A vibrant, stylized illustration of a coastal scene from the game Age of Empires Online. In the foreground, a large, tan-colored stone building with a red-tiled roof and classical architectural details like columns and a pediment is visible. To its right, a wooden dock extends into a bright turquoise sea. Several small figures of people are on the dock and near the building. In the background, a hillside is covered with more buildings, some with red roofs, and a few sailboats are visible on the water under a blue sky with soft white clouds.

Age of Empires Online: Radical Transparency Clearly Works

October 2012



kperry@microsoft.com

Radical Transparency

I. Overview

II. Backstory

III. The Problem

IV. The Solution

V. The Details

VI. The Downside

VII. The Exhortation

VIII. Q&A

Overview

Topics today:

- History of a poor game launch
- Community problems that caused
- Adoption of a new strategy
- Results of that strategy

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory**
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

Backstory

Age of Empires Online (AOEO) launched in August 2011.

| Timeline | Daily Active Users | Daily Revenue |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
| August 2011 | ~100k | ~\$85k |
| October 2011 | ~25k | ~\$9k |
| December 2011 | ~15k | ~\$3k |

Why?

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory**
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

Backstory

Age of Empires Online (AOEO) launched in August 2011.

AOEO launched with:

- ☐ Insufficient Content and Missing Features
 - ☐ Causing Daily Active Users decline
- ☐ Poor Business Model
 - ☐ Causing Revenues decline

And therefore acquired:

- ☐ Small Poorly Monetized Player Base

Had to fix the
game!

But that's not
today's story.

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem**
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Problem

- ❑ We built the core of a good game.
 - ❑ But didn't finish it before launch.
- ❑ And built a business model predicated **only** on the sale of very expensive, slow to create content, set at a high price.
 - ❑ Which we didn't have enough of.

All these things were fixable, but needed time. The game is live. All our fixes have to be done in the public eye.

Fixes begin
December 2011

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem**
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Problem

Initial production fixes took from December 2011 to March 2012.

Some interim releases done, but little response from the community.

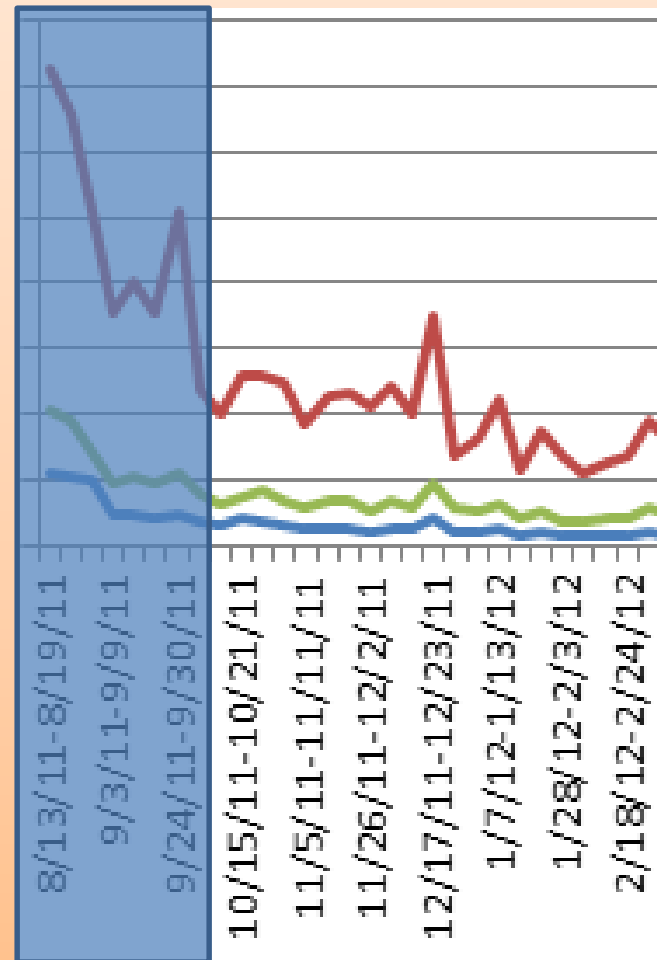
Community management strategy was standard:

- ☐ Maintain
- ☐ Moderate
- ☐ Acknowledge Delay
- ☐ “Soon”

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem**
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Problem



Forums

Social
Media

Engage
ment

83%

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem**
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Problem

We released a **major** update on March 26 2012.

