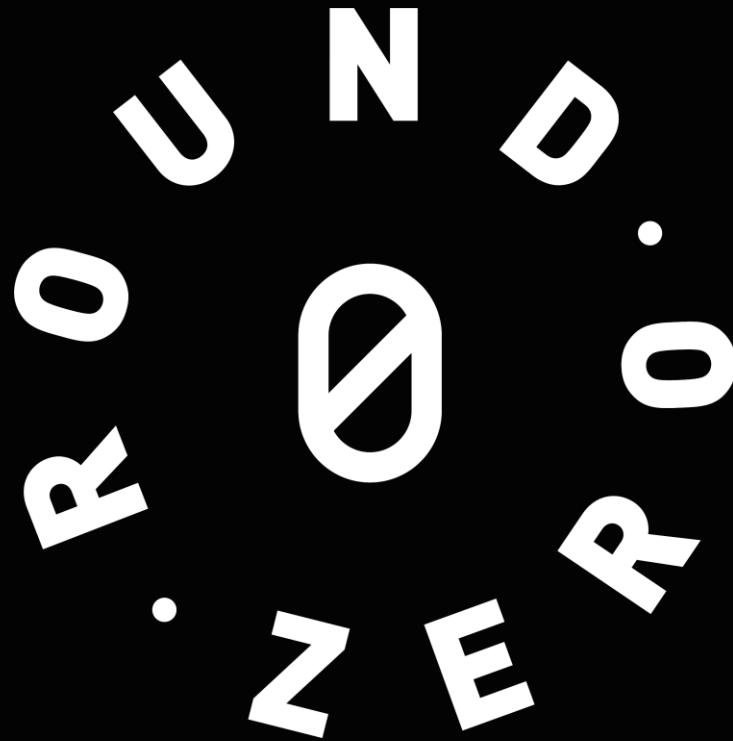


Free-to-play Game Design and Monetization Pitfalls



John Rantala
Publishing Director



- 1 billion+ installs
- World's no1 mobile racing game in Google Play Store
- 50+ million monthly active users



HILL CLIMB RACING



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Round Zero Goals



Identify hit games based on users' opinion, NOT ours



Allow developers to validate game core



Develop our own technology to automate this process



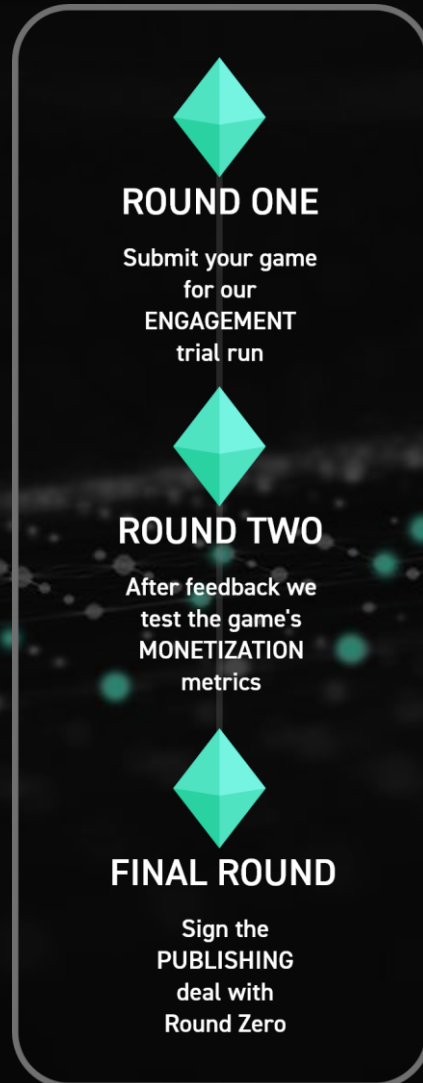
Validate Game Core



1. Free installs – no strings attached
2. Test game app, marketing materials and store page
3. Learn why it works or not



Evaluation Process



1. Engagement Evaluation Round

2. Monetization Evaluation Round

3. Soft Launch, Global Launch?

Free-to-play Game Design and Monetization Pitfalls



TOC

Level 1 **Free-to-play 101**

Level 2 **Free-to-play Game Pitfalls**

A dark background with a glowing network of nodes and lines, resembling a data visualization or a neural network, with some nodes highlighted in a light blue color.

Level 1

Free-To-Play 101

Why Evil?

