not carry over to *ARR* (they were known as "inn relics"). However, each time the monsters were wiped out by the Warriors of Light, the development team would supply the GMs with even stronger ones. They were so high level that the players were gradually losing the war.

But then, the players devised a "rock-throwing" strategy. In *1.0*, miners and botanists could throw rocks at monsters to protect themselves, which would stun them temporarily. In order to protect the cities, gatherers would throw rocks at monsters to stop them in their tracks, and the inn relic-wielding adventurers would take them down. What beautiful teamwork! Unfortunately for them, the cold-blooded GMs went on to take even more drastic measures... but I'm out of space now, so the next column will continue the story of *1.0*'s closing.

Come to think of it, when the monsters were attacking places other than the main cities, system messages requesting assistance would be broadcast to all of the players. Stuff like "A large group of ____s has... Aaahh! S-Someone, save m..." The GMs would act out messages like that while unleashing monsters into the world. One of these broken transmissions, "When this battle is over, I'll...", became a popular subject at the time. *laughs*

See you next time!

#29: “The End of 1.0”

Published in 2015/02/26 special issue

In the last column, I talked about how MMORPGs usually try to go out quietly, but for *FFXIV*, we did something completely new: turning it into an event that was part of the in-game story. Because of this, player blogs and media reports on 1.0’s “End of the World” event made their way around the internet, and we were starting to get a lot of attention.

However, at the time, both the development team and I were so preoccupied with facilitating daily GM events and preparing for November 11th that we didn’t really have time to look at the online responses. When we allowed all *FFXIV* account holders to log in for free, it was purely because we wanted as many people to experience the event as possible.

The GM assault on Ul’dah grew worse with each coming day (honestly, they went too far). Even Nael van Darnus, the final boss of 1.0, joined the fray under the convenient excuse of being a ghost. It wasn’t just one or two, either—there’d be four or five Naels attacking the city at once. It was pure chaos. Aside from the GMs, we also mobilized Morbol (Toshio Murouchi) and the rest of the community team to send out prearranged messages as the adventurers won and lost.

GM events were a common occurrence in first-generation MMORPGs like *UO*. During these events, GMs would use special commands to create unpredictable situations in real-time.

There was no prior announcement on which servers the events would take place on, nor was there any guarantee that all of them would get them. It was all at the discretion of the GMs. So, players who happened upon a GM event would excitedly join in on the roleplaying, and post about their experience online. Those who read about it would keep playing, hoping to be able to participate in one themselves.

The contents of the events varied depending on the GM, and whether they were fun or not was dependent on the GM’s skill. Some GMs were basically in-game celebrities. There were also a lot of cases where GMs would break the peace by shouting crude things or mercilessly raining thunder down on the players, killing them instantly *laughs*. GMs were majestic beings, so people were fine with just laughing it off back then.

Before long, 1.0 reached the fateful day of November 11th, 2012. The development team and operations team all got together to oversee the final day of service. Our plan for the day was to hold one final battle on the Carteneau Flats between the Imperials who believed in Nael’s plot to annihilate Eorzea with Dalamud, and the adventurers with the three Grand Companies of Eorzea who sought to prevent it. Finally, the meteor breaks apart, at which point all of the servers shut down. The “End of an Era” trailer is made public, painting the game’s conclusion, and a live letter is held afterwards.

We deliberated for quite a while on how to show the “End of an Era” trailer before deciding to stream it over the internet. Ideally we could’ve distributed it in a patch and have it automatically play when the time came, but nowadays there are a lot of datamining players, so that option carries the risk of the video being leaked online ahead of time. There was also no way to create a real-time cutscene in-game of Bahamut burning the world to a crisp, so we settled on presenting it in the video alone.

As we closed in on the final moments, word was spreading online about the “end of the world” cinematics, and there was a huge influx of logins. The lobby server couldn’t handle the traffic, causing delays, and in-game zones were also crashing because of the crowds. Players were getting logged out, contributing to the login jam as they tried to get back in. It was a lot of stress on the servers.

The fundamental issues with *1.0*’s server software were the reason why I decided to remake the game in the first place, and those issues were now exposed for all to see. It was my fault alone for not taking this into account when putting together the event. Even the players were saying “The greatest enemy isn’t Nael or the Empire; it’s the servers!”, to which I had no comeback...

The server team got to work on controlling the bandwidth, making adjustments in real-time to maximize the number of people that could be accommodated. Try and try as they might, there was no escaping from login hell, and the time came to shut down the servers. The live letter began with a formal apology.

Thankfully, when the players saw the trailer, they forgave us on account of Louisoix’s last smile. We were able to make it through this event because the players kept supporting us until the very end.

November 11th, 2012 marked a major breakpoint in the *FFXIV* project, and after that we could focus on *ARR* alone. *1.0* really had so many problems—there’s no denying that we caused a lot of disappointment for the players and fans.

Nevertheless, there were still many players who cheered on *Final Fantasy* and Square Enix until the game’s last breaths, and there’s also no denying that we were able to reach its finale.

Our team and Square Enix as a whole will never forget your encouragement. I hope to make *ARR* an unforgettable game, so that we can have as many people as possible playing with us until its end, too.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to all of our legacy players. Thank you!

#30: “I’m Not Saying This to Get More Players (Although We Do Want Them)”

Published in 2015/03/12 issue

This column keeps going off track from its purpose, but I managed to make it to 1.0’s server shutdown last time. So, this time I’ll be making another detour. *laughs*

Ever since I was put in charge of *FFXIV*, I’ve been going to gaming events all over the world, as well as our events here in Japan. I’ve had many more opportunities to meet the players in person than ever before. Since we’re developing and maintaining an MMORPG, I try to have as much direct communication with the players as possible, whether it be through live streams or this column, so that they can see the faces that are running the show.

In my interactions with these players, by far the most common topic of conversation is questions about new content or the current state of things. But on a rare occasion, someone asks me, “What do you need to study to get into the game industry?” *FFXIV* players cover a wide range of age demographics, including parents with teenage children. Sometimes, they ask me for advice on their son or daughter’s career path.

First off, there are a lot of possible occupations in the “game industry,” and the requirements vary greatly depending on the job. So, you’re not going to pass unless you first get a clear idea of what you want to do. During the (Japanese) bubble era and game bubble era, a lot of people were able to waltz in by socializing at bars, but now that the game industry has become more respectable, this basically never happens anymore. Although I secretly wonder if it’s viable myself... *laughs*

The most common question from parents is: “My son said he wants to get a job in the game industry. What should I make him study?” But like I said before, the required knowledge and skillset varies depending on the job.

If we focus on the word “study”, the easiest thing to study is definitely programming. It’s the only job where your skill level is guaranteed to rise from studying. Programming is about using “languages” like C or C++ to give commands to the computer, so programmers first need to learn these languages. Just like how you need to learn English if you want to communicate with someone in America, if you want to communicate with a computer, you need to learn the “words” that it can understand.

When you learn English, you do so by studying grammar, going to an English conversation school for training from an English teacher, etc. Programming is the exact same principle. At the very least, just like with English, the more you speak and the more vocabulary you learn, the higher your skill level rises. There is an endless supply of books that teach programming, from beginner level to practical applications to academic books, so any person of any age can study programming without

even going to school for it, so long as they have a PC and books. Honestly, I think programming is a job where your fundamental skill level is based on how many lines of code you've written.

Of course, just like how some people are good at holding conversations and some people struggle, the programming equivalent of variable "writing ability" is *cleanness and efficiency of source code*. Different programmers excel at different things, whether it be system architecture, rendering, physical processing, application architecture, server engineering, etc.

These are all very advanced fields, so programming might be the profession with the greatest amount of subdivisions. The so-called "genius programmers" that are constantly coming up with new algorithms or ways to drastically increase process efficiency didn't get to where they were through study alone, but regardless, learning the language comes first. That's why I believe programming is the easiest job to set goals for, and your efforts will always translate to skill.

Ever since I played *Mario Bros.* in the early NES days, I knew I wanted to make games one day, and the only thing I really studied was programming. I grew up thinking I wanted to write game stories and design games, but I started with learning programming, because anyone can come up with ideas—I wanted something that would give me an advantage.

Back then, I hated studying for school. I was what you'd call a delinquent *laughs*. I was good at guessing which questions would be on the tests, so I managed to score above average and avoid compulsory lessons. But programming was the one thing I took seriously. A big factor of this was that I was genuinely fascinated by how the computer would follow my commands, returning answers and making images on the screen move.

If you're reading this column and thinking "I want to join the game industry", know that no matter what field you go into, studying programming will always pay off! It's easy to get results and assess yourself.

Honestly, I don't think you even need to go to school for it (Oi!), but it does take a strong-willed personality to be able to set your own goals and continue studying by yourself. Enrolling at a game development school is also a good choice, and you can make friends there, too! But don't go to school if you only *feel like* entering the game industry. It'll be a waste of time and money.

Anyway, lately my advice to parents has been: "First, buy a PC for your child! Then give them *FFXIV* and force them to play to learn how to use a PC. Then, suggest learning how to write programs!"

After all, you can't work on games if you don't love PCs and games... I'm definitely not saying this to get more players *grin*. To be continued...

#31: “I Don’t Think This Will Work *Perplexed*”

Published in 2015/03/26 issue

Continuing from last time, people often ask me, “What training or studying should I do if I want to get a job in the game industry?” ...But whether my advice will get you in depends on what happens when you meet the company, so please don’t blame me in the unlikely event that it doesn’t work.

awkward smile

In the last column, I wrote about the importance and practicality of programming. Now, what about designers? (In Japan, the term “designers” refers to artists or modelers. Overseas they use the term “game designers” to mean planners, while people involved with art are called “artists”. This column is written with Japan (the former) in mind.)

Just like programmers, designers are divided into categories based on what they are working on, and each category requires different skillsets. However, most of them have one thing in common: you have to be able to draw. Regardless of if you’re doing artwork or modeling, you’re at a disadvantage if you can’t draw. Just as with programming, there are plenty of textbooks out there, and you can improve your shading and spatial skills through practice. Plus, you can start at any age—all you need is pencil and paper.

This is not a job you can do if you don’t enjoy drawing. See, when I start drawing what I want a character’s movement to look like on a whiteboard, and I see all of the staff tilting their heads in confusion, it makes me drown in self-loathing. Those like me should give up on becoming designers. (People call my drawings “more cryptic than hieroglyphs!”)

The main types of designers are artists, modelers, and animators. Modelers are often further divided into character modelers and background modelers (also called BG or environment modelers), and some companies don’t have designated artists. There are also incredible designers who are skilled at both drawing and modeling, who can do either one full-time. Designing is a job that deals with *art*, so even a layman can identify difference in skill levels. Being an artist basically entails a lot of drawing.

For modelers, aside from character and background modeling, there are also tasks like creating textures, sculpting (a 3D modeling technique where you manipulate models as though sculpting with clay), writing scripts for 3D modeling tools, etc. 3D modeling tools used to be prohibitively expensive, but thanks to volunteers there are free ones available now, making for an accessible learning environment. The fastest way to learn is to just try it.

The animators’ job is to give the characters movement. It’s not just about imagination or reproducing movements—you need to learn how to use tools to manually craft the animations,

process motion capture data, etc. When you take tools and technique acquisition into consideration, going to a fine arts university or vocational school can be a big advantage for a designer.

There are many other important types of designers, like special effects, cinematics, camera animation, etc. You may have to figure out what you're aiming for first.

And then there's my work: game designing/planning. This is actually as far from "study-able" as it gets...

First of all, there are a million different ways of writing proposals, and I never studied any of them. And even if you write a proposal, you can't do anything with it until you write the specification documents. There's no universal format for specifications, and each company has their own style, so the best thing to do when you get the job is to steal one from your seniors *laughs*. That's how it is, so it's very hard for me to tell you how to become a planner.

If I had to give some kind of advice, it'd be things like "read a lot of books (at least a few hundred" or "learn programming to get better at logical thinking." But since you'll be coming up with games themselves and their rules, the most important thing is to love games more than anyone else. You need to be passionate in order to convince the company to fund you and the development team to make the game for you. Otherwise, no one will follow you.

So in the end, I tell the inquiring parents, "He doesn't need to study; just make him skip meals to play games", but they often look bewildered and say "What? That's no different from what he's already doing. I'm asking for advice *because* he won't study..." The rest of the conversation goes as follows:

Yoshida: "In that case, forbid him from moving on to a new game until he's cleared the one he's currently playing. When he finishes playing, make him write a report on what was good, what was bad, and how he would improve on the bad points."

Parent: "Huh? A report to who? You?"

Yoshida: "No, not me. To Mom and Dad."

Parent: "But we won't know whether he's right or wrong. We're not professional game developers."

Yoshida: "There's no absolute right or wrong answer when it comes to games; what's important is to analyze them and find your own answer. Please praise him for writing the report."

Parent: "This is... difficult..."

Yoshida: “Yes, but finding a job is difficult no matter what industry you’re in...”

Anyone can become a game designer, but it’s a loosely-defined job with no clear way to prepare for, so I can’t recommend it as a career goal...

Hmm, why is my advice for my own occupation the least useful of them all? I spent two columns on this topic, so I’m really doubting if it’s okay to conclude with this. Even though it’s a fun job... *perplexed*

#32: “This Will Be Relevant to Video Games Eventually. Next Time... For Sure...”

Published in 2015/04/09 special issue

This year, I was in San Francisco and Boston from February 28th until March 9th, promoting *FFXIV*'s first expansion pack, *Heavensward*. I was in Boston for PAX East⁴⁵, where I did a lot of interviews and held a presentation for the *FFXIV* players and *FF* fans.

Being able to meet players around the world in person is one of my favourite parts of being in charge of *FFXIV*, but at the same time, having to fly in so many airplanes makes me want to die...

Angry voice Seriously, how can a lump of metal like that fly in the sky? I don't understand how a chunk of metal with hundreds of people on it can stay in the air. It doesn't make any sense.

