FRICTIONLESS

Build Better Video Games
Attract and Retain Players
Grow Revenue

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INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that the video game industry has entered a new golden age. In 2015, global game revenues were more than $91 billion. The continuing shift to digital distribution and the ever-increasing ubiquity of smartphones and tablets pushed that figure to $100 billion in 2016.

The label "gamer" used to carry a stigma that has long since faded. Everyone's a gamer now. There are as many people on public transit playing games on their phones or tablets as there are people reading. Accessibility and ease of use have thrown the doors wide open.

But golden ages come at a price. Hand in hand with the explosion in video gaming comes technology's ever-present nemesis: the "hedonic treadmill." The thrills of new tech and gaming experiences can wear thin quickly, as people go from "Sweet!" to "Meh." Players will often wait two to three years (or more) in anticipation of an announced or teased sequel to their favorite franchise . . . only to play it for a week or two after its release date and never pick it up again. The vast majority of players quit a game within 30 days.

But the problem isn't simply hedonic adaptation. The deeper question of why players quit and how to retain them is the focus of this book. The issue is not a trivial one, and it's heavily nuanced. It involves brand and community-building. It is strongly affected by social media and gaming influencers. It's an issue concerning marketing and hype. It's human psychology, and much more.

The rub, as it were, is friction.

WAIT . . . WHAT'S "FRICTION?"

To put it simply, a friction is anything that disrupts the ability or willingness of a player to engage with and enjoy a gaming experience. A friction is a launch delay. A friction is an unresponsive controller or an unintuitive user interface. It can be lag or outright disconnections. It can be having to use one user ID or login for the forums and another ID for the game.

Did you set the jump button to B and not A? That minor change can disrupt years of muscle memory. That's friction.

Now, let's be clear: A single point of friction isn't necessarily a deal-breaker (unless it results in an utter forfeiture of player trust). But they all add up, and some frictions are taken more seriously than others.

Of course, you can lose players before the game is even released. Has the development studio been clear about what their game is and what it's about? Is the content release schedule reasonable? Has the studio managed that fine line between teasing information and forthrightly putting it out for players to enjoy, disseminate, and engage with?

Many other obstacles exist to hinder or outright stop gamers from playing, from the first minute you discover a new game on your favorite site, to finding a trusted platform or distributor, to clicking a button to download, to installation.

Then it's time to actually play: the login, the day one patch, regular game updates, micro-transactions, match-making, and other game-related issues that could arise to complicate your players' experience.

In short, there are many moments and situations that have nothing to do with the game or gameplay itself that can get in the way of a gamer buying and playing your game.

Feeling ready to give up? I hope not. There are hundreds of millions of players around the world, looking for great games to play. You just have to make it easy for them to find, play, and fall in love with your game. So let's get to it.

CHAPTER 1: FRICTIONS
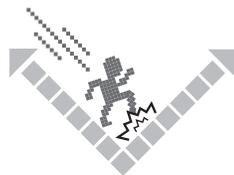
Gamers want open worlds . . . without loading screens. They want immersive, sprawling stories and game-affecting choices . . . but they didn't spend $60 to experience *Cutscene: The Game*. Players want tons of upfront content . . . but by the end of day two, they'd already love for you to be teasing upcoming additional levels and raids, novel weapons and armor, expanded classes and traits, new multiplayer maps and modes, and more. They want customization options and the freedom to spend so they can play however they choose . . . but they roll their eyes or grit their teeth at the inclusion of micro-transactions.

Hey, no one promised that game design was easy!

As I said in the introduction, a friction is anything that disrupts the ability or willingness of a player to engage with and enjoy a gaming experience.

It helps to think about frictions in terms of consequences and outcomes. Nothing motivates like the threat of lost sales, outright angering a well-earned community, or, even worse for developers, obscurity. After years of hard work, you don't want to see a game slip between the cracks.

Given enough sources or intensities of friction, players will quit. And once they're gone, it can be very difficult to get them back. That abandonment can affect not only the specific game but the studio's reputation and future projects for years to come. As if that's not enough to worry about, game studios also need to navigate the more general vicissitudes of fraying economies, shifting technologies, and competing developers and publishers.

WELCOME TO THE GRID

Let's make this easy. Below, I've laid out a straightforward way to conceptualize frictions — where they fall, how they intersect and interact, and what they mean to you. Even more importantly, I'll help you prepare for and manage them as they arise during your development cycles and throughout community-building and engagement, from announcement to launch and beyond.
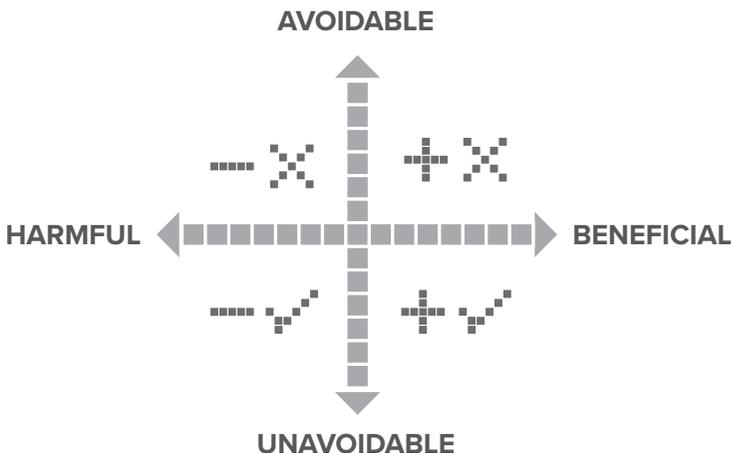
In fact, that's at the core of this book. If you take nothing else away, I hope you can reframe the messy list of threats that keep you up at night, and start to think about where the frictions fit on the grid. This can help you prioritize your obstacles and take action where needed.

You can see that I've divided frictions into quadrants, along two axes. At one end of the X-axis is "harmful" and at the other is "beneficial," while the Y-axis goes from "unavoidable" to "avoidable." I'll clarify something right off the bat: Yes, some points of friction are necessary and beneficial. Stick with me, and you'll understand how and why. Most frictions leech player satisfaction and disrupt immersion, but your job is to recognize the different kinds of frictions, to help you manage and solve them.

Every friction falls into one of the four quadrants, and some into more than one. This makes it easier to visualize and consider potential issues — ones that *might* arise as well as those that absolutely *will* exist.

Avoidably Beneficial

This quadrant title sounds strange, doesn't it? Why would you avoid something that's of benefit? Look below for a moment.

AVOIDABLE

BENEFICIAL
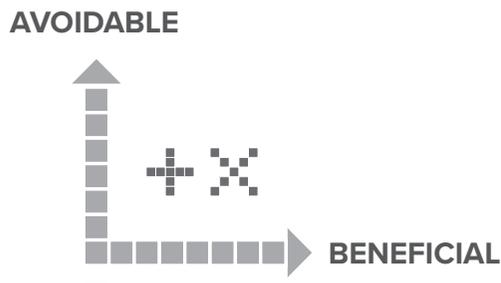
What about difficulty? Difficulty settings and your game's learning curves are frictions, but not necessarily ones that adversely affect players. Consider the *Dark Souls* series. It's a

classic example where a point of friction — difficulty — is one of the cornerstones of the entire play experience. Players love that *Dark Souls* games don't hand-hold. They're tough, and they don't provide much wiggle room for recklessness or distracted play.

But the experience of playing a *Dark Souls* game is fair. Gamers don't feel antagonized. Every player of the series is intimately familiar with the blood-red "YOU DIED" stamped across the screen. And while fans might get frustrated, they get annoyed at themselves and vow to out-think and out-perform. They never feel that the game has cheated or robbed them of their accomplishments.

And there's the challenge: matching expectation with, ultimately, fairness. To go even further, if the studio were to "dumb down" a *Dark Souls* game's difficulty, the series' core players — a large and avid fan base — would complain bitterly and abandon the game entirely, deeming it to have lost its very soul (pun intended). The point is that difficulty is a friction that can benefit your game if you've targeted the right audience.

Indie game *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* is another good example. Here, instead of traditional difficulty as the avoidably beneficial friction, a staple of the gameplay is a wacky and unintuitive control scheme whereby the eponymous cephalopodan father flails about in mundane environments as the player tries to perform simple tasks like getting dressed or picking up objects with his tentacles.

The style of gameplay is radically divergent from that of other games (and again, the control scheme is deliberately odd), but the effects of positively using those frictions are hilarious, not frustrating.

So how do you manage points of friction that are avoidable yet beneficial?

Balance.

In the game examples cited above, difficulty is a carefully managed core element of play. On the other end of the spectrum, unexpected difficulty or a spiky learning curve can feel punishing to players. It's disruptive, it's irritating, and players will dump the game in droves.

Balance. If your game is too hard, too fast, people will rage-quit, feeling like the deck's been stacked against them. If the game's too easy or the learning curve is too predictable, players will grow bored and wander off.

As a dev, you're well aware of the tightrope walk that is balance, so I won't belabor the point.

Unavoidably Beneficial
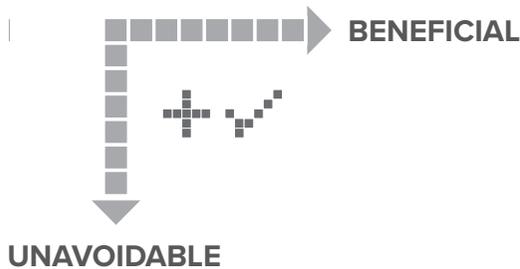
This is an interesting quadrant. No one likes the idea of something being unavoidable, especially when this book is all about those things that affect players to the point of quitting. It's jarring to think that something is inevitable or unchangeable and will affect your player base.

Thankfully, a friction that is unavoidably beneficial might be inevitable or unchangeable, but don't worry: We can put a check mark in the "this is good" column. Smart design and considered incorporation of this category of friction can smooth out a potential rough spot that has a solid payoff for you.

Consider payment. Having to pay for a game is an excellent example of a friction that falls into this quadrant. Your studio has to do more than survive — it has to thrive. It has to be in a stable position to pursue future projects. To do so, however, means that the games you create have to command rewards for the extraordinary efforts, resources, and time involved to produce them. That means that people who look forward to and want your game have to be willing to pay so that the product can exist at all.

Of course, this begs a question, doesn't it: How much is the right amount? A triple-A game usually costs between $50 and $70. Indie titles will range from $1 to $35. Where is the sweet spot between massive player take-up and fair compensation for those who've put their hearts and souls into the game?

This is the essential struggle. There's also normalization and reasonable expectation, but those tie into early announcement and community-building. (Trust me, we'll be covering that and more later.)

"But what about free-to-play?" I hear you asking. Payment comes in many forms, including using ads to extract value from your game or micro-transactions for a more direct pay-in-play impact. The fact is that most players won't pay for your free-to-play game (you did say it was free to play, didn't you?). This means you've got to include payment or ad mechanics in your game without spoiling the fun. The 1 percent who paid won't enjoy the game very much if all the non-paying multiplayer participants fled because of painful paywalls or intrusive ads. The friction has to be there, but it doesn't have to burn.

Other examples include customizing keybinds or adjusting the user interface. They can take some time — which is time diverted from starting and playing the actual game — but the advantage is enormous. Not only are you removing a rigid constraint, but you're promoting a kind of gamer selfhood. For example, when it comes to first-person shooters on PC, I

personally abandon WASD controls for ESDF ones as soon as I can.

Unavoidably beneficial points of friction are, of course, beneficial. But that doesn't mean that gamers necessarily want to come face-to-face with them while playing. They might be aids or advantages for the player, but most people don't want to be bombarded with or interrupted by them. Let them be avoided or chosen at the outset . . . and then left alone.

In other words, the key is to hide or delay frictions that are unavoidably beneficial. Put a mask on it, if you can.

Unavoidably Harmful
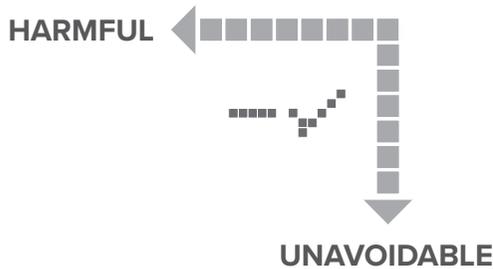
And here it is, the friction quadrant that you might think you have to dread. While these frictions might be unavoidable and unhelpful for both you and your players, there isn't anything to be done about them. They're core components of gaming. It's not world-destroying, and you'd do well to take these off your to-do list, once you recognize there's little to be done about them.

Think about hardware. Your game has to exist, and even if it's a digital-only release, it has to be played. Hardware is an essential component of gaming, but with it come a number of issues, both perceived and real, encompassing everything from controller size and comfort to screen real estate on a mobile device, voice-activated console functions, and many more.

The other side of the hardware friction has to do with exclusivity, such as iOS versus Android, or Nintendo versus Sony versus Microsoft. Whether to be a console exclusive or do a single mobile port requires a lot of deliberation, as well as the need to weigh advantages and disadvantages. Publishers weigh in with development studios, orchestrating release and distribution, often leaving the studio with few choices or little leeway if they want to see their game move forward and receive support and resources.

To dive even further into the weeds of the unavoidably harmful friction quadrant, think about region localization and end-user licence agreements (EULAs). These jurisdictional and legal dictates affect release dates, coverage, forced language support, content controls and regional ratings boards, as well as legal ramifications unique to specific countries.

While these numerous points of friction can't be avoided, with appropriate lead time and smart, proactive design, they might be minimized or mitigated, and expectations can be tempered well in advance.

This seems very Buddhist, perhaps, but you have to accept that there are a number of things that can't be eliminated, balanced, hidden, or changed. Thankfully, most of the above examples are conventional elements of games and gaming, which means that they've been normalized over decades, and players tend to be aware of them and forgiving when they arise. And when you can't do anything about them, learn to take deep breaths and focus on the frictions you *can* fix. In some ways, this quadrant is the reason for the effort you make in every other friction quadrant. Your game will have painful friction baggage, despite your best intentions, so focus on your fixable frictions!

Avoidably Harmful
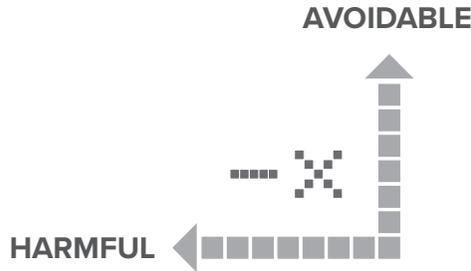
I often jokingly call this section of the matrix "the Derpy Corner." In this quadrant are the real troublemakers — indeed, the potential game- and community-breakers. Here thar be dragons.

These are things that either don't need to be part of a game (but are), or are issues that were not fully considered and/or QA tested. Perhaps an entire level is created to emphasize stealth mechanics, but the boss at the end is a bruiser — a straight-up slug-fest.

What about this seemingly insignificant avoidably harmful point of friction: a specific voice-over or sound effect? In *World of Warcraft*, for instance, there are a few bosses that some players joke about or gnash their teeth over due to the delivery of certain lines. (I should note that, just like enjoying a film that's attained cult-classic status, some players live to hear such lines and remember them fondly, even a decade and more later. Personally, I still grin when I think of Sindragosa's "betraaaaays you" line or Thorim's "in the mountains" line, both of which spawned songs and memes.)

Sometimes an avoidably harmful friction is more subtle but can be easily worked out. For instance, entire modding communities have formed around simplifying a game's menus or making it possible for players to adjust the sizes and styles of a game's UI. In *Doom 3*, it wasn't possible to have a weapon readied and use the flashlight at the same time. This was very deliberately built into the game to force a gameplay choice and

bulwark the game's tone and mood, but one fan (Glen "FrenZon" Murphy) decided to create and make available a mod that allowed for the flashlight to be used simultaneously with various weapons. Appropriately enough, the mod was called Duct Tape.

Since we're on the subject, I'd like to say that companies which allow for and even support modding help establish and grow their communities. It sends a clear message to players: "Let's see what you come up with. We trust you." (I'll be talking about community-building and engagement later on in this book.)

Oh, and one last avoidably harmful friction: unskippable cutscenes. These can be especially frustrating for players who have already watched the cutscene but who are forced to watch it again because they died before reaching a checkpoint or save point. There are also gamers who don't care at all about story. They just want to run 'n' gun.

So, how do you handle these avoidably harmful frictions?

It can be as easy as that: Eliminate them. Alternately, you can open the game to and support player modding. Why not have a menu option to turn off voice-overs or skip cutscenes? Speaking of menus, simplify them or even eliminate them — say, when starting the game. After all, if a player has loaded the game, do they need to be asked if they want to play? Perhaps your game could instead let them access a menu while playing, but not immediately at startup, or have the main menu options be accessed as part of the game itself in a tutorial-style intro.

SOURCES OF FRICTION

Ultimately, friction will originate from one (or more) of three sources: the players, the game, or the developer or publisher.

PLAYER FRICTIONS

How can a player be a point of friction in a gaming experience if we're talking about building communities and retaining them? Quite simply, there are issues of access, including mobility hardships and things like color blindness; psychology, including Skinner box-type motivations and drivers, as well as points of failure; personally impactful or frustrating balance issues; and learning curves that simply can't account for all possible players who will pick up the game.

Many of these will be discussed in more detail in future chapters, especially those that have a direct impact on developers' abilities to plan and adapt their brands to help ease player access and game adaptation.

GAME FRICTIONS

Game frictions are the most common, and can include a lack of female or representative playable characters; uninstructive, unproductive, or outright disruptive load screens and badly timed update prompts; control responsiveness and intuitiveness; graphics fidelity, stutters, bad "cropping," and other graphics-based conflicts; unresolved bugs and play-ending game issues; replayability and long-term play; and user experience (UX) issues, which is an enormous category and almost deserving of its own book.

Game and publisher frictions (below) will be the main focus of future chapters.

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER FRICTIONS

As noted, along with game-specific points of friction, ones that deal with back-end technical issues will be a main concern for you. Some of these fall into the category of unavoidably

harmful (and beneficial), but all of them have to be considered when it comes to a title's launch and maintenance.

Some of the larger points of friction include storage, security, and cloud data; the scheduling and timing of game updates; decisions around content types, such as free versus paid DLC, and expansion content versus an entirely new sequel; understanding and ensuring connectivity and data acceleration; whether the project will support modding and customization; and whether the game will require an always-on component, or an exclusive or specific platform or service use. There's a lot more you can fix in your technology stack than you realize. The key is recognizing that something is having a negative impact and admitting you have the power to fix it.

With knowledge of these various drivers and points of friction for your gamer communities, let's now look to how you can enable player communities to form and mature at the outset, during the announcement and pre-launch phase, at game launch and immediate follow-through, and during the sustain and franchise expansion cycles.

CHAPTER 2: COMMUNITY-BUILDING

If frictions are sticking points that can push players away, think of brand communities as elastic ties that bind. In a world where 84 percent of players will leave a game due to loss of interest, people are less likely to lose interest (or, perhaps more accurately, they'll find reasons to maintain interest) when they're part of a community.

A brand community can be anything from let's-play YouTubers to game modders, FPS clans and MMO guilds, and even fan fiction and fan art enthusiasts. A community can be official or unofficial, sanctioned or under-the-radar. Some are small but zealous while others inspire international conventions. Consider this one example: *StarCraft* + South Korea = the genesis of stadium-packed e-sports, multi-million-dollar franchises, and celebrity and career gamers.

Just to get it out of the way: Building brand communities is about people, not websites or technology. The ever-changing social web has played a huge technological role in allowing

people to find one another and get together more easily and across greater distances of space, culture, and, yes, even time. Think about 21st century *Doctor Who* fans. Many are in their teens, yet the *Doctor Who* series is over 50 years old and retains its old-school, '60s-era sci-fi aesthetic.

What about retro gaming and interest in classic consoles? Consider the ready availability of older titles like *System Shock* 2 and the original *Deus Ex*, and Nintendo's NES Classic Edition. It's become obvious that nostalgia itself can be the glue that binds. And let's face it, during the first decade of the 2000s, when the triple-A design mantra was "better graphics, bigger worlds, more polish," who'd have ever thought that gamers would demand not only the latest CRYENGINE and Unreal Engine games but would also flock to 8- and 16-bit pixel-art games?

But at the heart of all of that, technology enables. It does not, of itself, create. People form communities. Tools and technologies provide the deep desire to connect with fertile ground in which to grow and spread.