Artificial barriers that require payment

“It’s *not really free* if they ask for money”

Comparison to gambling

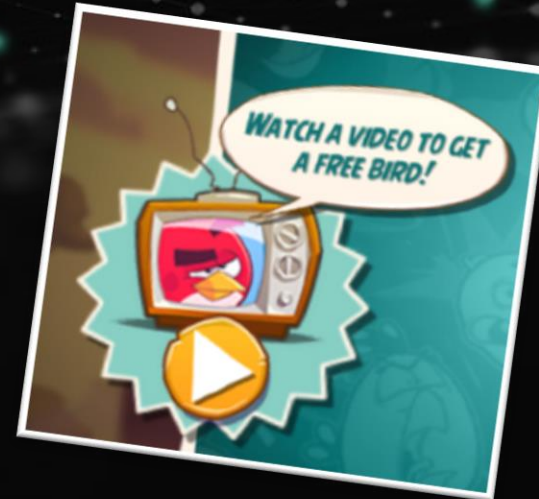
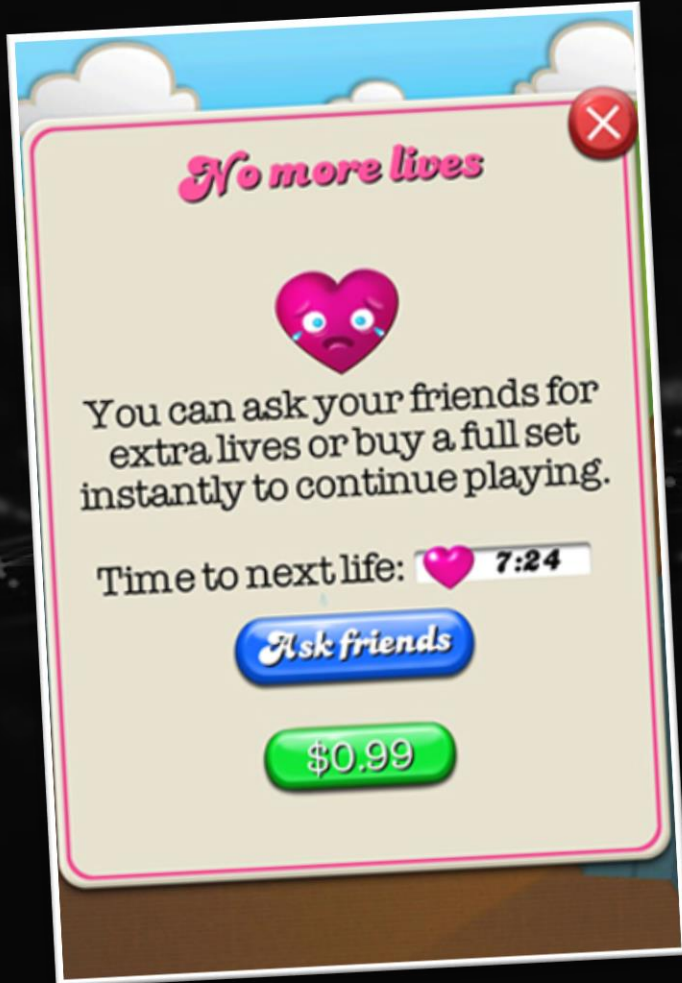
Frustrating game mechanics

Thinking of real money while playing ruins the experience

PAY-TO-WIN

Game design that encourages to pay

Advertisements



*Source: https://people.uta.fi/~kljuham/2014-alha_et_al-free_to_play_games.pdf
forums: steam, gamasutra, gameindustry.biz

What Free-to-play is



- **Uncapped potential**
 - Played by 1/3 people on the planet
- **Competitive Market**
 - 500 games released in App Store daily
 - 89 % of revenue from mobile and PC games comes from F2P
- **Smart**
 - Designing gameplay around modern and working monetization is a genuine challenge
 - Live ops: iterative development beyond launch
- **Accessible for everyone**
 - Try before you buy
 - Flexible price points and dynamic pricing

F2P Cornerstone Questions



How long do they stay?

Retention



Acquisition

How much installs, from where?

Monetization

When and how much do they pay?

F2P Cornerstone Questions



Retention



The return rate

- The percentage of users who return to your game after x days
- How much are players enjoying your game?
- Unfinished monetization is okay as long as you have good retention
- Industry standard goals
 - D1 40 %
 - D7 20 %
 - D28 10 %
- The opposite of retention is **churn**

F2P Cornerstone Questions



How long do they stay?

Retention

DX%

Acquisition

How much installs, from where?

Monetization

When and how much do they pay?

F2P Cornerstone Questions



Winning Formula

Cost Per Acquisition
(CPA or CPI)



Average Lifetime Value
of One User
(LTV)

The background is a dark, abstract composition of glowing teal dots and thin white lines, creating a sense of depth and movement, reminiscent of a data network or a particle simulation.

Level 2

Free-to-play Game Pitfalls

Level 2

Biggest issues in F2P games:

- Monetization is an afterthought

Monetization is an afterthought

“Monetization is something you slap on a game before release”



- Incorporating monetization mechanics in late production
 - Feels forced
 - Breaks game design
 - Creates IAPS that have zero value
 - Might affect retention

Monetization is an afterthought



Key questions for concept and pre-production phase



- Market analysis vs. innovation
- Who is my target customer?
- Ads or IAPs or subscription or all of them?

