UNDERSTANDING FRICTIONS

An excerpt from *Frictionless*

*Build Better Video Games, Attract and Retain Players, Grow Revenue*

Nelson Rodriguez
A FRICTION IS ANYTHING THAT DISRUPTS THE ABILITY OR WILLINGNESS OF A PLAYER TO ENGAGE WITH AND ENJOY A GAMING EXPERIENCE.

NELSON RODRIGUEZ
Akamai
Welcome to the new golden age. The video game industry realized revenues of more than $91 billion in 2015, and that number continues to rise.

$91 billion in 2015

The gamer stigma is gone – because everyone is a gamer now. On phones and tablets, whether you’re on the go or comfortably settled in at home, accessibility has never been easier.

But there’s a price. The thrill of the new has resulted in a fickle attitude among gamers. The excitement and anticipation of starting a new game is often matched by the subsequent, rapid abandonment by players. The questions then are:

Why? How do we make it stop?
Gamers expect a great experience, but there’s a lot that can get in the way. These situations and moments, consequences, and outcomes that originate from players, gamers, and developers are called frictions.

Consider the grid:

Frictions fall into one of four quadrants:

1. Avoidably Beneficial
2. Unavoidably Beneficial
3. Unavoidably Harmful
4. Avoidably Harmful

Game developers and publishers must understand these frictions – where they exist, and how you can prepare for and manage them to minimize or mitigate their impact. Doing so requires continual analysis and proactive strategies.

In this eBook, *Understanding Frictions*, you’ll learn about:

1. The friction matrix
2. The unique challenges and benefits of each quadrant
3. Common sources of frictions that interfere with keeping your players content
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**

![Avoidable Quadrant Diagram]

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

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.
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 “Fren-Zon” 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; uninstructional, 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.
There’s no perfect game, and there’s no perfect development process. But recognizing and managing 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.

Welcome to the grid.
UNDERSTANDING FRICTIONS

Akamai