A Foray into Final Fantasy XIV

By Sovann Hyde

From 1973's Empire to the present's innumerous multiplayer titles such as League of Legends, Among Us, World of Warcraft and Final Fantasy XIV, gaming has been a social activity since its creation. It's a great way to connect with friends and strangers. Final Fantasy XIV is known for its amazing community, even having won "Best Community" at the Golden Joystick Awards 2021.

World of Warcraft, on the other hand, is known for having one of the more toxic communities in gaming. Asmongold, a streamer who predominantly streamed WoW, often talked about how toxic it was. However, he recently switched to FFXIV and was amazed by how supportive and positive the community is. This shows that toxicity is not an inevitability..

On Asmongold's YouTube channel, Asmongold TV, there is a video of him getting into the second expansion of FFXIV, Heavensward. Magitek armors line the road to Ishgard, and the cheers of players can be heard as real fans and friends are there to greet and congratulate Asmongold. His stunned face says it all when he sees the mounts and players that have come together to create this event. All he can say are iterations of, "Oh my god." An event of this magnitude may seem like it would be reserved for popular streamers and YouTubers, but it isn't, It's for everyone.

Seth Parmer, a writer for Parallax Media, IGN and the Gamer, recently took the dive into FFXIV. After joining a Free Company, player-operated organizations for newbies and veterans, he got right into the thick of things. After completing A Realm Reborn, Palmer was on his way to the Foundation, which is the first area in the Heavensward expansion.

When he arrived, he was greeted by his friends and FC members. They were congratulating him and cheering his efforts on. Palmers said, "This community is responsible for many heartwarming moments for me personally already, but this may very well be at the top of the list."

"Sprout" is a term for newcomers to FFXIV, but they are not left to fend on their own. They are nourished by other players and the game itself to flourish and become flowers. Questions are encouraged, and players help each other with strategies and tips.

Red Light, who has been playing FFXIV since August 2020, is one of those players that experienced the kindness of others when he first started and then wanted to do the same for other newcomers. When his friends join the game, he does everything he can to help them. Whether that means being an in-game Uber to help them get around to their quests or helping them clear content, he does it all. However, his friends aren't the only ones he helps out.

Light often helps sprouts out and gives them all the assistance he can. In fact, he created a linkshell, a chat group for players who may not be in the same Free Company or in a party, for several sprouts that he met. Red Light said, “Long story short, I found a couple of new players who were just starting out the game and I created a linkshell for them as a way for them to come ask me for help if they ever need it or if they have questions because they can easily use the linkshell to contact me. … Sometimes I’ll be doing a duty and I’ll see the linkshell pop up, ‘Hey Red do you have a second, I need your help with something.’ And I'll be like, ‘Oh yeah sure, give me a second, lemme finish this’ and then I’ll head over and help them anyway I can.”

Light does this because he received the same kind of help when he was first starting out and now wants to pay it forward. “Because I’ve been in their situation, I like to help out the new people because it feels like I’m putting it forward, like someone’s helped me in the past before, and I want to help somebody in the same position, and then hopefully the people that I helped can do the same thing for new people as well,” said Light. This mindset is exactly what makes FFXIV such a welcoming game with an amazing community.

Gamer Soleil Iseterre also assists other players for a similar reason. She has been playing since September 2020 and said, “The 14 community is known for being really nice, especially to new players. And it kind of really touched me when I was a sprout. And so I kind of want to return the favor but also help other new players. … And also, I've met online mentors [veteran players who are supposed to offer help to new players] in the game. And I will just say, ‘They're really cool.’ And I was like, ‘Damn, I want to be like that.’”

A particular experience that stood out to her was when she and her friend Arietta Bellas were farming, or running the same trial repeatedly for loot, for Heavensward mounts. FFXIV has a tool called Party Finder where players can put up that they are looking for parties.

Bellas and Iseterre put up a Party Finder advertisement for the Heavensward farms, but they had just done the Diamond Weapon (Savage) Trial, so their Party Finder was still set to that by accident. The party was already full once they realized, so they apologized and let everyone know. Most left, except one person who stuck around. “He just stayed to help us. And after Ari[etta] got his mount, and he's like, ‘Hey, do you want to keep going? Because I know you haven't got it.’ … He kind of insisted we kept going. And I think later we also invited him to our Discord server and like, he also helped us clear Diamond. So yeah, that was one really interesting encounter. I still have him on my friends [list].”

One of the huge aspects of the game are Job Quests, which unlock skills and become one’s official job instead of just a class. As a new player, Parmer did not realize it worked like this. However, a stranger on Twitter took the time to explain it to him, even inviting Parmer to his Discord server. Parmer said, “That allowed me to learn a bunch of new abilities and become a Dragoon! It was beneficial and something I probably would have gotten frustrated with down the road, but the community proved wonderfully helpful once more.”

However, there is a dark side to the glowing positivity called toxicity. Rabindra Ratan, an associate professor in Media & Information at Michigan State University, defines toxicity as including, “sexual harassment, hate speech, threats of violence, doxing (publicizing others’ private information), spamming, flaming (strong emotional statements meant to elicit negative reactions), griefing (using the game in unintended ways to harass others) and intentionally inhibiting the performance of one’s own team.”

An area that often attracts toxicity are dungeons within massively multiplayer online games. Dungeons are instanced areas where a party of players go into to fight monsters and clear an objective. In WoW, if a new player messes up, they often are targeted by other players. Christopher Saxon, a long time player of MMOs, explains his experience in WoW with new players, “Random [players enter] a dungeon, get a new player that doesn’t know anything, they mess up and cause a wipe, or isn’t doing enough DPS, whatever it may be. What’s the first thing to happen? Instant vote kick initiation.”

