

WHY PLAYERS STAY (OR LEAVE)

And what to do about it

WHO ARE WE?



Alyssa Kollgaard
COO, Akupara Games

Notable Titles:

- My Pet Hooligan
- Ratchet & Clank
- Resistance 3
- Aliens: Fireteam Elite
- Stuntman: Ignition
- Frontlines: Fuel of War
- WARMACHINE: Tactics
- Starblood Arena
- Rain World
- GRIME
- Sorry We're Closed
- Cryptmaster



Peter Wilson
Director of Product, AMGI Studios

Notable Titles:

- My Pet Hooligan
- Ratchet & Clank
- Resistance 3
- Resistance 2
- Saboteur
- Mercenaries
- Spore
- Need for Speed
- Medal of Honor
- DefJam Fight For New York
- Tetris
- Pictionary



ANIMATION STUDIOS

INTRODUCTION

By understanding the information provided in this talk, we will be able to:

✓ Contextualize *data-driven critique*

✓ Identify and *mitigate risks*

✓ Align stakeholders to a *holistic vision*

✓ Develop *intentionally* and *strategically*

✓ Ask the *right questions*

✓ Prioritize achievable, *in-scope solutions*

PRODUCT DESIGN - [WHAT, WHY]

What is Product Design?

The most important principle of **Product Design** is that beyond the **Game**, there is the **Game as a Product**

Why is it important?

- Commercial games are **Entertainment Products**
- Ensure a smooth experience from **first impression** to **retention**
- Better **market fit** by holistic product design
- More efficient **scoping** and **task management**
- **Alignment** of stakeholders and team members

PRODUCT DESIGN - [WHO, HOW]

Who is responsible for Product?

Normally a **Product Owner** or **Executive Producer** is responsible. The Creative Director should **not** also be responsible for Product; this ensures business and creative interests have separate advocates.

How do we achieve these goals?

- **Own the Product.** Understand every facet and goal.
- Pursue **consistency of vision** for the product holistically
- **Define** the goals, **document** the strategy, use **approvals** for buy-in
- Get **feedback** and **iterate**, sometimes **pivot** if necessary
- **Mitigate risks** by planning ahead, nothing “just in time”



CASE STUDY - MY PET HOOLIGAN



Cartoon visuals with hardcore competitive shooter gameplay led to **low retention** and **market confusion**, requiring a **pivot** to more casual co-op focused gameplay to support the **vision** and align to **audience expectations**.



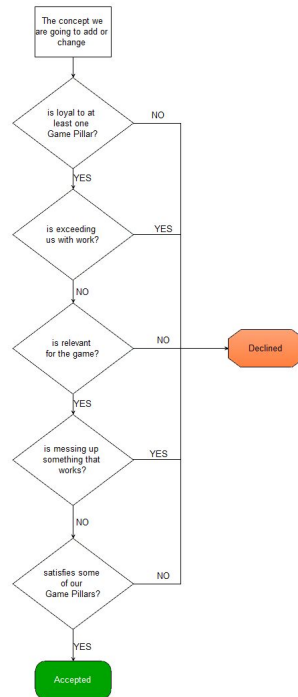
GAME PILLARS

Product design and gameplay pillars work hand-in-hand to create a **unified vision** - guiding both what gets built and how it feels to play.

Gameplay Pillars - Specific, actionable design principles that shape moment-to-moment play, ie:

- Combat should feel **tactical** and **weighty**
- Movement should be **fluid** and **expressive**
- Player actions should cause **chaos** and **laughter**

They answer: "What must the player always feel or be able to do moment-to-moment?"



PRODUCT **VS** **GAME DESIGN**

Product Design and **Game Design** both help mold a holistic vision of the game.

Product Design addresses how the game is *packaged and positioned*.