Just know this: Sites and technologies I mention and their positions of dominance in the marketplace will change — maybe even between the time I publish this book and the time you carve out to read it. So don't get too hung up on the magical world of specific social media platforms. Tools are tools. People are people. This book is about people and their desire to connect with each other about the things they love, specifically your brand — and how to keep players brand-loyal and satisfied.

It's also about how to use tech to get out of your own way.

PREDICTING COMMUNITY

Sometimes a community will form around a game unexpectedly, in an unpredictably fanatical way. Likewise, players might become excited and engaged by a game but

never really come together around it, at least not in a way that requires a studio's attention or action. Realize that this isn't a terrible thing, depending on your brand and go-to-market strategy. Some games simply don't need a comprehensive or dedicated community, for all sorts of reasons. These will become clear as we go along, and I'll talk about this sort of phenomenon more throughout the book.

For now, be aware of this quick rule of thumb: The depth and expansiveness of a game will be huge factors in whether your game will have or even need a community — at least from an official and proactive studio-side perspective.

This chapter is all about building community into your brand from the start, as long as having a community fits your vision.

GAMER DEMOGRAPHICS

It's likely you're well aware of your potential fan base, but let's run some numbers to put them out there.

When it comes to PC and mobile games and gender, 42 percent of gamers are women and 58 percent are men. Console ownership skews more toward men, with 62 to 64 percent of console owners being male. This is a huge gap. When you take genre and device/platform into consideration, those numbers really bop around. But the main lesson I want to impart is that you ignore female gamers at your peril — both in terms of the communities that form and in damage to your bottom line. And token inclusion isn't the point. Enough said, I hope.

Demography based on age is tricky. It tends to bounce around, based mainly on system or device. Including figures across nine devices, the average male gamer is 27.7 and the average female gamer is 28.7. Average ages for both men and women leaned older for gaming on mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones, and trended younger when it came to

consoles. Nothing terribly surprising about this, right? However, it affects how fan communities coalesce and how gamers share ideas with one another. That, in turn, affects how publishers respond to fan community feedback (if any can be pointed to) and how in tune with their brands the player bases are.

So let's talk a bit about the stats around why players quit. You might scratch your head for months trying to guess the reasons, but with the help of research firm EEDAR, I actually asked them. Over 1,000 of them, to be exact. Players pointed to game-breaking bugs, corrupted saves, and laggy connections as technical reasons they quit. In fact, over 40 percent of players who experienced such issues left the game. While this fact might not seem to matter much in a chapter on community-building and pre-launch frictions, technical game-side issues constitute one of the biggest points of friction for players, resulting in frustration, public outcries and backlash, and putting companies at a harsh disadvantage in trying to address concerns and win back community trust.

These kinds of friction fall into the quadrant of avoidably harmful, a veritable pit of despair for publishers and developers.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

There is an inscription in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. I haven't seen it with my own eyes (and I can't read Greek, anyway) but the internet tells me it reads "Know Thyself." Excellent advice for a sage or philosopher wandering into those ancient precincts, but when it comes to game design and production, a better mantra might be "know your audience." Who are they? And, while it seems like an odd question, why are they?

Knowing who your audience is (or who you want them to be) is a drill-down of gamer demographics. If you want your Android smartphone game to appeal specifically to color-blind

youngsters, you're going really niche. That might seem like an extreme example, but players who find themselves on the fringes of gaming, gamer communities, and life in general are critical people to keep in mind when designing your game and reacting to the realities of play for a launched title versus one that's still in the development stages. After all, there are many people who find refuge in gaming and gaming communities because school, work, and life exclude them. Video gaming is truly a magical universe because it takes all comers. Inclusion and participation are fundamental to the human experience, and few worlds deliver like those discovered in video games.

Still on the fence about fringe players? Well, you'll read a great example of how atypical or under-served gamers can make all the difference in the section "Small Voices Need a Seat at the Table." For now, know this: If fringe or marginalized players and player groups can jump into your game and go to town just as hard and well as those in your anticipated player demographics, you can be certain that the gaming experience of average players, hardcore and casual both, will be well-served by your game.

COMMUNITY AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

Because I'm sort of hardcore about searching out things, I scoured Amazon for key concepts of brand fanaticism and community-building. I stumbled upon an interesting trend: Although several books referenced the term "community-building," the vast majority of them had nothing at all to do with brand marketing or technology. Most dealt exclusively with the traditional idea of building sometimes-literal communities, such as providing guidance for parochial and non-profit organizations. While we think we do important work, it might be a bit of a stretch to compare it to the task of getting people together to help and provide care for one another.

I do feel strongly, though, that the term "community-building" reflects exactly the kind of marketing needed for entertainment brands to thrive at a time when traditional forms of marketing are struggling to motivate customers to take action (or even to take notice). Traditional marketing, at its best, drives a customer to convert a need or a want into a purchase at the cash register.

Creating and nurturing a community is about moving beyond a transaction. It's about getting players, your customers, deeply invested in your brand and making it easy for them to self-recruit as evangelists for your success. Your brand becomes one of the labels with which they choose to define themselves: "I am a father, a network administrator, and an Xbox MVP" or "I am a wife, an accountant, and a hardcore *Halo* fan." "I am pre-med, a skater, and run a site about tanking in *World of Warcraft* raids."

Building a community of fans around your brand not only drives a network effect at the register, but also builds an ecosystem designed to sustain your brand's life well beyond the pre-launch marketing blitz.

I hope to show you several examples, drawn from real-life experiences, of companies who built communities or have tapped into the community effect for their brands and reaped tremendous rewards while saving mountains of cash on their marketing campaigns, to say nothing of the go-forward power of entrenched brand trust.

Fans want to connect with each other. They want to be seen and heard. They want other people to love their favorite products in the same ways they do. They want you to ask them for help. At the very least, they want you to step aside so they can get out there and champion your work.

COMMUNITIES HAVE LONG TAILS

In Chris Anderson's oft-quoted "The Long Tail," we see clear reasons for why community outreach will continue to be such an important factor in marketing new products. It's my observation that new economic mechanisms set in motion by digitization and the internet allow niche products to make up huge chunks of a seller's profit base, where before only the very biggest hits were able to fight for space on store shelves. In a digital world (and a physical world with fewer brick-and-mortar storefronts), products don't have to tend toward the mass market in order to sell. With the help of powerful search tools, consumers are now able to seek out a very particular piece of content, as opposed to settling for whatever pop hit was being marketed to them through expensive advertising and store shelf merchandising.

From a pure product perspective, this means that new or neglected corners of a genre can emerge as viable categories, right along with their attendant audience segments. A mass retail store might only have room in their video game section for the top 50 games at any given time — and even those are ruthlessly purged weekly to make room for The Next Big Seller — but a digital distributor like Steam is able to list even the least-successful or niche video game title in perpetuity, as long as the file exists somewhere. This means the opportunity to sell a product no longer lives only in that slim launch window between release and the time the major retailers decide to stop carrying the item. Certainly, huge launch sales still make up the bulk of video game sales (the "head" of the long tail concept), but increasingly, a longer "virtual shelf life" is making it possible for even the smallest communities to coalesce around off-the-beaten-path franchises.

If we step away from the notion of products for sale, we see another even more powerful community dynamic at work. Vocal communities are now benefiting from the effects of the long tail. Traditional media (radio, TV and print) were very much defined by the high cost of entry and the limitations of time slots

and airwaves. Even in a city with 150 cable channels and four newspapers, there is a limit on the possible variations of content being fed through those conduits. As such, the marketing of a product could reliably depend on "big voices" to pass on the message. Fifteen years ago, the big voices were the only ones that counted and the only ones who could afford to be heard.

The simple user technology behind podcasting and blogging, and the dirt-cheap prices for storage and internet bandwidth, have demolished barriers to entry, laid off the gatekeepers, and allowed pretty much anyone to pay close to nothing to reach pretty much everyone. By spending less than $200 in a year, you gain access to a potential readership or viewership in the millions.

If you've spent any time with user-generated broadcasting (or narrowcasting, as it were), you'll find that a podium and a microphone do not an effective speaker make. There's plenty of junk out there, and many consumers still flock to the centralized big-media options available on television, as well as the "big" blogs and news sites.

But junk or not, the long tail effect is still at work in the world of influential voices. It is now possible for 1,000 or even 100 "medium voices" to consistently deliver their take on the world — and your brand — and for it to reach exactly the base of customers you used to use traditional media to reach. (Speaking of which, Kevin Kelly's essay "1,000 True Fans" makes for some terrific reading on practical audience size versus idealized audience size.)

SMALL VOICES NEED A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Despite all that, this isn't about how crowd- and ad-funded YouTubers and bloggers have crashed the television industrial complex. Old media is still alive and kicking, but it is no longer alone and there are no real barriers keeping the message safely in the hands of the big or "legitimate." The meek haven't yet inherited the Earth, but they are sitting side by side with the

bold. The lamb and the lion are sharing a meal – and it's made of veggie burgers, a young person doing a let's-play on YouTube, and your brand.

With the long tail in full effect, you simply can't rely on funneling your message through a few old-guard journalists anymore. It's too expensive to expand your PR campaign to every single voice out there or try to cater to every market space.

This is really where community-building kicks in. Organically tending to the vibrant community of customers (often hardcore early adopters during the pre-launch announcement phase) will let you participate in the discussion. If you're the type that still likes the sizzle of big media, take note: There are a lot of big stories to be found out there in small media.

Remember up above where I said I had a great example of a special situation and fringe gamer?

Randy Fitzgerald is a 28-year-old avid gamer from Minnesota who goes by the handle N0M4D. He spends most of his free time playing competitive multiplayer games with his gaming clan "H20." When they're not sharpening their skills online, this group of power-users travels the country competing in professional tournaments as a part of Major League Gaming, the videogame industry's answer to the PGA or MLB. Randy hosts a successful Twitch stream, has been featured on dozens of blogs, including the official Xbox community website, and was even interviewed by a local Fox television affiliate.

Randy is one of thousands of hardcore gamers who compete in tournaments every year, but his story is remarkable in two other ways. Randy was born with arthrogryposis, which means he has been a quadriplegic for all of his 28 years. Randy plays video games by using his face and has gone to great lengths to procure customized controllers to allow him to make the most of the hobby he loves.

Randy also got the attention of one of the industry's best-known development studios, Infinity Ward, who programmed a custom mode into their game *Call of Duty 4* specifically for Randy. Named the N0M4D control scheme, it allows players to configure their controller scheme to match their own play needs.

But Infinity Ward didn't put the time and effort into this custom design to tap into a new market. There is no evidence of a sizable population of quadriplegic gamers. Infinity Ward was tapping into their *fans*.

Randy Fitzgerald is, above all else, a person who loves his hobby so much he wouldn't let physical impairment get in the way of it. By developing the N0M4D controller scheme, Infinity Ward was aligning itself with its fans. For many players, especially the hardcore, love of the product knows few bounds. Infinity Ward knew that it is only right to encourage that kind of passion.

Whether driven by shrewd business thinking, genuine camaraderie with their customers, noble philanthropy, or all of the above, the practical (and marketing) benefits cannot be denied. Infinity Ward's good deed was noticed across the industry and even in the mainstream media.

Love your community and it will love you. Fight for them and they'll fight for you. The truth? In a way, there really are no small voices at the table — not when it comes to brand community-building.

FIRST, BUILD COMMUNITY INTO YOUR PRODUCT

I've been a games industry marketer for a decade, but I have to admit something: Planning your product to be deeply social will go much further than any marketing effort. If you want to build a strong community of hardcore leaders and followers, you should inject it into the very DNA of your product. Your game should not just ask to be shared with family and friends, it

should make the customer's experience better by sharing it. The most successful video games in the modern era of the industry provide experiences beyond the screen.

Whether we're talking about a casual-leaning brand like *Just Dance* or an ultra-hardcore gaming franchise like *Call of Duty*, the biggest hits in gaming have all begged the user to share the experience and team up with other people. Massively multiplayer online games hard-code vast, mechanics-entwined player interactions and communities into their games.

Just Dance, while a decent way to spend a quiet Sunday alone, is made a far better game when experienced in the company of friends or family, laughing, teasing, and cheering each other on. (Just make sure your nana doesn't knock over any expensive collectibles on your coffee table . . . .)

Call of Duty is a series known for its story and engaging level design, but it also happens to offer one of the most robust online multiplayer experiences on a console. Playing *Call of Duty* with friends converts it from a set of brilliant scripted moments into constantly unfolding and evolving shared experiences that are shaped as much by the other users as they are by the initial design laid out by the developers. These products are ingenious because they use complex technology — motion-sensing in one case; online multiplayer servers in the other — to send a simple message: "You will have more fun if you encourage your friends to join in."

To make the point time-relevant, let's jump back and look at the list of the top 10 games sold in 2015. You'll see a common trend:

TOP 10 GAMES of 2015

1. Call of Duty: Black Ops III (Xbox One, PS4, 360, PS3, PC)

2. Star Wars Battlefront (Xbox One, PS4, PC)

3. Fallout 4 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

4. Madden NFL 16 (PS4, Xbox One, 360, PS3)

5. NBA 2K16 (PS4, Xbox One, 360, PS3)

6. Grand Theft Auto V (PS4, Xbox One, 360, PS3, PC)

7. Rainbow Six Siege (Xbox One, PS4, PC)

8. Minecraft (360, Xbox One, PS4, PS3)

9. Minecraft: Story Mode (360, Xbox One, PS4, PS3)

10. FIFA 16 (PS4, Xbox One, 360, PS3)

You'll see that the vast majority of those titles tapped into natural community-building features within the games themselves. They created experiences people wanted to share, and that experience improved the more a customer was able to convince other people of their finer qualities.

Not to leave this point hanging: Those games were conceived and designed with community in mind.

IT'S ~~NEVER~~ RARELY TOO LATE

We'll cover late-to-the-party community mechanisms and integrations, as well as essential friction-smoothing, in an upcoming chapter, because here we're dealing with the pre-launch and early development stages. Regardless, you need to know that even if you're too late to change the direction of your product, it's probably *not* too late to trigger the community effect.

Building a community around your brand is all about building a shared experience. Even if the property you're trying to market has no multiplayer mode or doesn't force you to get up and dance like a flailing inflatable tube man in front of your friends, you can still build a community with your marketing. Single-player games and games with limited multiplayer appeal deserve and need communities to build up and flourish around them if you want them to be successful. You will have to be more creative about your marketing and PR efforts, and you will have to tap into other crowd-pleasing elements of your product, including behind-the-scenes content, how-to lessons, user support, and brand sharing.

Again, though, we'll be revisiting this idea of late-integrated community effects in upcoming chapters.

SHARE THE BRAND

Brand sharing gets you into sticky territory, and your legal department will probably lie awake at night tearing their legal pads into tiny strips at the very mention of sharing your brand with your customers. Community-building relies heavily on your willingness to open some of your cupboards and let your fans peer in and lay hands on your stuff. Customers who invest themselves in you want to know that, to some extent, they are trusted.

They don't need your secret sauce recipe or copies of every employee's health records. Trust doesn't have to be reckless, and neither does being vulnerable to conversations that might not trend in your preferred direction. But they also won't feel a lot of community love if you build bulletproof barriers between them and the brand. Consumers who are feeling increasingly empowered by online tools that let them speak from the highest mountain would like to know that you trust them if they are going to let you get all up in their social media. And that's the point.

As marketers in a social media age, we ask customers to trust us with what matters most to them: their time, their circle of friends, their credibility, and their attention. We expect customers to happily share *their* brands with us in the form of their Facebook pages and online identities. Every time a customer uses their own cred to make a recommendation for your product, they are trusting you with their brand. Is it wildly unreasonable to return the favor?

TASTING THE COMMUNITY RAINBOW

A number of years ago, when Wrigley converted the Skittles website from a traditional marketing brochure page to a streaming amalgam of YouTube videos, Flickr images and tweets from average users, many in the social media space blanched and gasped in unison. "Oh, man, just wait till they get the first 'I hate Skittles' post or bigoted rant," they said. (We can safely ignore the political involvement of Skittles in the 2016 U.S. election. Ah, Twitter.)

A candy product line introduced in 1974, Skittles doesn't invite the same kind of aggressive social activism that you might naturally expect from a cigarette brand or even a maker of SUVs. Even if you don't like Skittles, it's hard to *hate* Skittles in any way that would make a PR team nervous. Still, the fact that a major corporation was opening one of its key branding vehicles to the general public, for them to deface and defame at will, was naturally disconcerting for marketing traditionalists.

The fact is, as soon as the new site launched, many would-be virtual vandals crafted tweets intended to trigger shock and guffaws. So the social media protectionists were partially right. However, after the giggles were done, the experiment persisted, garnered hundreds of thousands of free eyeballs — admit it, you're headed over to the website right now, aren't you? — and showed the world that Skittles as a brand was unafraid, ahead of the curve, and in step with their customers. Even the viral

graffiti was a sign that consumers were tickled to be a part of the conversation. They noticed that they were being noticed.

Those people also found the whole affair engaging and entertaining. To some extent, users flocked to the Skittles main page precisely to see if someone would do something absurd while they were watching.

There is another important lesson from the Skittles experiment — one that many miss. Although the Twitter takeover triggered thousands of users to participate in the meta-game of trying to get their tweets on the front page of skittles.com, the initial purpose of the project was to reveal the conversations *already happening* around the brand. Ultimately, hiding from Twitter would never have changed the fact that someone, somewhere, at some point, had already tweeted odd Skittles-related things to all of their friends and followers. Now, though, the entire discussion could be revealed, and eager fans of the candy could see that they were not alone in their obsession.

MORE THAN WATCHING GRASS GROW

If you're lucky, a community will spring up organically around your brand, even as you announce and begin pushing small teases. Eager and loyal adherents will build their own fan sites and forum subsections just to discuss every aspect of your project and will organize themselves on your behalf. Some of the best brand-focused communities started this way. Grunts R Us, Podtacular, Halo.Bungie.Org, and Red Vs. Blue are just four examples of world-famous fan sites that rose up around the *Halo* franchise and have generated millions of positive *Halo* impressions. Bungie and Microsoft, the former developer and current publisher of the series, did nothing to spark these communities. They contributed greatly to nurturing them after a time, but they took action only after the sites had built themselves into sizable forces in the gaming community.

The *Halo* marketing budget would put some medium-sized nations to shame, but when it came to community-building, Bungie and Microsoft started out by sort of letting it happen. Most brands have not been so lucky. If you don't want to sit and hope this happens for you, there are some simple steps — and maybe make a few not-so-simple organizational mindset shifts — you can take to create the spark yourself.

Right about now, a perfectly normal professional marketer might be thinking, "What kinda phony-baloney mumbo-jumbo is this? Social marketing? Community-building? Overrated! Snake oil! Hooey!"

First off, if this is representative of you, an updated vocabulary is certainly in order. But you're not entirely crazy in your thinking. There are many claims out there that are irrationally exuberant about the mystical powers of social media. There has never been and there will never be a magic bullet for marketing your brand.

Building a Facebook app in a vacuum and tossing it out into the world through a traditional ad campaign won't guarantee you much of anything. Likewise, appointing a social media czar and handing him a crown, scepter, and Twitter account won't automatically lead millions of followers to your door, eager to bask in the glow of your social media magnificence. (Also, just as a public service announcement, be incredibly leery of anyone who puts the word "guru" in their bio or CV, particularly as it might relate to social media or SEO marketing. You're welcome!)

Although traditional marketing is far from dead, its power is eroding daily under the pressure of new developments in the way people choose to receive their information. If you are an advertiser who uses TV ads and billboards to sell product, then DVRs, cord cutters, and telecommuting are the least of your problems. The generation that grew up with computers in the home has figured out ways to bypass traditional marketing. Even when they're not bypassing it, they're highly skeptical of it

and are nearly inundated with counter-programming in the form of their real-life and online friends who all have voices nearly as loud as your highly produced ads. Their other inputs are often a lot better at flexing to their needs and interests. After all, you only want to sell them something. Their friends are willing to chat about, poke fun at, tell dirty jokes about, and comment on your product. And let's not forget memes.

There's the rub. If you're lucky enough to have a good product and don't participate in building a community around it, the fans will start talking about it on their own, without your input or ability to confirm or deny rumors, nudge interest, et cetera. Do you want to be absent when those conversations are happening? Do you want the participants to have no investment in your brand when they get to talking? Do you want them to dog-pile on bugs or design decisions without you taking part and showing them you're listening?