Don't get me wrong; I did research it, but I just can't accept it. I once read a book that said that “it's a mystery” how those tiny wings can generate so much lift. It had the nerve to do all of that analysis, just to conclude with “*it's a mystery.*” Anyway, if only airplanes couldn't fly, then I wouldn't have to take them for my overseas business trips. And I wouldn't have to be humiliated by a flight attendant loudly asking me, “Sir, is everything okay?” even though I was wearing sunglasses *specifically* so people wouldn't know I was scared. The plane hadn't even taken off yet! *exasperated breathing*

My self-diagnosed cause of my fear of airplanes is that they can be lethal in the event of human error or something being wrong with the airframe. That is the only reason. (It's a self-diagnosis, so it's not necessarily comprehensive.) But my friends and staff always say this to me:

“Yoshida-san, you like driving, right? Do you know which has more accidents? Cars or planes?”

“Don't make fun of me! Of course I know!”, I retort. That's not why I'm so scared. In a car, I hold the steering wheel myself and control the gas and brake pedals. When I'm driving on an icy road in Hokkaido and a car in the opposite lane comes at me, tires locked and uncontrollable, there's still a chance that I can do something to save myself. And in fact, I did survive (I dodged it by about 2 cm). But in an airplane, there's nothing I can do. There's nowhere to run. And there aren't any parachutes.

The only thing they *do* have has prerequisites... (1) The airplane becomes inoperable for whatever reason. (2) It can't avoid a crash landing. (3) It just happened to be flying above the sea. (4) Someone else (the co-pilot?) works really hard. (5) Through their miraculous maneuvers, the plane makes a safe emergency landing on the water. *Now* those lifejackets come in handy!

⁴⁵ PAX East is a gaming event on the east coast of America designed for fans. It is held every year in Boston. While America also has E3, that event is an exhibition for industry staff. The main events for fans are PAX East and the west coast's PAX Prime. PAX East 2015 was really exciting, because it was announced that PAX would be expanding to more locations!

I went on a rant there, but anyway, the only vehicles that have such poor emergency provisions are rockets, airplanes, and Cid's airship in *FFXIV*, the Enterprise. Cid's airship doesn't even have seats, let alone seatbelts. And yet the Warrior of Light boards it so nonchalantly. Truly a fearsome being.

But Cid's airship wouldn't look as good if it had seats and seatbelts. It can all be explained away by magic anyway! However, real life doesn't work that way...

I once asked the flight attendant why the plane didn't have parachutes. She laughed nervously, and choosing her words very carefully, said "To prevent people from panicking." I see. So you think that if the plane had parachutes, then people like me would see them and start screaming "I'm going to escape by myself! Open the door right now!" That's so cruel.

And so, every time I go on an overseas business trip, I'm sweating buckets on the plane. Last time was stressful, too...

There's one more painful thing about going overseas, but I must warn you in advance: if any of you benevolent people reading this column happen to be eating right now, quietly close the book and finish eating before you continue on. (You're saying this *now*!?)

The painful fact is that there aren't any bidets. On the rare occasion that you do find one, it's almost never a Japanese brand. Every now and then I get to stay in a brand-new hotel, but they still don't have them. From what I've surmised, they never even consider installing bidets.

When you go overseas, your eating habits change, and "doing your business" can be painful. Bidets come in really handy at times like that, but there aren't any, so I find myself thinking "Man, I don't wanna go to the restroom."

Some of you may call me indulgent, but between using a lot of toilet paper or filtering recycled water, which do you think is more environmentally friendly? Then again, toilet paper is also made from recycled paper, so I guess it's a cost issue?—I often find myself pondering that while sitting on the toilets there. But in that case, the bidet should win because it's gentle on your bottom!

So how come something so useful and comforting isn't popular over there...? When I go overseas, I make it a habit to ask local residents and staff that. After observing the trends there, I decided to take action...

Coming up next: "Let's promote bidets!" (Wait, what happened to stories about *FFXIV* and the gaming industry?)

#33: “Please Contact Me!”

Published in 2015/04/23 issue

Thanks to *FFXIV*, I’ve been traveling around the world for PR, but as I wrote about last time, I’ve been seriously contemplating the lack of bidets overseas.

Now, at times like this, there’s no point in random speculation. You should come up with several hypotheses and try to prove them. My first theory was, “Maybe they don’t think bidets are useful in the first place?” Indeed, the first time I used a bidet (around 15 years ago at a relative’s house), I hesitated to push the button. I didn’t really know how it worked; could I just sit there, or did I have to do something in advance...?

In the end, I entrusted myself to the words of my ancestors: “Everything is an experience!” I steeled myself and pushed the button. A jet of water suddenly splashed against a *sensitive area*, and I silently panicked and jumped to my feet. The bidets back then weren’t as high-tech as they are today. The water didn’t stop right away—it continued its assault on me!

I turned around and guarded against the splashing with my right hand. The bidet gave up right away, but there was water all over the place. I heard my aunt saying “What happened, Nao-chan?” and I shouted back, “N-N-Nothing!” as I frantically wiped the floor. Aunt, I’m sorry for lying and flooding your bathroom. I cleaned it all up, so please forgive me.

So basically, there was a chance that bidets were still considered scary overseas! If they have the same misunderstanding that I did 15 years ago, then I’ll just have to clear it up. First I went to hear from someone nearby: *FFXIV* Lore Writer, Localization Lead, and Primal Theme Vocalist Michael-Christopher Koji Fox.

“Hey Koji, what do you think about bidets? You’re not scared of them, right? If you are, you’re greatly mistaken. Bidets are allies of humankind, not enemies.”

I asked him that in a most friendly manner. His reply:

“Bidets are the most useful things ever! The worst part about going overseas is that there aren’t any bidets!”

“O-Oh... Glad you feel that way.”

I clearly chose the wrong person. He’s always telling me “Ask me anything about America!”, but what the heck? This guy looks American, but he’s actually a Japanese in disguise. I talked to him some more, and he too found it strange that bidets weren’t popular in America.

I did recall hearing somewhere in the news about Hollywood stars who would come to Japan to promote their movies, stay at Japanese hotels, and be so impressed by the bidets that they would buy ten of them to install in their homes (DiCaprio was a famous example). Things used by Hollywood stars, like cars, clothes, or perfumes, generally become trendy items. But I'd never heard of bidets being trendy... Americans love new things (is this a stereotype?), so you'd think bidets would fit right in.

My next theory was "it has to do with their cultural background." Every nation has its own history, so there may be a difference in how bidets are perceived... The fastest way to find out would be to ask someone while I was overseas, so I interviewed local staff members while I was at Japan Expo in Paris, France.

All of them said they thought bidets were a wonderful invention, but when I asked "Would you install one in your own home?", every single one of them said "No." Why not? "Hmm, I don't really know how to explain it. I guess in Europe, we don't really like change in places with water like kitchens and bathrooms..."

No one could give me a clear-cut answer, but their responses were all the same. It was a spiritual or subconscious kind of thing. In that case, it could be difficult for bidets to pervade their society without some kind of change in values. If the property owners don't change their views, then new buildings won't be built with bidets in mind, and it'll be hard to implement them afterwards. This was going to take quite some time...

However, I did find one common denominator: people who were involved in the gaming industry understood the value of bidets and had positive experiences with them. In other words, the IT industry and other new industries, as well as people in the entertainment field, had an easier time accepting change... and I was sure that they would feel the same way as customers.

So I made a proposal! (To who?) What if major gaming events like Japan Expo, E3, or gamescom installed simple bidets at their event venue for the duration of the event!?

If you place usage instructions in various languages at eye level from a seated position, then you can promote their magnificence while also reducing the number of tragic accidents. Include a link to an online store and explain how to install one on your existing toilet. I'm certain that gamers who love new things will buy it!

Japan Expo is all about Japanese culture anyway, so I'm sure it'd be a hit if they made all of their toilets bidets for the duration of the event! TOTO⁴⁶, please contact me!⁴⁷

⁴⁶ TL note: TOTO is a Japanese company, and the world's largest toilet manufacturer.

⁴⁷ This column has even been novelized now, but I still haven't been contacted... I'll continue to wait patiently. *laughs*

...I've now spent two columns on my passionate speech about bidets, but ultimately, this is just an example. When I travel all around the world for *FFXIV* work, I think, "There's no national borders between gamers", but actually, every region has its own culture and subconscious beliefs. This is just one of the many new discoveries(?) I've made.

I really enjoy thinking deeply into things, coming up with my own plans and conclusions. For example, I love asking "If Doraemon came to your room, what's the first gadget you should ask for?" (My answer is the "What-If Phone Booth".)

#34: “Heaven is a Step Away from Hell”

Published in combined 2015/05/07, 2015/05/14, and 2015/05/21 issue

Now, let’s get back to talking about the journey to *ARR*. Today I’ll be talking about *ARR*’s alpha test. On November 11th, 2012, we shut down all of the *1.0* servers, and all eyes were on what *ARR* was going to be like. (The development team and management were extremely nervous, too...)

Those who don’t have much experience with online games might be unfamiliar with the term “alpha test,” although you may have heard “beta test” from somewhere at some point. The content of an alpha test varies greatly depending on the game, but the concept is basically “We finished the foundation of the game, so please try it and find bugs for us!”

You may be thinking, “What? You’re making your customers find bugs for you!?” MMORPGs have the most complex server systems of all online games, and there are some things that the development team can’t test by themselves.

For example, “How many players can be in battle simultaneously in the same area before the server reaches its limits?” or “If thousands of people are trying to log in at the same time, how much can the lobby server handle?” We can crunch the numbers, but that’s only an estimate at best. A big part of the issue is that real players do unpredictable things that we can’t simulate with bots.⁴⁸

Alpha tests are generally “closed” tests (limited number of participants). Players apply to join the alpha test, and often have to accept a confidentiality agreement (i.e. an NDA) if they are selected. In short, they cannot tell any third parties about what they saw, heard, or found out in the alpha test.

This is because, in a way, the development team is having the players participate in the game’s development. There are still game-breaking bugs and incomplete graphics, so if that stuff got posted on the internet, other people would think “Wow, that game sucks.”

Anyway, *ARR*’s alpha testing was divided into several phases. In the initial phase, we provided 1000 players with alpha test accounts, and allowed them to log in during scheduled hours. We let them do whatever they wanted in the game, and I remember watching them run around, shouting things like “So this is the new combat speed” and “The graphics are so lightweight!” *laughs*

The *1.0* and *FFXI* players had been debating for some time over whether characters would be able to jump in this game. When I saw the alpha testers bouncing all over the place, I couldn’t help but think “See? You can!” *laughs*

⁴⁸ In online games, “bots” usually refer to illegal programs used by RMT (Real Money Trading) merchants that automatically control characters. In this case, I am referring to invisible virtual bots that the development team places in the game for load testing. These are often called “inspection bots.”

Some players immediately provided their feedback on our alpha test forum. It wasn't just bug reports, but also suggestions on how to improve the game for the official release, especially in the UI department: "It'll be easier to use if you do it like this!" "I want a function that does this!" We received so much useful feedback from everyone.

We discovered a lot of problems and unexpected situations that we wouldn't have been able to by ourselves, such as issues with the opening flow and hundreds of people attempting quests at the same time, and it's all because the alpha testers were motivated to make this into a good game. I still feel like the current *ARR* actually began with this alpha test.

After that, we periodically increased the number of alpha testers and the duration of the test periods. In the final phase, the cries of "I wasn't selected *again*! Please, let me play!" were coming close to being screams, so we kept the servers running and sent winning emails to almost everyone. This was an unusual thing to do for an alpha test, but *ARR* could only exist because of *1.0*, after all. The testers gave us a lot of strength and motivation for the last leg of our journey to release.

I actually logged into the alpha test server several times to chat with the players (rumours say that it was perfect for stress testing because hundreds of people would gather...). I'd hear their feedback directly, and they'd cheer me on, saying "This game is amazing! I'm really looking forward to it!" It's truly an unforgettable memory.

Thus, *ARR*'s alpha test came to a successful close... but we were left with a huge list of passionate feedback from the testers. What would we fix and when? How would we implement these in the final product? Our battle was just starting! Anyway, I think the next column will be about the development team and management's perspective on the alpha test (AKA a depiction of the screams from the depths of development hell).

Finally, I'd like to wish good luck to the development staff on the alpha and beta tests for fellow online game *Dragon's Dogma Online*! I know very well how exhausting it is... (I say that, but I'm playing it too. *laughs*)⁴⁹

⁴⁹ At the time this column was originally published, *Dragon's Dogma Online* was in the middle of alpha testing. This is unrelated, but shortly after the game officially launched, I went out to eat with the *Dogma* team, including Capcom's Kobayashi-P. Managing an online game is tough for everyone. *laughs*

#35: “Because I’m the Producer”

Published in 2015/05/28 issue

Last time I touched on *ARR*’s alpha tests, but this time I’d like to write candidly about what goes on behind the scenes—the work involved for the development team and management team, and how we handle things. (However, this may differ from how other companies and teams do things.)

First of all, know that the development team doesn’t want to do alpha and beta tests! (Oi!) This is because even if the game is not complete, they still have to do some minimum amount of debugging if the customers are going to be playing it. If the game is really bad, it’ll be like we’re causing our own negative campaign.

Of course, the perfect scenario is where the game is already mostly complete, and all that’s left is to hold the alpha/beta tests and make changes based on the players’ feedback. However, this is nothing more than a pipe dream! (If there is a development team that can achieve this, I want to see their producer or director’s face.)

Games are subjective products so you can add as much to them as you want, and there is especially no limit to the amount of content an MMORPG can have at launch. The UI looks simple, but it actually needs to be completely customizable, and since it’s a multiplayer game, the battle jobs need to be balanced to some degree (I’m sorry to all of the warriors at launch...). So, there was a myriad of incomplete features when we held *ARR*’s alpha test (see the previous column for the reason why we went ahead with it anyway).