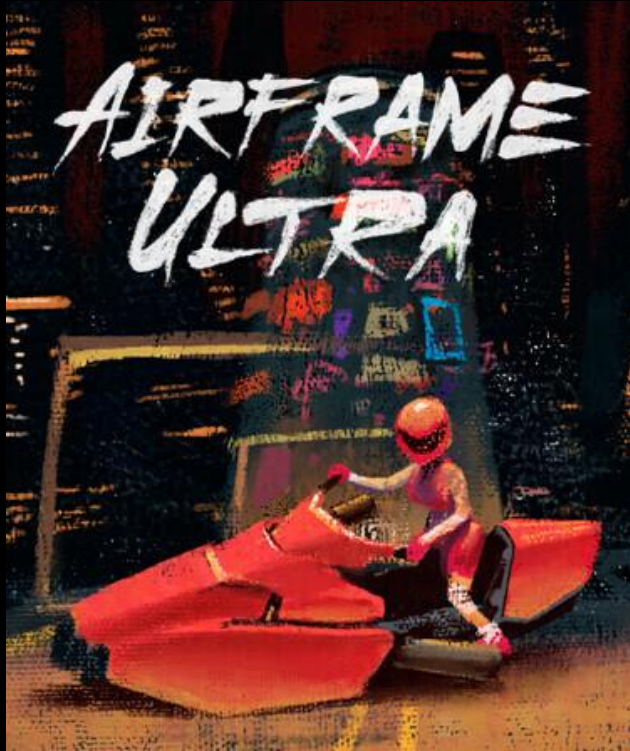
- Game identity
- Target audience
- Monetization strategy
- Core emotional and experiential goals

Game Design is the core discipline of *constructing the game itself*.

- Mechanics and Systems
- “Three Cs” Controls, Character, Camera
- Narrative
- Balance and Progression



CASE STUDY - AIRFRAME ULTRA

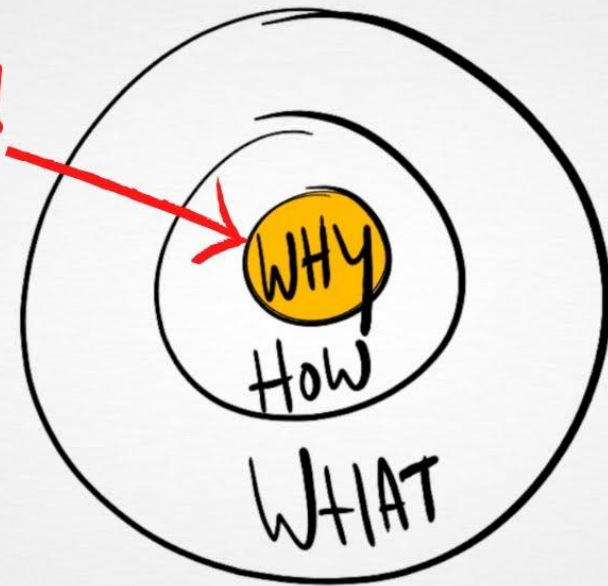


Despite both being nostalgia-driven combat racing multiplayer party games, these games are entirely **different products** and must be packaged, marketed and positioned accordingly.



!?! START WITH WHY !?!

Start
HERE!



WHY RETENTION MATTERS

Even without continuous content updates, *sustained player engagement* directly influences *long-term success*.

- Long-Tail Sales
- Word-of-Mouth
- DLC & Sequel Expansion Funnels
- Community Building
- Feedback Loops
- Ecosystem & Brand Value



PLAYER MOTIVATIONS - ARCHETYPES

What are they? Quantic Foundry's model says player enjoyment comes from *fulfilling psychological needs*.

Why is it important? This is WHY players *engage with a product*, and continue to engage with a product over time.

How does this inform decisions? This model provides a design framework for player *fantasy-fulfillment*.

PLAYER MOTIVATIONS - 6 ARCHETYPES



Action

"Boom!"

Destruction

Guns. Explosives.
Chaos. Mayhem.

Excitement

Fast-Paced. Action.
Surprises. Thrills.

Social

"Let's Play Together"

Competition

Duels. Matches.
High on Ranking.

Community

Being on Team.
Chatting. Interacting.