I think you know the answer.

THE DARK SIDE OF ~~THE FORCE~~ COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There's always gotta be a downside, huh? Thankfully, these disadvantages tend to be of the avoidably harmful kind of friction. But remember what Catherine Aird said: "If you can't be a good example, then you'll just have to be a horrible warning." (Pro tip: Strive for the "good example" part.)

One of the best ways to earn trust with future potential players is to set expectations clearly and honestly. As the state of the game changes, keep your budding community up-to-date on latest iterations and launch delays.

Let's talk about game states and what to expect. There are two examples that have become quite famous (or infamous): *No Man's Sky* and *Alien: Colonial Marines*. The issues experienced

by both games were similar, as were the public outcries by rarin'-to-go fan bases. Simply put, it's widely acknowledged that both games promised more than they delivered. Now, this kind of thing happens. Developers want fantastic features and huge set-pieces. They want a game that lights a fire in the imaginations of its potential or existing community.

The beast at the core of this issue rears its ugly head, however, when you knowingly under-deliver (or over-promise) an experience. The harsher and starker the contrast between what players are told they can expect of a game and what is given them will determine how much fuel they'll throw on the fire of their outrage. Both *No Man's Sky* and *Alien: Colonial Marines* became intense conflagrations.

The main lesson is to clearly establish reasonable expectations about system requirements, graphics, multiplayer-enabled, paywalls, in-game features, quality and style of play . . . the list goes on. If gamers feel lied to or misled, they'll respond vehemently. And they've got long memories.

Switching gears, games that keep getting talked up by the media and gamers both but fail to appear year after year are called vaporware. Software without substance is the essential drift.

It happens that sometimes, when the cosmos aligns, a game deemed to be vaporware will come out of the long dark tunnel of its development and surprise everyone, simply by virtue of it even existing. *Duke Nukem Forever* did this when it was launched after a fraught 10 years' gestation.

A 10-year march to eventual release is a dramatic tale! Awesome, right? Well, here's a weird "rule:" The longer it takes for a game to go from announcement to launch, the more time players have to hype the game and rev up their community's enthusiasm, even to the point of it gaining dangerous momentum.

Duke Nukem Forever was finally released, but it didn't revolutionize the gaming industry as we knew it or blow anyone's socks off. It was a game that some enjoyed and others did not. It was, basically, a decent game release. But the years of waiting had created an expectation that would have been all but impossible to deliver on, regardless of the dev team or the publisher.

Perhaps a sadder example of a launch delay leading to disappointment, outrage, and resentment (in that downward-spiraling order) was a little indie darling called *Fez*. Most developers have heard of its developer, Phil Fish, and a good many know what happened — at least with regard to the sudden cancellation of the sequel, *Fez 2*.

When developing *Fez*, Phil Fish seemed to primarily allow his community to be driven and grown via established games media, mostly online. Awards, honors, and accolades provided even more rocket fuel to Mr. Fish's ascent in the indie community as an up-and-comer, and *Fez* (from what people saw teased in videos and from demos at conventions like PAX East) was looking solid and interesting.

Fez was announced in 2007. It was scheduled to launch in early 2010. Then the date started slipping. *Fez* was not released until 2012.

Adding to the exasperations of those interested in getting their hands on the game through all the publicity and attention was Phil Fish's particularly acerbic and forthright manner of engaging with the public and his own fans. (His reputation might not have been helped by his representation in the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie*.)

Not only did he frequently, visibly, and publicly voice his frustrations with his community of expectant players, as well as his own issues in producing the game, but the burgeoning community tended to drive the narrative around the game, and that narrative was that Mr. Fish himself was to some degree

problematic — that perhaps he'd never release *Fez* at all. No doubt Phil Fish felt under assault, and from the very fans who were anticipating the release of the product of years of hope, sweat, and tears.

One lesson from *Fez* and Mr. Fish is that early and frequent community engagement — and an openness around the state of game and the issues being encountered and overcome — would have regained him at the very least a grudging respect and might have placated a sizable body his many fans that, by the end of the game's development, had nearly become malcontents.

COMMUNITY, ONWARD!

The community-nurturing work done in these early stages of development and marketing will have long-lasting effects in future game development and publishing cycles. Bringing fans on board prior to launch will not only help anticipate upcoming points of friction but smooth them out, setting you up for easier fan-base communication and engagement, and will give you buffers of trust if or when you make small missteps.

CHAPTER 3: GET THE WORD OUT
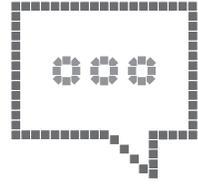
It's pretty tough to rally around something you don't know about. Managing frictions and considering communities starts at the very point of game conception, but it gets real and truly becomes critical once a game is first announced to the public.

Frictions and communities are intertwined in interesting ways. Where some frictions push players away, those same players find communities that pull them back.

In this chapter, I'll take a look at some of the frictions that emerge during the announcement phase prior to a game's launch and walk through what can be done to maximize player interest and community engagement — two things that, if focused on early, will eventually translate to keeping more players longer.

THE LIFE CYCLE BASICS

If you look at the way any product is sold, and you watch for the beats, you recognize a natural biorhythm:

Beat 1: Announce the product to let everyone know that it's coming and why they should pay attention.

Beat 2: Introduce incentives to get people to preorder or ask their local store about it.

Beat 3: Launch!

Beat 4: If you've done OK so far, promote how well you've done in your opening week, sharing the stories of happy customers to get fence-sitters to take action.

Beat 5: Remind people of additional opportunities to extend the experience and to tell their friends — merchandise, DVDs, and new downloadable content, for example.

Beat 6: Remind people how much fun they had with the product and keep them focused on the sequel.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The first point of friction for many developers and publishers will come from initial expectations of the game. How do players interpret the art style? What are their perceptions of the control scheme? What's the game trying to do? What's it trying to say?

At the core: What's the game *about*?

Often, dominant or primary game images stick in our minds. For instance, the Triforce from *The Legend of Zelda* games is utterly synonymous with the series. I bet you can picture

the *Assassin's Creed* logo. What about the *Half Life* lambda? These symbols have achieved such a state of pop-cultural prominence, in fact, that thousands of fans have gotten tattoos depicting them.

If your product is a sequel, you want fans to know that it's coming, and you want them to know what you're improving and what core components you're staying true to. You will face the pressure of a pre-existing set of assumptions about the franchise. You will also have to deal with any prior promises that fell short. On the other hand, you will have a powerful dynamic to tap into: Your fans will already have a relationship with your product. That relationship will provide ready-made leverage for you. You won't have to spend all of your marketing effort introducing your underlying concept. You can more easily run the extra mile toward a deeper emotional attachment between your customers and your product.

If it is a new product, you will need to set the stage for what your new and curious fans should expect. You'll struggle just to get their attention, but should you succeed in getting it, this is the first opportunity you will have to send the signal that you're looking to build or maintain a community around the product. There will be time, over the life of the campaign, to explain the details as you go, but in this first big splash, you want to at least hint about what they can expect.

A benefit of marketing a new property to a fan community is that you have an opportunity to define the tone and emotional impact of the brand right up front. You might fall into the trap of listing features ad nauseum. Realistically, if you are in the gaming industry, you will undoubtedly fall into this pattern. Games are often still treated by their marketers as software products, rather than as entertainment services filled with rich experiences. With any luck, you will slow yourself down enough during the announcement phase to plug into the power of your community leaders and their emotional triggers.

To get started, consider what your evolving community wants from you. Expectations are tricky beasts. Once bells and whistles have been shouted from the digital rooftops, they can be difficult to walk back later on in the dev cycle. After all, any alterations that players see as being less than what they've come to expect are viewed as weakening the game-as-brand or are labeled backpedaling. People who were once infused with "OHMUHGOD OHMUHGOD OHMUHGOD"-caliber excitement can sour quickly. In such situations, leery skepticism becomes a best-case scenario . . . with a cynical and vocal rejection of the game a worst-case scenario. (And may all the deities ever conceived save you if those detractors have a loyal fan base!)

This is one of the reasons that studio marketing teams choose to start small, with short teaser videos and brand-establishing graphics banners. Pre-vis footage is outsourced for CGI teasers or short story sketches. Color palettes and fonts are presented in announcement images. A company could launch a cryptic website or alter a long-standing landing page with a trusted franchise's teasing aesthetic. Word or footage of the game could be "leaked" in such a way as to align with marketing objectives or game style, and to get players buzzing about what it all could mean.

Studios test the waters, allowing their likely player base to understand the game concept's grassroots aesthetic, general theme, and genre.

Just as important, though, smaller-scale announcements give developers the chance to gather immediate (often emotion-based) feedback and assess how players might react. "Ugh. Another pixel-art platformer? Seriously?" some might opine. "Wow. Hey, Studio X: Any chance you're going to do this well and not load the entire game with jump-scares? No? THOUGHT SO," others might quip.

There's no shortage of equally fervent enthusiasm, though. "Sweet! Heard rumors about this. Please be good please be

good please!" some pray. "Shut up and take my money!" others gleefully cry. "I didn't even know that I wanted this but now I must have it!"

Establishing a positive and solid foundation means that developers can build forward, creative brick by creative brick, branching out as feedback streams coalesce around strong themes and resonant messaging or gameplay perceptions. Excitement leads swiftly to early community-building.

Early negative reception, however, can lead to brand community sniping. So what do you do if you encounter frictions from the get-go? You obviously have to address them, but how do you manage and assuage the naysayers without disenfranchising your early evangelists? After all, if you try to please everyone, you'll end up pleasing no one. Not to mention that you'll burn development cycles hedging.

There's an adage, yea, as old as the roots of mountains: "Haters gonna hate." Some of your detractors cannot and will not ever be won over. If someone doesn't like metroidvania-style games, your metroidvania-style surrealist puzzle platformer isn't likely to appeal to them, and spending time trying to win them over will result in, at best, a frustrating pyrrhic victory.

You must not make design and development decisions in order to appeal to the "haters" if doing so means losing fans. That's a terrible trade-off. It's always easier to stay true to and solidify your established (and already enthusiastic) consumers than it is to pander to people who don't want to be convinced. Besides, word of mouth and fan excitement are powerful fires. Don't trample them in the often-fruitless hopes of turning someone from "this sucks" to "meh," which is about the best you can hope for.

Think of it this way: Fans are already there. They love what they've seen so far. That means your fan base is yours to lose.

That said, a word of caution about the early formation of fan communities:

DON'T INVADE TROY

An impulse to avoid at all costs is to view community-building as an exercise in building a Trojan horse. Don't hit the ground running with the mindset that the ends justify the means. Failing to be authentic and true to the community — and its chosen platform — can be devastating. (Just do a Web search to read how well one of Woody Harrelson's Reddit AMAs went.)

Your task as a marketer is not to fool legitimate communities into receiving your attention as a gift, only to have your sales messages spring from within the metaphorical horse's belly, marketing-tempered sword in hand, eager to gain control of the city community. This introduces avoidable frictions and unnecessary (and harmful) complexity of marketing and messaging. Integrity has to be modeled.

And let's be realistic: Communities that gather around a hobby or a brand are far too fluid and decentralized to ever "take control of." I used to be a gaming community leader during the early days of podcasting and the Xbox 360. We all have stories of companies that tried to use freebies and threats as carrots and sticks, in an effort to steer our opinions and reviews in "the right direction." Do you know what we did when we got this kind of treatment from the PR and marketing teams of a brand? We complained loudly about these hard-sell techniques with our followers and friends.

The trick of consumer communities is that, for most of these men and women, it isn't a job. There is no boss to apply pressure and there is nothing to lose except reputation and influence. To this point, they have reach and a voice worthy of attention, but the old levers of "I'll talk to your boss" simply won't work.

If you happen to stumble upon a particularly skittish and easily influenced community leader and succeed in controlling the message within a community, you will probably fail to maintain the credibility and community ethos that drew your brand to

that community in the first place. In fact, you risk dispersing the community. These days, online community members are so aware of the influence companies try to apply on their collective opinions that they generally look for the smallest signs that their leaders have been compromised by free goods and corporate threats.

The social media tools that currently dominate the web have given voice to even the meekest among us. The web shines a bright light onto almost every secret plot, and it is nearly impossible for trickery to go unnoticed, especially when the tricks are a part of your marketing efforts. Marketing likes to get noticed, and shady marketing is no exception.

Above all, as said above, cultivate community as a genuine and authentic effort to recruit the participation and help of your customers, and you will find that it pays higher dividends for a longer period of time than duping them ever could.

LEADERS AND INFLUENCERS

A community needs leaders. A random collection of bodies saying and doing whatever suits them is a beautiful reflection of individual organic impulses. Anyone with children will tell you that creatures want to do all kinds of random stuff. That stuff can be clever and endearing, but it can also be wild and dangerous. We can't, in the scope of this book, discuss free will and the divine right of all creatures to do as they please. Within the scope of community, however, we believe individuals must ultimately coalesce around a set of beliefs and ideals. These beliefs must be expressed — at the very least — by someone. That someone is a leader.

Product marketers need to get very good at understanding what makes leaders tick. PR managers have all become experts at motivating and connecting with leaders who happen to be journalists. Their behavior is somewhat predictable, largely

because all journalists have been trained in a very small set of schools, according to a defined set of principles, and they all work for a small handful of news organizations that have clearly defined what is right and wrong as relates to reporting on a brand or product. Within this defined set of rules, PR managers operate to pull, prod, and please the journalistic leaders. These guys and gals hold tremendous sway over the millions of people who still get their product news from mainstream media outlets on radios, TV sets, newspapers, and magazines (even digital ones).

Marketers, for their part, have grown adept at connecting with the masses, reaching out in big bold words to persuade the average consumer. The space in between is where our story lives. Thanks to technology, there's something between journalistic leaders and consumer followers. There are, in fact, many types between. For our purposes, we want to focus on only two: community leaders and community members.

The announcement of a product is the perfect time to reach out and identify the community leaders you want to recruit to your cause. The very fact that you know who they are and are willing to ask for their help will mean a lot to these leaders. It will be a validation of their thankless efforts slogging away at their hobby. Many community leaders find their joy in the appreciation they receive from their followers and from knowing that they are sharing their passion with other people. Few of them will deny, though, that they also feel a wild rush when a major corporation shakes off the dust, moves a giant stone arm, points to them and says "I recognize you."

They might be freaked out, and a few will doubt your intentions. Here is your first community test. If you are lying to them, and are just a leering, self-interested, corporate manipulator, they will know. They will proceed to tell their thousands (or millions) of followers that you are a liar. Even worse, maybe they will consider you a desperate liar for stooping to gimmicky and insincere "social media" tactics.

When trying to woo community leaders, don't confuse honesty with polish. They won't mind if you make a mistake or if your advances are the clumsy fumblings of a pubescent teen. They know why you want their respect, and they don't mind. They hope that you're recognizing them as a part of your broader embrace of the changing landscape of marketing and mass communication. Recognize them with respect and a good dose of humble honesty, and many of them will jump at the chance to participate as leaders in an industry they flocked to as amateur fans.

HEAR YE, HEAR YE!

Let's hop back to discussing the nascent days of your game's life cycle. As I wrote above, sooner or later, you need to let the world know you've got a game incubating. There is no single, solitary proper way to announce a game; there are dozens of right ways (and, yes, a few wrong ones).

First, let's look at the fairly standard case of a company making an announcement via a video or press release. What are the advantages? The most obvious benefit is that you completely control the timing and the content on display. There won't be any early alpha gameplay bugs on display because you'll have curated the encapsulated experience, in the case of a video. A press release can give the media all the main messaging and talking points — a kind of game brand mission statement and information about what people can expect of the game, including differentiators — but shouldn't be the tip of your early marketing spear.

If you choose the video route, depending on your game and your budget, you might lead off with a pre-rendered trailer that doesn't showcase in-game footage but that instead provides an emotional and stylistic punch. Paired with or instead of that, you might fire off an early gameplay teaser.

How long should the video be, and what should it reveal? Early on in the announcement and production phases, less is more. You need to convey tone, spark interest, and get players looking for official channels through which they can keep tabs on future revelations and updates. That might mean bookmarking a dev blog, setting Google alerts, and following the company's social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitch.

There are other more expansive options, of course. One of the best is a convention or expo reveal. Conventions are fantastic venues because you have a high concentration of people who already care deeply about video games and video game companies. After all, they've literally spent money to congregate around, learn about, and demo games.

Consumer conventions tend to be filled with people who are enthusiastic and embracing, while media- and developer-focused conventions tend more toward the technical and professionally objective. The "sell" might be harder but the payoffs are greater. When it comes to media-heavy cons, they're literally there to cover you and your products, but you're in intense competition. News outlets only have so many journalists and writers, and there are publishers and studios with serious budgets duking it out for well-positioned feature articles. Smaller outlets could lose out in that arena. Just be aware that the stakes are higher.

As for consumer or fan-targeted conventions, it's a bit more utilitarian: One player, one voice. Where a journalist can amplify your brand's voice enormously, fan expos depend upon large-scale interest and engagement, as well as those fans blogging and talking about what they've seen with lots of others. (The press will be here, as well, by the way. It's just that they're more likely paying attention to what attendees are talking about and where they're congregating in enthusiastic hordes.) Typically, you're working more from word of mouth, which isn't a bad thing at all! It's just different and requires a less polished, less

on-message approach. It's a lot more informal and colloquial —
a fireside chat versus a State of the Union address, if you will.
Gamers want to gush about what they're seeing and chat with
you, especially if you're one of the designers or programmers
and not part of the marketing team.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

At times, we feel we are balancing precariously between
two extremes when it comes to understanding our target
players. This isn't so much about community-building as it is
about focus. If you look at exaggerated versions of the two main
player types, it can help break down how you and your team
think about your game and to whom you're marketing it.

"FILTHY CASUALS!"

Or so goes the cry from the hardcore, the dedicated, the
pixel-maestros, THE DESTROYERS OF DIGITAL WORLDS.

Ahem.

Usually we say someone is a "casual" if that person plays
infrequently or intermittently. Maybe they've got busy family lives
or are devoted to work, or maybe they're just not that into gaming.
They might not even tag themselves with the label "gamer" at all.

Casual players tend to enjoy competition that's more on the
friendly side. They're not taking things too seriously. They don't
want gaming to become a second job, and so they don't spend
as much time playing as more dedicated gamers — often fewer
than 10 hours a week.

Many are attracted to games with more forgiving learning
curves (and more open and forgiving communities). Being an
optimizer doesn't appeal much, nor does investing in add-ons

and technology power aids. They're not out there scouring the internet for strategies and ways to maximize play experiences.

However, it's entirely possible (and in fact, even likely) that while casual gamers might be laissez-faire about most games, they get really into a *particular* game. They prioritize having fun versus playing intensely or competitively.

So . . . doesn't this mean that casual players are more likely to quit sooner than more invested gamers? Not necessarily. In fact, it might be the opposite. Casuals don't burn themselves out by blazing through levels, expansions, competition modes, et cetera. They have no problem taking breaks, trying something new, and coming back after a hiatus. *World of Warcraft*, for example, never would have been possible had the developers not explicitly designed that MMORPG to be more accessible. Other offerings in that space weren't interested in appealing to casual players, so *WoW* prospered — and then some.

Oh, here's something else to bear in mind: Casual gamers are just as social as the hardcore.

It's also important to understand that, while they might not be early adopters and trendsetters, the industry as a whole depends heavily upon casuals — people who are often the gaming majority. Unless your game is particularly niche, ignoring casual players could have appreciable consequences, both to your bottom line and to your game's uptake and longevity.

Mobile gaming is one space in which casual players have taken a fierce hold. The mobile gaming industry exploded from $2 billion annually in 2010 to $35 billion in 2016. Tablets and smartphones are increasingly used to jump into games and pop back off whenever, which means they're great for commutes to work or while waiting on an appointment. The ubiquity of mobile devices as gaming platforms has made the industry an absolute powerhouse, engaging young children, teens, adults, and seniors — a much broader gamut than the console and PC gaming industries are able to wrangle.

"ELITIST HARDCORES!"

Or so they might be dismissed by casual gamers. Hardcore gamers are the determined, the dedicated, the competitive, and the intensely invested.

