

Double Coding

Making Online Games for Both the Casual and the Hardcore



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I wanted to call this talk **Moving Beyond Double-Coding**, but I didn't think most people reading the program would know what that means.



Double-Coding is the simple idea of **making content for two audiences**. It is a popular term for people making childrens television, and refers to programming that parents can watch with children without hating life.



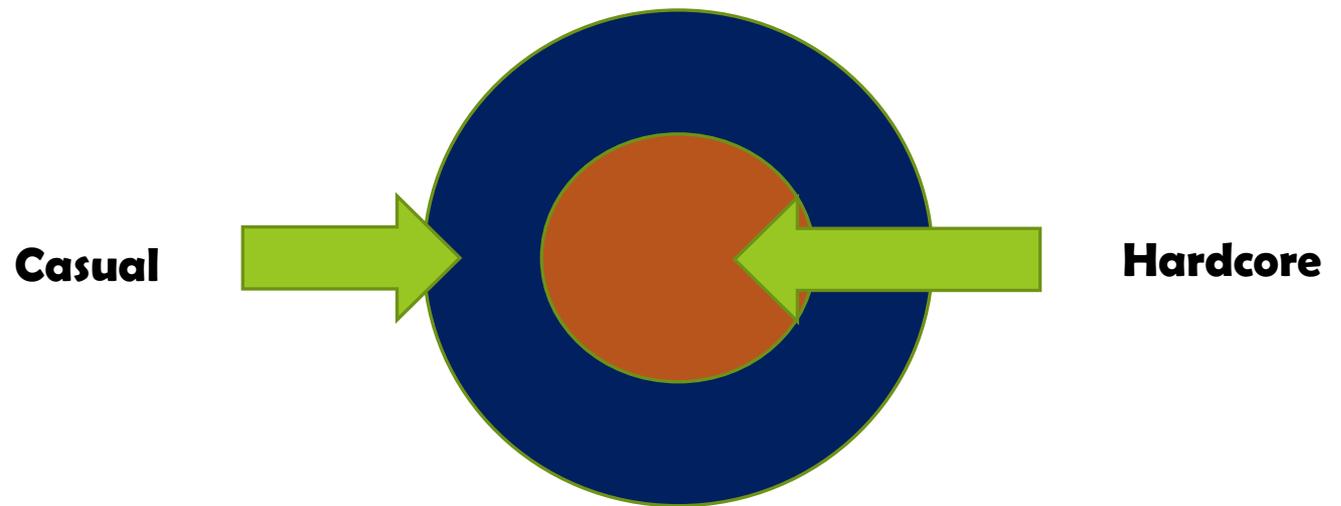


In game development a similar philosophy is often cited when trying to reach hardcore and casual players **simultaneously** and being sure you have mixed appeal.





Designers from Blizzard embrace this philosophy. They point to the **Blizzard Donut** as a cornerstone of their success





Almost all of the industry heavy hitters, in fact, make games that are **deeply double-coded**. Many of the also-rans end up focusing on only one or the other.

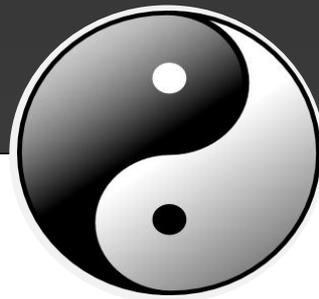


So double-coding is a good thing. Why do I want to **move beyond it**?



Because it depends on entirely too **simple** an understanding of hardcore and casual gamers.

A nearly meaningless term.



Hardcore Gamer



As game designers, how we tend to think about the hardcore is **wrong**.



We tend to focus too much on the **Michaels** – the idea that some gamers play any and all games that come their way.





This doesn't really map to a useful reality. While the same gamer might like to play Rage, Rift, and Civilization, he most certainly has a **favorite**.





Unsurprising, given the three games vary on almost every possible design axis, including adrenaline flow, strategic analysis, **time and social demands** and even hardware requirements.

An Oversimplification



Casual Gamer



I know of one studio that has the Midge test. They put a picture of their prototypical casual gamer up on the wall, and ask themselves '**Would Midge like this feature?**'





But the current facebook games aim at putting themselves on as many desktops as possible, but are subsidized by a small number of **whales**.





Some studies show that only 10% of social game player spend any money at all, and 2% spend more than \$25/month. Which is to say, there are **hardcore Zynga game players.**





The interesting question is **'is Midge one of them?'**





Or is it someone more like **Michael**?
(I genuinely don't know)



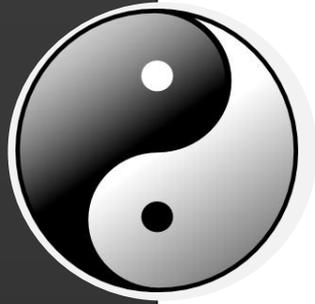


Anyway, there are **three** interesting and important points here.



