

You Were Told to Lose Money By Making Games, and You Actually Did It?

Chapter 47: Operation Save Sekiro

April 10

Inside his apartment, Li Xiang sat anxiously in front of his computer, sweat beading across his forehead.

As he browsed Sekiro's official social media account and community forums, he felt increasingly miserable.

He had followed Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice from the very day it launched.

And the more he looked, the more anxious he became.

As one of the outsourced QA testers who had worked on the game before release, Li Xiang's first impression of Sekiro had been nothing short of disbelief.

He had never seen a game so determined to torment its players.

Its brutal difficulty and seemingly malicious level design were bad enough.

But the game didn't even have a minimap or a quest log.

During testing, they had even been required to use a paper map.

Wasn't that just ridiculous?

Given his usual tastes, if he had been playing purely for fun.... He never would have touched a game like this.

But as testing continued, he gradually discovered something different.

Sekiro was undeniably difficult.

Painfully so.

Yet its difficulty wasn't the mindless kind.

Instead, it felt like an entirely new philosophy of game design.

If players approached it using the habits they had developed from other action games, they would simply be beaten into the ground.

But once they adapted, they would realize that Sekiro's difficulty curve was actually remarkably well-balanced.

In most traditional action games, difficulty was largely a matter of inflated numbers.

Regular enemies encountered while progressing through levels were little more than seasoning.

The punishment for making mistakes against them was minimal.

Unless players were specifically attempting a no-damage challenge, few people cared about taking a hit or two from ordinary enemies.

Sekiro was completely different.

Players had to memorize each enemy's attack patterns, patrol routes, and fighting styles.

Healing Gourds were limited, and every time the player rested at an idol, all defeated enemies respawned.

Anyone who tried to treat regular enemies the same way they did in other games would quickly receive a brutal lesson from Sekiro.

Then there were the game's mechanics.

Although the game was difficult, it also provided players with tools to make things easier.

The key was learning to make proper use of equipment and prosthetic tools.

Take the Chained Ogre, the first major obstacle that stopped many players.

Before reaching him, players would encounter a merchant while exploring.

That merchant provided information about the Flame Vent prosthetic tool.

If players traveled to the Hirata Estate three years in the past, they could obtain a prosthetic capable of producing flames.

The Chained Ogre happened to be extremely vulnerable to fire.

Combined with the game's stealth assassination system, players could remove one of the Ogre's health bars before the fight even truly began.

Then, using the Flame Vent, they could defeat him with relatively little difficulty.

Many bosses throughout the game were designed around similar mechanics.

Gyoubu Oniwa and the Blazing Bull were terrified of firecrackers.

Shield-bearing enemies were weak against the axe prosthetic.

Once players adjusted their way of thinking, the game no longer seemed impossibly difficult.

In fact, the difficulty itself became part of the fun.

Every attempt pushed the boss's health bar just a little lower than before.

Eventually, after enough practice, the player would finally emerge victorious.

The sense of accomplishment was unlike anything Li Xiang had experienced in previous games.

Because Sekiro wasn't about leveling up or grinding statistics.

The journey from failure to success allowed players to experience, to the fullest extent possible, their own personal growth and improvement.

Back during testing, Li Xiang had nearly been driven to a mental breakdown by the game.

Now, he genuinely loved it.

He had even wanted to stay late at the office during the QA period just so he could keep playing.

Morning Star Games, however, had refused because of confidentiality requirements.

"Sekiro doesn't deserve to be judged like this."

"I have to do something for this game."

Looking at the flood of negative reviews online, Li Xiang silently made up his mind.

To him, Sekiro was like an unpolished jade hidden beneath layers of dust.

Only by removing that ordinary outer shell could people discover the masterpiece inside.

The players online were only looking at its dusty exterior.

They had never bothered to dig any deeper.

A game this extraordinary deserved far better reviews and far better sales.

The thought that it might never receive either was simply unforgivable.

With that resolve, Li Xiang opened a group chat.

There weren't many members.

It consisted mostly of fellow employees from the QA company—people like him who genuinely loved games.

"I'm so angry. Sekiro is clearly an amazing game."