Yet, contrary to the popular fear, a lot of those amped-up people are on your side, ready to consume, adore, spread, and defend pretty much anything you have to tell them about your brand. All of this assumes, of course, that your product is decent, or at least appealing to a broad enough crowd. If not, you might consider reading a different book altogether — one about product planning, perhaps.

The hardcore component of any fan base is typically vilified and marginalized. Once a company has ridden to success on this group's back, they have a tendency to forget. Great companies with bright leaders understand that dancing with the person who brought you to the party is part of the deal when selling a product that people fall in love with. Shortsighted companies ignore their hardcore and look for the next cool crowd.

The trick is this: Cool crowds like being associated with brands that have been blessed by the in-the-know hardcore. Would hip hop be hip in the suburbs if the people from the proverbial 'hood (where I grew up) hadn't graced it with the legitimacy of passionate loyalty? Would your grandmother own an iPod or iPhone if a fanatical group, once on the fringes, hadn't bled their passion for Apple across the world? Would millions of eager fans be scooping up the latest iteration of *Halo* had not an irrationally exuberant group of dedicated gamers supported the developer even when they were a tiny game studio on the outskirts of Chicago?

These people are the hardcore, and many of us are devoted to leading-edge tech. We're hardcore about different things: video games, television, and movies, having propped up some of the largest producers of entertainment on the planet.

We're hardcore about making sure that players get the best experience they can find, and we've helped deliver some of the strongest game launches in the world over the last 30 years.

Those who wear the label "hardcore" like a badge do so because they've met those marketers and business leaders who fear and look down on their hardcore customers. If you have any respect for your brand and its ability to catch fire early on, you'll need the hardcore on your side.

Among the hardcore, the community influencers and leaders want recognition — from their peers, especially, and from their championed brands if at all possible. Hardcore followers (and casual gamers as well) demand authenticity from the creators of their brands. A slip-up, a fumble, a poor decision — none of these are necessarily deal-breakers for the hardcore. The unwillingness to recognize a misstep or the persistent failure to address product shortcomings? Wrath, thy name is the hardcore.

Hardcore community followers share a lot in common with their leaders: They spend a large amount of their free time involved in a hobby, they yearn for new information, and they are vocal about the joy and pain they experience at the hands of their favorite products. The major difference in these followers is that they do not require personal recognition and they do not often need a direct line to your company. They are willing to receive the information after it has been parsed by brand leaders. They can wait an extra day or two for the aggregators and curators of content to pass it on to them. They know that among their friends they are still early to the party, but they don't want the pressure of being "the definitive voice."

At the announce stage of your campaign, while you are making personal calls and sending direct messages to the community leaders, their followers will look only for authenticity. They will sniff-test your marketing message, and they will look into the faces of the influencers and decide, almost in a second,

whether your pitch is legit or just another pile of hyperbole. We've all spent our entire lives awash in glossy, slick marketing messages. We've also all been disappointed by the hucksters. That treadmill never *really* made it easier to exercise. That plumber I saw on TV didn't really show up on time.

That game I bought didn't *really* do anything novel.

We still respond to marketing, but we've learned to go into it a bit defeated, expecting to be mistreated and unaware of a reasonable alternative. That's changed some, as social media tools have allowed us to see the alternatives. Our peers are now our guides and our experts. And if we are active members of an online community, we will know very quickly if our peers have already called B.S. on a new product.

Players generally want to be heard, they want to be seen, and they want to know that the faith, time, and money they're investing in your brand matters. The lines between fandom and creators has blurred, so it's important to know that ignoring players and catering to them so much that you become in thrall to them are at opposite ends of that particular spectrum.

While we've looked briefly at both the casuals and the hardcore, this book is concerned mostly with the hardcore for one simple reason: The hardcore typically determine radical product take-up, especially in the early stages prior to official release. They are the canaries in the coalmine.

EARLY FRICTIONS

So with all of this, how can early player appeal go sideways?

I've talked about setting expectations from the get-go, but what if you miss the mark? In this age of outrage, there's no shortage of social, political, and economic frustration, and people are happier than ever to turn their sights on you and unleash salvos of vitriol.

If you're managing a franchise brand, you're not necessarily better off having set prior expectations and built a community around a previous release. Changes to game tone, style, setting, or aesthetic can enormously affect your audience. They want what they had — but also something different. Your dedicated player base could decide early on that you've altered too much. "It's change for change's sake," they might say. Even changes to an iconic character's clothing could cause the Earth to tremble from fan ire. And yet, if you don't evolve your brand, you'll likely face disgruntled cries that you're just trying to cash in, you should just make it DLC and not a full release, "Why are you even bothering?" et cetera.

Juggling flaming chainsaws is always a fun time, no?

Prior to any announcement, the entire team has to know and understand the core fundamentals of the game. For example, "*Delve Master* is a ludicrously paced two- to four-player local co-op retro platformer that uses voxel technology to allow you to destroy and build your way through a surrealist world." Everything that emerges into the public space has to support and reinforce these first principles, so to speak.

When in doubt, always return to your brand's founding principles and ask: Does X feature serve the game?

THE HYPE TRAIN

The world has become a noisy place, filled with distractions and diversions. Cutting through the raucous din can take some doing, but it's far from impossible. A complex and intricate mechanism is easily broken, but a simple tool is always effective. This goes back to first principles, as mentioned just above. Stay minimalist. Be concise. Convoluted or long-winded messaging gets filtered out.

Let's face it: Attention is one of the most precious resources a person has. We're constantly running opportunity-cost analyses and examining costs versus benefits. There's even an acronym for the psychological state of wanting to stay on top of and be part of the best things: FOMO, or fear of missing out. Thankfully, while attention is hard to get, gaming isn't exactly a zero-sum situation. It's possible to have, and play at various times, quite a few games. When I'm done playing a single-player platformer, I text my friend and see if he's up for a two-player tower defense game. Whoa, is it 8:30 already? Time to raid with nine (or 299) others in your favorite MMO.

Presence and influence on social media are looked at in depth later on in this chapter, but for now, know that your ability to garner attention depends on a few factors. One of the biggest is whether you're a big, well-known studio. If so, your weight and established prestige will cut through the noise like a dreadnought through ocean swells. Are you launching a sequel in a known franchise? You'll stand out quickly and with distinction, like a magnesium flare at night. Got a powerhouse marketing team and budget? Insert T-rex riding a shark metaphor here!

Media take-up and industry influencer amplification will result in widespread and near-immediate awareness among the player base that you got game, literally.

Once you've pierced that attention membrane, you're cooking with naphtha. (My lawyer just informed me I have to tell you not to actually do that.) The question then becomes a balancing act. You have to tread that razor wire between getting quality information out, withholding judiciously (but not being miserly), and ensuring that players are feeling invigorated when you unleash new brand breadcrumbs upon the world.

This tension is at the heart of hype.

So what's hype? Hype is evoking enthusiasm. Hype is working up a crowd, whether from a stage or a YouTube video.

Hype is a curated fire. Tip that balance, though, and you spill that flame all over their expectation, elevating it to roaring heights . . . but also widening the chasm between what your game actually is and what players expect it to be. The expectation-actuality gap can be deeply affecting, to your detriment.

Why? Hype can easily become hyperbole. In the MMO space, everything in the mid-2000s was emblazoned with the moniker THE WoW-KILLER – granted, more often by the media than by the marketing teams. Every MMORPG was going to be the gaming tsunami that would sweep *World of Warcraft*'s entire player base of millions away from Blizzard and into another brand's waiting masterpiece.

It never happened. That's not to say that MMOs weren't getting traction, because they certainly were. But none had market-overturning power or, usually, the long-standing appeal of *World of Warcraft* or the entrenched trust of its players.

Hype is a subtle seasoning. Dumping the whole thing on your brand will spoil the meal and lead to virulent mass-social media indigestion.

Also tied into the matter of hype and aggressive marketing is . . .

TO FIREBRAND OR NOT TO FIREBRAND

During the lead-up to game release, it can be an extraordinary boon to have a vocal, recognized, and trusted champion for your game and/or company brand. These people are the evangelists — spokespeople, deeply knowledgeable about the brand for which they're cheerleading and helping to forge. They've also got to be adept at press and fan interactions, both in person and online, which typically requires a dominant and forward personality (or persona).

An exceptional evangelist is a company go-to for vlog-style updates and video reveals, game feature affirmations, media wrangling, rumor control, and convention-hall crowd rousing.

On board the hype train, these folks are the conductors, and they've got giant megaphones.

Psychologically, it's much easier to rally around a person than it is an amorphous corporate entity, even when the individual in question is virtually synonymous with their studio, as with Tim Schafer of Double Fine Productions and as was the case with John Carmack, co-founder and former lead programmer of id Software.

An evangelist humanizes a company, regardless of size and pedigree, and gives the player base a singular focus. Instead of worrying about half a dozen lead programmers, creative directors, community managers, or founders, they can simply look to one person to satisfy their thirst for information and to feed their enthusiasm for the game.

And yet, an evangelist can be as detrimental as they can be advantageous. What happens if your spokesperson leaves the company? The loss of a champion, for any reason, can leave a gaping hole that few others will be able or ready to occupy. And that's from the company's perspective. Think of the degree of player commitment and acclimation the now-departed evangelist wielded. How does one deal with fan acceptance of possible replacements?

Obviously, an evangelist is a potential point of friction that is avoidable and can be beneficial *or* harmful. Which it will be depends largely on the personality, their commitment to their studio and its brand, their own appeal as a persona, and their ability to promote a game brilliantly and stirringly without driving the hype train into that already-mentioned realm of over-promising hyperbole.

When *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning* was announced by then-Mythic Entertainment in 2005, the internet exploded. The intellectual property owners of Warhammer Fantasy, Games Workshop, were and are very cautious when considering the licensing of their adored brand.

Right from the start, the creative director of the game, Paul Barnett, became the face and voice of the game. He appeared in video developer diaries and was the one players listened to. He was entertaining, engaging, and had no qualms about making grand proclamations. The fan base quickly grew, even in the shadow of the *WoW* juggernaut.

A few months after its launch in 2008, however, the game was unable to sustain the grand vision that served as its foundations. The hype exceeded what the game could deliver. Don't get me wrong: It was a helluva lot of fun, had a great community, and it did a great job of faithfully representing the vast, complex, and beloved world created by Games Workshop. (Ironically, it even innovated new systems and interfaces that would later be incorporated by *WoW* and expanded upon in ArenaNet's *Guild Wars 2*.)

One final example (or cautionary tale, if you like): Peter Molyneux is a famous programmer and game designer. He's responsible for such classics as the *Fable* series, *Black & White, Populous*, and many more. His name is synonymous with his products, and this is both a great advantage . . . and a disadvantage. Which it is depends greatly upon perspective and, to some extent, the age of the person pondering Molyneux. He is both held up as an exceptional designer, having contributed fantastically to the evolution of the video game industry, as well as "the man who promises too much." His apologies, however, have been heartfelt and earnest, and most gamers know that any faults were based on love of games and trying to create playing experiences. I once spent an evening with Peter at a hotel bar in Santa Monica, where he explained the new combat system he was cooking up for the *Fable* franchise. His enthusiasm and

charm are captivating. I couldn't help but be swept up, despite the fact that I had never played a *Fable* game. Maybe because of that meeting, I still loved the game he delivered, but not all fans were as gracious. Love can hurt.

ALL RIGHT, LET'S GET TECHNICAL

In 2011, as a run-up to the release of the fourth installment of Ubisoft's lauded *Assassin's Creed* series, *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, the company launched a pre-release brand reinforcement and community engagement campaign called "Discover Your Legacy." It was a Facebook app that analyzed a user's "ancestry," thus tying them to one of a number of possible ancestors and bloodlines. It included some of the user's Facebook friends, bringing them into the user's own bloodline and then declaring them to be either a trusted ally or part of the antagonistic faction.

It worked wonderfully — so much so that user demand overwhelmed and crashed the app. It also meant I lost sleep for the first two days, as my team at the time was responsible for writing, building, and deploying the app. We had focused so much time and energy on making it cool, we never stopped to consider the tech behind it. We were pushing the limits of what a server could deliver, and we had left the infrastructure decisions for last. In the first hours, eager to see all the excited fans posting online, we were faced with loud complaints of "It doesn't work!" or "Anybody getting in? It's stuck for me?" That's not the kind of social buzz we wanted.

We scrambled to switch hosting providers so we could flexibly scale to meet the crush of fans, but got a bloody nose in the process. (Metaphorically. It'd be crazy future-times if we got a bloody nose from an app.)

Luckily, after resolving the tech issue, we ended up seeing all the fun and excitement from the fans that we were first hoping

for. They loved seeing all the stories we cooked up for them. If only we hadn't made it so hard for them to enjoy it.

There are two points to this anecdote. First, everything is the experience. Every point of failure promises to upset your players, so keep them in mind. Second, pay attention and fix problems quickly once you see the complaints roll in.

WHERE DO COMMUNITIES MATTER?

Although almost every product known to humankind can benefit from the positive effect of viral buzz and encouraged sharing, some categories are natural fits. Some products attract fanatics the way celebrities attract tabloid sensationalism. Those products need community-building campaigns to do their best. I've identified three clearly defined product categories that can benefit greatly from a dedicated community-building effort from the outset.

First up, community-building can help products that are complicated to use. The Microsoft MVP program is one of the most well-established evangelist programs in the high-tech industry. Tens of thousands of eager customers have participated throughout the years in a program that was designed not as a marketing extension, but as a way to save money on technical support costs. It was reasoned that fanatical and dedicated consumers of technically involved products like SQL Server were some of the best people to answer the questions of their peers. Not only were they energetic and knowledgeable, they also benefited from being outsiders. They were not so immersed in corporate culture and the business needs of the product as to have developed natural blind spots for some of the more niggling challenges associated with using the product.

They used it as customers used it, because they *were* customers. They stumbled like a customer would stumble and addressed their concerns the way a caring customer would. The

MVP program resulted in millions of dollars saved, and hundreds of thousands of IT professionals hope each year to be added to the ranks of Microsoft MVPs. This model has now become widespread, as community-managed wikis have dominated the high-tech space, but at one point, this was an entirely novel idea. The MVP program still offers great value as an informal evangelism platform.

Second, community-building can help products that confer social status. There was a time, back in the olden days, when running shoes were something that only athletes and school children wore. They were neither cool nor hip, and their cost at retail reflected their utilitarian appeal. But by the 1980s, brands like Adidas, Puma, and Nike had become household names and helped to change the sneaker game. Sneakers can now be badges of style that people will wait in line for and spend hundreds of dollars on. They don't provide dramatic functional benefits to the wearer; even the most expensive pair of sneakers doesn't increase the wearer's speed, jump distance, or resistance to injury much more than the cheapest pair. Yet, today it is common to see a pair of sneakers selling for $300.

Many of us don't demand the latest and greatest shoes, so among the broader audience, sneakers are still not such a big deal that they should command prices more commonly reserved for airline tickets. But we're gamers. Social status isn't to be found on our feet. It's the tech in our hands and pockets. It's our leaderboard scores. It's server-first achievements. Millions of dollars are spent sponsoring e-sports teams and filling arenas for intense head-to-head competitions.

Consider the invented scarcity of limited editions, "ultimate" editions, and collector's editions. Early access and preorder benefits, such as exclusive cosmetic and vanity bundles, can be yours . . . but only as long as supplies last. In order to drive demand for rarer items, companies rely on community-building efforts that are usually based around the idea of being not just someone who will play the game. Oh no. You're not just a fan,

either. You're *the* fan. It isn't just about the game. It's about everything that orbits the game. (I should know: I bought the *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning* Collector's Edition.)

A company that taps into that kind of community drive can easily triple its profit per item, and burn itself into the public consciousness as "the ultimate brand."

Finally, community-building can help products that are improved when shared. The world's only cell phone is worthless. Having one of two cell phones in the world would be a neat and moderately useful distinction, unless the other cell phone belongs to a bill collector. Having one of a million cell phones would make you run-of-the-mill and far from unique, but you would also own a tool made supremely useful directly by virtue of its proliferation. If you are the first owner of a cell phone, you'd be hard pressed *not* to share the discovery with other people; otherwise, you end up with a useless piece of plastic. The more your passion for this kind of product spreads, the better your own experience becomes.

If you are the marketer of such a product, you have every excuse to make sure your earliest consumers get to meet each other as well as your potential customers. You also want to be sure they have every tool and every reason to share their thoughts and feelings with other people. If, as will undoubtedly be the case, you are the marketer of one of these products *and* you have competition, building a community becomes an absolute necessity. The last thing you want is for your customers to start conversing without you just as your competitor taps into the conversation.

NEW AND SOCIAL MEDIA

This isn't specifically about Twitter, Facebook, Twitch, or YouTube. There's no question that, as I write this, some of the fiercest brand fanatics are hanging out on exactly those

sites, sharing their thoughts, rallying crowds, and directing conversations. But the story of your brand doesn't live on a single website or platform, perhaps especially not your own. The story lives in the hearts and minds of the community leaders and their followers, wherever they happen to digitally reside.

In short, social media tools are to communities what streets are to cities. They're a method of transmission — the conduit — but not the thing itself. Reddit, for instance, isn't in itself a community. Reddit is a platform that actively and easily *enables* communities.

I wrote earlier about not pulling a Trojan horse in those kinds of public interaction spaces. However, that doesn't mean that creators can't or shouldn't engage in those forums. This is especially true — essential, in fact — when using official forums. Community managers, coordinators, and developers are welcomed with great enthusiasm on brand forums to discuss everything from planned releases to bug fixes, and to jump into the middle of a bombardment of game-centric memes and inside jokes.

Since times change quickly and I know you're tech savvy as all get-out, it's fruitless to look at specific strategies for existing social media. The point is to understand the strengths and weaknesses of your engagement platforms and maximize them. Get news out quickly on Twitter. Solicit comments and plan fan events on Facebook. Demonstrate the latest animations and art assets via YouTube. Jump into a real-time demo of your product and chat about it on Twitch.

Apart from social media are new media. Whether they're bloggers or let's-play video producers, there's no thumbing your nose at these folks. Questions about "legitimate" or "real" sites died at the beginning of the 21st century. The walls that once enshrined the legitimate have been demolished, the gatekeepers have wandered off, and it's a level playing field for anyone with a computer, a microphone, a camera, and/

or internet access. *Game Informer Magazine* and *GamePro* are powerhouse publications, as are *PC Gamer, Electronic Gaming Monthly*, and other established, more traditional outlets. (*Nintendo Power,* R.I.P.) But none can hold a candle to the subscribers and view counts of YouTube personalities like PewDiePie, VanossGaming, and Markiplier. Video game and industry critics and commentators like John Bains ("Total Biscuit"), Anita Sarkeesian, Jim Sterling, and the good folks at Extra Credits can and have shaped public discourse and affected game studio development policies, design principles, and publisher marketing strategies. Not only do they keep a critical eye on what's happening in the industry, but they can also be rallying points for player activism and advocacy for marginalized groups.

I said before that the hardcore followers demand authenticity. The real truth is that *everyone* wants authentic interactions with one another. So whatever you do, whatever you put out into the glorious internet ether, be authentic. And prepare to be held to account. What happens on the internet stays on the internet.

IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME . . .

While there are fan sites, gaming forums, news sites, and user-curated content sites, your brand's website still matters. A lot. It's rare that your own site won't be listed first in a search for your company or product, so how you approach your site's design and content should be foremost in your thoughts when it comes to after-announcement inbound marketing. Once a player hears about you, they'll find you (and fast) and they'll want to consume everything you've got to offer and then shout it out to their peers and friends.

What makes a good site? Well, I'm not writing a web design manual (that's next week's project) but solid principles demand that the information be clear, concise, and easy to find. Content

on a particular subject should fit the reader's monitor; you don't want too much scrolling. You want to be comprehensive in what you provide to people poring through the pages of your official site, but you don't want complexity. Simple doesn't mean stupid, and complexity doesn't translate to completeness.

The absolute number one rule is to never make it difficult for a prospective fan to find what they're looking for. Multi-page click-throughs, dead links, slow load times, and poor headers and section titles are enormous points of friction that will leave people frustrated and searching elsewhere, leading to second-hand information that ought to have come directly from you. Fans, even eager fans, leave websites that are slow or poorly organized.

Where might they land? At a fan site. There's nothing wrong with a fan site, of course, but it isn't *your* site.