- ☐ New Civ (Celts)
- ☐ New distribution (Steam)
- ☐ Massive changes and bugfixes
- ☐ PC Gamer from 65 to 90
- ☐ Still more to come...

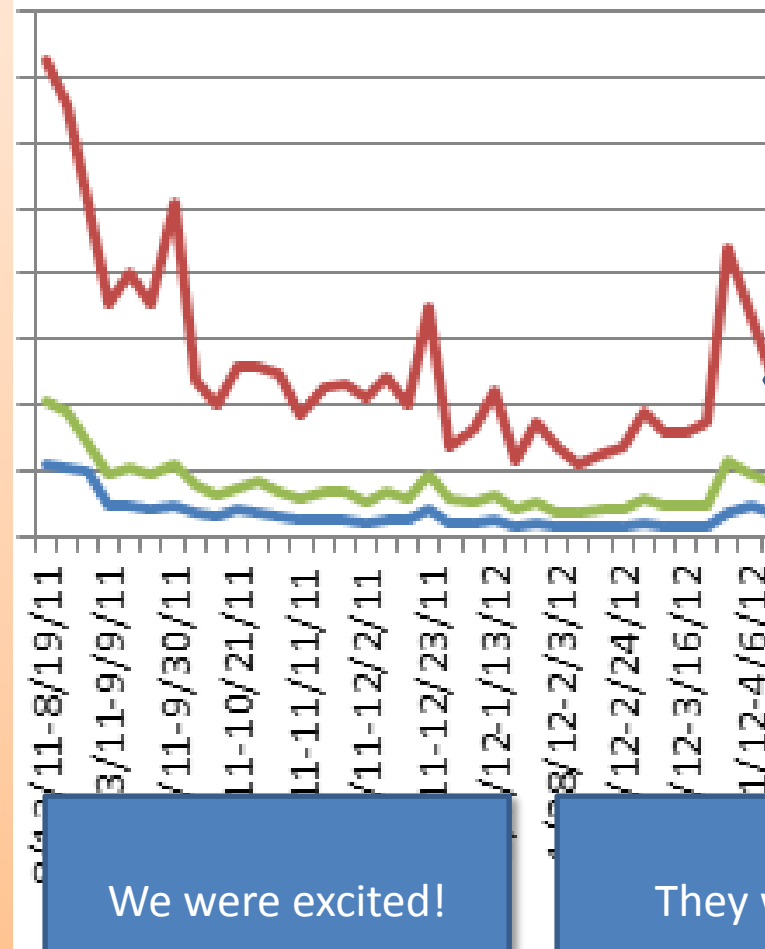
So what happened with the community numbers?

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem**
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Problem



Why?

We were excited!

They weren't.

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution**
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Solution

What can we do?

We still have 3-6 more months of surgery to do, including a full business model shift.

How can we keep the **core audience engaged** while we continue the fixes?

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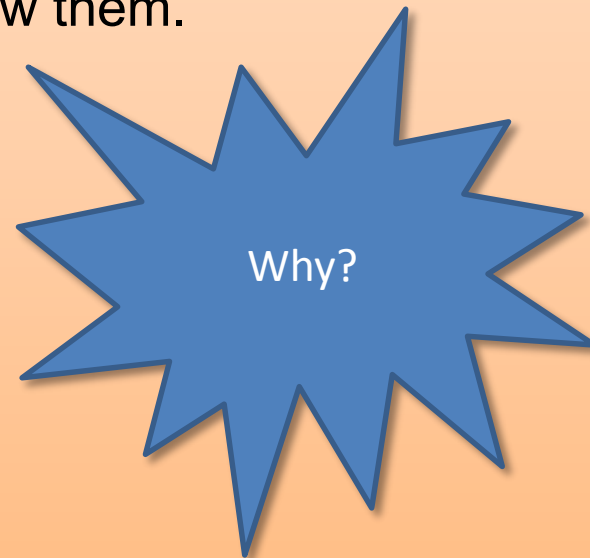
- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution**
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Solution

Let's talk openly with our players.

Tell them what our plans are.

Tell them all the things we know. Even the things we don't know. And tell them that we don't know them.



Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution**
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Solution

By telling them our plans, we engage the players more in the process, and treat them with **respect**.

We are not trying to make friends, but to keep them involved and engaged while the game is still improving and evolving.

How can we keep the core happy until the game gets better?

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution**
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Solution

Our thinking:

What could go right?