Level 2

Biggest issues in F2P games:

-  Monetization is an afterthought
-  Underdesigned ads

Underdesigned Ads

Balance is key

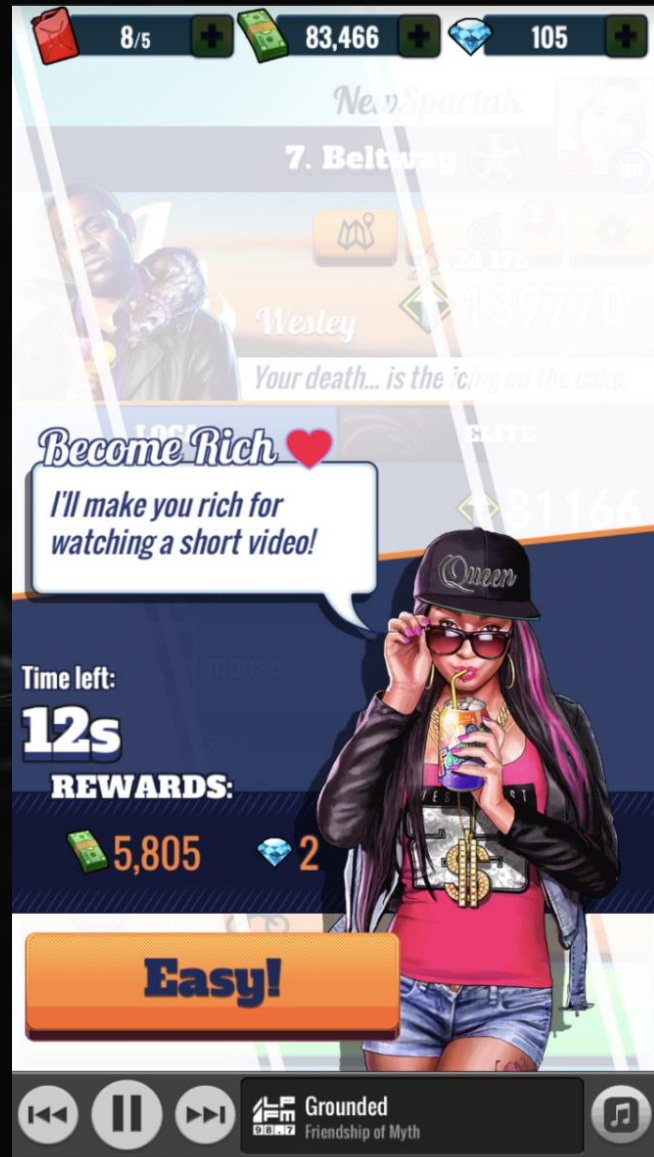
The big issue in F2P ad strategy:

Monetizing
non-paying users



Negative impact
on retention

Underdesigned Ads



Four Ad Design Pillars by Space Ape Games

Rewarding but Complementary to IAPS

Shown at Natural Session End Points

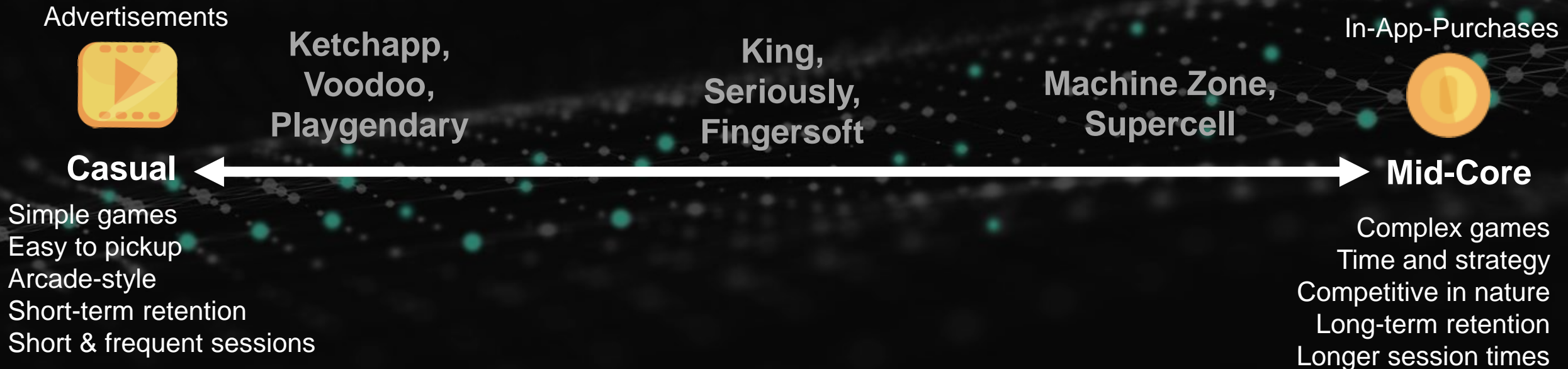
Embedded Into the Game World

Placed Where They Get Installs, Not Views

Underdesigned Ads



When should I focus on monetizing with ads?



Level 2

Biggest issues in F2P games:

- Monetization is an afterthought
- Underdesigned ads
- Little reasons to pay

Little Reasons To Pay



How to create value in the eyes of players?