This wasn’t an uncommon occurrence for Saxon to see happen; it happened a lot on the server he was on. It was rare for someone to help that newcomer, whether it be by explaining mechanics, how to play or other helpful tips. However, in FFXIV, players love helping each other. “Instead of complaining about me, the other players actually encouraged and helped me learn the game,” said Saxon.

Parmer =had similar experiences. “When the squad wipes, and we have to start a boss fight from the start again, there is never anyone shouting or pointing fingers at another player. Instead, they are giving strategy or words of encouragement to players who felt it was their fault.”

When Iseterre was running a dungeon, she was amazed by a mentor that she met. She said, “He just kind of spit out the mechanics like an encyclopedia, and it was really helpful. I was really impressed.” That mentor needed no prompting to explain the mechanics to people. It was such a smooth experience for Isettere and left such a positive impression on her that she remembers it to this day.

There is also a mentor system where novices can chat within the game, which is designed to help new players. The novice chat is essentially a place for sprouts to get help from veteran players. In theory, it seems like a good system, but it has become a running joke within the FFXIV community about how unhelpful mentors can be.

Oftentimes mentors want to clear content and go fast. On social media, memes about mentors are plentiful. On a Reddit thread, an anonymous user said, “Not to say all mentors are that way of course, because I’ve run into a lot of awesome mentors who were very helpful and actually EAGER to help. But for every mentor like that, you have 10 crappy mentors who just want to do speedruns and get pissed if they have to offer help or guidance.” It is more of a status symbol than an actual title that says they will help. Of course, there are mentors that are amazingly helpful, welcoming and encouraging, but it seems there are more who aren’t.

Light knows about the running joke within the community surrounding mentors and talked a bit about that subject. “These mentors are like a joke or just a status, going, ‘Hey, I'm, I'm supposed to be knowing more than you. You're supposed to be asking me for help.’ And a large majority of the time the mentors are just making a fool of themselves like bad advice or just being bad at the game in some aspects,” Light said.

There is no clear cut reason for why mentors have such a bad reputation. Light has one theory on why many mentors may have stopped trying to help others. He says, “On paper, having the mentor symbol and status is meant to say, ‘I'm here to help, and I'm knowledgeable, and I'm here to be your big brother, big sister.’ But in reality that doesn't always happen.” Players aren’t always receptive to feedback, and it can put off mentors and players who try to help.

Even though mentors are often regarded as a joke within the FFXIV community, there are many mentors who work towards breaking that stigma. They help other players, offering advice, explaining mechanics and anything else they can do. Iseterre said, “For me, I've actually never really come across any bad or rude mentors. I do remember meeting some really helpful mentors.”

Iseterre does agree that it is more of a status symbol, though. She said, “I think generally in a community, it's treated more as a status because the crown looks so cool.” Her issue with the mentor system is that it isn’t always intuitive. “You're supposed to ask this person with a crown for advice. I don't think that's intuitive. I didn't know what those crowns mean. I didn't know they're supposed to be people who can help me.”

The mentor system is not the only aspect of the game that has issues. Iseterre says that stalking is a problem within the game due to how the friends list system works. You can put a user on your blacklist, but Iseterre explained that the list is single-sided—the blacklisted user can still find the player on their own friend list and know where they are and if they’re online. “The thing just basically does nothing,” she said. “There's something messed up about that. I think the community has been kinda complaining and pushing the [developers] to address these problems, but they haven't really done anything about that yet.”

Toxicity is also more prevalent in hardcore content. With tensions running high and people wanting to clear, things can get heated. Light said, “Once you start heading into more hardcore content, that's when the game stops—I want to say—holding your hand, essentially, and starts to really force you to sink or swim in a sense. … But there's also plenty of times when people just flat out leave or they don't say anything. And I'm assuming some feelings are gonna get hurt because of that. It's definitely towards more when you start doing the harder, much harder content; that's your biggest area that's prone to toxicity, negative behavior.”

As with all games, FFXIV isn’t perfect. However, the overall positivity outweighs the negativity and dominates the toxicity. In response to the hardcore content negativity, Light said toxicity is

“very hard to find once you start doing some of the more broader aspects of the game, like the casual content, the main story.”

Even when he does harcore content, Light said he finds more players who try hard to be positive when things do go wrong. “Some really try to stay positive when you're with them if something negative happens and the progression towards the boss isn’t going well—I guess the best case scenario would be for everyone just to politely say, ‘Sorry, we're just going to disband this and try another time.’”

Another aspect of FFXIV that helps foster its amazing community is its development team. It seems intuitive that the developers of a game would care about what they’re creating, but that is not always the case. With FFXIV, it is a different story. Light said, “It's the developers of the game that really influenced the community as well. The [developers] are known for being really receptive and being really interactive with the community and stuff. And I feel like that's ... only just helped the game as a whole.”

Light, like many other players, feels that the game has been shaped around positivity. “The game is designed in such a way that it promotes, for the most part, positivity, the way the player commendation system works. … [The developers] take harassment extremely seriously, and they will act on it, which is really nice to hear. … It's nice to play a game that the developers really discourage negative behavior in such a way. It only promotes positivity, and in the end, it's basically, ‘Don't be a dick,’ and you'll be fine.”

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