- ☐ Core happy users
 - ☐ Make more users
 - ☐ Make more revenue
- ☐ Feedback on possible changes
 - ☐ Less shock of change
 - ☐ Tighter iteration loop

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution**
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Solution

Our thinking:

What could go wrong?

- ☐ Trust issues
 - ☐ Mentions are **promises**
- ☐ Entitlement issues
 - ☐ Some questions we can't answer
- ☐ Marketing/PR
 - ☐ Exclusives

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution**
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Solution

We did it, despite the risks.

It's an experiment, and we are chartered to be experimental. So we took metrics along the way.

Besides, the player base already hated us and was dropping anyway, so not much downside, really.

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

So what exactly did we do?

Initial Blog Post

Named

...we are immediately adopting a new policy: **transparency**. We will tell you our plans, discuss our decisions, and solicit your feedback. Only a very small portion of the player base consists of you who do are dedicated fans, and we want to tell you about the future of this game, and to hear what you say about it.

Set Expectations

Before I actually make any announcements (and I will), let me tell you what that transparency really means. **We cannot tell you things that we do not know**. For example, we cannot say that the Summer Update will be available to you in this blog, because we don't know yet. But we will tell you things as soon as we know them.

Be Specific

However, **we cannot answer every question**. We have limited time in every day, and our first focus must be on running and improving the game. We want to answer more, and we will, but we need to keep it within reasonable limits. Currently, we have developers answering some questions in some threads sometimes, which can be frustrating. To solve that problem, Solicest will be discussing our new Ask a Dev forum activity, starting on April 26th.

Be Human

Also, **we will not tell you everything at once**. We have a plan for releasing both overview and detailed information about changes and upgrades, and we will release the information over time. For example, the Summer Update will likely contain a Tech Tree Overhaul. What precisely those changes are, and why we are making them, will be the subject of a future blog post from the CPG designers, and we won't discuss it any further until then. However, we can let you know when we will release it. Expect a blog post with more information on May 8th.

Seek Feedback

Finally, **this is an experiment**. It is our plan to be one of the most open and transparent online game companies when it comes to communication with our player base. So we may change the way we communicate as we go along. It's helpful for us to hear from you what you like and what you don't like. It's also helpful to know how you would prefer to receive the communication. Do you want lengthy in-depth articles? Forum thread conversations? Videos? Podcasts? Formal interviews? Please let us know...

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

- ☐ Set Expectations
 - ☐ Clear limits
 - ☐ They will not be clear to the players
- ☐ Be Specific
 - ☐ Exact blog dates
 - ☐ Specific about what we don't know
- ☐ Be Human
 - ☐ Honest about what we can't know
 - ☐ Have fun (no soon)
- ☐ Seek feedback
 - ☐ What do they want to know?
 - ☐ How do they want to be informed?

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

This is a whole team effort.

We encourage the game designers to post directly in the forums, in scheduled events as well as freely. (We did give them basic community training first.)

We have game balance testers playing in public challenges with unreleased content to showcase upcoming changes.

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

When we screw up, we admit it. Fast and openly.

When we can't talk about something, we say we can't. No silences.

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

So did it work?

We've had six months of Transparency.

Three major Updates, all with associated announcements and following blog posts.