On this topic, you need to consider early on whether and how much you will sanction and support fan sites. Depending on your game, fan sites are exceptional resources. Players in need of optimum skill builds look to leaders to give them templates. Having problems finding the secondary entrance to the Temple of the Burning Moon? There's no doubt a walkthrough or guide out there to see you through.

It's often in your best interest to have a proactive policy of supporting fan sites. You need to establish criteria around that support, obviously. MMO producers, for example, don't want to be providing IP media assets and dedicating team resources to currency farmers or potential identity thieves. But podcasters, strategy writers, master optimizers . . . those folks could use your help and assistance, so prep a straightforward policy agreement and provide a media bundle so that their sites accurately (and legally) reflect your brand and all its promise.

Your site, of course, can also be a fan site, inasmuch as you can build robust forums and even rich logged-in states that let fans carry their in-game accomplishments over to the web. A

key here is to treat the website like the game itself. Some folks assume the game website is a "secondary" experience that doesn't deserve the investment and focus that the game gets. But players might spend way more time on the forums than they do in the game, particularly after their play lapses. (I myself continued to frequent a particular game's forums for months after I'd quit the game itself, because I'd been playing side by side with some of the same people for years. In one instance, I knew a guy online for 12 years before I met him in real life.) Also, players need things to do while pretending to work. (Uhhh . . . not that I'm encouraging time theft.) Just make sure the website loads quickly and delivers rich, useful content that keeps them engaged.

. . . BUT DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

Innovation has to take a backseat to existing and thrumming community spaces. Especially since you're not a startup company looking to create the next killer app, don't worry about building (and then having to dedicate precious cycles and resources drawing attention to) a user-curated content aggregation and discussion website. Reddit already exists. Don't work up native video codecs and proprietary viewers. YouTube, Vimeo, and Twitch are already there, fully loaded, waiting for you to jump in and have access to millions of users.

CROWDFUNDING FOR FUN
(BUT NOT NECESSARILY PROFIT)

Last but not least, let's take a moment to delve into the power of crowdfunding. Crowdfunding is turning to your audience, or assembling an audience, to fund your project. This form of monetary democracy has completely altered the landscape of game development. In fact, I'd rate crowdfunding and the advent of digital distribution as being the two biggest

game-changers in video game history. Both have blurred the lines between triple-A studios and indie developers.

Crowdfunding has allowed communities to coalesce with astonishing speed and then mass-escalate and -promote, based on players identifying with beloved styles of play, the underdog studios they love. Not only that, but "lost" genres like point-and-click adventure games and pixel-art or low-bit retro games have resurfaced and (re)gained prominence. With the democratization of content, people are literally voting with their wallets. The studios and game projects that find enthusiastic communities — or reconnect with forgotten communities — can be eagerly demanded and funded.

Let's look at an extreme, but awesome, edge case in the mind-blowingly extraordinary promise of crowdfunding. In the bygone era known as 1990, a man named Chris Roberts, while working for Origin Systems, created a game called *Wing Commander*. It was met with critical acclaim and was a bestseller. Roberts went on to create nine more *Wing Commander* releases, both full titles and add-ons. The last was in 1996.

Fast-forward to October 2011. Chris Roberts re-emerged at the foreground of gamers' consciousness when he announced *Star Citizen*, an extremely ambitious, sprawling *Wing Commander*-esque space simulator MMO that he would entirely crowdfund. By November, it had raised $6.2 million, breaking records.

But as of 2016? It had raised $138 million. (I'll just let that sink in.)

Thanks to crowdfunding, game studios like Double Fine Productions have been able to pursue projects they're passionate about without concerns around relinquishing creative controls or working through an intermediary. They could go directly to consumers and say "Hey, guys. Here's what we've got brewing. What do you think?"

Just like electronic books and forerunners like Amazon. com have disrupted the legacy book-publishing industry, crowdfunding has in some ways affected developer-publisher relationships, shifting the power dynamics. One in four developers doesn't have or need a publisher. It's now possible for game dev teams, small and large, to easily prove to investors (if needed/wanted) that their idea not only has wings but jet turbines. This means that enormous projects can be partially funded by gamers and also receive outside investment. More resource-intensive and ambitious-but-niche projects like City State Entertainment's *Camelot Unchained* can be funded through various means. In the case of *CU*, the Kickstarter campaign raised $2.2 million, founder Mark Jacobs put $2 million of his own into the pot, and investors contributed an additional $1 million.

Nostalgia is back in a big way, too, as gamers like me who were kids during the early console generation see fantastic opportunities to revisit the hindsight-tinted splendor of our younger gaming years. And not only are we the audience, but those kids from the '70s and '80s are the ones developing these games. They've got fire in their bellies, too. After all, there are easier ways to make a buck than video game development. Ours is an industry founded on passion.

But democratized money-pooling isn't the only incredible thing about crowdfunding. In fact, it's as much about crowd*finding* as it is about crowdfunding. Websites dedicated to bringing people together to co-fund projects great and small also work to ensure that users are directed to other products that might suit their interests. Did you just back a board game about spelunking? Well, you might love this video game about world-building.

Instead of having to ask for and compile email lists, updates from the creators regarding ongoing efforts can be public to everyone, private for backers, or emailed. Attention can be refined and focused. Other collaborators can be brought

on board to fulfill expanding content. Conversations can sprout up around features and forward-looking plans the creators might have.

Once the fundraiser concludes, that community can easily shift to an established channel, or communication can continue via the original funding platform. Crowdfunding can be a kind of all-in-one community builder *and* project-funder. Caveat emptor, of course.

ALMOST THERE . . . .

As you work hard during the run-up to your game's launch, there's clearly a ton to think about and work through. A lot of resources, human and otherwise, will need to be allocated so you can stay on top of multiple pre-launch streams. Just know that laying strong foundations early means fewer points of friction later, and an ability to adapt and respond quickly to changing conditions and player needs lets you maintain and hold onto the devoted community you've fought hard to grow and engage.

CHAPTER 4: GAME TIME
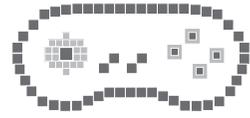
"Art is never finished; it is only abandoned." This quote is attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, and if anyone out there in the world understands this better (and feels it more) than video game developers, I've never met them.

The culmination of not only all your extraordinary work on game development through concept to crunch, but also your outward community-building, brand awareness, and engagement comes down to one thing: Launching the game.

It's impossible to finish a video game. The longer the dev cycle, the more likely it is you'll run out the clock on tech, slipping down the slope toward obsolescence. The more time you give your team, the more features and assets they'll want to include and incorporate.

It's not even the development, though. It's also quality assurance, specifically identifying and resolving bugs. The more features you build into your game, the more bugs you're guaranteed to inadvertently create and feel obligated to fix.

You'll never get it *just right*, but you can (and must) get it past the threshold of *good enough* for market. I'm not even talking about the idea of minimum viable features; I'm talking about not letting the pursuit of perfection be the enemy of the good. The best leaders know when it's time, and they also know that there's never time enough.

SHIP OR SKIP

Like I said, you've got to launch at some point. Seems obvious, right? Yet a lot of studios wage the arms race (or features race, if you will) between hurtling toward a definite release date and the need to incorporate features and, especially, crack down on game-affecting bugs.

You need to pull the trigger or you've got no game.

Literally.

However . . . it's also the case that studios that are invested in their overarching brand integrity and that value their customers (and their customers' investment) sometimes have to pull the plug, not the trigger.

In 2007, speculation emerged regarding a new and franchise-unrelated "next-gen MMO," a "top secret" project by Blizzard Entertainment. It was being worked on under the name Titan. The gaming space went insane. If it was an MMO, would it be a fantasy? Sci-fi? Would it be like a *Starcraft* MMO? What were they up to over there?

It took until 2008 for it to be verified by Blizzard as officially existing!

By 2011, it was being reported that Blizzard deemed the project to be playable. By 2012, more than 100 people were dedicated to the project.

Then in 2013, it was announced that the project was being rebooted, with 70 per cent of the team being shifted to other, existing Blizzard titles. Later that year, the company announced that Titan was moving in a new direction. It would no longer be an MMO. A previously leaked release date was dismissed.

In September 2014, after seven years, Titan was cancelled.

You could take a few minutes to scribble some calculations and figure out what those seven years cost — just in person-hours! Cancelled?! That's suicide . . . isn't it?

Maybe not. In early November of the same year, Blizzard announced *Overwatch* and eyebrows rose. The game's open beta in May 2016 attracted more than 9.5 million players. That same month, when it was released, the game was estimated to have made over $265 million in digital sales. By October 2016, there were more than 20 million players. In January 2017, Blizzard announced that number was 25 million.

Integrity pays.

Now, the nine-year Titan-to-*Overwatch* situation is an edge case, granted, and Blizzard's got some wiggle room to make those kinds of hard decisions. Regardless, if deadlines have been pushed and things are rocky, the question has to be asked: Ship or skip?

In terms of frictions, the abandonment of an entire game stood a chance of rocking the faith of Blizzard's devoted fan base. But it didn't. Sure, people were disappointed by Project Titan's cancellation, but the above example shows that players who trust their favorite companies learn to trust their decisions, especially

those coming from a place of concern for the satisfaction of those customers. The alternative is 10 years of players eye-rolling and muttering about vaporware, with the best-case scenario a good game that has no chance to live up to a 10-year crescendo of desperate hope and lingering expectation.

Obviously, smaller studios or ones lacking solid and foundational successes behind them can rarely afford those kinds of long-term gambles. Sometimes a company just has to ship and cross their fingers.

LOVE THE ONES YOU'VE GOT

Before we jump back into launch, I'll reiterate a major theme of this book for a moment: Community-building is never done — not if you're intent on both retaining your existing player base *and* growing it.

Gamers want to feel a sense of validation. They want to have invested their time and money, but they also want to have invested their very selves in a brand that other people also recognize as valuable. They want to know they made the right choice and that they are smart consumers.

The minute after a new product goes on sale is often the time people in the marketing department lose interest. On to the next thing, they vacate their battle stations and leave behind a husk of a campaign. Sometimes it takes a month or two, but by and large the party is over, and the circus tents are all being packed up. "Why should I spend time on yesterday's big hit?" a marketer asks. "The people who wanted it bought it, and now that they've bought it, they're players, not prospects. I'm all about prospects, baby!"

In a way, this reasoning makes sense. If you market for a living, there's no surer way to guarantee a need for marketers than to ignore the big mass of people who just paid money for

your product. After all, if you ignore them long enough, they'll have to be lassoed again in order to get them to buy the next thing you come calling around with.

Even if we don't want to be cynical — and believe me, sometimes I *want* to be — a marketer doesn't get paid for customer service; they get paid to move people to the cash register or to get them to click "buy now." Once they're through the other side with their bag and receipt, they might as well be invisible to us. But what about stopping them from crossing back through that cash register? It is now exceedingly easy for an average customer to turn into a merchant just weeks after buying your new product.

Amazon, eBay, Best Buy, GameStop, and many other local shops encourage customers to trade in yesterday's hit for a store credit or cold hard cash. Yesterday's customer might spend that on your competitor's product. Worse still, the used copy they put back into the marketplace means a loss of a new sale for you when someone snatches it up at a discount. Ignoring your customer just because they already bought the game ignores the need that people have to justify their purchases and continue a brand-centric buying pattern.

That sends a message that might hurt you next time around. There's every chance you will want those players to come back to your brand in the near future. If you think a customer sold is a customer for life, I've got a few bridges I can sell you. Customers have more choices and more methods than ever to come and go in and out of brand communities as they see fit. Yesterday's Myspace user is today's Facebook user. Yesterday's Blockbuster member is today's Netflix subscriber. There'll be another *Zelda*-esque roguelike-like (-like) in another month.

Customers also have the option of just saying no. Or they might shift media entirely. After all, sure there's that *Conan* video game, but there's also a board game and tabletop roleplaying games. Brand loyalty might slide off laterally into other realms

entirely — or into ones that are close enough.

There's a reason that cable television providers advertise to their own customers. Sure, a cable company typically has a local monopoly, and the process of switching from cable to satellite seems too prohibitive for some people. But customers also have the choice to cut the cord or stop watching TV and play video games or read books instead.

This is why the period immediately after launch matters.

A lot.

We once spoke to a marketing exec who scoffed at the idea of using community-building to promote their brand. "Social media is all about customer service," he said, "not marketing." He's half right, bless him. Social media is, in fact, best at customer service. But using social media for customer service is also marketing. There are no steel fences between your prospect pool and your existing customers. They can come and go as they please, and they can share messages freely. And it's the believable, not necessarily true, messages that proliferate.

How you service your newly acquired customers and how you help them blend into your community are just as important as a gimmicky marketing event designed to get the attention of new people.

Bear in mind not only prospective fans but those who've rallied to you already.

BUILT-IN COMMUNITY?

It's possible that you've already made this easier on yourself and your brand. You might have simply constructed community support and player attraction right into the game itself. I'm not just talking multiplayer support as an add-on but

multiplayer as essential.

As with most things, there are pros and cons (and frictions). A multiplayer-only or multiplayer-focused video game is itself a community builder. At the very least, it's a community enabler. MOBAs, MMOs, and many tower defense games require multiplayer. Most people believe all first-person shooters need to have multiplayer, or a multiplayer component, to stand even the barest chance of success.

On the positive side, it's easier for a single die-hard fan to rope in a few compatriots who might otherwise sit on the fence. Replayability approaches the infinite, and variability is exceptional. Good maps and levels never feel staid or worn-through; they're familiar battlegrounds, the subtle nuances (and nooks and crannies) of which have become dependable — something to look forward to. I obsessively played the *Quake* II mod *Action Quake 2* from 1998 until 2002 and loved it, even though most people tended to only keep a handful of maps in play rotation.

An extraordinary multiplayer game with a devoted fan base can persist long after better games and physics engines have been developed. I mean, just think of *Counterstrike*! What about *Dark Age of Camelot*? A friend of mine admitted last year that he was still playing that MMO, even though it launched in 2001 and there are dozens and dozens of newer, shinier MMOs in the wild.

One downside should be obvious: Departing players pull others away with them. If you lose enough of your customers, either through run-of-the-mill attrition or as a result of a slow start or release stumble, your remaining customers are far more likely to also depart. If a game, especially an MMO, can't maintain a certain population threshold, the whole thing collapses in upon itself, or brand support teams have to be shrunk to scale, turning what might once have been a vast and thriving game into a niche piece of nostalgia tailored to a few never-say-die fans.

There is another point of friction, and it's one that's plagued every single multiplayer-essential game that's ever been released: balance. You have to balance maps and levels. The weapons need to be carefully weighed against one another; if Weapon Z is ridiculously powerful, it needs a slow load-time or limited ammunition. If a particular character class can absorb enormous amounts of abuse, heal and buff efficacies have to be cranked down. *Dark Age of Camelot*, which I mentioned above, had 45 character classes across three different realms (factions) — and that's multiplied by the six distinct races in each realm, which could be combined with various classes! All of those complicated variants had to be considered, tested, and re-balanced constantly. The work of fine-tuning game balance is never done.

This introduces a company-side friction in the form of dedicated support teams. Most multiplayer-essential brands have a team or teams whose only focus is to maintain server stability, create and bug-fix content, et cetera. Again, there's a revenue threshold for multiplayer-integral experiences that campaign or single-player brands don't need as much after launch.

MORE PLAYERS, MORE PROBLEMS

And yet . . . on the far side of the player population spectrum is the friction of having too many players. Generally speaking, this issue will likely only arise as either a failure of planning or a failure of confidence.

What do I mean? Let's address the failure of planning first. This one's pretty straightforward: You know you've got a solid franchise or a brand with a built-in fan base, but you don't escalate gradually during development and early testing via alpha testing, beta testing, early access feedback, sales forecasting and pre-order indicators. None of these alone can signal take-up at release, but the point is that marketers have plenty of opportunities to reasonably estimate sales.

That means ensuring technology infrastructure to handle server loads, which is a particular friction at launch for MMOs and multiplayer-essential games. Server limits can affect enthusiastic players, keeping them from getting into the game they've paid for. Poor technology on the hardware and data-acceleration side can result in poor multiplayer match-making. In a way, we've come to accept this kind of friction, despite the fact that it might be the most fixable. You can make your infrastructure scale. It's not always as easy as waving your hands and whispering the word "cloud" three times, but there's still no excuse for missing this planning step. Players hate these kinds of technical issues, and have every right to complain. Technology shouldn't get in the way of the game. The curse of our world: If your infrastructure team has done their job perfectly, nobody will notice they exist.

There can also be optics issues around the number of people who've pre-ordered and who are in open beta versus those who buy at launch and who are still there days later. The gap between those two can be huge, as can the media gap between teased videos and curated demos and the news coverage that's mostly speculation, positive or negative. News and new media coverage at release provide surges in gamer attention and anticipation . . . or can shunt the game clear off the precipice of consumer interest.

Failures of confidence can fall closely in line with failures of planning. After all, there's nothing to stop lack of confidence (or an overabundance of it) from affecting strategy during pre-launch phases, the reverberations of which then carry right on through to release and beyond.

One of the biggest ways that confidence is felt at launch is in marketing. Some video game publishers spend half as much as the cost of development on marketing and advertising budgets alone. Some spend 150 per cent the cost of production on pre-launch and at-launch marketing! Awareness and momentum are critical, obviously, but what's harder to calculate is how much to

spend, where, and when.

PRICED TO SELL

Back when I used to wander through the mall in the mid- and late '80s and ogle the shelves stacked with the newest releases for Nintendo and SEGA, a video game cost around $50. It seemed like a fortune to me then. In 2015 dollars, that $50 would be about $84.

Now consider this: A new triple-A game in 2015 cost anywhere between $65 and $70. That tiny price shift over the course of *three decades* is mind-blowing!

I mean, how can that even be possible? Every other commodity and luxury good has adjusted over the decades to account for changes in inflation and cost adjustment, as well as supply chain and production cost increases. It's no wonder that triple-A game studios have come under increasing pressure in recent years to sell incredible volumes just to break even or be considered a success. Two million sales might be deemed middling — or even a failure by some publishers' reckoning.

Basically, prices for video games haven't changed much in 20 years, while the costs to produce games have skyrocketed.

So how do you contend with the existing pricing structures? It depends on the nature of your game, but you have to choose a fee model based on foisting the fewest frictions onto your potential player base. It's become the norm, for instance, to sell a title at full price ($60) and then introduce quality content add-ons as DLC (downloadable content) at regular intervals. How regular? It depends on the game and how engaging it is, including its replayability, but also how quickly players will be able to burn through content and whether having new content will translate to continued consumption and enjoyment.

Many games also incorporate micro-transactions, allowing players to purchase minor upgrades, more in-game resources, game time, accelerated or reduced timers, aesthetic and cosmetic options, and more. This is an essential model for free-to-play video games, including mobile and browser-based titles.

But a word of caution. In 2013, video game commentator and critic Jim Sterling coined the phrase "fee-to-pay," a riff on "free-to-play." A fee-to-pay game is a full-priced game with free-to-play (read: micro-transaction) elements incorporated. It's possible for a model of this sort to work and not drive players away or cause online outrage, but the strategy has to be carefully crafted and baked in from a game's inception. The bundled transactional aspects shouldn't be game-disrupting pop-ups, whether narratively integrated or otherwise, and the available rewards should be of a type that won't cause uninterested players frustration. In other words, the items and benefits ought to be earnable in-game and not exclusive to micro-transaction purchases, unless they're purely cosmetic.

As for pricing itself, that's a particular friction whose waters you'll have to carefully navigate. There are too many X factors for me to highlight here — everything from development hours and team size, to estimated longevity and content expansion strategies, to the very form factor or gaming platform. A free-to-play game might make a mint while a triple-A-priced premium game sags from hopeful blockbuster to glaringly lackluster. I've written before about first principles, and that goes for brand integrity as well. Keep a clear sight on how you can best serve your customers while being in the best financial position to push forward with new projects.

Charging money is a friction, make no mistake. But it's a beautiful, necessary friction that makes the game possible and empowers you to make more.

HYPE, NOT HYPERBOLE (PART DEUX)

Don't worry, this isn't a retread. As I've noted before, the purpose of pre-launch hype is to generate brand attention and then amass momentum, allowing fans to not only become excited at the prospect of release but also to spread their own joy for the project. Brand fans love nothing more than to share and exult in their favorite companies and projects, whether that's for a TV show like Community or a video game like *Middle Earth: Shadow of Mordor*.