When we began the alpha test, the server team was prepared to work without rest. In *FFXIV*, the server team is divided into the *server programming team* that codes server-side processes and the *infrastructure team* that handles the datacenter/server equipment. For the server team, the alpha test is even more critical than the game’s completion. They create a list of tests for everyone to carry out, hold meetings with the operations team, establish emergency procedures for handling server errors, and do mental training(?) in preparation for the possibility of being called at any time...

FFXIV is a global game, but the initial stages of the alpha test were scheduled based on Japan Standard Time (apologies to all of the North American and European players). This was because we anticipated that there would be a lot of bugs, so the workflow would be as follows:

Major bugs discovered → Work until morning to fix them → Take a nap → Next alpha test

Since the game was being developed in Japan, we needed to schedule around Japanese waking hours so that the programmers involved in the alpha could address issues immediately.

The development team was working ahead on new features and content for the beta test and final game, but the same could not be said for the team leaders. Each day after the alpha test concluded, players would be leaving feedback on the test forums until late in the night. The team leaders would comb through the forums, making itemized lists of all of the requests and estimating roughly how much labour would be required to address each one. The lists were submitted to me. (The test forums were divided into specific categories to make it easier for them to go through.)

After merging all of the lists, I would assign priorities to the tasks: “top priority, get it done during alpha”, “finish before beta phase 1”, “beta 2”, “beta 3”, “launch”, “patch 2.1”, etc. This process repeated every day during the alpha test period. I would merge the lists from all days, adjust the priorities, and hold meetings with the team leaders... (I don’t even want to recall how many meetings there were. *laughs*)

Of course, there were problems that we were aware of even without the alpha test, which had already been converted into tasks and scheduled on the development team side. However, a lot of new tasks were created during the alpha test for UI changes, because they directly affected the user experience. *ARR*’s UI at the time of the alpha was developed on top of a certain middleware, and that middleware simply did not have the performance required to satisfy all of the UI requests. We determined that it wasn’t going to work no matter how much optimization we did.

Even though so much of the UI was already created based on that middleware, I planned to have the new *ARR*-specific UI system created from scratch and in place by beta phase 3. (All of the windows and the chat system were using that middleware until beta 2.) It would include all of the new UI system features from the alpha test feedback. It’s something we can laugh about now, but back then we had 30 UI programmers... (Never mind, I can’t laugh about it.)

The management side had full-time duty on the forums, responding to players, gathering data, handling announcements, and so on. We also had to start on PR, so videos had to be created and advertisements had to be submitted. I’m surprised they were able to stay sane...

Anyway, somehow we made it through the alpha test. *FFXIV* can only exist as it is today because of the loud encouragement from all of those players. I’m truly thankful.

In conclusion, it was a lot of work, but a fond memory! Currently, we’re on the final stretch for *FFXIV*’s first expansion pack, *Heavensward*. Who would’ve thought that it’d be even more ruthless than the alpha test...? I’m sorry, everyone on the development team. I’m also sorry to all of the players who have to wait until launch. Even I want to scream “The schedule’s too tight, Yoshidaaaaaa!!!” Good luck, everyone. Remember to value your life. The release date is June 23rd, 2015! Hurry and preorder it! (It turned into advertising after all?)

#36: “Almost Missing the Deadline”

Published in 2015/06/11 issue

The train arrived at the station at 10 p.m., but the days in Europe are long, and it still wasn't dark enough to be called night. I was greeted by the crisp air, which carried the scent of grass... (This is now a travel column.)

I'm writing this manuscript from the remote countryside of France, part of a city called Nantes. The master version of *FFXIV: Heavensward* is almost complete. I toiled through all of the director checks, got on a plane from Haneda to France without any sleep, and then spent three hours on a train from Charles de Gaulle Airport. It was 20 hours of travel in total.

Why did I come here? Not for sightseeing, of course. The media tour for *Heavensward* is being held in a castle. Though I had seen the photos when the venue was selected, upon arrival I was struck by awe. It was a genuine medieval European castle. At any rate, I couldn't fight the drowsiness any longer, so I crawled into bed. The next morning, it was time for rehearsals and equipment checks, and I'm writing this column while those are going on.

Looking at people's reactions online, I'm seeing things like “Why is Yoshida in France? Why is he staying in a castle?” and “Is he sightseeing while he's there for the live letter?” Come to think of it, I never really explained what a “media tour” is. (In other words, I now have a topic for this column.)

I didn't know what a media tour was either, until I started working on *FFXIV*. I'd never even heard of it before. I also didn't know if other companies were doing them (there's an 80% chance that they aren't). The first media tour I participated in was in October 2011, when we announced *ARR*.

Prior to that, I had spoken to the press about our future plans for *1.0* at events like E3. But our new game, an unprecedented remake, deserved something more special. We invited the media to Square Enix's offices in San Francisco, Germany, France, the UK, etc., where I would give a presentation and take interviews.

Before *FFXIV*, I had always avoided media coverage. I left PR completely in the producer's hands, so my definition of PR was something like: **“Making announcements for the company and sometimes handling events and interview requests.”** (I was extremely naïve.) In reality, it's not a passive job at all—when there's a new announcement, you have to inform the media in advance, get them interested, schedule interviews, secure magazine space, and purchase advertisements for that period to maximize the announcement's effect.

Most of the people reading this column are probably Japanese gamers, so you may not be familiar with this, but in order to sell your game worldwide like *FFXIV* does, you have to coordinate

with foreign media outlets in order to stir up interest. It's very important to let them try the latest version of your game, and express your game's strengths in interviews (indeed, it's not "them interviewing us", but rather "us telling them" about our game).

The Japanese press and players live in the same country as us, so we can spread information through events, live streams, and in-person interviews. However, in North America and Europe, there are titles that are bigger than ours, and they have the home field advantage. It is no longer an era where they'll go out of their way to hunt down the latest news from Japan (although there are plenty of media outlets who do come to us).

Basically, a media tour is a PR event where we go to the location ourselves and invite various media outlets to come see what's so great about our game. Major titles in other countries do the same thing when trying to compete in foreign markets. Booking a hotel meeting room and setting up demos of your game is a must, but each company puts their own spin on it, like doing an early premiere of their first promotional video or having a dinner party with the developers.

FFXIV had also done a solo media tour, not tied to any events, back during its turning point in 1.0. However, we were a lot more enthusiastic about planning our *Heavensward* one, since it's about a new title going on sale, and our PR teams in each region helped organize it (*FFXIV* has PR teams in Japan, North America, the UK, France, Germany, and Northern Europe).

We wanted to do something clever this time, so we booked an old castle in France to match *Heavensward*'s gothic aesthetic. We invited press from all around the world to play the demo, conduct interviews, have a BBQ party (!), and most importantly, learn all there is to know about *Heavensward*. There were several reporters that came all the way from Japan, too!

Each region's PR team is allocated funds for marketing/PR (approved by me), and the specifics are ironed out twice a year at our *FFXIV* Global Marketing Summit. It was only after being placed in charge of *FFXIV* that I truly learned that a game project is more than just development—all of the pieces have to come together.

Anyway, that's why I came to France. But there was one thing I didn't foresee: the Wi-Fi signal here is terrible! It won't connect! It's a wonderful, elegant summer getaway, but this Wi-Fi is not OK! Am I going to be able to submit this manuscript...?

I'm sure Famitsu or "Famitsu Connect! On" will write an article about this media tour, so please see the details there! (Can't forget about the magazine PR *laughs*)

#37: “For the Low, Low Price of ¥4,104!”

Published in 2015/06/25 issue

FFXIV’s first expansion pack, *Heavensward*, is finally going on sale on June 23rd, 2015, although the real release date is June 19th, the start of early access⁵⁰. For the players reading this page in Famitsu, it’ll be in about 8 days...

I’ve spoken to several media outlets about our current status, and did an interview with Famitsu, but at the time of writing (May 31st), we are still working on the final balance adjustments. Will we make it in time!? (Oi!)

People who play regular games may be thinking, “What? You’re still making adjustments even though the game releases on June 23rd? There’s no way you’ll make it in time!” However, online games have a powerful mechanism: you have to download the latest update before you can play. This means that we’re free to update the game even mere minutes before the release date. This is commonly known as a “day-one patch.” It should be avoided as much as possible.

Imagine someone buying a game and coming home eager to play it, but suddenly they are forced to download tens of gigabytes of data first, much to their dismay. This is an extreme example, but the point is that graphical assets and other things that take up a lot of space should be included on the disc or in the pre-download. Meanwhile, things like combat parameters, text, and cutscene scripts are small in size, so we can continue fine-tuning them until the last minute.

Games are a form of entertainment where quality and balance are subjective. This means that you could potentially keep working on them forever. In reality, you should be finishing all of the adjustments well ahead of the release date, but *Heavensward* is implementing a lot of different new things, so in the end we’re still making adjustments now.

From a developer point of view, I think the common aspect of all MMORPG expansion packs is **“something that requires long-term development and brings changes that will influence the game’s operation for the next 1.5 years.”** In *FFXIV*’s case, we’re “taking the adventure into the skies”, so we decided to create a new map system and implement flying mounts that allow you to fly freely in the sky. This meant that we had to develop the new system, create maps for it, populate those maps with story quests and monsters, and make them vast enough to accommodate the next few years of updates. This kind of long-term, resource-heavy development doesn’t fit in our regular 3.5-month patch cycles.

⁵⁰ Early access is a system where you can play the game a few days before its official release date. In *FFXIV*, early access is a preorder bonus. It’s also beneficial to the development and operations team because it reduces the amount of congestion on the official release date.

However, after implementing flying mounts, while it does feel good to fly in the sky, this eventually becomes *normal*. Flying is only a method of travel, after all. Using flying mounts to explore and discover things in a new way is where the fun lies, and part of the significance of an expansion is that we can add to this fun in future patches as well.

On the other hand, from the players' perspective, they're already paying a monthly subscription fee, and now they have to buy the expansion pack on top of that. It's only natural for them to expect "a game's worth of content". Our development team's motto was "A new RPG's worth of content!", but my estimates were too optimistic, and it ended up being an alarming amount of work for them...

Normally I'm very fussy about task and manpower management, and although everything went well up to patch 2.4, there was a period where *ARR*'s "finale" patch 2.5 and *Heavensward* (3.0) were worked on concurrently, and the development priorities were not adjusted. This led to me making a big mistake when managing the development schedule and task volumes for 3.0.

The development team wasn't going to be able to make our estimated release date, and based on what had already been done, it would be difficult to cut the amount of content, resulting in a huge workload for the team. For the players, it meant delaying the release by about one month. (While we hadn't announced a specific date, we *did* say spring, and it ended up being early summer...)

As I said earlier, game development can continue forever, since the possibilities are endless. However, that's only if you have the time and the creators are mentally fit for it. We wanted to push through because this is *FFXIV*'s first expansion, but I can't let it continue the way it is right now. I'm actually writing this column while carefully revising our workflow (I'm seriously reflecting on it...). I'm really sorry to both the development team and the players.

However, we really did create a lot of content, so please play *Heavensward* as though it were a full-fledged RPG!

Heavensward alone has a story campaign with over 50 hours of playtime, the ability to fly freely in the sky with flying mounts, a level cap increase for the current 10 jobs, 3 new jobs, and for the crafters and gatherers, we have a raised level cap, new systems, new recipes, and tons of new abilities!

8 new dungeons, new high-end raids with two difficulty levels, new large-scale PvP maps, and the ability to build house skins and airships with free company crafts! ...*catches my breath* All this for the low, low price of ¥4,104 (tax included)!!!

Go ahead and preorder it right now! (Oh, and for those who haven't played yet, we also have a special package set containing both *A Realm Reborn* and *Heavensward*!)

#38: “Anxiety”

Published in 2015/07/09 issue

When this column is published, *FFXIV*’s first expansion, *Heavensward*, will have just been released (I hope) and everyone will be frolicking around in the game. I’m absolutely certain that people on *FFXIV*-related websites will be shouting “YOSHIDAAAAAAA!”, whether in a good way or a bad way.

What I’m concerned about is login errors and restrictions due to congestion. How will it turn out...? If it’s hard to log in, I’m sure I’ll be doing my best to remedy the situation, so please have mercy *self-protection*. I think the publish date for this column will be right in the middle of the festivities, and I can’t predict what will be going on at the time, so this time I’ll be talking about something unrelated to games (like always).

Whenever I’m walking, taking the train, or in the bath, I’m always daydreaming (this is dangerous). I love creating things, and I also love meeting people that are similar to me. When I see creations where a single idea was able to change how something was seen, I feel a lot of respect for it, and at the same time, frustrated.

Even though *FFXIV* was the first time I’d been a producer, I still secluded myself in development work. I’m not one for socializing, but I did manage to meet several amazing people during these years.

One of them is one of Japan’s representative content creators (according to me), LEVEL-5’s President Akihiro Hino, the father of *Yo-kai Watch*. I first met Hino-san during development for a *Dragon Quest* game, when I was staying at a hotel in Harumi with Yuji Horii for a training camp. It’s already been ten years since then.

After that we greeted each other at events, but that was about it. The turning point was when *FFXIV 1.0* was assigned to me. *1.0* was being bashed left and right at the time, but Hino-san nominated it for best game of the year in an interview: “Even though it has a lot of problems, Square Enix is the only game company in Japan that can create a game world like this, with this level of graphics quality. I respect them.” I had the chance to have a meal with him during the game’s revamping, and he’s been looking after me like a little brother ever since. *laughs*

I’m sure everyone already knows how successful *Yo-kai Watch* was, but what I admire in Hino-san is his unusual passion for games and his work. We often ate together (I’m almost always late. I’m sorry.), and he’d take out his laptop at the restaurant and do his work there. It was a huge laptop, too (although he recently switched to a new one, the same gaming laptop model as mine *laughs*). Whenever he had the time, he’d use his laptop to make quick decisions on issues. Apparently, he wouldn’t have any time to play games otherwise. I can empathize with that.

And he does spend a lot of time playing games—he’s got an incredible playtime in *FFXIV*, and he also plays other popular games to completion. When *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* came out, he was talking about it nonstop... (He even installed mods on the PC version.) I hope we will continue to support each other, both inside and outside of work.