Mastery

"Let Me Think"

Challenge

Practice. High
Difficulty. Challenges.

Strategy

Thinking Ahead.
Making Decisions.

Achievement

"I Want More"

Completion

Get All Collectibles.
Complete All Missions.

Power

Powerful Character.
Powerful Equipment.

Immersion

"Once Upon a Time"

Fantasy

Being someone else,
somewhere else.

Story

Elaborate plots.
Interesting characters.

Creativity

"What If?"

Design

Expression.
Customization.

Discovery

Explore. Tinker.
Experiment.

PLAYER MOTIVATIONS - 6 ARCHETYPES

You are not the entirety of *your audience*.

Player motivation can be broken down into several primary *archetypes*:

- **Action-Oriented** - Combat, power fantasy and scores
- **Mastery-Seeking** - Challenge, skill and depth
- **Achievement-Focused** - Numbers go up, rarity and status
- **Immersion-Focused** - Lore, narrative and character
- **Social** - Communication, social groups and comradery
- **Creative** - Building, customizing and sandboxes

In addition to these bullet points, it's also important to consider *intersectional player archetypes*, and to build synergetic systems that satisfy multiple archetypes simultaneously.

Combined Types	Motivations	Game Examples
 Acrobat	Excitement + Challenge	Hades, Vampire Survivors, Cuphead
 Architect	Design + Strategy	Civilization, Cities Skylines, Terraria
 Gardener	Fantasy + Completion	Stardew Valley, Hello Kitty Island Adventure, Animal Crossing
 Slayer	Destruction + Power	Space Marine 2, Borderlands 4
 Bounty Hunter	Power + Strategy	Path of Exile, Warframe
 Gladiator	Competition + Excitement	Street Fighter, Counter Strike, Rainbow Six Siege
 Storyteller	Story + Fantasy	Baldur's Gate 3, Undertale
 Strategist	Strategy + Challenge	Balatro, Clover Pit, Shenzhen I/O
 Craftsman	Design + Completion	Factorio, Satisfactory
 Explorer	Discovery + Fantasy	No Man's Sky, Subnautica
 Networker	Community + Customization	VRChat, Fortnite, Roblox
 Skirmisher	Destruction + Competition	Marvel Rivals, Battlefield 6

🪝 HOOK & ANCHOR 🚢

A successful hook combined with a compelling anchor is how you create *sustained engagement*.

Hook: "Why should I try this game?"

Anchor: "Why do I keep playing this game?"



HOOK & ANCHOR - EXAMPLES

Power + Strategy

Warframe:

Hook: Fast, intense action combat.