Scarcity
Anticipation
Desire & Envy

Little Reasons To Pay

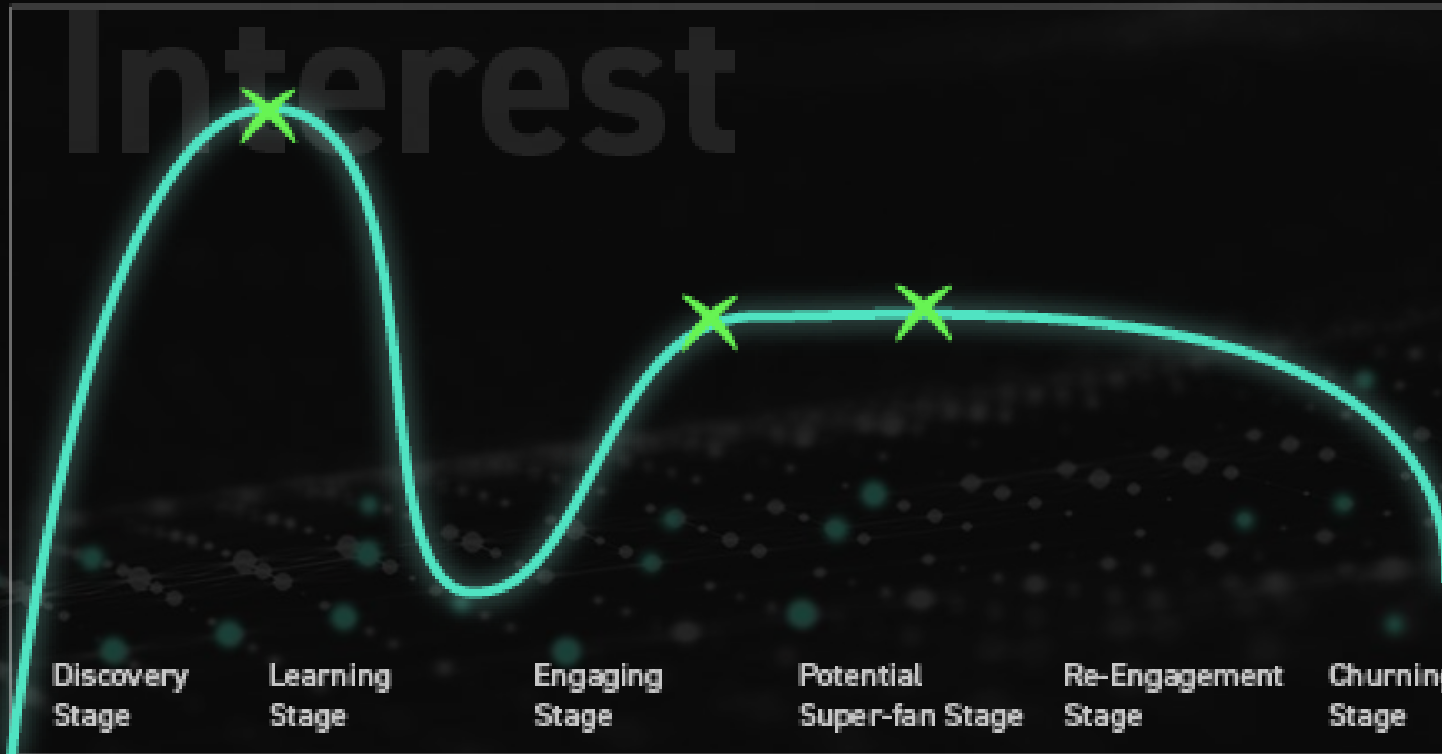


SAD for what?



- Faster progression (shortcuts)
- Increase success or protect from failure
- Completion (3 stars, 100 %)
- Continue playing (session capping)
- Expressing oneself (skins, themes)
- Strategic depth (new playing options & mechanics)
- Simply more content (new and different)
- Social reasons (bragging rights, competition)

Little Reasons To Pay



Goal:

3 purchases per paying user

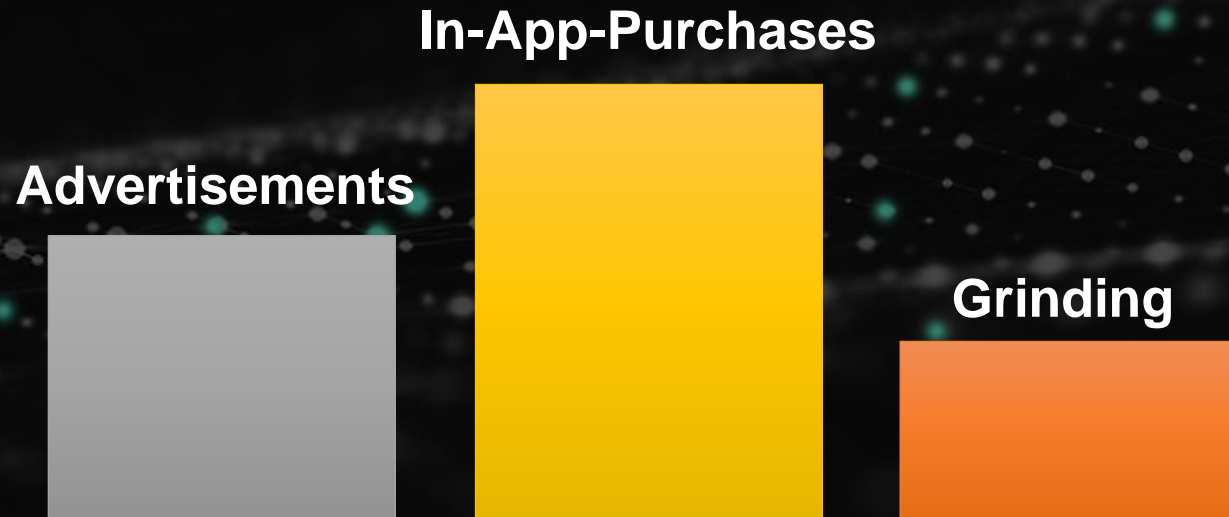
Design offers at the right moments in player lifecycle

Time

X Monetization Offer

Little Reasons To Pay

Which provides most fun/value in your game?



Level 2

Biggest issues in F2P games:

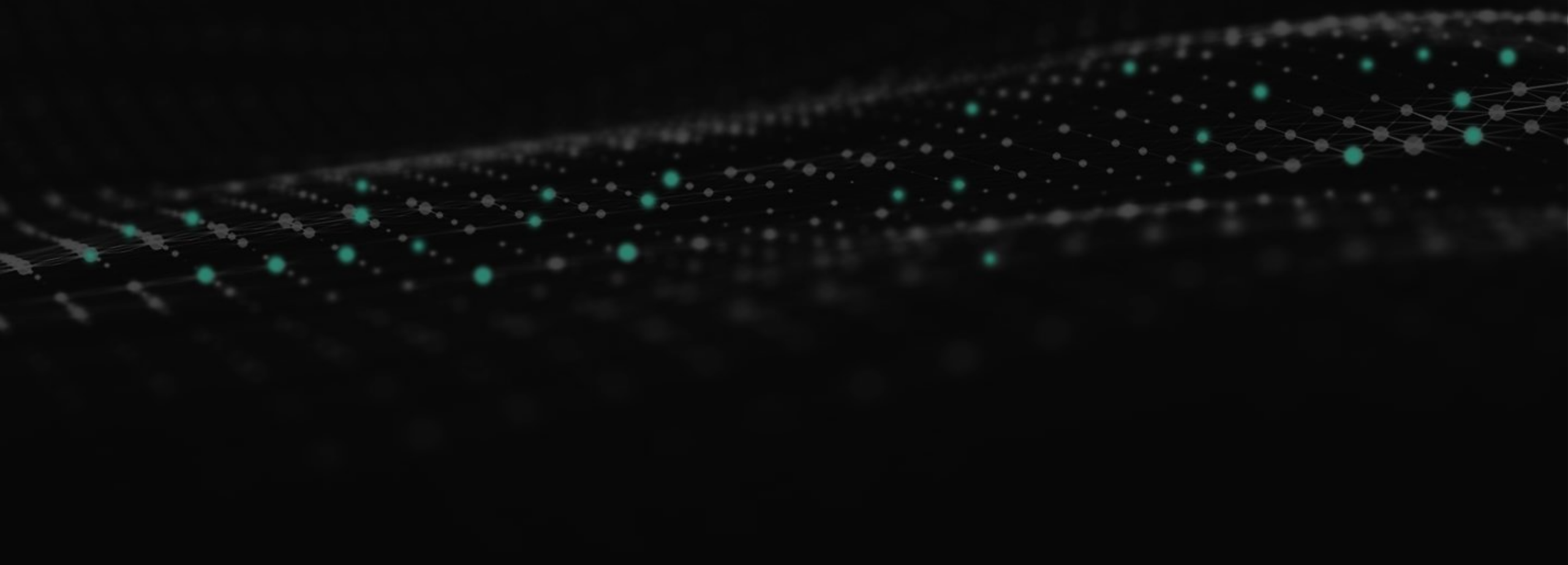
- Monetization is an afterthought
- Underdesigned ads
- Little reasons to pay
- Getting great retention