The first is that almost anyone has the capacity to be **hardcore towards their hobby.**





Have you been to **Hobby Lobby** lately?





Did you know that **scrapbooking** was big business recently?





Among the things that there were conventions in the US for last year.



Sock Knitting.





Harry Potter.





UFOs.





Porn.

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Let's not forget the length that **Sports Fans** go to for their hobby.





The second is that 'hardcore gamer' is **impossibly broad**. It was even before casual become big.



Again, not unique to us. For example, the people who go to both of the concerts shown below would probably consider themselves **hardcore music fans**, but crossover is probably light.





Players tend to be fans of one or more **genre** of games, and a hardcore MMO player may not care one fig towards a new FPS game.



Indeed, one **annoying example** is that MMO players care much less about top-end hardware to support their hobby.



Even more interesting, sometimes players are hardcore towards **one** game, instead of towards a genre or gaming as a whole.



Players who are hardcore **Rift** players may not care about **WoW**.



Players who are hardcore **Unreal** players may only dabble with **Quake**.



Players who are hardcore **Frontierville** players may never learn the existence of **AdventureWorld**.



Being hardcore is a **high-investment** activity. A player's time, attention and cash is limited.



In MMOs, this manifests itself with an open question of **'how many subscriptions will a player keep open at one time.'**



Facebook games may be in a similar quandry. Some studies show that most whales are **unlikely** to spend that much money in two games.



But a hardcore audience is undoubtedly essential to any game-as-a service. In an MMO, this group acts as the **nucleus of your community.**





In Facebook games (and free-to-play MMOs), they are most of your monetization - effectively subsidizing your **freeloader** population.



Beyond that, hardcore fans of your game are crucial for reasons of being **evangelists** that build buzz for your game.



The problem is that **no one** is a hardcore fan of your game on day one.
Even if they buy into the hype, reality may differ from expectations.



Which means you as a designer have two jobs to do: capture casual gamers, and then **convert them** to hardcore fans.



Which, of course, makes sense. If whales subsidize your business, you want **more of them.**





And if your MMO is made a more vibrant community by having a core of hardcore **regulars**, you want more of them too.



So how do we design for conversion?



Investment



The first step is to abandon the idea that casual/hardcore is a binary state. It is rather a **continuum** that you are trying to push the player through.

casual



hardcore





Of course, what this looks like is **very different** based on the kind of game you're making.

Plays once a week,
never pays



Spends thousands of
dollars on virtual items





Of course, what this looks like is **very different** based on the kind of game you're making.

Logs in for an
occasional level up

Raids 5 nights a week





Of course, what this looks like is **very different** based on the kind of game you're making.

Blows off occasional
steam in the demo
version

Ranked eSports players





Overall, there are a **lot of waypoints** on the way to hardcore.