Anchor: Deep progression and combat customization

Fantasy + Completion

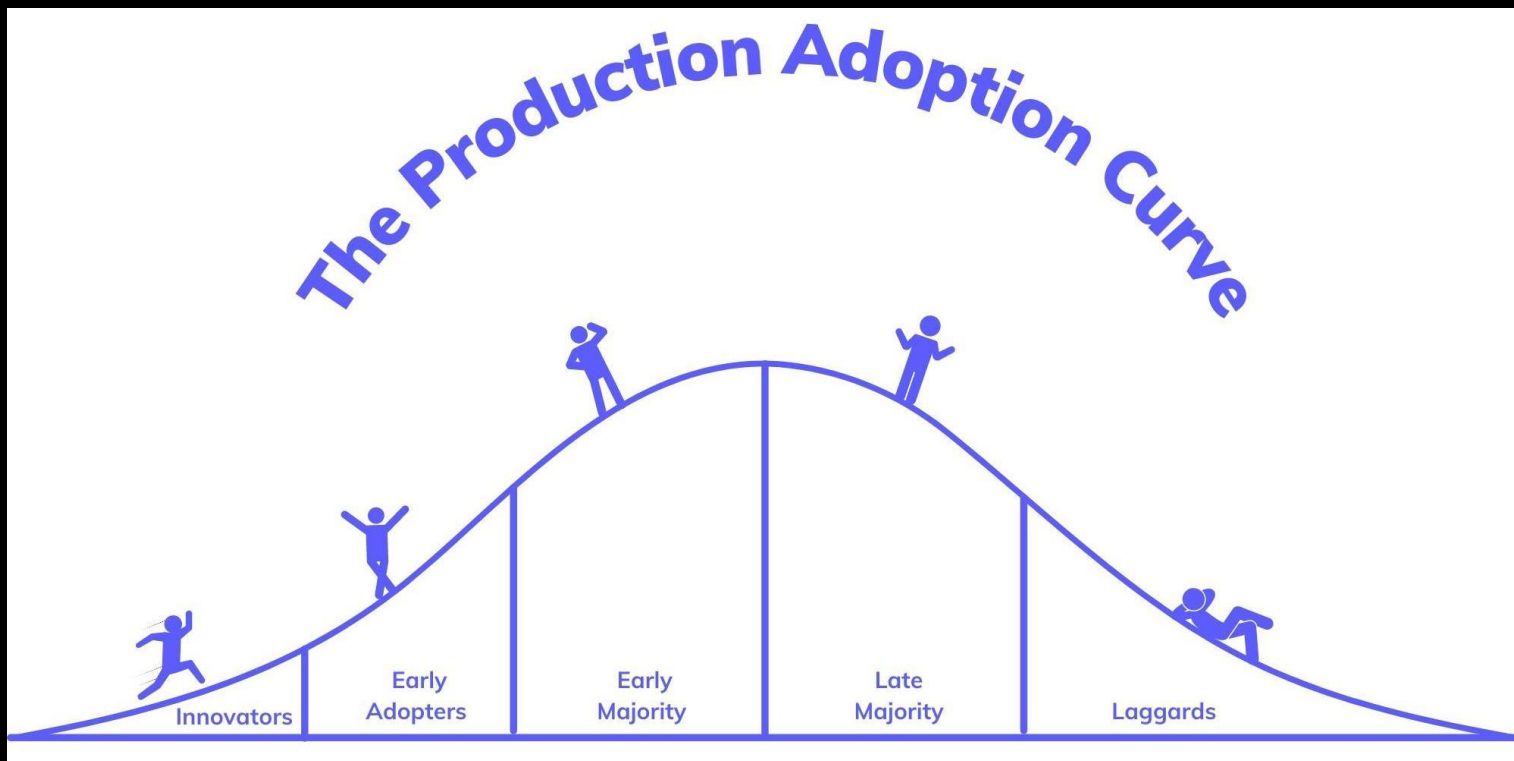
Stardew Valley:

Hook: Simple incremental tasks, character introductions.

Anchor: Expansive farm design, character based narratives.



PRODUCT ADOPTION CURVE





PRODUCT ADOPTION CURVE



Games that rely on retention don't just need to be good - they need to maintain a **critical mass**.

Otherwise you will be at risk:

Concurrency threshold

- If matchmaking times increase, new players churn.
- If worlds feel “dead,” social systems break.
- Below a certain CCU, your game loses network effects.

