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Hundreds Of People Are Still Playing SEGA's 'Phantasy Star Online' And You Can Too - Forbes

Jason Evangelho , ContributorI write honest reviews and opinions on the bleeding edge of gaming

16 years ago, if I wasn't slinging VHS rentals at Blockbuster, I was hunkered down on my roommate's couch using the Dreamcast's 56k modem to party up with my fellow Hunters and relieve Dark Falz of his tasty loot for the 30th time in **Phantasy Star Online**. Fortunately, admission into the Hunter's Guild is still open and hundreds of people are still teleporting down to Ragol to slay some Rappies and chase down the perfect piece of equipment.

Phantasy Star Online has aged well, my friends. I've been reliving the addiction all over again. That's thanks to private, custom **Phantasy Star Online** [servers like Ephinea](#).





Phantasy Star Online Blue Burst menu

Native Research

Phantasy Star Online first released on the Sega Dreamcast in December 2000, and it was revolutionary. It took the hack-and-slash, loot-driven appeal of *Diablo* and translated it into something fresh for a new generation of console gamers. The game's visuals were extraordinary for the time, its music beyond memorable. But PSO's mainline addiction was its online component. Using the Dreamcast's built-in 56k modem, players around the globe could party up and slay together, with communication facilitated by Sonic Team's genius implementation of Symbol Chat, a collection of complex customizable symbols used to convey emotions or actions. They penetrated language barriers and preceded the popular emojis we have today.

I dropped at least 150 hours into the original *Phantasy Star Online*, and the mere mention of the game ushers in an intoxicating wave of nostalgia. It was a compelling mix of dungeon crawling, looting, ranged and melee combat, beautiful graphics, and evocative music. Getting from point A to point B in a video game had never been more enjoyable.

Then came *Phantasy Star Online: Episode 1 & 2*, and later a spin-off for GameCube that replaced PSO's real time combat with card battles. In 2004 SEGA released *Blue Burst*, a PC version that

encompassed the first two episodes as well as four new areas.

SEGA released the long-awaited direct sequel, *Phantasy Star Online 2*, in 2012, but it's still isolated to Japan despite diehard fans clamoring for it to be localized. For all intents and purposes, it's been 12 years since a proper *Phantasy Star Online* release in the states. Which in this industry feels like an eternity. (*Phantasy Star Universe* for Xbox and *Phantasy Star Portable* for PSP didn't manage to reproduce Sonic Team's original magic formula.)

Journalistic Pursuit

Imagine my surprise when a pang of nostalgia for PSO led me to [Google](#) [GOOGL +1.23%](#), just to see if playing the Dreamcast version was still a possibility. (It is, but it requires a modded version of the game and an investment, as picking up the required [Broadband Adapter](#) is a pricey proposition.) The surprise kicked in when I stumbled across [Ephinea](#), a private *Phantasy Star Online Blue Burst* PC server.

It showed 99 people online at that very moment. Next to it, a [kill counter](#) showing more than 11 million enemies slain to date.

Ephinea is propped up by a [community of fans](#) looking to recreate the classic PSO:BB experience, striving to keep it pure but injecting it with new content and features. One such feature is Hardcore Mode, which introduces permadeath and is definitely not for the faint of heart. Then there are tweaks like leaderboards, custom commands, multi-region servers, milestone events, custom lobby music, a drop system inherited from PSO2, and a lot more.

I dug in without any hesitation. [Registration is simple](#), then you download the client and install it on your Windows PC (and yep, it works on Windows 10). Within minutes I was back on Pioneer 2, hearing that soothing music and mingling with a group of friendly players more than willing to accommodate a “veteran noob.”



Getting ready to form a party and teleport down to Ragol in PSO Blue Burst

Knowing One's Heart

Ephinea is the creation of programmer and site admin “[Sodaboy](#),” and he’s also responsible for the custom server software powering it. When his father passed away in 2008, he threw himself into the project as a needed distraction. A few months later Tethealla was born, but Sodaboy has poured more than 18 months worth of work into the software. Plus, it’s being used by numerous other private *Phantasy Star Online* servers.

Despite only being active since August 2015, Sodaboy tells me they have thousands of registered accounts, with about 300 active

players from around the world.

“I’d describe Ephinea as Vanilla+,” he told me via the site’s forum.

“It always has the newest features before other servers, but we try to keep them optional, so people can enjoy PSO the way it’s meant to be played.”

There’s even a feature to import your character from other private PSO servers.

Best of all, the service is completely free, and the site refuses to accept donations.

“It’s all out of the staff’s pocket,” he says. “We just want people to have fun.”



Rappies. Rappies everywhere! | Image courtesy of Ephinea member Eistee

I’m definitely having fun again. Perhaps my bias is influenced by

rose-tinted glasses, but much like the Dreamcast itself, *Phantasy Star Online* was ahead of its time. It remains a classic.

Sodaboy and the staff at [Ephinea](#) have been nothing but welcoming and supportive, and they're eager to see the server family expand with new players. In the [community forums](#) you'll find an enthusiastic group of people who, like me, have a strong affinity for Dreamcast games of old, but an even stronger love for the game they're keeping alive.

Come find me on Ragol. I could use a good Ranger by my side.

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