The next person is completely because of my personal interests—one of Japan’s leading artists, and someone I personally consider a god because of his contributions to tokusatsu⁵¹ shows: Director Keita Amemiya. I’ve always loved superhero shows, but in 2005, *GARO* came out and I was absolutely floored by its drama and production values. I’ve been a hardcore *GARO* fan ever since. In fact, I can only keep at my work because every time they announce a new *GARO*, I think “I can’t die until I watch it!” *laughs*

When I was still new to the gaming industry, I did get a chance to come in contact with Amemiya-san’s work. I was in charge of game design and direction for *Dragon Quest: Monster Battle Road*, and we had him play our game. It felt like fate, but I didn’t really have a chance to meet him...

Eight years ago, I met some actors who were doing motion capture⁵² for our games, who had also done stunts and acting for *GARO*. I could have just asked them to let me meet the director, but it felt kind of awkward, so eight years passed without me saying it. (You’re that shy!?)

Recently, I went to go see a stage play, and a few conversations later, I was finally able to meet Director Keita Amemiya in the flesh. Apparently there was a rumour going around in the *GARO* staff that the *FF* producer Yoshida was a huge *GARO* fan...

If I had to describe the greatness of the *GARO* series in one word, it would be “earnestness.” I could feel it from the very first time I watched it: the dedication put into the CG, the self-imposed difficulty of the actors’ movements, and how you couldn’t tell when the actors switched places with the stuntmen, even if you replayed it in slow-motion. They turned the setting into art with incredible passion and skill.

I’m also involved with creating things, but there were so many scenes where I couldn’t figure out how they’d done it. What kind of stage directions did they give here? How did they film this? How did they edit it? The actors were also incredible at portraying the drama. If you haven’t watched it before, please do! (I can vouch for its quality *laughs*)

⁵¹ TL Note: Tokusatsu means “special effects”, and as a genre refers to live-action films or TV shows that make heavy use of them, often for monster movies like *Godzilla* or superhero shows like *Kamen Rider*.

⁵² Motion capture is a way of animating CG characters by having stuntmen or actors perform the actions, and then extracting the movements to create the animations. This is as opposed to the traditional method of creating the animations by hand. Whenever I watch the mo-cap actors, I can’t help but think they’re superhumans...

Anyway, the creator of this amazing series, Director Amemiya, is a kind man. He's probably strict during filming, but I can really sense his love for his staff, and they seem to see him as a father figure. He also smiles at me when I'm gushing about *GARO* like a little kid. *laughs*

It's thanks to *FFXIV* that I was able to meet people like this, which means that it's also thanks to all of the players who have been supporting us ever since *1.0*. Aside from those two, there's also a game designer I've always looked up to, Yasumi Matsuno, as well as other people from my small assortment of friends that I would like to introduce, but it'll have to wait for another time (because I'm out of space).

I was calm while writing this column, but... is the server congestion going to be okay? *Anxiety*

#39: “4 Hours and 8 Minutes Left”

Published in 2015/07/23 issue

I’m on an airplane again. It’s a 12-hour flight to France. And it’s taking forever. The seats have personal TVs for you to watch movies and variety shows, but the lineup hasn’t changed since my E3 flight the other day, and the variety selection is the same as last *month*. I went to France last month too, so I’ve already watched everything.

Is there a reason why they’ve had the same variety shows for two months...? I wish they would be more considerate of the people who have to fly overseas every month despite hating airplanes. International flights from the same airline always have the same selection, regardless of destination. So if I go overseas every month, then I’m guaranteed to be stuck watching the same shows two months in a row. Is there a hidden reason behind this? Is it because of rights!? Unfortunately, it’s probably because whoever’s in charge of cutting costs at the airline company said “This is all the budget you get for the personal TV lineup! There isn’t enough money for the variety section! Be prepared to show the same things 2 months in a row!” (I think they looked at the average passenger’s travel frequency.)

Speaking of variety shows, I’ve always liked *How do you like Wednesday?*, which began as a late-night program on local Hokkaido TV. The show attracted fans from outside of Hokkaido and began selling DVDs. I lived in Hokkaido at the time, so I would send video tape recordings to my friends in mainland Japan every month. I’m absolutely positive that my mother was suspicious of this monthly video tape exchange (but I digress). The actor Yo Oizumi suddenly rose to fame because of this show, and I actually ran into him before at a soba noodle shop in Sapporo. But to be honest, we aren’t friends or anything (even if I wasn’t honest, we still wouldn’t be friends).

...I went really off-topic there. Anyway, this airline’s TV provides two episodes of *How do you like Wednesday?* each time it updates its lineup. Two 30-minute episodes. This show ran for a long time, and it had many arcs like *Journey on Dice* and *Journey on a Cub*. I don’t think they’re ever going to reach the end if they only air 2 episodes at a time. And think about it: this is a show about a bunch of middle-aged dudes going on a trip. There’s barely any sightseeing involved; it just shows scenes of them driving around on mopeds. And we only get two episodes from the middle of their journey!?

This program was only interesting because we would watch it late at night. Or alternatively, you could buy the DVDs and watch it all at once. When I watch random episodes in the middle, I just feel conflicted afterwards—I want to see the next part, but I have no idea when I’ll be able to. I’d rather buy the DVDs, but if I do that, then I’ll have less things to watch on the next flights. I wonder if they’ll have the next two episodes next month... But still, the variety section only updates every two months. I can’t believe *How do you like Wednesday?* is only progressing two episodes every two months... I was about to write “What’s the point?”, but thinking about it, I guess it doesn’t matter for a variety show. OK, just 1/4 of the length requirement to go. (Don’t mind me.)

I'm a heavy smoker. I know I'm suddenly changing the subject. It really does hurt not being able to smoke on flights. You might not be able to believe it now, but 15 years ago, there was no problem with smoking inside the plane (I just remembered that). Thinking back, I feel like a lot of people in that cramped aircraft were smoking. It was so bad that you couldn't see clearly (I'm exaggerating), and it must have been awful for the non-smokers. Smoking was very prevalent in Japan back then, so society didn't oppress smokers like this... *distant look*. This plane needs to hurry up and land so I can escape from the terror and take a good, long smoke. I looked at the flight information on the TV just now, and it's still 4 hours and 27 minutes before we reach Paris... *despair*

Baby boomers like me, who can't forget the days when we were allowed to smoke, occasionally try to smoke in the airplane's lavatory, causing a big ruckus. I think it happens about once a year (based on online news). When that happens, the fire alarm or smoke detector goes off, and the plane has to return to the airport. It tends to happen on international flights. I don't know if it's because they're drunk, but it's embarrassing as a fellow smoker, and even worse if it's also a Japanese person. However, while I was writing this, I suddenly remembered something that has always confused me, so I went to go take a photo with my iPhone. (Right now!?) Look at this!⁵³



(Photo by: Naoki Yoshida)

⁵³ When this manuscript was written, it was already 1 day past the deadline, and I realized that I hadn't confirmed with Famitsu in advance if I was allowed to use photos in my column. I was sure that Kikuchi-san (the editor in charge) would take care of it somehow, or rather, I really hoped that he would do it for me. I'm sorry. *Politely passed the buck*

I don't know if I'm allowed to publish this (Oi!), but this is on the inside of the plane's lavatory door. On the right, we have a huge "No Smoking" sign. But the icon on the left looks like an ashtray! What!? Why is there an ashtray when smoking is prohibited!? I ponder this every single time. (For what it's worth, this airplane is a recent model that was built after all airplanes became non-smoking.)

When I push the bottom part of this button, the main part pops out, revealing a hollow area which could isolate a cigarette from oxygen, making it perfect for extinguishing them. This is the only place where I've seen this mysterious contraption resembling a simplified ashtray. Of course, I've never used it before. And it might not even be an ashtray.⁵⁴

I want to try it... but I can't. If I did, then I might be the one causing a ruckus as a middle-aged man who was caught smoking in the lavatory because he lost to his desire for knowledge. I guess I'll ask the flight attendant later. But for now, my Häagen-Dazs vanilla ice cream is melting, so I'll be eating this first. (4 hours and 8 minutes left until arrival.)

⁵⁴ After this column was published, I got a lot of responses addressed to me. Apparently, a lot of people had been wondering the same thing. So, I did some research. According to current aviation laws, it is mandatory to have an ashtray inside airplane lavatories. This is because in the event that someone does smoke there, it would be even more disastrous if they didn't have anywhere to extinguish it and instead threw their smouldering cigarette into the garbage, causing a fire. Human nature is fundamentally wicked.

#40: “Different Scenery”

Published in 2015/08/06 issue

FFXIV’s first expansion pack, *Heavensward*, successfully went on sale on June 23rd! Good work to our development team, operations team, PR team, infrastructure team, advertising team, and everyone else. And thank you to all of our players!

This column has already reached #40. I think the topic was supposed to be “the journey from 1.0’s restructuring to *ARR*’s release”, but the expansion pack came out before I could finish...

Since the expansion overtook me, today I’ll be writing about what an expansion pack is. (In other words, I’m being defiant... or perhaps aggressive?)

MMORPG expansion packs are called different things in different regions, but since *FFXIV* is Japanese, we use the Japanese term in all of our official documents. However, all of the terms refer to the same thing. Lately, downloadable content (DLC) has been taking over console games, but the concept of *expansion packs* is a bit different.

DLC is similar to major updates in an MMORPG. It adds new content or maps on top of the existing game system, to extend the amount of playtime you get out of the game. Some DLC is free, some is paid.

DLC is a way of reusing a game or system that has already been sold to extend its lifespan or maintain sales. By adding paid DLC to a system that cost a lot of money to develop, you can increase revenue. (Of course, the developers are only trying to create content that the players will enjoy. This should be obvious, but I wanted to make it clear.)

On the other hand, MMORPG expansion packs differ in scale from DLC (that’s how I define it, at least). *FFXIV* gives 30 days of playtime for free when you purchase the game, but after that you have to pay about ¥1,500 per month to keep playing. This is to cover the development/operations/QA teams’ salaries, as well as server costs⁵⁵, advertising, and so on. In other words, major updates (DLC) are free, because their development costs are included in the subscription fee.⁵⁶

However, *Heavensward* which went on sale on June 23rd is an expansion pack, not a major update. It is sold separately from *A Realm Reborn*⁵⁷, and its content cannot be played without purchasing it. Of course, even if you don’t buy it, you can still keep playing *FFXIV*—you just can’t play

⁵⁵ I think that server maintenance costs are surprisingly not well-known, so I covered them in another column (#43).

⁵⁶ Major updates are often free in F2P or microtransactions-based MMORPGs as well.

⁵⁷ *A Realm Reborn* and *Heavensward* are being sold in a convenient package as well: *FINAL FANTASY XIV Online*. Those who are considering starting the game should check it out!

the new jobs or access the new maps. There is a reason why these can't be covered by the subscription fee like the major updates are.

An MMORPG is a world that is constantly being updated. Aside from maintenance and unexpected downtime, the game world is always open, and players are running around gathering items and fighting powerful enemies 24/7. Even when new content is added in major updates, we have to take the world's *stability* into consideration; that is, we can't make any drastic changes.

The *FFXIV* world of Eorzea is made up of a huge amount of graphical assets. If we were to modify one of the map rendering systems, we'd have to remake *all* of the existing maps. This is what we did when we transitioned from *1.0* to *ARR*: the world was "destroyed" and all of the maps were remade. However, we were only able to convert and transfer everyone's data to *ARR* because the servers were stopped from November 11th, 2012 until August 27th, 2013.

As I mentioned before, once service begins, it's our job to keep the world open perennially. So we normally can't use that method. However, if we focus on maintaining stability, we run into a new problem: the world gets outdated. It'll soon be two years since the launch of *ARR*, but the gaming industry evolves quickly, so it's more like "two years have already passed." It's particularly easy for graphics to feel dated, and MMORPGs want to prevent this from happening.

So, MMORPGs allocate staff to a separate development line to work on long-term changes. These are released all at once in *expansions* during the game's operation. Of course, the main staff are also assigned to expansions, so it's not a *completely* separate team, but we receive help from outside companies too, so it costs a lot more than our regular operations (managing the development lines gets extremely complicated...).

Implementing the ability to fly freely on flying mounts, creating several huge maps, supporting DirectX 11, adding new races and jobs, raising the level cap, and releasing eight new dungeons all at once... these can only be possible in an expansion pack. And then, the next major updates are built on top of this new foundation. However, making these revolutionary changes comes with a ton of extra costs, which is the big reason why many expansion packs have to be purchased separately.

But since we have to charge the players separately for the expansion, we made sure that *Heavensward* would contain more content than a new offline game would. When you start your adventure in Ishgard, try to look for hints of evolutionary changes as you play, and you might notice slightly different scenery from usual (it's evolving slowly, but steadily).

#41: “The Final Ordeal (Or Maybe Not)”

Published in combined 2015/08/20 and 2015/08/27 issue

Ever since taking over *FFXIV*, there are several dates that have become unforgettable to me. One of them is December 3rd, 2010: the day that Square Enix acknowledged that *1.0* was a failure and announced the restructuring of the development and operations team. There’s also August 27th, 2013, the official release date for *A Realm Reborn*, and June 6th, 2015, the release date for *Heavensward*.

There’s another date which may not seem special, but it is one that I will always remember. That date is June 14th, 2013, the start of *ARR*’s beta test phase 3.

The original theme of this column is “what happened between *1.0* and *ARR*.” I’ll be using the next three installments on the final chapter of this journey, covering the eve of *ARR*’s birth until right after official service began. (I don’t know if this column will end after that *laughs*)

From the end of 2012 until June 2013, the *FFXIV* team diligently worked with players all over the world through the alpha test, beta test phase 1, and beta test phase 2 to make the game’s rebirth a reality. I think we did more tests than any other MMORPG (although I didn’t check).