Getting Great Retention



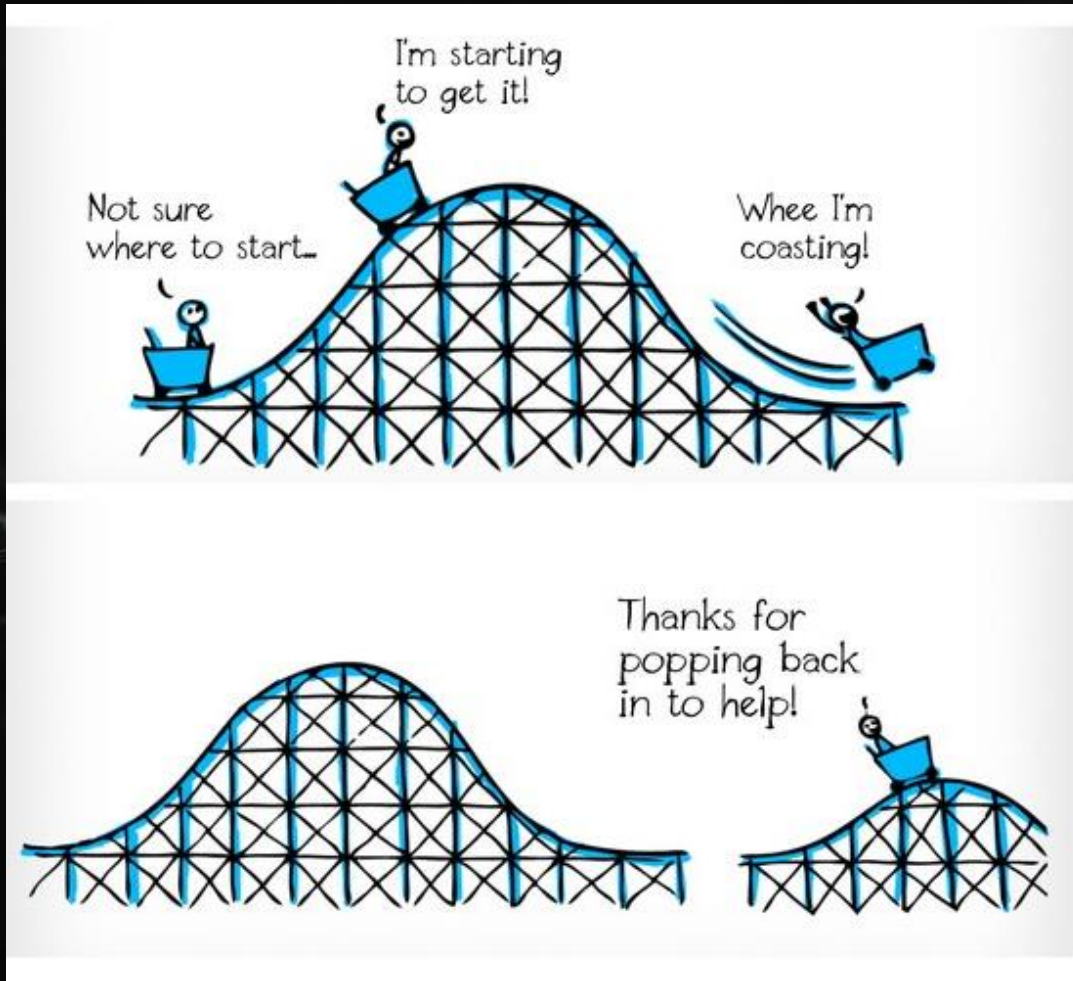
5 Steps for good retention

1. Astonishing onboarding



Onboarding Problems

FTUE, onboarding, tutorial



What it is

- First-time user experience as a whole
- Onboarding: shorter than tutorial
- Tutorial: teaching the rules and mechanics

Why it is important

- Short attention span
- Turning point of 5-9 minutes
- Minimize churn rate (leaving your app for good)

Onboarding Problems

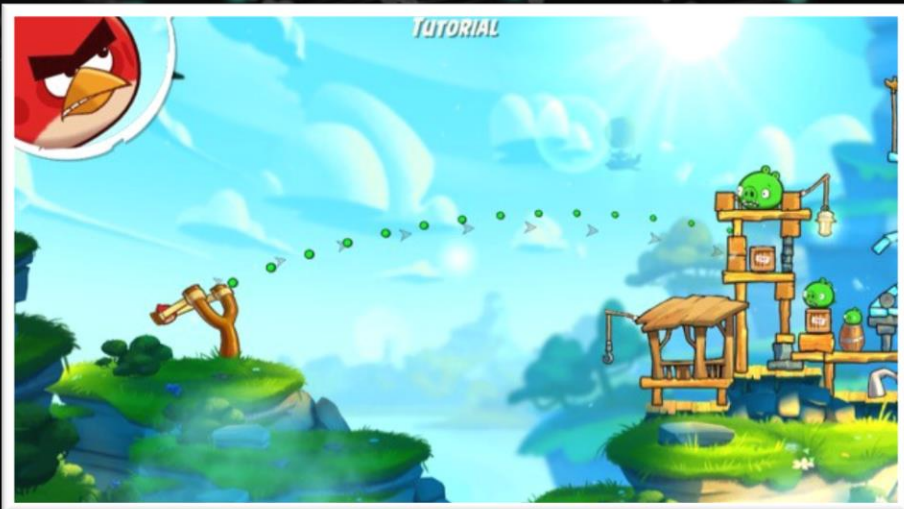


The bad

- A wall of text or dialogue - forcing player to read your game manual
- Too long - a tutorial world
- Boring content
- “When can I play!?”