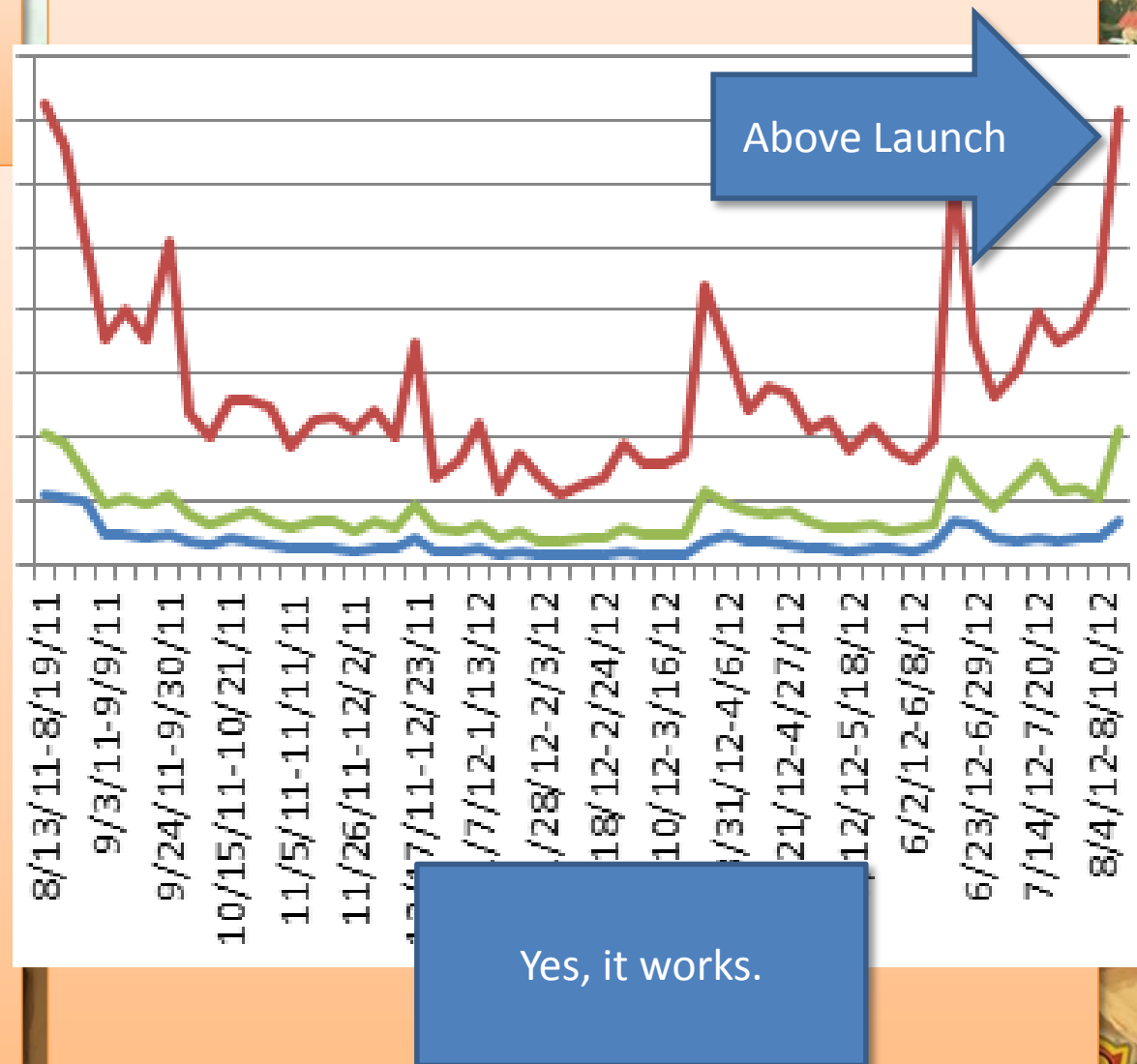
Where are the numbers?

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details



ONLINE

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

Social Media traffic

- ☐ Doubled

Forum engagement

- ☐ Up 33%

Active community members

- ☐ Up 40%

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

Let's be clear.

User numbers are dependent on the quality of the game more than the quality of the community management.

But—

Community management kept the numbers high between updates, during the natural lull. And happy users make more users.

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details**
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Details

For a game as a service, community management is as important as server management.

If the servers are broken, no one **can** play your game.

If the community is broken, no one **will** play your game.

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Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside**
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Downside

It's not all wine and roses.

Aside from getting executive buy-in first (oops), you need to be concerned about the effort required, and the hardcore paradox.

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside**
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Downside

We spend an enormous percentage of our community bandwidth communicating new information.

In the two weeks prior to the Anniversary Update in August, we published **42** blogs.

We have limited resources. So every video blog explaining a new feature is a few hours less of trollstomping, customer service routing, or general moderator engagement in the game and on the forums.

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside**
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A

The Downside

There is also an irritating paradox.

Our hardcore users, who want the information and data more than anyone else, consume that data at an impossibly high rate.

We cannot fill that void, even if transparency were perfect.

Tread carefully.

Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation**
- VIII. Q&A

The Exhortation

Go out and do this thing!

Our community is much happier and more engaged.

Frankly, so are we.

It works, and we have proven that it does for our audience.


Radical Transparency

- I. Overview
- II. Backstory
- III. The Problem
- IV. The Solution
- V. The Details
- VI. The Downside
- VII. The Exhortation
- VIII. Q&A**

Q&A

Any questions?

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A vibrant, isometric illustration of a coastal city in the Age of Empires Online. The scene shows a large stone building with a red-tiled roof in the foreground, a turquoise sea with several sailboats, and a hillside town with red-roofed houses in the background. The sky is blue with white clouds.

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