The core development team constructed this test schedule in January 2013. After the alpha test ended, we looked over all of the player feedback, and planned the roadmap until launch. There were several reasons why we were so prudent with the testing.

The biggest reason was that *1.0*’s testing was a failure. I didn’t know until after the restructuring, but from what I could tell, their idea of “testing” was completely different from mine.

Those who participated in *1.0*’s alpha and beta test may still remember what happened. The servers were horribly unstable, your character lagged with every action, and there was no content to play. Many players around the world gave their serious feedback, whether it be criticizing or hopelessly optimistic.

However, none of that feedback was answered, and the game was released basically as-is. Even though they had player tests, nothing was improved and none of the problems were fixed.

Alpha and beta tests are supposed to be a way for the development and operations teams to get player assistance on things they can’t check themselves, like large-scale server stress tests, UI usability, battle load tests, etc. The problems that come up are discussed, and solutions are researched and implemented. The game’s release date is set when its quality has reached the point of being “suitable for an official release.”

However, MMORPGs exist on a global scale, so there is fierce competition within the genre. Even though they should release the game when it's ready, they have to do PR to gather a lot of players, which means that in the majority of cases, the release date has to be decided in advance. Of course, if there are fatal issues with the game, then it can be delayed. But when they've already spent so much money promoting it for the planned release date, it's not hard to imagine why they'd be unwilling to do so.

ARR's tests were also for PR purposes. Our customers had lost most of their trust in us because of the progression from *1.0*'s tests to launch, so for *ARR* we had several rounds of testing. We publicly communicated how we were addressing the player feedback, and the next test round would reflect the changes. Regaining trust between the players and the development team was a major objective of our player tests. In the end, I think that our approach, the test results, and the ensuing word of mouth became the greatest possible PR for our unprecedented "rebuilding of a failed game."

The beta test was split into three main phases. Phase 1 tested the fundamentals, Phase 2 focused on the "cross-hotbar", which is our gamepad mode, and Phase 3 was the largest scale test, encompassing the PlayStation 3 edition and the main story playable up to level 20. In order to carry out this testing schedule while also addressing feedback swiftly, I combined Phase 1 and Phase 2 into one development line, which would prioritize implementing feedback before closing (in other words, this line would be discarded at the end).

Phase 3 had its own development line, and focused on the final optimizations for PlayStation 3, as well as scrapping the UI middleware that had been used until Phase 2, completely replacing it with our original system. This way, we could maximize the quality of Phase 3 and copy over the differences from Phase 1 and 2.

This approach involved a lot of acrobatics, but it was the most effective way to stay on schedule, preserve quality, and address feedback with unknown costs. I salute our developers that managed to get it done, especially our programming team.

And so, our development team made it to June 14th, 2013, the first day of beta phase 3, which would become the greatest climax of *ARR*'s development. At this point in time, I was at E3 2013 for our final PR campaign before launch. On the final night of the event, at 2 a.m. on the 14th (in Japan it was 6 p.m.), I sat at my command station in the Los Angeles hotel, switching between the development team's IRC, the official forums, Twitter, and other relevant websites. It was finally time for the last test to begin.

This was the final ordeal that would decide whether we would be able to do what no one had done before: revive a failed MMORPG. (To be continued.)

#42: “Looking Forward to Old Age”

Published in 2015/09/10 issue

In North America, the home of MMORPGs, the press called *ARR* “a project to revive an MMORPG that failed its launch.” However, the development team, the operations team, and I didn’t really feel like that was happening. We were desperately working towards our final launch, so that we could regain the trust that had been lost after *1.0*.

Summer 2013 passed by at the speed of light. In the final two months, we had beta phase 3 from June 14th – July 15th, followed by the open beta⁵⁸ and early access⁵⁹ leading into the official launch, from August 16th – 27th.

Beta phase 3 was the first one where the PlayStation 3 version was playable. I was at a hotel in Los Angeles when it began at 2 a.m. local time, and the login server was broken for the first four hours due to extreme congestion. Players were waiting in queue to log in.

Phase 3 tested most of *FFXIV*’s current systems. It included the main scenario up to level 20 (unvoiced), free company founding, duty finder load tests, etc. For us, it was truly do-or-die. This would determine whether we would be able to dispel our fears of “Can we really remake this game?”

I communicated with the server team in Japan over our IRC hotline on which datacenters and which worlds were suffering from login issues, as well as what was causing them. At the same time, I spoke with our lead programmer Hideyuki Kasuga in real-time, wrote notices, and had Toshio Murouchi from the community team post them immediately. Murouchi was scouring Twitter at the same time, gathering the participants’ laments in real-time and alerting the development team.

We informed the players of the reason behind the crashes and our estimated recovery times through our website news and the forums. Instead of the usual process where the GMs write the notices and I give my approval, this time I wrote the notices and announcements myself and had the GMs and community teams translate them into their respective languages. It was faster that way.

The development team and QA team had worked in unison on debugging and fixes, so that no major bugs would be seen in-game (although there were naturally some minor issues...). Our new UI engine, which had been implemented in a flash by the work of over 30 programmers, seemed to be working well, too. The players who were able to log in looked like they were enjoying(?) the game intently, so that took a big weight off of our shoulders.

⁵⁸ Open beta is a testing phase where anyone can participate for free. Sometimes there’s a level cap, sometimes there isn’t. While we call it a “test”, from a development and operations point of view, it might as well be the official launch.

⁵⁹ Early access is a special login period for the few days prior to a game’s release date. It’s often an incentive for preordering the game. Honestly, it’s practically the real release date.

People were in such a rush to play the game that most of them didn't see the announcements on Twitter or anywhere else, and they would complain whenever the game crashed. So, we weren't really getting any feedback on the game itself. We were anxious, but on the other hand, maybe it was because they were too engrossed in the game? It was a complicated feeling...

The test opened at 2 a.m. in North America (PST), and 6 p.m. in Japan (JST). Peak time in Japan is generally from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m., but it was a weekend and many people stayed up late on the first day. Murouchi and I didn't take a breather until 8 hours into the test, around 10 a.m. the next morning for me. The game population was starting to cycle as normal, and more people were logging in from North America now that it was morning. The servers continued to operate at peak capacity, but the chaos had quelled, and now we could just monitor the situation from our own rooms.

Even though it'd been a long time since my last full all-nighter (I usually get at least 2 hours of sleep), I was so anxious that I didn't feel sleepy. Instead, I went around looking at the feedback on the beta test forums and checking out the trends on news aggregators and major forums. (Come to think of it, back then, people weren't prone to screaming "YOSHIDAAAAAA!" yet...)

There were three main points of interest in the feedback. First was the battle system, in particular the length of the GCD⁶⁰. Another one was the ease of using the duty finder (cross-server party matchmaking system). Last was UI requests, for which the lead UI artist Hiroshi Minagawa perused the forums, addressing each individual one. Someone had expressed concern that the duty finder's matching algorithm might be "too convenient." We tried to include as many features as we could from other MMORPGs, and we aimed for a game speed that would be comfortable for players new to MMORPGs. But most Japanese MMORPG players had only played games that were localized in Japanese, so many of them were taken aback because their standards were different.

We received a lot of passionate feedback from players who wanted the rebirth to be a success, and I posted many serious replies in the forums. Those conversations are a dear memory to me, and I plan on reading over them again when I get old. *laughs*

Thus, beta phase 3 managed to get off the ground. It continued for about a month while we brought in more participants. At last, the next column will be about the open beta and official launch. I plan on writing candidly from behind the scenes of the mass congestion and chaos. (YOSHIDAAAAAA!)

⁶⁰ GCD stands for Global Cooldown (timer). It's the amount of time where you can't use a skill after performing an action. In beta phase 3, it was 2.5 seconds. For launch, we reduced it to 2.25 seconds, which would further shorten to 2 seconds as you leveled up. When the GCD is too short, the game becomes closer to an action game where you have to input skills more quickly, widening the difference in player skill. *FFXIV* intentionally keeps it longer. Also, the server and client have to stay in sync, so considering global internet infrastructure, it's physically impossible to make it less than 1 second.

#43: “Haha, It’s Just as I Predicted...”

Published in 2015/09/24 issue

The 2nd anniversary of *FFXIV*’s rebirth was on August 27th, 2015! We received many congratulatory gifts and messages from the players, fellow game companies, and the media. Thank you all! I can’t believe it’s already been five years since *1.0*. *touched*

Now that our expansion pack *Heavensward* is on sale, the PR antics have died down a bit. But on August 27th two years ago, every day was spent being chased around by emergency calls⁶¹ and status updates. I’m sure that the players who have been playing since *ARR*’s launch can remember the login wars. My column this time will wrap up the *ARR* saga with that crazy congestion from the perspective of the server teams and the business.

ARR officially launched two years ago on August 27th, 2013, and while we were glad that so many people purchased the game, *FFXIV* servers all around the world were suffering from severe stress. Many server-related errors were cropping up, ranging from login failures to login caps to instance caps.

First off, an MMORPG has several different types of servers. The first one is the authentication server that verifies your ID and password before you can enter the game, also known as a login server. Next we have the lobby server, which is where you select your character to enter the game with, and possibly wait in queue. Then there are the game servers⁶², which are further divided into other categories. *FFXIV* also has info servers that link game servers through information, database servers that store your beloved characters’ data, and countless other types.

To be frank, servers cost a ton of money. Most people probably think they’re expensive because they’re high-spec PCs, and they’re not wrong, but the most expensive aspect is actually a combination of *land cost* and *quantity*.

Using my server examples from before, most of these servers come as a “set”, aside from the login servers. In order to open a new world in *FFXIV*, we need an entire set: lobby server, info server, and all of the game servers. *FFXIV* has 64 worlds in total, meaning 64 server sets. In order to have so many servers, we need to have a physical location to put them, which is where land cost comes into play.

⁶¹ Emergency calls come when a major issue happens that impacts gameplay, like a server going down or a serious hardware fault. They can come at any hour without mercy. The most frequent victim is probably the lead programmer, Kasuga. Next is the server team. If the call comes to me, then it must be a serious problem. In Japanese, the term is “red telephone”, and there are various theories as to its etymology. It could stem from the English term “red alert”, or it could be a remnant of Japan’s pay phone culture...

⁶² *FFXIV* basically has a server for each map. Battles and whatnot are also processed within each map server. We’re making progress on a daily basis, and recently we’ve introduced the concept of map instances that process tasks in parallel.

The servers themselves are indeed high-spec PCs; each one has 40-60 GB of memory and extraordinary CPU capabilities. But since they are computers, we have to make sure they are kept safe. Servers are arranged on secure shelves called *racks*. Each rack can hold a predetermined number of servers, and in the end, we measure in groups of racks rather than groups of servers.

The places where these servers are stored are called *datacenters*. They have strict security, server rooms with powerful air conditioning to protect the servers from heat, and a strong power supply on each floor. Also, the voltage and electricity consumption are determined per floor, and your servers cannot exceed their consumption limits (or else you have to pay fines...).

It is important to know how many floors or how much floor space you're renting in a datacenter building based on the number of server racks you have. It's even more prominent with multi-storey buildings: if we rent one floor for *FFXIV* and use the entire thing, then when we want to add more servers, we have to *expand* to another floor. Even if we only have one server that doesn't fit, it's still an extra rack, even if the rack is mostly empty. And even if we only have one rack on the new floor, an extra floor is an extra floor. This is what I mean by the land cost and quantity combo.

That was a long preface (Huh? The page is already full), but basically, the unbreakable rule of server business is that instead of just skimping on servers because they're expensive, you make your estimates carefully with respect to those costs.

When we remade *FFXIV*, we disposed of all of *1.0*'s server equipment. This was because *ARR*'s server design and configuration was different from *1.0*'s. If we'd decided to save money by using the old hardware, its limitations would hold us back, and the end result would be a poorer gameplay experience for the players.

Also, for *ARR*, we decided to create a datacenter in North America, which was a frequent request ever since the *FFXI* days. It was a challenge to construct Square Enix's first-ever overseas datacenter. (Establishing it alone took a year, and it cost several hundreds of millions of yen.)

So, we used statistics from the alpha and beta tests such as number of participants, average login period, and average login interval to run countless simulations on the number of concurrent players we would have for the "post-release rush" and "post-release average operations", as well as the times that people would log in at. This involves game design, so I worked with our lead programmer, Hideyuki Kasuga, to crunch the numbers over and over, in order to decide on how many worlds and servers we should have...

However, as you could see, our servers were so insufficient that we had to implement login restrictions and suspend sales of the digital edition of the game for about one month. We caused a lot

of inconvenience for our players... And now I'm out of space! (I predicted that I would run out of space in this column. This is infinitely easier to predict than server quantities.)

Next time will be the thrilling conclusion (part 2) of our behind-the-scenes journey to *ARR*. Where did our estimates go wrong? Why are these predictions so hard to make that every online game crashes upon release? I'll bring you the candid answers to these questions!

#44: “Thank You for Your Continuous Support.”

Published in combined 2015/10/8 and 2015/10/15 issue

This “Yoshida Uncensored” column has now reached #44. With this installment, the “original goal” of this column—an insider look at *FFXIV*’s rebirth—will be complete (it ended up taking two years...). Last time I used *ARR* to explain server preparation and costs for MMORPGs and other online games, and I’ll be continuing from there.

We reflected deeply on *1.0*’s shortcomings for *ARR*’s launch. As we were scrambling to complete the remake, we also wanted our customers—who had tried *1.0* and quit because of its poor workmanship—to give *FFXIV* a second chance, so we invited them to join the beta test. The legacy players who did continue to support *FFXIV* through *1.0* were given top priority access to the alpha and beta tests, and they would be able to continue playing through to *ARR* without purchasing the game.

However, the reality was not so ideal. Even in the free alpha and beta tests, the return rate for players who had quit in *1.0* was extremely low. After seeing the numbers, we were prepared to have to regain their trust post-launch, through content and reviews.

When lead programmer Hideyuki Kasuga and I were estimating the numbers for *ARR*’s launch, we ran simulations focusing on the number of participants and applicants for the alpha and beta tests. We estimated how many servers we would need in total, and after all of the world preparations were mostly complete, I went to Germany for gamescom, to do our final PR before launch.