A game's launch is the time to weigh the reality of the game experience versus the nurtured expectations of the fan base. It's a strange alchemy, because you need to stoke the fires of interest without burning down your brand with false expectation.

Making matters worse for studios and publishers is the enormous influence that the average gamer can have. The first people to stumble upon janky graphics and creature clipping bugs can see their videos of that footage going viral, altering their perceived place in the order of the universe, if only for a few days. The effects are magnified a hundred or thousand (or ten thousand) times if the person capturing the game's disappointments is a prominent voice among the fan base.

It's not only a matter of studio- or publisher-side misrepresentation, willful or otherwise, but one of stepping up and addressing the fan base. At a time when all the digital social barriers have fallen and anyone can tweet and reach out to anyone else, honesty is not the only currency. Developers, marketers, and brand managers must also be forthright and transparent. Few video games released can stand up to a player's imagined version of it, particularly if that fantasized ideal has been gestating over the course of years and was well-fertilized with actual footage and walkthroughs of exciting gameplay that never came to be.

And most studios and marketers know this. Sometimes, it's better to hold back a little — to let hype be more even-tempered,

so that reviews and word of mouth at launch really break the expectation bubble of players and give them a reason to sit up and take special notice.

D-DAY

So far, we've talked about the prospect of and speculations orbiting launch day, but what happens on The Glorious Day itself? At least, I hope it's glorious. No one likes seeing a project fail, least of all those of us who've been deeply invested in forging brand successes over the years.

Your day one strategy is critical. Things will go wrong. (Things always go wrong.) After all, no plan survives first contact, and when it comes to creative pursuits, all results seem uncertain, the outcomes only obvious in hindsight.

On the optimistic side, prepare to be overwhelmed. You can't predict where in the world your players live and you can't know just how successful your marketing has been. Research and advisory firm Forrester found that 34 per cent of website visitors will abandon that site if they have a poor experience. That's why you have to be ready to host a global audience, at a global scale. That said, it's not practical to establish a global network of server centers, unless you're launching an MMO and have excellent data to suggest you can (and must) sustain such an investment in financial, technological, and human resources. Instead, turn to a company that has invested in a reliable and flexible CDN (content delivery network) infrastructure to deal with the massive influx, no matter where they're from or what device they're using.

You'll also need to manage your fan base gracefully and with alacrity, whether distributing highly sought-after beta codes or kicking off a midnight launch. Your hardcore fans will likely be the first to complain (loudly) if your servers struggle to manage the crush. To avoid this nightmare scenario, prioritize visitor

traffic and give your early access and preorder first-in-line fans an excellent online and connectivity experience while managing expectations properly for everyone else.

It's reported that 50 per cent of visitors abandon websites after just four seconds of waiting for a page to load. Gamers might hold out a little longer, but do you really want their first engagement with your game to be coming from a place of frustration? Again, this is a technical challenge, and you'd better be using the best infrastructure solutions possible to make sure the very first experience with your brand is just as good as the game itself.

FAILURE TO LAUNCH

We all know what a resounding success looks like: Finely laid marketing groundwork, longstanding momentum, a generous and high-utility feedback loop between early players and the studio, excellent release timing, groundswells of enthusiasm, early access "let's play" and demo play-through videos already out there, a product with a game experience that hits every note teased and promised, big sales across retail and digital channels, and consistent glowing reviews across media.

Cry "Hallelujah!" and sound the silver trumpets.

Interestingly, few players notice a good launch. They'll often acknowledge a fantastic (or at least loud and explosive) launch, but they'll definitely take note of a botched or poorly executed release, almost gleefully, it seems.

And so, on the stormier side of the fence, we also know — all too well — failure, or the perception of failure. I say perception because an excellent game, released to solid reviews and strong sales figures, might still be deemed a disappointment by a publisher looking to have eked out better ratings and revenues, or by the media who had come through the course of

development to expect more.

Of course, the prospect of failure looms throughout production. Funny how we don't anticipate success in quite the same way or with the same weight that we envision failure. Regardless, I think it's important to discuss failure, its causes, and the consequences. I'll be brief, since this subject could occupy an entire book, and video game orthodoxy changes fast. What might constitute a design failure at the time I'm writing this might be a stepping stone for future game experience considerations in another year or two — or by the time you're reading this.

The word "failure" occupies a special place in our cultural psyche. Humans are intensely failure-averse, despite the fact that some of the most extraordinary people on the planet credit their past failings for their eventual success. We'll fight tooth and nail not to lose $20, but we often overlook simple opportunities to use that same energy to make $100.

In the video game space, failures can come from any number of places and cause all sorts of player-frustrating frictions. Always-online restrictions might feel onerous or be poorly calibrated and integrated, resulting in long wait times as the game wrestles its way through the crowded corridors of the internet. A section of your game that was showcased at an expo was removed and a backlash ensues. Controller responsiveness might be kludgy, or actions are mapped to buttons and keys that flummox players who are accustomed to a different, more standard setup.

Some of these examples of frictions are on the player's end of things and not the developer's, and you might think there's little you can do about them. However, in a previous chapter, I wrote about a *Call of Duty 4* player who needed a specialized controller scheme and the studio pushed out an official setup for him and others like him. In other scenarios, studios can let enthusiastic players modify their game to suit their play styles and desired displays and user experiences. Take *The Elder*

Scrolls V: Skyrim. The modding community for that brand is enormous, and those modders are encouraged and supported not only by other players but by the studio itself, Bethesda. Modding both fuels and inspires studios' consumers while at the same time reducing the resources the company needs during the sustain phase of their brand. It's a fantastic win-win, embraced by all parties involved, and that sort of strategy is a big part of what the next chapter is about, which is post-launch player engagement and brand continuity.

But I was talking about failure. So how do you come back from a less-than-stellar release?

HOW TO RECOVER

Stumbles and mistakes during the launch of your game may seem monumental and insurmountable, but they rarely are, as long as there's a will and the resources to correct course. Always-online server-side issues can be remediated. Weapon or character class imbalances can be patched.

Let's use a made-up game from the last chapter as an example. *Delve Master* is the game I described as "a ludicrously paced two- to four-player local co-op retro platformer that uses voxel technology to allow you to destroy and build your way through a surrealist world."

All right, so what went wrong with this hypothetical game's hypothetical launch?

We can see that *Delve Master* is a local multiplayer game, which means you need people to game with. And that's not an option; it's multiplayer-essential. However, that's not necessarily a bad thing. After all, *TowerFall* has a dominating multiplayer focus and it's received plenty of accolades because of it. That said, *TowerFall* was built around the promise of party gaming and was, at first, a six-month exclusive on a local multiplayer-supporting

style of console, the Ouya. The dev for *TowerFall* had developed his game with that play scenario explicitly in mind, and the game marketing and media coverage had cemented that aspect into the budding player base from the get-go.

Sadly, *Delve Master* didn't do that, and it came as an unpleasant surprise to some customers that the game lacked a single-player experience at launch. That could be a sales-breaking point of friction, but the devs of *Delve Master* were tracking feedback, watching early demo play, and reading previews by media and game industry influencers. As they saw the common criticism, they worked like mad to roll out a free expansion that provided both rudimentary bots instead of other players, as well as a simple but essential single-player campaign mode. Follow-up articles and coverage of the game made strong mention of this expansion, and players returned to check out and take advantage of that experience.

Another issue with that hypothetical game? There were only four characters (the maximum number of players possible at one time), and none of them were female. Recognizing their gaffe, the devs quickly re-jigged and modified their character models and released a patch — for free, of course — that was comprised exclusively of four distinct female characters that could be chosen from the main game's menu and played alongside any characters, original or new. They not only apologized for the omission but asked a few prominent female Twitch streamers to run a live "let's play" game session for their subscribers as well as fans of the game, a win-win for both the devs of the game and the streamers.

There are many more scenarios that could lead to a perceived or actual failure, but those provide a taste. While it's absolutely true that some issues can't be recovered from post-launch, the above examples (and lots of others you can think of) prove that there are plenty of ways to get back into your players' good graces and show your dedication to them and the spirit of your game.

GETTING IN THE GAME

Finally. You've got in your hands the game you've been waiting years for. You tear the cellophane, crack the case, slot the disc, and . . . "Game is now updating. Please wait." And these days? That update could well be 20 gigs or more. (But on the positive side, you *did* say you were looking for an excuse to start reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, right?)

This is a technical friction that can turn a fan into a resolute cynic — and a proactive critic. Back when I first got access to the internet, it would take 40 to 60 seconds for, say, a photograph to fully appear on my screen. (And if someone picked up the phone, game over entirely.) I would watch the resolution sharpen, starting from the top, the horizontal loading cascading slowly downward like a page coming out of a printer. Nowadays, I have to remind myself to be patient when waiting that second and a half for a smartphone app to start up. Times change, but human behaviors usually don't.

Comedy sketch-style joking about our entitlement culture aside, one fact is plain and unavoidable: People don't like waiting, and they don't think they should have to. If you make them wait when it comes to them engaging with your product, you'll lose them to something that gives them the satisfaction of faster, more immediate access. Gamers want to click and play.

And sure, they might come back, but they also might not. Increasingly, players aren't, even after purchasing your product. They've got too many other options to feel they have to wait around. I myself only have to glance at my Steam library and laugh with good-humored embarrassment: I've bought dozens and dozens of games, but I've only downloaded a quarter of them, and I've only played half of those. Obviously, pricing considerations enter into the psychological calculus of whether people use their purchases, but still.

So how do you get players to actually play your game? Large updates and patches are especially problematic because games *need* updates and quick-fix patches. You can't get out of this one. This is an unavoidably harmful friction. However, it can be shifted to become unavoidably beneficial. That depends on the nature of the patch, whether it's expected, and how swift it is.

Let's start with the first update most gamers will see.

DAY-ONE PATCHING

No game is perfect. Even more important, no game *can* be perfect. If the choice is between perfecting ad infinitum and releasing and updating as needed, well . . . it's just not a choice, is it? An unreleased game increasingly costs you money. A launched flawed game makes money.

Enter the rise and normalization of the day one patch.

Patches and updates are essential. Back in the 1980s when I played console games, there were no patches or updates. When I bought the original *Legend of Zelda*, that was it; that was the game. SEGA didn't release any updates for *Sonic the Hedgehog* in the very early 1990s, in part because it couldn't and partly because it got right those particular game elements SEGA deemed absolutely essential.

Minimum viable product had to be maximized viable product back in the day.

That said, games were also simpler back then, and companies making them had more time to polish them and ensure thorough QA. The bugs that could be inadvertently introduced were a bit easier to find, replicate, and eliminate. Honestly, I can only recall a few small errors from old NES and SEGA games, and none of the ones I personally happened to stumble across were in any way game-breaking.

But as internet access became ubiquitous and broadband speeds turned from a trickle to a deluge, certainly in geek and nerd households, always-on gaming experiences were no longer seen as an impediment and were no stranger than having an always-plugged-in toaster.

This leads me back to what I mentioned before; namely, that day-one patches have been normalized. This is a good thing. This is what makes it possible to shift updating and patching from unavoidably harmful frictions and convert them into unavoidably beneficial ones. Players know patches and updates are required. They're not being caught off-guard by the mere fact that you need to interrupt or pre-empt their play experience.

RECORD SCRATCH

Just then, I purposefully used a word to see if it would make you stop for a second. I'll draw your attention to it: "interrupt." A *disruption* can force companies out of status quo plateaus and stir up progress, propelling an industry or society onward and upward. An *interruption*, though, is generally undesirable — very undesirable. Imagine, if you will, sitting down at your favorite restaurant and preparing to go to town on the fantastic meal that was just set before you, still sizzling. You've waited 40 minutes and it looks like it was worth it, but as you go to take your first delicious bite, someone jams a sign in between your mouth and your fork.

"STOP. Meal must now update."

I could feel my blood pressure rising just writing that.

When it comes to play experiences, be very careful not to introduce these record scratch moments — incidents that ruin immersion, pacing, or the flow of the game. Such interruptions include untenably long load screens or sudden, jarring quick-time events in a story-focused game. Does

your hacking mini-game fit with the theme and style of your designed play experience, or does it leave your players scratching their heads in the first instance and then ignoring all other engagement opportunities?

Don't jam a stop sign in your players' faces when they're heavily invested in wanting to love your product. Smooth the way for them; don't interject friction. There are solutions, both technical and design-centric, that can greatly reduce or hide some of these frictions. You just have to prioritize them. Are you using the best CDN? Have you built your game to allow seamless sideloads?

THE DEATH OF CURIOSITY

I could just as easily have included this topic in the previous chapter, but it works well here as it deals directly with game play, and usually game play as it unfolds early on.

It's become a sticking point for some players — mostly older gamers like me — that modern games involve too much hand-holding. "It's too easy," they lament. "Why even bother playing and trying things out if the game just tells you exactly what you need to do every time something new is introduced?" These gamers are used to video games that were made to drop the fresh player right into the game, without any walkthroughs, voice-overs, cutscenes, or introductions. I'll give you an example:

Fade in: A simple room. There's a character in the center of the screen. There's a sword nearby, glinting and easy to spot. On the other side of the sword is the one exit that opens onto an enormous world.

In this scenario, there's zero hand-holding. A player will test movement, press available buttons to see what happens, move the character to take the only thing presented — in this

example, a sword — and then wander through the only exit from the bland, incentive-free room. The contrast between that room and the vast and sprawling world beyond was stark and obvious. It would be like walking out of your bathroom to find yourself in the middle of a city you've never been to or seen before. Good luck!

Now, contrary to how straightforward this seems, it can be tough to qualify whether that example I just gave is an avoidably beneficial friction or an avoidably harmful one. Since that example is basically the start of the original *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), and that game launched one of the most popular and best-selling franchises in video game history, we might feel compelled to say that it's obviously a beneficial friction!

Again, though, it's all a matter of when you first embarked upon your gaming life and what age you were, your expectations of game design and video game precedents, the complexity of a game's mechanics, and the expectations built up throughout the product's development and marketing cycles.

Tutorials are the norm in game design nowadays. But why did our expectations of design and our introductions to game experiences change — or even *have to* change? One of the biggest drivers of the need for more curated introductions to game play and progression is the current complexity of controllers and game mechanics.

There were two buttons on many original game controllers, plus a movement pad. Easy peasy. Compare that to a standard controller nowadays, like those for the Xbox One or Playstation 4. Each has two analog sticks for movement and camera control, four thumb buttons, two triggers, and two bumpers. Oh, and a D-pad, which was the old movement pad from those bygone days of the '80s. And some have touchscreens. Did I mention you also use the analog sticks as buttons?

It can be easy to see why most contemporary games include a tutorial or early mechanics walkthrough.

But now we get to the real issue: How intrusive is this set-up? Does it call attention to itself or is the experience nestled into play itself? Does the game start with rudimentary puzzles and enemies, allowing you to come to grips (pun intended) with movement and basic actions, or do you feel hemmed into a spectator-style "here's how you push buttons," blatant, in-your-face tutorial?

Some fans, both core and casual, bemoan that more intrusive and immersion-breaking tutorial as being the first of a thousand cuts that has led, generally, to the "death of curiosity" in video game engagement and interaction. Options are plentiful, though. The easiest is to ask the player at startup whether they'd like a tutorial, or make it possible to skip the tutorial at any point. You could include a sort of companion or device that provides your players with an in-game, narrative-appropriate information and reference resource. This might take the form of the Ghost in *Destiny*, a holographic heads-up display that can be queried or that will alert you if you're doing something ridiculous, or something like a souped-up version of the Pip-Boy personal device from the *Fallout* series that might provide maps and logs of past events and recordings.

At the heart of it, you want to construct your play experience such that the players are teaching themselves through the joy of discovery and during actual play . . . or they have the strong and still-immersed sense that they are. This keeps tutorial-style engagement in the beneficial quadrant of frictions and not in the harmful one.

DANGER, W1LL R0B1N50N, DANGER!

Beyond the actual game itself is a vast and complex — dare I say borderline inscrutable — *system* of systems that conspire to deliver your customers' gaming experience. This includes your game marketing sites and digital storefronts; the delivery of games and downloadable content (DLC); the

essential acceleration of data, including updates and patch files; intelligent match-making algorithms for competitive multiplayer; and maintaining up-to-the-second leaderboards and refreshed scores and rankings.

The ever-growing and -shifting data involved is extraordinary and, for some companies, overwhelming. And the better you manage it, the less your players have any idea that such systems even exist to serve them.

Accompanying such information infrastructure is the need to secure everything from homepages to forums, game server logins, and player identity data, no matter where in the world your players are or what devices they're playing on. Companies like yours have faced tons of threats: more than 65 per cent have come up against DDoS attacks, 38 per cent have known the threat of account hacks, over 35 per cent have seen attempted attacks against their websites and storefronts, and more than 17 per cent have faced attempts at content theft.

People, gamers not least of all, live their lives online, and they're invested deeply in digital spaces. You possess user names, addresses, purchase histories, credit card data, and more. I don't need to tell you the potential for loss of brand integrity as a result of hacking and theft, yet only 66 per cent of game companies proactively budget to safeguard against security threats.

Data security and information assurance architecture are critical. One of the biggest causes of player churn and game abandonment is brand insecurity, whether known or perceived. More than any other friction, a data breach or hack is not only disruptive, it's abortive. Players will either go on hiatus (and possibly never look back) or stop playing entirely, at enormous cost to the affected company, and prioritize playing games on another platform, at least until they feel confident in the company, its hardware, and its ability to protect their most vital resource: the players themselves.

Of course, there are game challenges beyond the technical frictions of data acceleration, assured connectivity, and security, and we've certainly looked at a few of those. But it's really important to know that it's not all about what's *in* the game itself. Some of the really contentious points of friction are found in the unseen technical and digital spaces that underlie the play experience. Give your player base the fast, flawless experience they expect. You honestly can't afford not to.

All right, let's shift gears a bit from technology enablement and data assurance to . . .

STOP THE PRESSES!

On a dreary day in November 2007, a dozen of the most influential and discriminating gaming bloggers flew into Seattle, Washington. All of them had taken time off from their real-life jobs and their families at the request of one of the largest corporations in the world. They had taken three days out of their personal schedules to spend eight hours locked in a fluorescent-lit conference room. After this, they spent a rainy evening outside a Best Buy pumping up a crowd of consumers until the wee hours of the morning.

They weren't there for a job offer or for a secret government mission (more's the pity, huh?). They were there to preview *Halo 3*. They were recruited into the marketing effort with the simple promise that they would get to see some cool stuff and that everyone would know they got to see it first.

So what if your product isn't an eagerly anticipated video game like one in the *Halo* franchise? What if you are the brand manager for a game from a smaller studio? Well, the example still applies: Give some gaming enthusiasts early access and involve them as early as possible in your marketing campaign. Why not ship out some beta codes for them to share with their own communities weeks before your game goes on sale? Why

not organize an event to get them all together to ask questions and commiserate? If you've done your homework and have identified the right evangelists, there's a good chance that most of those enthusiasts are going to tell anyone and everyone they can about your new title. I mean, why not? They're one of the few people in the world to try something that no one else has. Ah, the power of "I have something and you don't . . . but, man, lemme tell you all about it."

Several times a year, dozens upon dozens of online video feeds stream live coverage of midnight launch events for some of the biggest games of the year. In all but a few cases, the video feeds are not sponsored in any way by the publishers and developers of those games. Nope, those video feeds are initiated, funded, and hosted by your dedicated customers. Established bloggers and upstart vloggers and video-makers dedicate their own time and resources to spend evenings at their local Best Buy or Target with cameras at the ready, all so they can infect their fellow fans with the same kind of enthusiasm and joy they feel by being at the launch of a beloved or anticipated title. These fans treat retail launches like red-carpet movie premieres. Having attended several of these fan experiences ourselves, we can tell you that the passion is palpable. Even the best multiplayer games can be downright isolating when compared to the feeling of camaraderie and fellowship you're bathed in when standing with hundreds of other ecstatic fans awaiting a new and much-anticipated release.

The leaders who build these live streams want to be a part of something special. Many of them are also looking to get noticed. They want to have their own identities associated with these cultural events. They go to great lengths to make sure the world sees the commitment and passion on their sleeves. It's in your power to deny them or empower them. It's in your best interests to make sure that excited fans overall and brand leaders specifically have every avenue opened for them to discuss your game with and expand your brand community.