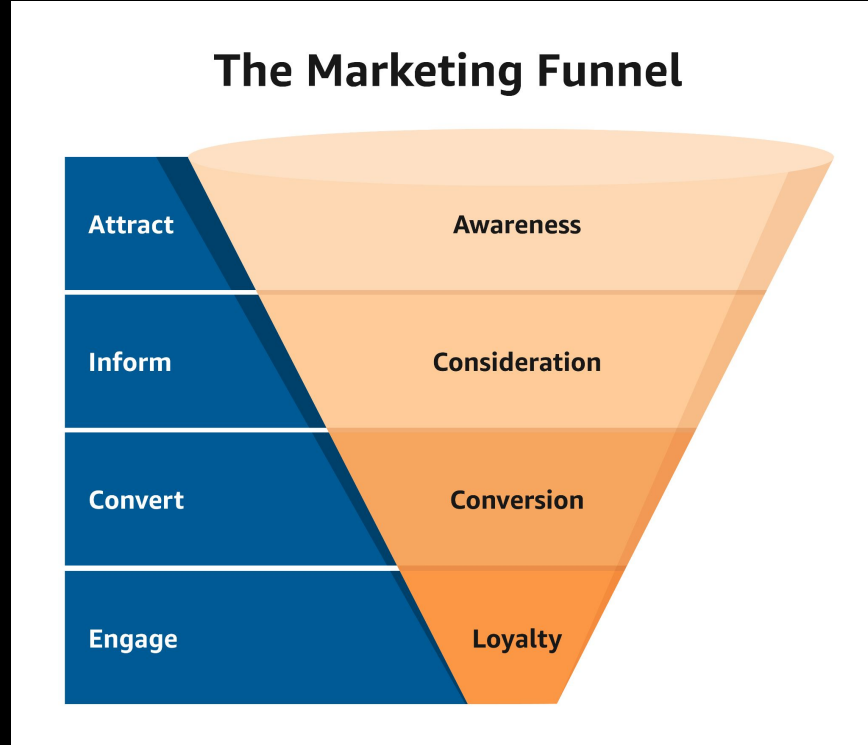
Retention funnel

- DAU drop = fewer players to match with.
- Lower retention weakens ROI

MAPPING TO GAMING COHORTS

Lifecycle Phase	Player Type
Innovators	Hardcore testers
Early Adopters	Streamers, brand ambassadors
Early Majority	Mainstream gamers
Late Majority	Cautious adopters
Laggards	Casual/low-engagement

▼ THE MARKETING FUNNEL ▼





AUDIENCE SEGMENTS



Audience Segments have different *motivations* and respond to different *features and tactics*:

- Core Engaged players
- Active Casual players
- New players
- Churned/Lapsed players
- Returning players



PLAYER IDENTITIES



What are identity based cohorts?

These are groups of players who share *taste* and *emotional goals*.

- Genre
- Subcultures
- Playstyle mindsets
- Aesthetic or theme preferences

How do we engage them?

Think of your audience as cultural communities.

Target their *aesthetics*, *values*, and *vibe*, not just their motivations.

GAMEPLAY LOOP

Why are
gameplay
loops
important?

Gameplay loops are the cycles of activity players will repeat most often. There is a hierarchy of loops with different desired attributes:

- *Satisfying* short term
- *Motivating* medium term
- *Compelling* long term

What makes a
good loop?

- Clarity
- Feedback
- Rewards
- Choices
- Retention
- Motivation

🌀 GAMEPLAY LOOP 🌀

🔄 **Core Loop** (seconds to minutes)

Action → Feedback → Reward



Progression Loop (minutes to hours)
Complete Tasks → Earn Progress → Unlock



Meta Loop (days to months)
Play Sessions → Improve Mastery → Build Identity



RAMPS & PEAKS



Content peaks

Peaks are big, exciting, **high-difficulty** or **high-reward** moments that usually cater to core players or veterans.

Content ramps

Ramps are the onboarding and reboarding structures that help players of all kinds reach those peaks, gradually and meaningfully, without falling off the mountain.

Examples of great ramps

- **Onboarding Ramp**: Guided quests that unlock systems over time
- **Season Pass Ramp**: Early tiers are fast and easy, so players feel momentum
- **Power Ramp**: Smart scaling (e.g. dungeons that match your gear)
- **Narrative Ramp**: Episodic story that doesn't require grinding
- **Social Ramp**: Guilds that reward light contribution



AUTHENTICITY & CONSISTENCY



It is important to make something *authentic to you* that also resonates with *greater audiences*.

A clear narrative ensures *consistency of vision*.



**Ludonarrative Dissonance* refers to when there is a conflict between a video game's narrative (the story it tells) and its gameplay mechanics (the actions it allows or encourages the player to take).

IN CONCLUSION

✓ Identify strong *gameplay pillars*

✓ Maintain *holistic vision*

✓ *Understand* your audience

✓ Your *game* is a *product*



That's all Folks!

Any questions?