However, on August 21st, 2013, right before early access was to begin, I received a call from Kasuga back in Japan. They’d finished aggregating the data from beta phase 4, and there was an anomaly: most of the quitters who had ignored us up until now had suddenly started playing again.

Kasuga: “The infrastructure team has already run the calculations. At this rate we definitely will not have enough worlds.”

Yoshida: “By how much?”

Kasuga: “It will probably be 1.5 times what we expected, but to be safe, we should assume it’ll jump to almost 2 times our prediction.”

Yoshida: “Really...?”

Calculations are a thing to be feared. It wasn’t just a simple matter of “we have 1.4 times more returners than expected”—more returners means more people spreading information and inviting their friends to play. Social media is king in this era, and in a way, it’s even more influential than the

mass media. Plus, even if the numbers themselves were small, they would have a multiplicative effect, so we had to be very careful about how we used them in our estimates.

To further complicate things, servers themselves are costly and take up space, and increasing the number of servers can't be undone later on. This is because purchased servers can't be returned, and *ARR*'s servers are so high-spec that they can't be reused for other projects. If we made a mistake in our estimates, it'd have a big impact on *FFXIV*'s operating costs. Then we wouldn't be able to keep the game running, and we wouldn't want to force the customers to pay more, either.

Also, I'm sure that many of you have experienced login rushes, congestion, and server crashes when a new online game comes out. It may be natural to wonder "Why didn't they prepare more servers?", but actually, the management already tacitly assumes that a login rush is guaranteed...
spoken candidly

When a new online game begins service, many people flood in to try it out. This is especially true for free games or free open betas, where tons of people go in with that "let's try it out" mentality. However, a certain percentage of these customers who join at the start are sure to stop playing.

In other words, if you prepare enough servers to withstand the opening rush, you're guaranteed to end up with too many later on. Of course, you develop a game with the intent to keep everyone playing, but games are a form of entertainment and people have different tastes, so it's inevitable that some will quit.

Thus, the development and operations team estimate what the average activity will be later on, and focus on trying to spread out the opening rush enough to ride out the server stress. However, as mentioned before, *FFXIV* was a special case, and our estimates were overridden at the last minute.

When Kasuga and the infrastructure team called me, they had already contacted the server vendor and determined the earliest possible timeframe that we could have the servers purchased and delivered. All that remained was the decision and payment.

"What should we do?", asked Kasuga. "How much are we estimating?", asked Yoshida.

Kasuga: "Well, the database will hold somehow, so for the physical servers we're looking at XXXXXXXX." (If I candidly write the real numbers, PR will definitely yell at me)

Yoshida: "OK, order them right away. I'll get the company approval when I come back from Germany. How long will it take to get them running?"

Kasuga: "Even if we work all night, it'll still take three weeks."

Yoshida: “Understood. In the meantime, I’ll decide on login control logistics when we see the numbers.”

Kasuga: “Please do.”

In the end, we continued adding more servers, spending more than what we’d anticipated—but that’s just how the service industry is. Speed is also crucial. We planned to launch *ARR* with 51 worlds, but now we have a total of 64 across all datacenters.

Between the strict login restrictions, character creation restrictions, login errors, suspension of sales of the download version, and the duty finder overloading, we really caused a lot of inconvenience for our customers. *ARR* wasn’t a free game, so we were criticized by people saying “I bought the game but I can’t play at all! This game still sucks!” Over the past two years, we’ve used this incident as motivation to strive to deliver the best updates that we can. If you’re reading this as someone who left the game, we have free login campaigns, and Eorzea will welcome you back with open arms.

Now then, it took nearly two years (with a lot of going off-topic) to tell the behind-the-scenes story of how *FINAL FANTASY XIV* was reborn. What did you think? I’m sure some parts were more interesting than others, but if you’re interested in developing online games, I hope this was at least a bit of use to you.

But in the end, the most important aspect is the trust relationship between the players and the management. Writing this column made me realize yet again that *FFXIV*’s rebirth could not have been possible without it. Thank you for your continued support, and please continue to support us. I have no idea what’s going to happen to this column now. Kikuchi-san from the editing department, what are we going to do? (I’m over the word limit, so...)

(From Kikuchi: Hmm... I want to hear stories from after *ARR* too...)⁶³

⁶³ And so, I continued writing biweekly columns for Weekly Famitsu, and as of June 2016, it’s still going. (Half digressions and half game-related.)

Extra: “Love Letter”

Written for this book – 2016/06/22

There is a monthly magazine about online games called “Famitsu Connect! On” (hereafter shortened to “CO”). Unfortunately it’s suspended now, but this magazine began in July 2006 (on an irregular schedule), and became a regular monthly publication in January 2011.

January 2011 happened to coincide with the period of time after I took over *FFXIV*, so they were following our project from the very beginning.

CO *had* an editor named Koyama-san. He was in charge of planning the *FFXIV* coverage, which involved both writing articles himself and assigning articles to the other writers. He was truly an *FFXIV* reporter. Of course, there were many other charismatic people writing articles about us, such as Mainai-san who was extremely versed in Eorzea’s history and lore, and Bourbon-san who was in charge of writing guides.

Honestly, I used to dislike the press. When I was new to the gaming industry, game magazines were praising many game developers, calling them “creators”. But back then, game development was full of people working constantly without sleep, sipping dirt-like coffee from their blackened coffee mugs as the cigarette butts piled up beside them. I was one of them, and I detested seeing people in the same generation of developers as me being hailed as “game creators”.

“You don’t have to appear in magazines; just do your work already,” was what I thought.

In the late 90s, the world broke out of the economic bubble, but the game development bubble reigned on with a terrifying amount of enthusiasm. Game developers were being called creators, and producers and directors were being featured in all of the game magazines.

Naturally, young game-loving boys would see these and think “One day I’ll make a game and appear in a magazine like that!” And of course, I do think it was only because of these “heroic figures” that the industry had expanded to what it was.

However, for us underlings, the creators featured in the magazines felt *manufactured* by the media. Either that, or they only became like that *because* of the media exposure.

They were all young, and they’d be featured in magazines, go out to eat nice things, drink alcohol, and use up an unbelievable amount of funds despite rarely showing up at the company. It was really messed up (but of course, there were many people who didn’t end up like this).

I remember feeling really sad when I saw my admired seniors changing more and more. That's why I hated the press, and before *FFXIV*, I always declined interview requests because I knew that personality-wise, it was easy for me to get carried away—so I would always leave that role to the producer. But that all changed when I was assigned full authority over *FFXIV*.

You may be thinking, “How could you say all that when you’ve done so many interviews and even hosted live streams?” (and even published a book of columns). But I only made this decision because I wanted more than anything else to convey my gratitude to everyone who supported *1.0*.

Anyway, I figured the best way to repay the favour would be for *FFXIV* to make a big comeback. This was the last stand, so I was going to make use of anything and everything—including my position and personality. This way, even if we failed, the blame would be on me, making it easier on the next person to take over.

However, while I was stuck dealing with the stubborn media, I met CO and Koyama-san, and of course, other reporters that were capable of having an honest discussion. I think my preconceptions about the media were correct in some ways, but wrong in others. Koyama-san and the CO *FFXIV* team were the first to genuinely listen to my goals and write sincere articles about us.

Koyama-san spent five years following us to our PR events all over the world, as though he were PR staff himself. Even though his travel schedule was tighter than ours, he still came with us to the ends of the Earth (he's probably the only person who's attended every fan fest and every F.A.T.E.). Whenever the development staff or I were talking to *FFXIV* players, he would cheerfully take our photos and then stay up all night in his hotel room sending the data to Japan to show all of the players.

CO's existence itself was a challenge. In an era where using the internet was as natural as breathing oxygen, a print medium stood no chance when it came to speed. To make things worse, they only covered online games, so from a business perspective they were doomed to fail. Despite that, they still did a 24-page special on *1.0* in every issue, even though the game clearly wasn't attracting many readers. CO documented Eorzea's rapid changes in great detail, and through their pages, the voices of the players reached us.

I once apologized to Koyama-san during *1.0*'s operation: “I'm sorry that an *FF* title ended up in this state of affairs. You always write so many pages about us in every issue, and I'm sorry we don't have the sales to make up for it.”

Koyama-san looked a bit surprised, and then smiled and simply said: “Don't worry, we have faith in you.” Those words gave me so much courage...

I realized that the media were also game-loving kids at heart, who loved both games and the people who make them. In the end, it's up to the developers to decide for themselves how they want

to interpret that passion. Personally, when I take interviews, I know I won't be able to face the media properly unless I remember my gratitude towards the development staff who are slaving away at their desks. I think I misunderstood this for a very long time, but now I've come to know it.

This spring, Koyama-san was finally taken off of their *FFXIV* team. The community team, PR team, and of course myself, were all shocked at the news. We'd all assumed that Koyama-san would be covering *FFXIV* until the day the game shut down. No one could believe that Koyama-san would be the first to move on...

When I told Koyama-san this, he said "I'm the one who's saddest about this!" I wanted to ask him to stay, but he told me about his new determination: "When the transfers were announced, I wondered, why me? But I think my next job will allow me to see *FFXIV* in an even bigger light."

Koyama-san's next challenge was an important role as vice editor-in-chief of "Den Fami Nico Gamer"⁶⁴. Instead of publishing guides and introductions for individual games, it was a new type of media that would discuss the marketplace, genres, global perspectives, changes between now and the past, and speculations about the future.

"I think I'll be able to create opportunities to follow *FFXIV* from a worldwide MMORPG market perspective."

Koyama-san was so cool when he said that.

I received an email from Koyama-san on his last day on the *FFXIV* team, and the following was written at the end:

"I've been an editor for game magazines for 18 years, but *FFXIV* is the only title that has overcome so many twists and turns, using them as motivation to refine itself into a solid game."

Thank you for giving us your utmost praise until the very end. Thank you so much for your five years of *FFXIV* coverage, Koyama-san!

FFXIV is supported from all around the world by our players and the passionate game reporters, which is why we are still in service today. I love all of our players, the media, and of course our development and operations staff.

⁶⁴ TL note: *Den Fami Nico Gamer* is a game news app collaboration between Dengeki, Famitsu, Niconico, 4Gamer, and other Japanese gaming media outlets.

“A Candid Afterword”

Now then, continuing on from the preface, welcome to the afterword. Those of you thinking “Huh? But I read the entire book before coming to the afterword” are a very valuable type of reader these days. Those of you thinking “But I skipped to the afterword before reading the preface” can continue reading. To be honest, there isn’t much difference between them (no one writes anything important in the afterword).

This book contains my columns up to #44, but “Yoshida Uncensored.” is still being published biweekly in Weekly Famitsu. No one has told me to stop yet, so I guess I’ll keep going. If, after reading this book, you find yourself interested for more, please do check out the column in the magazine.

It’s been about two and a half years since I started this column, and just as Japan’s gaming market has been changing, the MMORPG market has been, too. Japan’s gaming market makes big changes through generations and playstyles, and the global MMORPG market has been particularly tough. (Many stories on this subject are in the columns that came after #44.)

For this novelization, I reread all of my past columns, and found that some of the concepts and analyses were already outdated. I wasn’t sure whether to make corrections or not, but in the end, I modified the parts that could be interpreted incorrectly and added supplementary notes. However, I kept the changes to a minimum, so that you could see how much things have changed in just 2.5 years.

Come to think of it, ever since I started this column, I’d often meet people in the gaming industry who would tell me “I read your column in Famitsu!” I was immediately dubious of these people, and I’d question if they were just trying to be polite. But after some indirect probing, they *did* know the things I’d written about, so I guess they did read it to some extent *laughs*. But at the same time, people often said it must be a ghostwriter. Not everyone, but around half. Either because they knew how busy I was, thought that “Yoshida is capable of having one”, noticed inconsistencies in my writing style, or perhaps all of the above... But ghostwriters only existed for famous writers of the past. I don’t think anyone would take a ghostwriting job for a game developer’s personal column. There’s no money to be made there.

Next is the subject of my inclination to jump between writing styles each time. I do base it on the contents of the column, but the real reason is because I enjoy changing up my writing style. (It’s especially noticeable in the post-44 columns. The ones in this book are still fairly consistent.)

Lately I’ve been having to do a lot of management and company-wide work, so I hardly ever get to write anything for the game itself. Of course, we have a talented writing crew, and I meet with them all the time to discuss the story. I also make a lot of corrections to messages, but it’s very rare that I get to announce something with my own words.

I originally entered the gaming industry because I wanted to write game stories. In order to bring my stories to life, I had to gain trust from the people around me first, so I took on other work even if I didn't want to do it. But the harder I worked, the further I drifted from my dream... the world doesn't work the way you want it to. You can interpret the changes in my writing style as my way of acting on my desire to write.

I'm closing in on the end now. At the end of the book, we're including a three-man talk with myself and my coworkers in Business Division 5, Hiroshi Takai and Hiroshi Minagawa, who were also part of the rebuilding of *FFXIV*. There, we discussed the events leading up to the restructuring, which I didn't elaborate on in columns 1 to 4. Please enjoy it as part of this book.

Many people assisted me in writing this biweekly column. One of them is a co-worker of mine, who promptly reviews my last-minute columns, points out my typos, and gives me amazing feedback. My greatest thanks go out to Toshio "Morbol" Murouchi from our community team.

I also thank Nakagawa-san and the rest of the *FFXIV* PR team who handle the discussions with the editorial department. And I thank Assistant Producer Matsuda-san, who manages my schedule and never hides his dissatisfaction, always asking "How long are you going to keep writing that column?" I also thank the Square Enix PR staff for checking my columns to make sure they aren't *too* candid.

The Famitsu editorial department also helped me with this novelization. Thank you Hamamura-san, for pushing to get this published! And thank you to Akihiko Yoshida for drawing a lovely cover illustration on such short notice!