It takes as much (and sometimes more) effort to close yourself off to fan communities. Let them sing your praises and keep your carefully built momentum growing, right into and through your game launch, as well as those important weeks after.

EVERYONE'S A CRITIC

It's impossible to talk about a title launch without discussing the other side of attention: reviews, scores, and criticisms. These are vital and inescapable elements of your product release, but they can each be painful and introduce points of friction for potential customers, affecting how they view the product and are converted to buyers in the wake of your game's release.

Critics can be attracted early, just as fans and community leaders are. In fact, many critics separate themselves from the fan base by virtue of their harsh or critical appraisal, even in the face of populism and raving enthusiasm. And populism can go both ways. There are plenty of people who are happy to hate something because others love it, especially when they know how social media can bump "the haters." If a game has a 9/10 rating across 17 sites and one reviewer gave it a 6/10, can you really tell me you aren't going to click through to that article and see what's going on? It's a form of engagement via provocation.

Also, you might think reviewers are the same as critics, but they're not. Well, not always. Their role isn't to draw attention to specific mechanics or themes, or to contrast styles or influences. Reviewers typically look at the game overall, and categorically or in ways they think other gamers do, so they can describe and critique it for prospective buyers. They're looking for a summative view, not to deconstruct the game experience.

Both reviewers and critics are crucial to inbound and passive marketing (after all, they're doing it for you), but reviews and critiques can go off the rails if your game is hard to understand or leaves too much room for interpretation. Even when you see positive feedback that misunderstands your intentions, it can be hard to hear. This happened to Jonathan Blow, the creator of *Braid*, which is considered one of the first breakout indie games. He was pleased that players enjoyed the game, but he became distraught and pensive over the fact that most people didn't seem to understand its underlying core, which was an artistic and abstracted expression of Mr. Blow himself.

THE TREE AMONG THE WEEDS

To dig a little deeper into the issue of sprawling discussions and rigorous deconstructions of your newly launched brand, it can seem really hard to uncover the valid and helpful criticisms among all the noise that fans across online platforms are capable of generating. Trusted news sites and your own brand communities are excellent places to start, though.

The idea that no criticism is worth listening to if it's negative is, let's face it, absolutely ridiculous. We live at a time when a small quick-fix patch can potentially resolve a critical game play issue that's plaguing a prominent subset of your players. You need to know that a particular problem exists and possess the capacity and resources to address it. Again, having a reliable and fast content delivery plan can keep you responsive to your player base and their evolving needs — and earn you some serious brownie points from those who are watching. And when it comes to being critical, someone's always watching how you perform and respond to surges in player feedback.

SO . . . SUCCESS?

Let's not jump the gun, huh? Success isn't determined at launch, but rather over the entire life cycle of your product. Keeping the players you have and growing entrenched fan communities over time is what you're all about.

CHAPTER 5: SUSTAIN IT
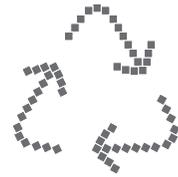
Your company just spent untold millions promoting the launch of a new product and now, just a few weeks later, every last shred of attention is being focused on the *next* big project or launch. But what about your customers? Not everyone bought the game during launch week. Not to mention that the people who *did* buy it just might want to know what else you have in store for them — new content, merchandise, sequels.

You did leave someone behind to watch for and support stragglers, right?

"But we can't afford to have someone nurturing last week's release. That sucker is old news, baby!" See, that kind of cynicism just burns fans' butts, and you're completely ignoring a group that is willing to help you out. Your core fans aren't about to abandon your product just because your entire marketing

team is ready to move on. Those core fans can make all the difference during this critical time. You could think of them as your brand nannies, in a way. You're thinking about how you're going to make your next baby, and they're figuring out how they can spend more and more time loving and nurturing the baby they already have.

To give you an example: Emerson Spartz was barely out of diapers himself when Harry Potter and his merry band of wizards burst onto the scene in 1999. Well, okay, not quite diapers, but he was just 12 years old. The bright and crafty young home-schooled pupil was a fan of J. K. Rowling's freshman effort *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. He enjoyed the story so much that he decided to start up a *Harry Potter* fan website.

Fast-forward a few years and Spartz has now earned hundreds of thousands of dollars in advertising revenue because of the overwhelming popularity of his expanded MuggleNet empire. His site, run mostly by volunteers, is considered important enough for the film studio behind the franchise movies, Warner Brothers, to treat it as a trusted partner in the promotion of the films. Anthony Ziccardi, vice-president of rival publishing house Pocket Books, has said "The *Potter* [fan] sites really stand out — they're like a marketing machine in and of themselves."

The industry wasn't always so welcoming, however. At one point in 2007, Warner Brothers tried using their lawyer muscle to edge Potter fan sites out of existence. At the time, the movie studio felt that the fan sites were flagrantly violating the studio's copyright.

Fan reaction to the bullying was — here comes the twist ending — decidedly negative. After countless hours of dedication and hard work, these fan site leaders weren't asking for money, though some of them were lucky enough to make it. They mostly just wanted to spread their enjoyment to and connect with other like-minded fans, and to be appreciated by official channels. They wanted emails returned and they

wanted a little bit of access. The fan followers of these sites wanted to be engaged.

After a marketing blitz surrounding a release, there's a tendency for everything to go very dark and very silent, very quickly. Marketers who aren't entrenched fans of their own products don't always realize this. Even avid fans within the marketing team can be lulled into a false sense of fulfillment because they're privy to information the public won't see until the next marketing campaign for a sequel or related brand product. Hardcore fans aren't so lucky, and fan communities are usually the only way for them to feed their need for brand engagement and reach out to their fellow devotees.

In the *Harry Potter* example, Warner Brothers relented in their scorched-earth campaign. The studio realized there were far better things to do with their resources than fight their eager fans. The studio pulled a 180 and now seeks feedback and participation from the hardcore fan site leaders. After all, there's great profit in not being perceived as a combative, hard-nosed corporation. As The *Seattle Times* columnist Hillel Italie pointed out in an article on the subject, "Websites helped start the international Potter obsession and kept it going when Rowling took three years — 2000-2003 — to write Potter V."

There isn't a marketing department on the planet that would be willing to devote a team — let alone one numbering in the thousands — to fanning the fan flames for three years while a new product is being developed. The fact is, be it the *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, or *Sex and the City* franchises, the only dedicated marketing force a brand can hang on to during off years is a band of rabid core fanatics. Just think of *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*. Those fans became intergenerational before those series were brought back, and they were only restored to prominence because the fan base was established and primed — self-primed.

Few industries in the world have historically had such an on-again, off-again relationship with their customers as Hollywood. The movie business can sometimes be a cynical one, but they've come to respect the power of their customers and you need to be doing the same, no matter what your business segment might be. Even if you're marketing a product that's not a hit video game, movie, book, or TV show and doesn't take three years to complete, the lesson of dedicated core fans still matters.

When it comes time to ask your fans to re-up, you will really be hoping that you've built up a community after your last release. Getting someone to buy a product based on a simple feature list is downright easy compared to the effort it will take to reignite the interest of someone who has already quite literally been there and done that.

Losing customers is easy. Getting customers is hard. But regaining a customer you've outright lost? That can be damn near impossible. Put another way, a fire is easy to stoke to life from embers, but quite a lot more difficult if you've wandered off and left it to become a pile of cold ash.

I want to point out that you also don't have to irritate a customer to lose their interest. Sometimes, a mediocre, barely passable effort will be enough to lull a customer into a sort of brand coma wherein they stop hearing and feeling your message. That customer may not storm out and fire off nasty tweets or write scathing forum posts, but they are no less lost to you.

While we assume that all competent and ethical marketers would never sell a product that does not deliver on its promises, a product doing what it says it will do is not enough to keep customers in love with you during active marketing hiatuses.

And, again, this is exactly where community comes in. Or, to be more accurate, this is where a well-established community-

building plan really pays off. You don't want to start building community only when it's time to ask your customers for more money. It's disingenuous — or will feel like it — and your customers will roll their eyes, mutter under their breath, and move on.

The best way to sell someone on a sequel or product add-on is to make sure they never stop enjoying the original. With a movie that lasts two hours or a game that can be played for eight or 10 hours, there's only one consistent way to keep them plugged in: community. A strong multiplayer mode can, of course, keep people engaged in a game for months on end. This can be extended to years if you're frequently updating the experience or, better yet, if you lend the fans the tools to make their own new experiences and share them.

"STAY ON TARGET!"

Very briefly, this leads me right into something I've said throughout this book: Don't lose sight of your original marketing (or design) goals and your player-engagement first principles. Once you understand the reasons you were able to earn the trust and loyalty of brand fans, it's possible to replicate that success when you encounter inevitable frictions, whether related to marketing communication, release date delays, game-stopping and player-frustrating bugs, or a slower-than-expected content release schedule.

THE *HALO* EFFECT

Bungie, the developer that soared to legendary status with *Halo*, cut their teeth on a cult favorite, *Marathon*. That game offered several hours of proto-*Halo* sci-fi shooter fun, but more important, it shipped with the ability to customize your own scenarios and maps. Once the initial campaign was

done, *Marathon* players spent years cavorting in playgrounds designed and built by other fans. Some maps simulated real-world spaces, while others mimicked moments and landmarks from famous movies and television shows.

The first time I ever ran around inside a Star Trek ship was not in an officially licensed game from Paramount, it was in a fan-created *Marathon* map called "Enterprise." Intellectual property issues aside, many of the shared cultural experiences uncovered within the *Marathon* user interface were delivered to us by our peers.

If we look to *Halo*, Bungie's first mega-hit, we can see how this penchant for community-building was applied even to a product that featured zero customizability and no multiplayer modes. Long accustomed to answering fan mail and participating in online forums, Bungie was immediately eager to participate in forum discussions on their own site and let their fans know that they were constantly in tune with their needs and wants. Bungie was able to take *Halo* beyond the single-player experience that came in the box and into the realm of online fan clubs.

One of the dangers you'll face when asking customers to open their wallets for a new iteration of your product or brand is that the new extension might not be something customers wanted. This is especially true when dealing with an active and involved community that has come to feel a sense of ownership over your brand. When developing a new product or add-on, you will always be inclined (with good reason) to try to head in new directions. Even if the first product was a huge hit, you will want to explore what untapped features or qualities you can integrate into newer versions that might get both existing fans and new customers to take notice.

Be careful, though, not to stumble into New Coke territory.

New Coke is the name that pops up the most when discussing marketing to loyal customers. It is one of the most famous marketing missteps of the 20th century. In the mid-

1980s, the venerable Coca-Cola company was feeling intense pressure applied by their age-old nemesis PepsiCo. The Pepsi brand was being embraced by young consumers, and although Coke was still the leading carbonated soft drink on the block, Pepsi was catching up. This was costing Coca-Cola valuable market and mindshare.

In addition to celebrity endorsements and a youth-focused ad campaign (I can't be the only one who still remembers the Cindy Crawford Pepsi commercial from the very early '90s), Pepsi was giving stomachaches to Coke marketers with the success of their "Pepsi Challenge." In widely publicized outreach efforts, Pepsi was being chosen overwhelmingly by consumers in blind taste-tests that pitted Pepsi against Coke. Testers commented that Pepsi was sweeter and tastier than "the other soda." All of this triggered Coca-Cola to take a logical action: change the flavor of Coke to compete with the hip new soda.

New Coke is known for being a meteoric flop, but what a lot of people forget, or perhaps never knew, is that New Coke tasted fantastic. Market research showed that blind taste-testers preferred it to original Coke and to Pepsi.

So why aren't we all drinking New Coke today? Taste was not the leading factor for the loyalty of longstanding Coke fans. Coca-Cola die-hards identified themselves with the brand as a cultural statement. Coke was the original, and it was authentic. New Coke was a pretender. Having erupted in the now-seemingly ancient 1980s, the New Coke debacle is a pre-World Wide Web example of consumer communities at work. Angry letters poured in by the thousands and derisive anecdotes spread from mouth to mouth (stopping by the ears in between). Coke fans didn't care that the new formula supposedly "tasted better;" they cared that the brand they loved was being dismantled. At least, that's how it felt.

The New Coke story is a cautionary tale, though not one about the dangers of experimentation. You have to try

new things, but as I said above, you should always strive to understand what spurs your most dedicated fans to align themselves with your company or product. It isn't always about the "features" of your product; it's often about the intimate emotional relationship your consumers have developed with you. The beauty of all the new social media tools is that the intimacy of that relationship no longer has to obscure your view of it. Communities are now willing to share their thoughts and feelings with you if you'll listen . . . and even regardless of whether you'll listen. However, as I've mentioned a number of times, fans want recognition and to feel that they're being taken into consideration when you develop and market your gaming projects.

SUPPORTED, NOT PAID FOR

When fans of the *Tekken* fighting game franchise arrived at the 2009 San Diego Comic-Con for the *Tekken 6* Tournament, they found an unusual group of uniformed staff waiting for them inside the basement of the convention center. More than a dozen young men in black and red shirts were handling all of the crowd control, contestant registration, and announcement duties.

These were not Bandai Namco (formerly Namco Bandai) staff members, nor were they with the convention organizers. This group was led by a man named Mark Julio, who just happens to be the webmaster for one of the most popular *Tekken* fan sites in the world. The crew in black and red were all volunteers, officially sanctioned and supported by Bandai Namco of America.

Bandai Namco enthusiastically jumped into the community-building business. It had a great base to work with, considering that it's produced some of the most beloved games in the history of the industry, including *Pac-Man*, *Soulcalibur*, and *Tekken*. Long before Bandai Namco were looking to build a community strategy to help them develop their brand and smooth over

potential points of friction down the road, the fans were already pouring their hearts into fan forums, tournaments, fan art, and gameplay guides.

I've got to say up front that I'm biased, but *Tekken 6* is a fantastic game with lots of strong visual assets to help market it. But it was also being released in a competitive holiday window during a legendary worldwide economic recession. The press was focusing much of its attention on *Halo ODST* and *Modern Warfare 2*, both triple-A sequels with 10-ton marketing budgets and the powerhouses that are Microsoft and Activision behind them. Dozens of high-profile games saw their release dates pushed from holiday 2009 into the typically lukewarm first quarter of the following year just to avoid what many suspected would be a bloodbath at the registers.

Bandai Namco knew that if they wanted to carve out a space for *Tekken 6* during this hot zone, they would need to go beyond the series' pedigree and appeal to modern gamers' desire to be involved. They would need to start a revolution. Mark Julio was a perfect candidate to help them rally the troops.

Mark founded SDTekken in April 1999 while he and a few local San Diego friends were looking forward to the release of *Tekken Tag Tournament*. Mark wanted to figure out an easy way to get all of his fellow *Tekken* fans organized for regular gameplay sessions and competitive tournaments. Like most online community leaders, Mark spent years without getting noticed by the powers that be at Bandai Namco. Eventually, SDTekken became a major organizer of *Tekken* events and started hosting a yearly tournament at the San Diego Comic-Con.

SDTekken is yet another example of how freely the community will run without your involvement or intervention. Mark Julio was fulfilling what could arguably be considered a core marketing function, and he was doing it without the sanction or assistance of the company. On the other hand, Bandai Namco was missing out on opportunities for coordinated marketing

planning because they weren't actively involved. What Bandai Namco did at San Diego Comic-Con 2009 was signal a new era of partnership. Instead of just saying "we approve of your fan effort," they asked Mark Julio and his followers to be a partner in the success of the game.

More than that, Mark was hired by Bandai Namco in 2016 to be a brand and community advisor for *Tekken*. Other companies have also identified prominent and high-value community leaders and hired them on to manage or coordinate communities. Josh "Lore" Allen was hired into the *World of Warcraft* community management team by Blizzard Entertainment for his knowledge of the game, which had been on display for years through his involvement at Tankspot.com and putting out the shows *Legendary* and *After Dark*, all about *World of Warcraft*.

To get back to the *Tekken* example, SDTekken is not alone. Bandai Namco has reached out to nearly a dozen influential online community leaders and succeeded in getting them to throw their full effort behind the game. The partnership isn't a perfectly scripted honeymoon. Community members have voiced concerns and openly asked questions about product announcements in public. These partners have acted in ways that would get a PR staff member fired or reprimanded. (I speak from experience.) But they also carry a deep level of credibility with their followers and the broader enthusiast audiences that watch these communities carefully. A traditional hired gun can rarely hope to come close to being taken this seriously by skeptical and often-reactionary core fans.

By partnering with these community leaders, Bandai Namco used that credibility to boost the profile and positive energy surrounding *Tekken 6*.

Getting your vocal community leaders to partner with you for the success of your brand can seem like an odd fit. Getting average customers to participate with your marketing effort can trigger thoughts of the twin evils of customer manipulation and

force. Some in the industry think the only way to get people to do what you want is to trick them or threaten them. To the most cynical among us, delicately constructed facades or iron-fisted coercion often seem like the only formal ways for a company to trigger action. There are many different manifestations of the twin evils: bribes, blacklists, job offers, finger-wagging, public humiliation, review guides, exclusives.

As you might be able to gather, I recommend something altogether different, something potentially controversial: ask them for help.

Asking for help can seem utterly mundane and pedestrian when compared to the complex maneuverings of an influence machine. We in the gaming industry are in the business of influencing people with pretty spokesmodels and savvy spokespeople, flashy graphics, high-priced stunts, and aggressive promises.

Yet in the world of the empowered customer, you will find that sometimes asking will deliver far superior results. As Bandai Namco proved with SDTekken, if your product is good, there will be fans lining up at the door to offer their advice, insight, influence, and help. Some bloggers and aspiring journalists may be taken aback by your request. There are no doubt people who participate in your community outreach efforts only because they want access in order to report back to their followers. For them, partnering with you might seem inappropriate because of their self-defined duty to be impartial. But many others will jump at the chance to be trusted members of a fan community.

Not everyone wants to be Edward R. Murrow. Some people just want their favorite brands to know they exist, to care about their voice, and to be humble enough to ask them for their help. Early access to a game or a beta key for a much-anticipated gaming title might not hurt either.

JUST . . . ASK

I recommend you have two fully formed "online" PR campaigns: one for journalists and another for fans. Let the fans know that you want their honest feedback, but that you also want their help. Make it clear that if you deliver on your side of the deal to be open, transparent, and collaborative, then you want them to tell their friends and spread the good word. Balance and impartiality have their place in the marketing and PR mix, and you should guard those jealously if you want to retain credibility, but there's also a place for unabashed fandom.

While helping to manage the Xbox MVP program for Microsoft, I found we were starting to run into a tricky problem. Always sensitive to the PR objectives of the program, we focused heavily on reach when evaluating inductees. We felt that the best way to spread the Xbox gospel was to find the people with the best reach stats in the form of readers, listeners, and subscribers to their blogs and podcasts. As it turned out, our effort brought an influx of junior journalists to the program. These folks were fans of gaming, and by and large fans of Xbox, but they also felt a strong pressure to be impartial.

As a PR campaign, this made perfect sense. Unfortunately, the Xbox MVP program also contained many eager fans. These guys were not aspiring bloggers. They were just vocal customers who liked spreading their knowledge of and love for the product.

The fans began to feel like they weren't as noticeable as the aspiring journos. Within months, nearly every member of the Xbox MVPs had their own blog and wanted access to games in order to post "impartial reviews." By blending the two groups, we inadvertently turned card-carrying fans into slightly more indifferent observers. We should have taken greater care to offer a distinct and honorable role for a fan — separate and apart from the digital news folks.

Ironically, there was another negative side-effect to keeping these groups co-mingled: The semi-pro bloggers started to find themselves under fire from observers outside of the program. Community members who went to great lengths to appear impartial now stood accused of being company shills.

When the line between press and fanatic blurs, lots of uncomfortable things happen. We don't make the lines on the web, so we cannot control entirely how our programs are received, but we strongly urge you to find the resources to merge your junior blogger efforts into your broader PR work, and to focus on community-building with fans as a distinct marketing effort.

CONTENT, CONTENT, CONTENT

As you might be able to tell, community comes back into sharp focus during the sustain phase of your product marketing, but it isn't just about reducing the frictions involved in bridging your just-released project and the one you're beginning to develop for launch down the road. Content can keep those players not only interested in your brand and company, but actively engaged as consumers during what might otherwise be a game title lull that could give hard-won fans a reason to disperse.