"There's nothing we can do. The difficulty is just too high. Most people never make it far enough."

"Exactly. If I hadn't been testing it for work, I probably would've quit around the General fight."

"I wonder if Morning Star Games will even make their money back. It'd be terrible if such a great game ended up bankrupting the studio."

Seeing everyone discussing Sekiro wasn't surprising to Li Xiang.

After all, during the QA testing period, none of them had thought much of the game at first.

In fact, they had spent plenty of time complaining about it.

As testing progressed, however, many of them came to appreciate the game's unique charm.

"How about we help Morning Star? At the very least, Sekiro is the only game we've tested recently that didn't feel like eating garbage."

Li Xiang typed into the group chat.

The moment his message appeared, the group suddenly came alive.

"+1. Personally, I don't enjoy games this difficult, but objectively speaking, there's nothing wrong with Sekiro's quality. Unlike the game we tested last week—the optimization was so terrible that we had to kill every NPC in the city just to get the frame rate up."

"Exactly. Testing games is basically an endless process of eating garbage. Sekiro spared us from more than a month of that, so it deserves our support."

"But how do we help? None of us are big influencers."

Looking at everyone's enthusiastic responses, Li Xiang shared the idea he'd been thinking about.

"I was thinking we could start making strategy guides."

"As far as I can tell, there still aren't any comprehensive guides online. I haven't even seen anyone post the Return ending yet."

"We can make walkthroughs, boss guides, and 100% collection guides."

"If we help players suffer a little less, and if this actually works, maybe we could even start running a content channel together. Being game testers forever isn't exactly a career plan."

After carefully considering his proposal, Li Xiang finished typing.

"I think that's doable."

"We'll have to see how well it works. If we can help Sekiro while also building an audience, we should seriously give it a shot. Honestly, I think we're more knowledgeable than a lot of those strategy-video creators."

The conversation shifted toward future plans, and everyone became visibly interested.

Then someone raised an important concern.

"Making guides isn't hard. There are plenty of cheese strategies for the early bosses."

"But later on—Genichiro, Isshin, Owl... those fights ultimately come down to actual skill."

Li Xiang immediately replied with what he considered the key point.

"So what?"

"By the time players reach those bosses, they won't be able to refund the game anymore."

Everyone in the group froze.

"!!!!"

That... actually makes perfect sense!

Why were ordinary players giving up on Sekiro?

Because they simply couldn't handle it.

They couldn't beat elite enemies.

They couldn't beat bosses.

They kept dying while exploring.

Eventually, their mentality collapsed.

But what about the early-game enemies?

The Generals could have one health bar removed through stealth.

The Chained Ogre could also lose one health bar to a stealth deathblow—and was weak to fire.

Juzou the Drunkard looked intimidating, but if players first cleared out all the surrounding enemies and then recruited the nearby NPC for a two-on-one fight, he became much easier.

The Blazing Bull and Gyoubu Oniwa were both vulnerable to firecrackers.

None of the early elite enemies or bosses were truly that difficult.

As long as players became familiar with them and learned a few tricks, they could get through.

As for later encounters like Lady Butterfly and Genichiro Ashina...

By the time players reached those fights, the refund window would already have expired.

Li Xiang continued explaining his idea.

"Besides, Sekiro is a perfect opportunity for us to get started."

"We all know how good this game really is."

"When players start getting destroyed by Genichiro, Isshin, or the Demon of Hatred, we can upload stylish, high-level gameplay videos showing how those bosses are meant to be fought."

"Even if we don't keep making that kind of content forever, it'd be a great way to attract viewers in the beginning."

It was a win-win situation.

Once the refund period expired, players would only have two choices.

Either quit the game completely, or keep pushing forward.

If they quit, Morning Star Games had already made the sale.

If they persevered, everyone in the group firmly believed those players would eventually discover what made Sekiro such an incredible game.

"Let's do it!"

"My gameplay isn't as good as yours, but I know video editing. Just send me the footage, and I'll make sure the videos are polished."

"I also think Sekiro's story deserves a deep analysis. So much of the lore is told through scattered fragments—we could piece it together into a complete narrative."

"Let's give it our all!"

The entire group was buzzing with excitement.