I'd like to give my shout-out to one of my few friends, who always looks after me: LEVEL-5 Representative Director/CEO Akihiro Hino, who's like an older brother to me. Let's drink and talk about games again!

And to Opone Kikuchi-san, who puts up with my last-minute submissions, listens to my unreasonable demands, and put his heart into this book, thank you for your continuous support.

Lastly, I give my heartfelt thanks to the Warriors of Light who play *FINAL FANTASY XIV*, and you for purchasing this book!

If you haven't read the book yet, please do!

If you *have* read the book and even found it interesting, I'll see you in the sequel in around 1.5 years. Assuming it gets published...

Naoki Yoshida
May 2016

Special Program: Secrets Reborn

Yoshida has been writing candidly about his work on *FFXIV* from 1.0 until the *ARR* relaunch in his column. You can get the general idea of how the game was rebuilt from there, but he doesn't give any specifics on the period of time surrounding his inauguration as producer and director. So, to celebrate the publication of this book, we called in Yoshida and two other people that are very familiar with those days: Hiroshi Takai and Hiroshi Minagawa. The suffering and strife of the Square Enix staff and developers, taking place behind the scenes of *FFXIV*'s comeback from ruin... This true story will surpass your wildest imaginations!

Naoki Yoshida – Producer & Director

Hiroshi Takai – Assistant Director

Hiroshi Minagawa – Lead UI Artist

This article uses the following titles to differentiate between *FFXIV* versions:

“FFXIV 1.0” – The original *FFXIV* that ran from September 30th, 2010 until November 11th, 2012.

“FFXIV: ARR” – *A Realm Reborn*, which began service on August 27th, 2013. *FFXIV* currently refers to itself with this name.

“Heavensward” – *FFXIV*'s first expansion pack, which was released on June 23rd, 2015.

Yoshida took part in the creation of Gyrozetter

Before you became FFXIV producer and director, you were working on two other projects. What were they like?

Naoki Yoshida: One of them already made its way into the world: *Chōsoku Henkei Gyrozetter* (*1), an arcade title that also got an anime adaptation. I spoke to Producer Ryutaro Ichimura (*Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies* & *Hoshi no Dragon Quest* producer) about making a card game that parents could play with their kids, along the lines of *Dragon Quest: Monster Battle Road* (*2). He told me not to rely on an existing company IP like *Dragon Quest*, so I proposed “cars” as the theme.

(*1) *Chōsoku Henkei Gyrozetter* was a card game that opened in arcades on June 21st, 2012. It involved both automobile driving and exciting robot battles. The 3DS game *Chōsoku Henkei Gyrozetter: Arubarosu no Tsubasa* was released on June 13th, 2013. The franchise also expanded to comics, anime, toys, etc.

(*2) *Dragon Quest: Monster Battle Road* was an arcade game that launched on June 21st, 2007. Its unique characteristic was the “King’s Blade” in the middle of the cabinet. It was a trading card game where you would build a team of 3 monsters and battle with them. Yoshida was the director and game designer.

Why did you choose cars?

Yoshida: At the time, I thought that a father with a young child might be yearning to drive a sports car. Nowadays, most people drive either fuel-efficient eco-friendly cars or light minivans, but their children are probably more interested in cooler-looking cars. I thought we could use animated robots to show the different appeals of both sports cars and eco-friendly cars, and turn them into a card game for kids that parents could enjoy too.

How far along in the plans did you get?

Yoshida: Back then, we were working on a mock-up for the arcade cabinet and an internal preproduction version of the game, and Ichimura was busily negotiating with various car manufacturers. The first mock-up was completed with the help of Taito, and we were reviewing the preproduction version when talks shifted over to *FFXIV 1.0*.

It must have been painful for you.

Yoshida: Development had been greenlit for the 3DS game *Chōsoku Henkei Gyrozetter: Arubarosu no Tsubasa*, too. It was a joint production with people outside the company that I'd known for a long time, but right after we'd gotten the foundation down, I was assigned to *FFXIV*. I felt really bad about having to bow out because of internal company affairs.

It looks like it was pretty far into development.

Yoshida: The arcade game was still just a rough game design, and I was supposed to be fleshing it out. I consulted with Ichimura, and he assured me that they would take care of the rest, so I should focus on fixing up *FFXIV*.

The new project that would predict Square Enix's future

Tell us about the other project that you were working on at the same time.

Yoshida: The other project was a request from the company for a brand-new title. At the time, we'd prepared an internal alpha version for *Dragon Quest X Online (DQX)* (*3), and *Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies (DQIX)* (*4) had just been completed. Jin Fujisawa (*DQIX* director, *DQX* original director) was about to return to working full-time on *DQX*.

Editor's Note: Yoshida was a chief planner for *Dragon Quest X Online*. He was also the acting director during the period of time when Fujisawa was focusing on *DQ IX*.

Did you think that this would expedite DQX's development?

Yoshida: Yes. However, the company didn't like the idea of having multiple people on one project that were all capable of being directors. I wasn't removed from the project, but I was told that it was "against company policy." *bitter smile* While I was away on a business trip, Yoichi Wada (previous Square Enix president) apparently called in Yosuke Saito (DQX producer), Koji Aoyama (DQX technical director), and Fujisawa, and told them that he wanted me to lead a new project by all possible means...

(*3) *Dragon Quest X Online* is the *Dragon Quest* series' first online installment, which launched on August 2nd, 2012. Its latest expansion pack was released on April 30th, 2015, titled *Inishie no Ryuu no Denshō Online*. The game can be played on Wii, Wii U, PC (Windows), Nintendo 3DS, and smartphones/tablets (via d-game).

How did they respond to that proposal?

Yoshida: The three of them are all kind-hearted people, so they decided to let me go, because I wouldn't get a better opportunity than this. When I got back from my business trip, I was told "That's what was decided, so start working on a new project." *laughs*

(*4) *Dragon Quest IX: Sentinels of the Starry Skies* is a game in the *Dragon Quest* series that was released on July 11th, 2009 for the Nintendo DS. It was the first numbered entry with multiplayer components.

So it was decided while you were away.

Yoshida: I did hear about it beforehand, but I told them, "If it's not an order from the company, I'd rather continue with my current work until it's gone gold." And then while I was on a business trip, they got the project leaders together and turned it into a company order. *laughs*

What a feat of strength *laughs*. Did you invite Takai-san and Minagawa-san to staff this project?

Yoshida: I hadn't worked with Takai-san before. Minagawa-san was on DQX in the initial development period as Technical Design Supervisor, so I had worked with him a bit. I invited him because I'd thought, "I want to do full-fledged game development with him someday!"

Why hadn't you been doing full-fledged game development together?

Yoshida: Back then, the three of us were kind of the "odd ones out" at the company... *bitter smile*

Hiroshi Takai: Yeah *laughs*.

Hiroshi Minagawa: People seemed to be wondering, "What are those guys gonna do next?" *laughs*

Takai: I wonder if they made this staff arrangement to put all of the "stray dogs" in one cage. *laughs*

Yoshida: Anyway, it looked like I'd be able to create something to my tastes, and it was a company order to boot, so I accepted the job. Minagawa-san was still working on *Tactics Ogre: Wheel of Fate* (*5) for the PlayStation Portable at the time, right?

Minagawa: Yes. Actually, the three of us had met before... Back in the height of the PlayStation 3 era, Square Enix hadn't been releasing many HD titles. (*6) Foreign developers had gotten ahead of Japan in various areas, so the company thought we'd be in trouble if we didn't adopt foreign techniques. It just so happened that the three of us were sent to the UK, Stockholm, etc. to observe influential development studios.

(*5) *Tactics Ogre: Wheel of Fate* was released for the PlayStation Portable on November 11th, 2010. It was a remake of the SRPG game *Tactics Ogre* that was released for the NES on October 6th, 1995. Minagawa was also involved in the original game's development.

(*6) HD titles are games with graphics at a resolution of 1280 x 720 pixels or higher.

So instead of wanting to expand their line-up, it was more like an experimental project to see how the future would go.

Yoshida: It did seem like those kinds of talks were going on among the higher-ups.

Takai: From a market perspective, it was going to get ugly soon if we couldn't compete with the West. We had to understand how to compete in foreign markets, and how our competitors were creating their HD games. So, they let the stray dogs out, like "get out there and see." *laughs*

What observations did you report to the company?

Minagawa: They asked for our impressions, and we were saying "They're making steady progress over there" before they hit us with the leading question: "Do you want to try doing it that way?"...

Yoshida: It's already been, what, seven years since then? (2009)

Takai: Indeed.

Did you take them up on that suggestion?

Minagawa: If I had to say, I think with a bit more pressure, I would've said yes. *laughs*

Takai: Yeah, I was like "I... I'll do it". *laughs*

Minagawa: The project I was part of at the time was about to reach a stopping point, and personally, I was excited to work with people I hadn't worked with before on an HD title for a new IP.

A hardcore action game targeting Western markets

In your column, you wrote that the project planning was in progress.

Yoshida: I worked on this project for about a year.

Can you tell us about the project?

Yoshida: When I make a story-centric game, I want the story to be finished first. If you change the plot or add characters in the middle of development, it causes major workload changes, affects the game system, messes up the schedule, and so on...

So you work out the story first.

Yoshida: We were targeting the Western market, so we brought one of the company's well-known writers in to hold a discussion on what kinds of story developments would be best. I thought this would be the first and last opportunity of my life, so I even traveled overseas to gather information. Thinking back on it now, money-wise it was a... Whoops, that was close. *laughs*

Minagawa: You learned your lesson. *laughs*

Yoshida: I think it's great to experience the atmosphere of the region where your game will take place, but I can't say it'll have any correlation to sales numbers. Taking reference photos for textures might be useful, though.

Takai: We also hired someone from that region to do the artwork.

Yoshida: Looking back, we were really enthusiastic about it at the time. We were well aware that we wouldn't be able to compete in the West unless we had a firm grasp on their "aesthetic."

Takai: It's an undeniable fact that we're Japanese, so we're not going to understand the mindsets of people who grew up in North America. That's why we decided to hear from people who lived there.

The difference in lifestyle seems like it would have a great effect on how things are perceived.

Takai: For example, supermarkets in San Francisco are on a completely different scale than Japanese ones. No matter how detailed we make our graphics for minced meat, the fact is that in North America, meat is sold in big blocks. Of course, if we did it that way, then Japanese people wouldn't understand it. So, from the very beginning, we thought we should work together with foreign creators to avoid these kinds of problems.

Yoshida: We also knew that we couldn't base it in the modern-day real world. Having only lived in Japan, there was no way we could really understand things like self-serve gas stations or having a Starbucks on every block. It would be impossible for Japanese people to create a modern or realistic Western game environment. So, we switched gears to a fantasy-based game.

What genre was this game going to be?

Takai: It was similar to *Bloodborne*. (*7)

Yoshida: Yes, that's probably the closest example.

So it was an action game?

Yoshida: Yes. Not an RPG, but a fairly hardcore action game.

Minagawa: If we'd kept going and *Bloodborne* was released first, we'd probably be freaking out right now. *laughs*

Takai: It had the same weapons and guns *laughs*. And it was in Gothic style.

Yoshida: We also had a few sci-fi elements in there. When I first saw *Bloodborne*, I thought, "Where have I seen this before..." *laughs*

Takai: Thinking about it now, I don't think our personal interests were very "FF". *laughs*

***laughs* When did you start discussing the game's direction?**

Minagawa: We discussed it while I was still working on *Tactics Ogre: Wheel of Fate*. We already had a good idea of the game's ambience and lore by then.

Yoshida: It was going to have 5-player multiplayer, where 4 of the players are on the protagonist side. The remaining player takes the PK (player-killer) role. The PKer has to fight the other players 1-on-4, but they have the strongest abilities out of all the characters to make up for it. However, if the PKer died in the game, their character would be deleted and they'd have to start anew. It was a vicious system *wry smile*.

It had asymmetric teams then, like *Evolve* (*8) which you've pointed out before.

Yoshida: It was basically *Bloodborne* plus that system... If we'd kept going, I think we'd still be working on it right now. *laughs*

Minagawa: I really wonder how it would've turned out... *laughs*

Yoshida: I think it would've been a huge failure *forced laugh*. At the time, I was the director and Takai-san was kind of like the manager. But I couldn't help but want to put the work in the hands of the young workers, kind of like a parent wanting their kids to learn and grow. I didn't know how much

(*7) *Bloodborne* is an action RPG for the PlayStation 4, that was released on March 26th, 2015 by Sony Interactive Entertainment. The game was directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki of From Software, who developed games like *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. It takes place in a gothic fantasy setting, and features exploration of the unknown, high-risk battles, and unique online gameplay components.

(*8) *Evolve* is a shooting game that was released on March 5th, 2015, by 2K Games. It features four hunters battling one monster, and players can also play as the monster. The game is available on PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC (Windows).

longer we'd be working, and I felt compelled to train candidates for the next director... And I got into heated arguments with Takai-san because I was entrusting them with too much.

That's surprising...

Takai: After 6-8 months of development, the game was gradually taking shape, but at the same time, the staff were taking longer and longer on trial and error. At first I thought it was fine to just wait and see, but I got impatient watching them; they were taking too long to come up with solutions...

What did you do?

Takai: I said to Yoshida, "You already have the answers [to their problems] in your head, right? Shouldn't you give up on making the youngsters come up with solutions?" And he replied with something like "I know, but still", which just made me even more mad. *laughs*

Yoshida: Takai-san once called me, saying we needed to have a one-on-one chat. *laughs*

They heard about 1.0's issues from online criticism

You heard about 1.0's issues while you were working on the new project. What were your first impressions?

Yoshida: I was browsing the internet as usual, and thought "Wow, this is intense." *FFXI's* (*9) popularity and achievements had an immeasurable impact on the MMORPG industry, so it was only natural to have high hopes for *FFXIV*. I thought the issue was that players were comparing *FFXI*, which was a complete, well-rounded game, to *FFXIV* which was just getting started.