But the big issue for you is that such a hiatus is not merely one of time between games. Worse, it's one of time between revenue — time you can't afford, if you'll excuse the pun.

We all know game development has become extremely expensive, especially for publishers of triple-A games whose players demand and expect a high caliber of polish and spectacle. An even greater burden is placed on such studios and publishers to keep the dollars flowing during resource-intensive development.

Quite simply, outside of having a subscription-based payments model, your players need continuing content to buy and experience.

Downloadable content, expansions, and add-ons are vital. Which you choose — or which combinations — depend upon the nature of your game and your go-to-market strategy. You have to have had this mapped out beforehand, unless you know your dev teams can crank out additional game content quickly and reliably.

Content can be as simple as a holiday-themed outfit for your players' characters or as complex and development-intensive as a world expansion. You need to know your players before launch, listen to what features they're pumped about and why, and plan around expanding or adding to those game elements that drew in your hardcore audience initially. You also have to be able to respond quickly, because no matter how much you know about your players, their expectations and needs will change as their experience with the game develops and matures.

There are, of course, all sorts of caveats and things to be on the lookout for: power creep, over-investment, cash-grab perceptions, content that deviates from game tones and styles, game balance iterations, and lots more. Have contingency plans in place. If, for instance, you introduce a weapon into your game that is found to be unintentionally overpowered, have you built in systems and messaging such that you can roll back or revoke and compensate, both in terms of the game's mechanics as well as community response?

Know your audience, stick to your development first principles, and serve the players. When you act in service of your core fans, you're acting with integrity, and fan communities are built on being able to trust you to keep your promises.

THE MOUTH SAYS NO
BUT THE WALLET SAYS YES

When it comes to online consumer feedback in the video game industry, downloadable content has famously been an area of contradiction. When Microsoft announced that they would make a catalogue of old Xbox games available for download on the Xbox 360, community leaders cried foul at the pricing. In many cases, the virtual games on offer were priced higher than what you would pay if you bought the physical disc at a retail store. This rubbed some vocal customers the wrong way. Digital downloads, it was reasoned, should be cheaper because they cost nothing to manufacture, and could not be sold or handed down by the purchaser. (I should mention that digital downloads are definitely not free, but the costs are different, and largely hidden).

After much debate and discussion, the service launched with prices unchanged. Almost immediately, hundreds of thousands of games were downloaded at full price. Some of the very same people who complained about the pricing purchased the games on their launch weekend. They put their money where their mouth wasn't.

Nurturing a community is about listening, but what the fans say isn't always what they mean. You won't know every time this is the case, but you have to be aware of it if you are going to successfully manage a community-building campaign. Take care to balance the voice of the customer against a careful study of their actions. Your coworkers will thank you for it.

MARKETING FORWARD

I'd be lying if I said we marketers weren't occasionally accused of being careless jerkholes. I won't get into it right now, but buy me a chocolate chip cookie and maybe I'll open up my trove of anecdotes. In all seriousness, for your sake, we

marketers are as cautious about community as a straw man at a bonfire. Opening the doors to your brand carries with it certain risks. You'll want to be aware of these risks before you engage in an all-out community-building and -nurturing campaign.

You might have heard some horror stories about social media campaigns gone terribly wrong. From the Chevy Tahoe ad-building tools that were used by the public to construct anti-car propaganda to faux-grassroots websites embarrassingly exposed by the press, the rise of "social media marketing" has led to many sleepless nights for marketers. Even with the best intentions, there are internal and external risks to community building, and yet it's absolutely vital to nurture your fan base beyond product launch.

An honest assessment of your corporate culture and product attributes could help mitigate those internal and external risks, and reduce frictions between your ongoing efforts and the retention of your valued players.

The first step in that assessment is to determine if your gaming project would benefit from proactive community-building and outreach. Frankly, some product brands have no business building communities around them. That's not to say that they shouldn't strive to; it's just that some brands come with consumer anxiety or paranoia so deeply rooted that the organization can't expect to pull off positive community outreach efforts without a lot of pain.

Companies that lose focus easily or pursue one-and-done campaigns are particularly bad candidates for community outreach. Community-building and engaging one's fan base to maintain interest and player retention is a dedicated mid- to long-term effort, and although short-term rewards might be reaped, walking away from a community of enthusiastic supporters midway through a marketing effort can lead to a vehement backlash and lasting resentment among the very people you wanted to attract in the first place *and* convert from

single-product to company/franchise customers.

Although ignoring a pool of loud fans can be a missed opportunity, inviting them to the party and kicking them out halfway through is far, far worse. For the career-suicidal among you, here is a recipe for community destruction: Take a group of fanatically engaged customers who feel like they have a voice and place at the table with you, get them excited, and then turn your back on them. Those fans will quickly become rabid detractors if they feel they have been treated disrespectfully, particularly if you give them cause.

Another risk of maintaining a community is the punishing blessing when your initial campaign is a huge success and your organization is simply not prepared or equipped to deal with the intense responsibility of having a constant, committed group of external customer-partners. Even if you're dedicated to the effort and in it for the long haul, your engagement teams may need some guidance in parsing and processing the needs, desires, and feedback from your community. After all, there are tons of gems to be harvested, but you need to know how best to respond and take action on your player base's top priorities.

And yet, back when interacting formally with online communities was still new and people like me were on the front lines, we constantly ran into members of the marketing team who responded defensively to customer feedback. Most marketers are eager and willing to receive constructive criticism when they've signed on for a market research session. They can approach the feedback professionally because they know it's coming and they'd actively sought it out.

They also used to know that the feedback period was limited. With the modern state of communities and technology outreach, market research is ongoing and everlasting — whether you want it or not. Vocal and often well-thought-out critiques of everything from your product to your pricing to your marketing copy and creative execution will become a regular part of your week.

If you are engaging with a group of people who have decided to collectivize around a brand, expect that the brand will be dissected, remixed, and analyzed on a rolling basis. Marketers who don't spend time in online communities, whether personally or professionally, will be taken aback by the no-holds-barred approach with which fans declare their thoughts and concerns. This ongoing, post-launch challenge requires both tact and internal education. You do your team and product a disservice if you hide the community's thoughts from them. On the other hand, you risk the health of the campaign — and your career — if you fail to acknowledge the feelings of your team.

This can get trickier when you consider that there are bad actors out there looking to disrupt the relationship you've cultivated with your fans. I'm not even talking about run-of-the-mill trolling. Cyber threats are ever expanding, and increasingly targeting game servers and game communities. These barbarians at the gate can set fire to your fan base, especially if you haven't made plans to deal with the scale and types of threats they pose. This gets back to a recurring theme: Technology is there to help you, and it should usually go unnoticed by the players. If you don't use it properly, tech will take center stage and ruin everything.

Remember, also, that sometimes your fans will be loud, insistent — and wrong. Henry Ford once noted that if he'd asked his customers what they'd wanted, they'd have said a faster horse-driven carriage. A motorized vehicle wasn't even adjacent to their thinking. You won't always know when your fans are wrong or misguided, and you'll want to temper your community sentiment reporting with some real stats or more than a few grains of salt.

THE NEW WALTER CRONKITES

A common unintended result of building a customer community is the development of a junior press corps. There was a time when the line between journalists and fan club members was bold and clear. One of the side effects of Web 2.0's unleashing of the consumer's voice is the development of an amateur journalist job description. Unpaid and often untrained, thousands of influential bloggers and broadcasters act very much like the journalists who inspire them.

This means, on the one hand, a dedicated effort to promoting and amplifying your PR and marketing messages, but on the other hand, it means a kind of critical dissection of your product and marketing in a way that comes off to some as ornery or cagey.

Bloggers have no pressure to be objective about you, one way or another. This can lead to sycophants who gush over every release, but it can also foment activists against you. Within the videogame industry, some old-school PR operatives still fear bloggers and their penchant for snarky commentary. To professional PR folks, bloggers seem unwilling to adhere to the politeness of embargoes and "approved subjects."

I certainly don't advocate manipulating bloggers in any way — and I insist that it does more harm than good — but I do recommend something that many in the industry shy away from: I think there is still a place for the good old-fashioned fan club, even in this newfangled world of social media. I don't mean that you should manage your campaign in the slow and limited one-way format of a fan club where members sit and wait for you to push content at them. That's too passive. Besides, it won't work. We're in an age of information abundance, not scarcity. Certainly, the new technology culture has caused us all to expect and demand access and two-way communication. But nothing says marketers can't still expect to promote and encourage loyal and vocal fans.

When initially creating your community engagement plan — and then enhancing it to adapt to post-release realities — you will doubtless come across a lot of junior journalists. These amateur reporters will want access to press materials, review copies, and invitations to media events. While this is perfectly reasonable to include as a part of your community-nurturing efforts, it would behoove you to proactively develop an alternate plan more geared to fan base leaders. A fanatic of your brand will take review copies and will gladly be treated like a journalist if it means they will get more exposure to your products. It makes them feel like insiders, which is exactly what you want them to feel. If, however, you offer them something else (or something better), many will gladly leave behind the pressures and responsibilities of the journalist and jump into their roles as community leaders.

For those bloggers itching to copy and paste this section into your next treatise about marketing arrogance, hold up. I'm not saying that people who genuinely want to pursue careers as journalists should be pushed aside in favor of fans. But I am saying that there's also room for fans within a company's marketing plan, especially in the phase between product launches and immediate, at-release revenue and frenzied audience activity.

We know many community leaders who massaged their blogs, podcasts, and video-makers into news-style shows only because it seemed clear to them that the companies they admired only wanted to deal with "the press." If a marketer doesn't want to be hounded by a growing cadre of junior press, he needs to offer them another way to show their love, commitment, and talent.

If you develop a fan club strategy that rewards and incentivizes vocal leaders to build communities filled with like-minded fans, you can still expect to see them write reviews and report on your brand as if they were official news sources. They're certainly dedicated sources of news. It has become so

much a part of individuals expressing their voice that you have to accept it as a fact of life. But if you put some thought into what kinds of non-press swag and promotions you can offer them, you will find a place for fan communities to thrive and help promote your brands.

Here's a simple consideration that often goes ignored: Make the experience easy. Never stand in the way of someone who wants to buy or find out more about your product. I still get emails from PR teams at games companies directing me to FTP servers or nearly abandoned asset landing pages that look like they were built during the Clinton administration. It's easier than ever to build good, clean, fast asset distribution into your plan. Never place frictions in the path of your already-engaged players. Ease of access to assets is a win-win for you and your brand community.

WHEN TO HOLD 'EM . . . AND WHEN TO FOLD 'EM

All of this said, you have to know when and how to reallocate resources to new projects, and how to bring your fans with you. Rockstar Games had to know when to begin teasing *Red Dead Redemption 2*, despite the continued success and enthusiastic fan base for the original. When does Ubisoft decide to shift gears from one *Assassin's Creed* series release and begin to unveil and up-shift hype for their newest sequel to that franchise? Where is the line between *World of Warcraft* players having had an opportunity to fully explore their existing play experience versus being bored and feeling thirsty for the next patch or expansion, and how do you balance those sentiments in radically different gameplay style demographics?

If you've got a game that is largely self-supporting and community- or multiplayer-driven — say, like Valve's *Left4Dead* — you can afford to move ahead sooner than later, with the reasonable assurance that the game won't just disappear from users' minds. Other games require constant vigilance

and dedicated ongoing teams. MMOs, MOBAs, and evolving multiplayer games in general have to be actively pushed and iterated. New content for such games is critical not only for making sure you don't lose some of the players but *all* of the players. Design, development, art, IT, marketing, PR, QA, community management — all of your core product teams have to be on deck through and well beyond launch.

This isn't just a financial decision. The choices you make will demonstrate your commitment to your players and telegraph to them your future plans. Will they celebrate new announcements and come along for the ride, or will they feel misused by decisions to introduce paid-content churn that makes them wonder if they're being strung along by their wallets?

Even an exceptional game can be hamstrung by criticisms of wallet-baiting. Despite being hailed as a commercial success at launch and receiving numerous awards, developers and publishers can come under fire for various reasons. A rising and unfortunate trend is for a game to be (or be perceived as) a mere framework for tons of DLC. This is especially egregious when players feel that most of that content ought to be free. Games aiming for their fans' wallets will suffer for it. Player backlashes in our social media era are monumental and incendiary. Don't make your players feel like they're being strung along.

FETTERED BY THE BRAND

It's not just about DLC, though. Franchise games can sometimes be viewed by brand communities as too little content for too much money. "Why isn't this DLC or an add-on?" they demand to know. "Sixty bucks for what's barely a reskinning of *Super Space Saga IV*? To hell with these guys."

If you look at Hollywood and movie production, you'd have no problem spotting one of the biggest trends of the industry:

sequels. It's not much different in the video game realm. Sequels come with huge benefits for publishers: Players know the title and are familiar with fundamental gameplay, ongoing themes and series storylines can be expanded upon and explored, and it can feel nostalgic. (These days, it's hard to ignore the gravity-well pull of nostalgia for us middle-aged gamers.)

All right, so what are the downsides? Well, familiarity can itself be a negative. As they say, familiarity breeds contempt. I absolutely loved *Eye of the Beholder* way back in 1990, but would I have bought — never mind enjoyed — *Eye of the Beholder VI* if it had been the same first-person, square-by-dungeon-square game as the first one?

There's also a huge risk of shoehorning previous mechanics or themes into a sequel. What works for one game might not work for future iterations. Just like aesthetics, systems and mechanics in the game have to be in service to the specific game itself, not necessarily to the brand. Whether it's power-ups or stone-cold violence, what makes sense for *BioShock* doesn't necessarily fit into *BioShock Infinite*.

But how many "Grizzled, Cool, Husky-Voiced Shooter Dude" games can be made before players have gorged on so much for so long that they hit satiation and brand-exhaustion, kind of like the ginormous diner in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* who just can't eat another bite?

FRICTIONS PAID FORWARD

The real costs to you may not come due with the game you've launched and are supporting post-release. Instead, you risk affecting your future relationship with your most passionate players, churning them from that franchise or your brand entirely if you grievously misstep, if you're unable to plan for content and support over time.

Revenues for a lot of games have graphs that look like a ski slope.
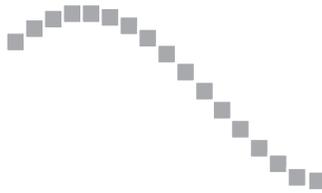
You want one that looks like a healthy heartbeat monitor, with plenty of opportunities to reinvigorate your player base and bring in new fans.
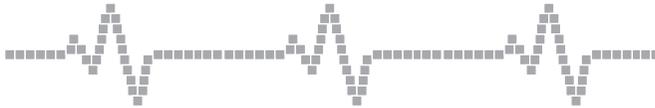
Believe me, I know the pain involved in trying to forecast and strategically plan around players. It's one hell of a tight line to walk, and every game is different, requiring unique and adaptive solutions for whether and how to shift gears from release into the sustain phase.

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AFTERWORD

There's nothing easy or straightforward about video game design and development, but when it comes to marketing, community-building, and revenue assurance, unpredictability skyrockets. My main goal with this book is to encourage you to examine and consider all the different facets of a video game launch, with a particular focus on smoothing out the various frictions your players might (and will) experience.

There's no perfect game, and there's no perfect game development process. But recognizing points of friction and working actively to reduce and eliminate them will build a buffer of trust between your company and your audience of players. The easier you've made it to hear about, find, understand, get on board with, purchase, and engage with your video game, the longer your fans will stick around and the smoother the transition is for them to shift from "Huh . . . not really sure about this" to "Hell yeah! I'm all in, and everyone else should be, too."

Every phase of game development matters, and every step you take toward game realization and release has to be strategic. At no point is your fan base — actual or potential — irrelevant or unimportant. You have to account not only for their reactions and feedback, but for their *expectations* during the early pre-launch stages. As you push forward and are able to give them more, they'll give you more — if you let them. (In case it still needs to be said at this point: LET THEM.) Without prompting or direction, they'll help power your marketing, and they'll gladly promote brand awareness and excitement. They'll even help you shape and fine-tune development and the prioritization of features, gladly becoming a mass focus group without you having to do a single thing other than acknowledge them, listen to them, and consider them.

And here's the final friction: Don't put roadblocks in the way of your most enthusiastic and engaged fans, especially when it comes to helping *you*. There are more than a few unavoidable frictions, but almost every single point of friction can be managed. But when you impede your fans' willingness and ability to step up and provide you with exactly what you need to move forward, you only hinder yourself, your brand, and your company. Even more than that, you limit and disrupt the readily available potential of communities forming around your future projects.

Finally, through the many-faceted lenses of frictions, I hope I've helped you see more deeply into your video game strategic planning, design, development, outreach, player community coordination and collaboration, title launch, and brand staying power. Good luck out there!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Scientists say that grateful people sleep better. I'd like the whitecoats to explain, then, why I've been losing sleep over this acknowledgements section. I've been lucky throughout my entire career, and have benefited from the help of dozens of people. I realize I'll never be able to thank them all, and that stresses me out. If you were omitted, know that my appreciation of you is no less!

First, everything I do is made possible by my wife, Natalie. She's one of the best co-hosts/designers/writers/program managers a guy could have. She brought our two clever, curious kids into the world — kids who have helped me see games (and everything else) with new eyes. Natalie also supported every crazy endeavor, including the day I quit my job in 2005 and said I wanted to do "video game stuff."

I literally snuck into the games industry. In 2006, my dear friend Paul Caparotta worked at a major publisher and got me into an event for a new video game by pretending that we worked

together. Inside the venue, I met three guys who changed my life. John Porcaro, Tony Hynes, and Chris Paladino from Microsoft spent the evening with me and my digital recorder, discussing games. I had been running a games-focused podcast, and it turned out these Microsoft guys were listeners. Mere months later, I was working at Xbox, building marketing campaigns with them. I'd later go on to build a business with them, too.

At Xbox I crossed paths with industry legends who took the time to get involved in my daily work. Aaron Greenberg took me on my first outreach event in Los Angeles. Larry Hyrb spent more time with fans than anyone I've ever met. Christa "Trixie360" Charter was always committed to being authentic, bold, and funny. And Jeff Bell, SVP of Marketing at Xbox at the time, handed me an Xbox LIVE anniversary controller from his own collection because he overheard me admiring it.

After my time at Xbox, I was helped and coached by some of the best in the games marketing business, including Chuck Lacson at Sony, Chris Early and Justin Landskron at Ubisoft, Michael Wolf at Microsoft, and Ryan Grissom at Bandai Namco (which was Namco Bandai back then). I couldn't have asked for better mentors.

Along the way, the gaming community kept me honest and taught me about passion and commitment. I wouldn't have a career in games if it weren't for folks like Danny "Godfree" Peña, Parris "Vicious" Lily, Jake "Jakenbear" Reardon, Jose "JVB" Betancourt, Jay "Skittles" Van Beveren, and a thousand others.

I can't even start to wrap up these acknowledgements without mentioning my mother. She bought our family's Atari 2600 . . . and waited in line at Best Buy to get me an Xbox 360 (even adults get toys as gifts!). She sat in a hotel with our infant son while my wife and I attended our first PAX, and I kicked off my career in games. She also took me to every arcade in New York City when I was a kid, from Dangerfield's on the Upper East Side to the Coney Island Arcade in Brooklyn and Playland

in Times Square. She encouraged my love of games, and now here I am.

Last but not least, I was shepherded through this book project by the always-on-top-of-it publications manager Karen Morad. My editor, collaborator, and textual guardian angel was Patrick Riegert, a great partner in crime who understands the games industry both as a fan and an expert. Behind the scenes was copy editor Alison Larabie Chase, working with amazing efficiency to ensure my words on the page were clear, concise, and grammatically correct. Book designer Jess Marina created not only the cover art of this book but also tackled the layout and interior graphics. We all know a fantastic team makes all the difference, and mine helped bring this book to life.

Nelson Rodriguez has helped launch dozens of games across every platform, including blockbusters *Halo 3*, *Tekken 5,* and *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, and indie titles *Tweet Defense* and *A Kingdom for Keflings*. After two years on the Xbox marketing team developing social and community strategy, Nelson spent six years creating award-winning digital marketing campaigns for clients such as Ubisoft, Microsoft, Sony, and Hasbro. Nelson currently heads up Akamai Technologies' games industry marketing strategy. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his fantastic wife, Natalie, and their two awesome children.