The good

- Short bits
- Interactive
- Rewarding
- Evoke emotion
- Communicate long term goals



Getting Great Retention

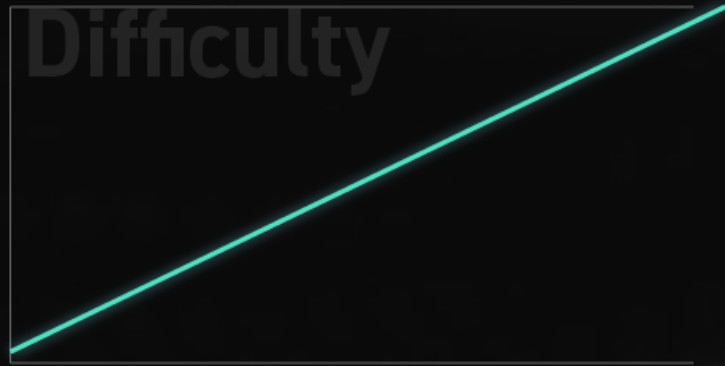


5 Steps for good retention

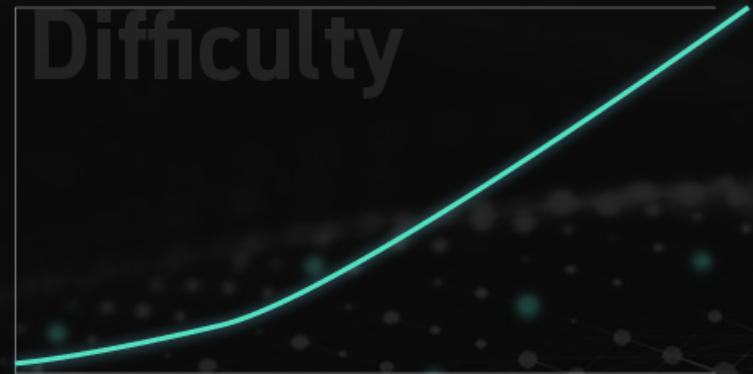
1. Astonishing onboarding
 - Track tutorial completion rate %
2. Difficulty curve issues