(*9) *FFXI* was the first MMORPG in the *Final Fantasy* series and began service on May 16th, 2002. It was also the first serious console MMORPG, and was a global success, surpassing 500,000 active players. Support for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox 360 versions ended in March 2016. It is currently only playable on PC (Windows).

But it was the opposite of those high hopes.

Yoshida: Every MMORPG gets some degree of complaints at launch, whether they be about server stability or lack of content. When it happened to *1.0*, I only assumed that it was zealous *FFXI* players who had their expectations set too high, but...

Takai: I was the one who first learned the true state of things. A month or two before launch, the company asked me to investigate the game's current progress, and through that investigation I found out that the game was in shambles...

You understood the severity of the situation.

Takai: I told the company that “the PC version is barely functional, but there’s no way the PlayStation 3 version is going to be OK like this”, because I thought that there was still plenty of time before launch. As a result, 1.0 was released, and sure enough, the online reception was scathing. The complaints from players were piling up and it turned into an all-out riot.

What did you think during the original investigation?

Takai: The alpha and beta tests had been poorly received, but like Yoshida, I too thought that people were just comparing it to *FFXI*. When I did the investigation, I immediately realized that this was not the case. I started by playing the game from a player’s perspective, listing out the issues in an Excel sheet, but they just kept on coming.

I see...

Takai: I honestly didn’t think they were going to release it like that *bitter laugh*. The fact that they forcefully went through with the launch was a shock. I’m a designer, so I consulted with my other fellow designers, and we all came to the conclusion that the PlayStation 3 version was going to be troublesome. Despite that, the company never made the decision to cancel the PlayStation 3 development. I thought it was going to be really rough.

Minagawa-san, when did you begin your investigation into 1.0?

Minagawa: My first experience with 1.0 was about 1-2 weeks after launch. At the time, Takai and I were in charge of personnel management for all of the company’s designers, but one day, I was asked if I could check up on 1.0. I said “Sure”, and they suddenly set up a PC at my desk *laughs*. It almost felt like they were forcing it on me.

What did you think...?

Minagawa: I had a really bad feeling about it. At any rate, I figured I’d take a look at it first.

Did you talk to the 1.0 development team?

Minagawa: At first I just played the game from a player’s point of view. By the time I got out of the starting city, I’d already found close to 100 issues... even the game installation step had UI issues.

Even high-spec PCs had difficulties running 1.0, right?

Minagawa: The game as a whole ran slow, and I could feel the stress on the PC no matter what I was doing. The discomfort reminded me of early PC games. I was very surprised when I stepped into the game world after creating a character.

They began by uncovering the issues, since Yoshida hadn't received an official request

Was Yoshida-san informed in advance that the two of you were looking into 1.0?

Yoshida: Right before they were given PCs to use for 1.0, Hiromichi Tanaka (1.0 ex-producer) sent me an email, which said "We're in an extreme crisis; please let us borrow Takai and Minagawa for 3 months." Since the company was in trouble, I told him I would arrange for their schedules to be adjusted.

In addition to Tanaka-san, the company asked you for help, too.

Yoshida: I was leading a new project, and this was right before Minagawa-san was to join our team, so I had no choice but to let him go.

Minagawa: It was mid-October when that happened... soon after 1.0's launch.

Yoshida: At the time, (former) President Wada had personally instructed Yoshihisa Hashimoto (former ARR Technical Director) to investigate their client-server technology. Minagawa-san and Takai-san were thrown in as well to check their UI and battle system respectively. These weren't full-time assignments; they were more like a task force.

They hadn't asked you for anything yet, Yoshida...?

Yoshida: No, not really *laughs*. Despite that, on the day that they began hearing the details from the 1.0 staff, the three of them came to me at around 10 p.m. that night...

Minagawa: Hashimoto-san's face was really stiff *awkward laugh*.

Takai: It was an unbelievably bad situation...

Yoshida: The four of us went to a separate room, where Hashimoto-san drew a graph on the whiteboard and suggested that they go over the problems that they'd discovered that day. I hadn't received any official request for help, so I just stared at the board in awe and answered their questions on how to handle each item from a director and MMORPG player's perspective.

So you gradually got a grasp on the situation.

Yoshida: I still remember at around 3 days into the investigation, Minagawa-san said “There’s nothing that a single person can do about this, so I want to go back to our own project.” *bitter laugh*

Did you think you were going to get dragged into it?

Yoshida: No, if I were going to join in, it would have to be part of a concentrated effort. There was no point in charging into a losing battle by myself...

Minagawa: Even if he came along for a little while, he wouldn’t be able to do anything about that situation.

Yoshida: Minagawa-san said that “if they were looking for a solution, they weren’t going to get it by just sending one or two people in to investigate.”

Takai: We were considering reporting the situation to the company and having them decide whether to continue with 1.0. We made Yoshida decide whether or not to actually tell them that. After a while, he came back with a pale face. We were afraid something had happened, and it turned out that they were already working on things like new maps.

The ship had already set sail...

Takai: When I asked, “Does that mean they can’t cancel the game now?”, Yoshida looked down and said “It would be difficult considering the internal company situation...”

Yoshida: Night after night, I would hold meetings with Takai-san, Minagawa-san, and Hashimoto-san, and before long, 1.0 staff members were showing up too. We discussed the investigations in detail, and when November came, the president and vice president called me in to ask if we could salvage this somehow.

Things were making progress.

Yoshida: Yes. MMORPG development involves an extremely costly financial risk. The company was already taking several measures to counter it, so we couldn’t really call it quits...

We can guess that the development team was going through a lot of hardship.

Yoshida: Indeed. I think they were feeling very cornered. FFXI’s launch was also very rough, but things got better as the game was updated, and I think everyone was blindly believing in the success they’d achieved. Back then, every MMORPG launch was messy like that. However, when *World of Warcraft* (*10) came out, launch standards went up like crazy. I think this caused a gap in experience and knowledge, which led to the chaos we saw in 1.0.

Everything has changed since the FFXI era.

Yoshida: It has. The marketplace, business operations, and development all have different hurdles in place now. I felt that if we didn't rectify this soon, we wouldn't be able to keep going, and I told the company that loud and clear.

(*10) *World of Warcraft* is an MMORPG by Blizzard Entertainment that launched on November 23rd, 2004. It is the most popular MMORPG in the world, with over 100 million registered users. It can be played on PC (Windows/Mac OS).

What was the company's reaction?

Yoshida: "We can do something about the business situation, but it's the development team that has to do something about the game itself, right?" is what it turned into... And as Takai-san said earlier, I went back to them with a pale face. Early the next morning, I was officially asked to "fix *FFXIV*."

But prior to that, you didn't formally touch the game, right?

Yoshida: I had already spoken with many of the developers, but the company hadn't officially asked me to help out, so. *laughs*

Despite that, you were called to the room of judgement at the last minute.

Yoshida: And I yelled at the president and vice president sitting on the other side of the table. *laughs*

That really escalated... Is it possible that the higher-ups had already planned on putting 1.0's future in your hands at that point?

Yoshida: No, I didn't interpret it that way. *bitter smile*

Takai: Unfortunately, it's not such a moving story. *laughs*

Yoshida: I think the trigger for their decision to restructure was that there was still a lot that the development side didn't understand, and the investigation wasn't going the way they wanted it to. On the other hand, it would be cruel to inform the ones working under those circumstances about all of the measures they planned on taking. So the project was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

At first, the higher-ups just wanted to hear your opinion, right?

Yoshida: There was a lot of money involved in *1.0*, so they were probably nervous. They didn't know who to believe, so they likely wanted to get an outsider's perspective. They're lucky I didn't take that day off... *laughs*

He became the producer because Takai said “He can do it”

When was it officially decided that Yoshida would be producer and director?

Yoshida: December 1st, 2010. Personally, I thought that Hiromichi-san was going to stay as producer. There was talk about asking Ichimura to do it, but that guy’s talent lies in creating things from scratch. Plus, when the president, him, and I discussed it, he said that he would take on the project that I was leaving behind, so *Chōsoku Henkei Gyrozetter* went on under his care. I’m still grateful to Ichimura for backing me up.

It was difficult to select a producer, right?

Yoshida: The new development structure had been more or less decided, and it was time to hold a meeting with all of the staff. However, up until the night before, we were still trying to figure out: “What do we do about the producer?” And then, *this guy* *points at Takai* went and... *laughs*

Takai: I was all, “He can do it! He can do it!” *laughs* Regardless of whether the game was going to be remade or fixed up, someone had to be the leader, and I nominated Yoshida. I’d only known him for a few years, but from working with him for a year on our previous project, I knew that he was capable of making quick, courageous decisions. Of course, I *didn’t* want to be producer, so I said “Let’s just go with Yoshida, he can do it!” Thinking about it now, I can’t deny shoving it onto him. *laughs*

Minagawa: *laughs* While I said “I think making him both producer and director is too much.”

Yoshida: Takai-san said “I think Naoki Yoshida would be good” so suddenly that I instinctively replied with “What!?” *laughs* And then Hashimoto-san said “Actually, I was thinking the same thing”... *bitter smile*

What did you say to that, Yoshida-san?

Yoshida: I rebuked them, saying “I think you guys are underestimating the work of a producer”, and even the quiet Minagawa-san spoke up for me and said “I really don’t think he should do both. Do you have any idea how much work you’re trying to push on him?” I had observed Ichimura, a real producer, in his work, and didn’t believe that I would be capable of doing that alongside creating a game.

Minagawa: I think it could’ve been possible if the situation hadn’t deteriorated so much... After that, Yoshida himself said that the situation might make it advantageous to hold both roles.

Yoshida: Then, Takai-san said “What we need right now isn’t a producer. Yoshida-san has been making all of the decisions for the past two months. He’s the one who gave us all of our instructions. We don’t need anything more than that right now, so it’s best if we just have him. Yoshida-san is also capable of managing costs, so that works out too. But right now, he just needs to tell us what to do.”

Those are convincing words.

Yoshida: And then Hashimoto-san said “We don’t have time for Yoshida-san to explain every little situation to another producer and get his approval on everything. Either way all we can do is follow what Yoshida-san wants to do, so it’d be a waste of time!”...

That’s intense...

Yoshida: When I heard that, I was a bit touched that he thought that way. And then even Wada-san said “Actually, I think so too.” Come on... *laughs* But Minagawa-san was hesitant until the end, saying “I’m still not sure if we should make him carry the burden alone.” At the meeting the next day, we would announce the restructuring to all of the *FFXIV* staff. Minagawa-san returned with me to the development room, and he told me “I can’t believe they made you do it. Since you got roped into it, I’ll put in my utmost effort, too.” After the all-staff meeting, he set up his own workspace right next to my desk and sat down there. I could tell that he was concerned about me. It would certainly be faster and easier to have one person decide everything... and that was really the only reason why I was chosen as producer.

Takai: I thought it was going to be really annoying if we did get a producer halfway through. We weren’t talking about dream scenarios. *laughs*

Minagawa: Especially on the development side. *laughs*

Takai-san, did you feel bad for Yoshida-san when he was assigned producer and director?

Takai: Yeah. Even if Yoshida wanted to be producer, the reality was that he had to be director, too... but it all went as I’d hoped. *laughs*

Yoshida: Takai-san is really a bad guy. *bitter smile*

And so, Yoshida became producer and director. The details of how *ARR* came to be while *1.0* continued operations are spelled out in his column. However, there is still one more thing we want to know: What were his interactions like with Hiromichi Tanaka, the former *FFXIV 1.0* producer? We’d like to conclude this program with this anecdote.

Hiromichi Tanaka continues to be a “senior that takes care of him”

What did you talk about with Hiromichi Tanaka-san after you were assigned producer and director?

Yoshida: At the time, no one had asked me to work on the game, so I didn’t have a single opportunity to talk to Hiromichi-san directly about *1.0* until after the company had passed the restructuring decision.

Even though you were already involved, your position hadn't been decided yet.

Yoshida: So long as no one had requested my assistance, there was no reason to talk to him. Plus, I was only looking for objective information, and I felt that talking to Hiromichi-san would make it harder to make objective decisions. Both of our comments were published when the restructuring was announced, and a few days later, we went out to eat together.

What did you talk about?

Yoshida: Before I joined Square Enix, Hiromichi-san had helped me out a lot with a game I was working on. We hadn't talked in quite a while, and I apologized for the situation. I felt like I had returned his favour with spite. After that, we talked about why *1.0* turned out the way that it did. We talked about the objectively bad parts of the game, how Hiromichi-san felt about Square Enix at the time, and other various topics.

What did Tanaka-san say?

Yoshida: We talked about a lot of things, but sorry, it's private between us two. However, Hiromichi-san was concerned about us all the way until leaving the company, and he was always very kind to me. At Tokyo Game Show 2013 after *ARR* had released, Hiromichi-san came straight to the *FFXIV* booth before the event opened and praised me on how far I'd come, with a huge smile on his face. We had our photo taken together in front of the booth. It's a memory I hold dear.

So there were no hard feelings between you.

Yoshida: None at all. Ever since I was young, he was my respected senior that took care of me, and nothing has changed since then.

The “FFXIV Remake” Concept Screenshot from October 14th, 2011



In the initial stage of development, Minagawa created this as a concept for what the final game would look like. It's an image, but it was actually composed with character models and scene data used in 1.0. Minagawa consulted with our graphics engineers to determine what effects would be realistically possible for the remake, setting his goal at a point where “implementation would be precarious, but not impossible.” He said that if you don't cut it close, the final game often ends up looking too safe, only making a weak impression.

According to Takai, “Some people may think this image was an exaggeration, but actually, the current FFXIV engine can recreate something very similar to this. The reason why we don't is because it doesn't match our artistic direction for *Heavensward*.” On that end, *A Realm Reborn*'s artistic direction was Yoshida's concept of bringing out the colours everywhere, resulting in a bright, vivid game screen. On the other hand, *Heavensward*'s artistic direction was darker, to match the European fantasy atmosphere. We added more contrast to the graphics—the bright parts were bright, while the dark parts were notably darker.