Difficulty Curve Issues

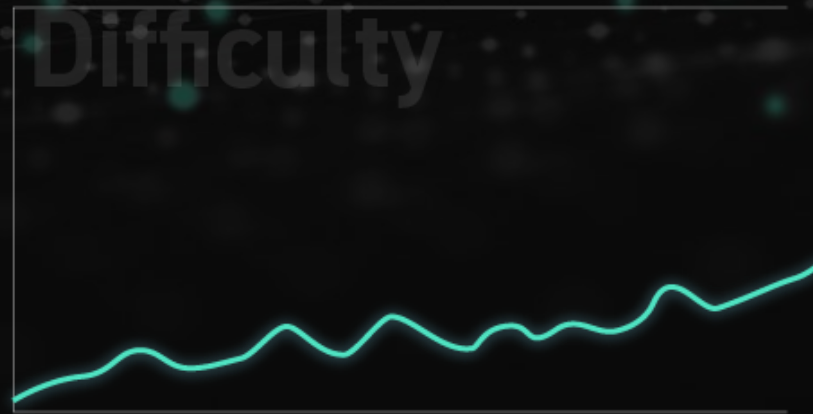
45 degree



The Hockeystick



Free-to-play designed for monetization



Time

Difficulty Curve Issues



FUUU factor

- FUUU = Churn
- Frustrating without feelings of FUUU

Number of tries

Number of tries when you nearly won

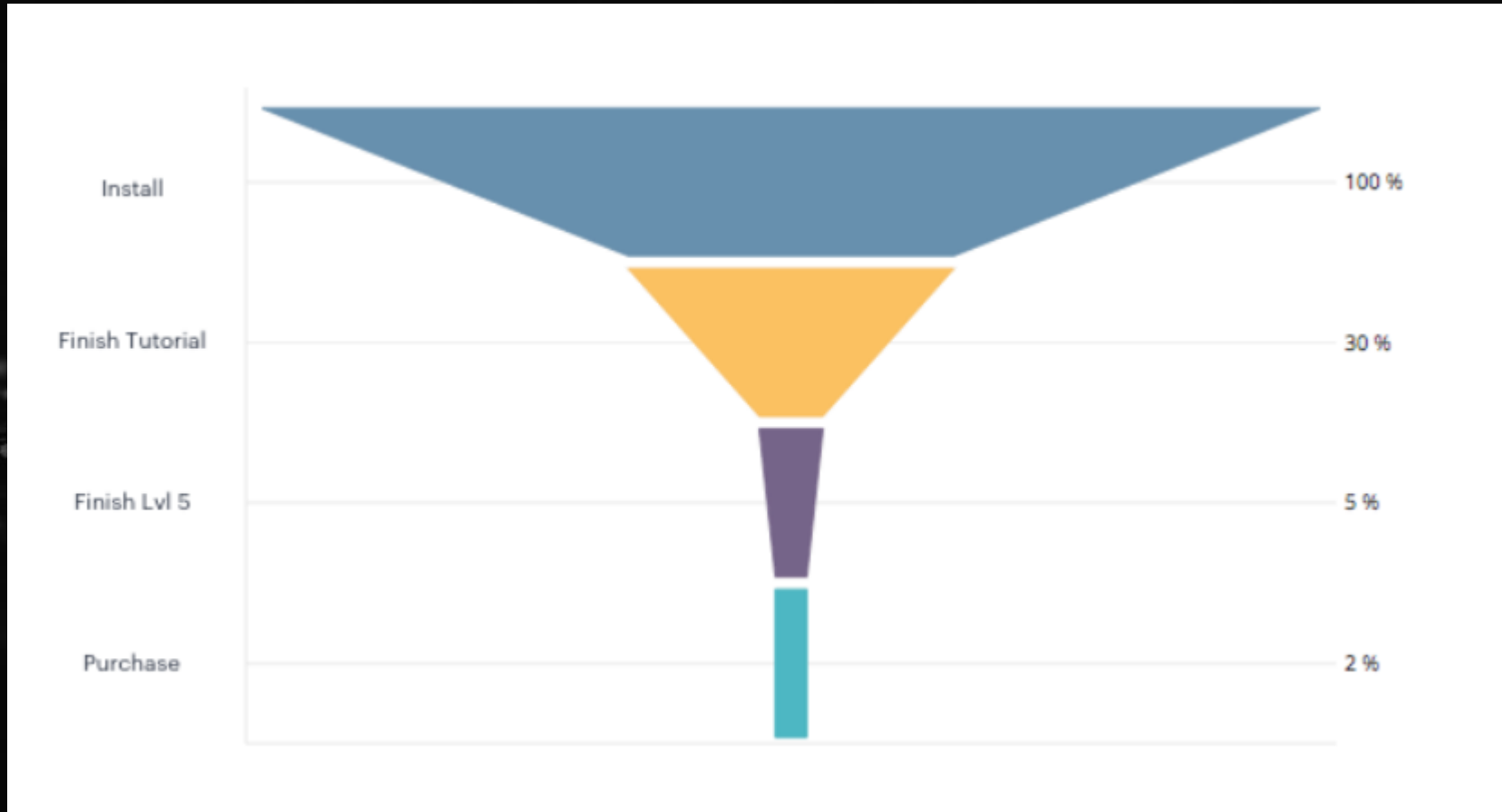
Should be less than 10!

20 tries / 2 near wins = Fuuu factor of 10

20 tries / 5 near wins = Fuuu factor of 4

Difficulty Curve Issues

Use custom funnels to track your players



Getting Great Retention



5 Steps for good retention

1. Astonishing onboarding
 - Track tutorial completion rate %
2. Difficulty curve issues
3. Explicit rewarding

Explicit Rewarding

Medals/stars/rank
In-game rewards
Accomplishments

Effects
Animations
Texts



Getting Great Retention



5 Steps for good retention

1. Astonishing onboarding
 - Track tutorial completion rate %
2. Difficulty curve issues
3. Explicit rewarding
 - Go over the top with effects when winning
 - Give good rewards at the start (but keep balance)
4. Infinite content by design

Infinite Content

Running short of content



- Fans don't have enough content
- Game is good but creating new content is too expensive: hard to break even
- Problems in game mechanics or progression
- Hard to fix afterwards

- Think of design loops that allow long-term gameplay and easy expansion
- RPG mechanics, leveling up, prestige system
- Progression capping: lives, energy, gacha

Infinite Content

Design with 3 loops



Infinite Content

Example Cases



Add new vehicles and levels

Unlock vehicles and upgrade them

Progress as far as you can in an infinite level

Unlock levels and break highscores in them

Add PVP, Leaderboards, skins, upgradeable components

Getting Great Retention



5 Steps for good retention

1. Astonishing onboarding
 - Track tutorial completion rate %
2. Difficulty curve issues
3. Explicit rewarding
 - Go over the top with effects when winning
 - Give good rewards at the start (but keep balance)
4. Infinite content by design
5. Daily Incentives

F2P Cornerstone Questions

Retention

Daily / weekly / monthly incentives



Level 2

Biggest issues in F2P games:

- Monetization is an afterthought
- Underdesigned ads
- Little reasons to pay
- Getting Great Retention

The background features a dark space with a network of glowing teal and grey nodes connected by thin lines, creating a sense of depth and connectivity.

Extra Level

Information Sources

Good Sources



- (F2P Bible) test.mobilefreetoplay.com/bible
- Extra Credits (Youtube)
- PocketGamer.biz
- Gamasutra.com
- Deconstructoroffun.com
- F2P Toolbox (book)
- Talk to other developers in events!

Thank You!