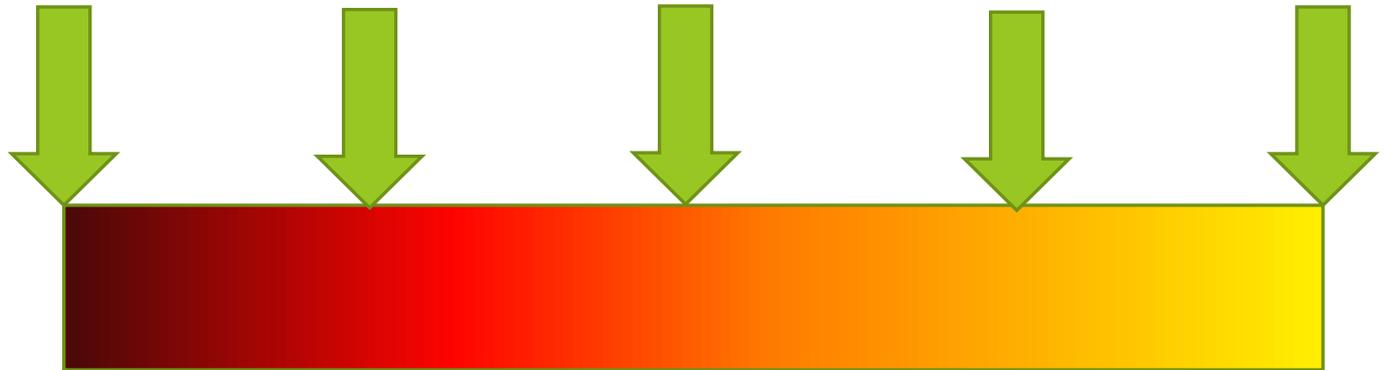
Interested

Casual

Committed

Devoted

Hardcore



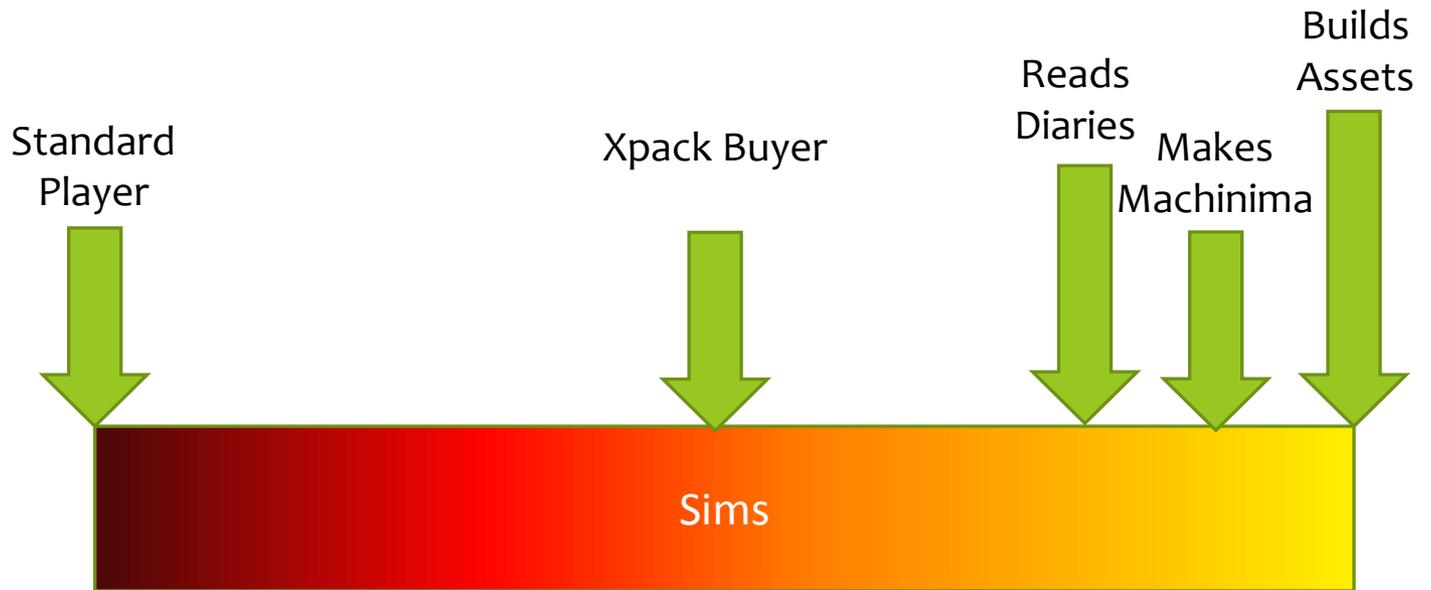


Sometimes, a game's metrics can tell you very clearly what those waypoints actually are – and how **far apart** they are.





Sometimes, a game's metrics can tell you very clearly what those waypoints actually are – and how **far apart** they are.





The best way to think about the casual/hardcore continuum is to think of it as a measure of **investment** – how attached players are to your product and gamespace.

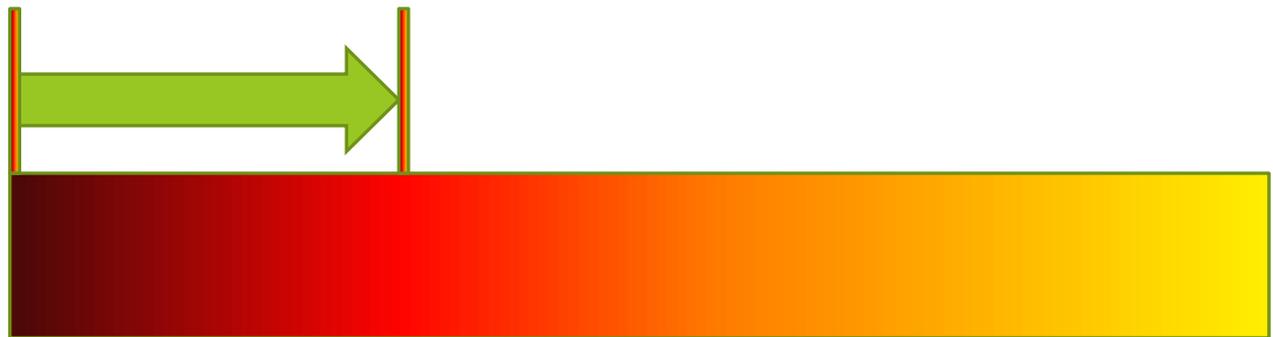




As a designer, you want to increase their investment. You don't necessarily have to take them the whole way up the ladder. **Any increase is good.**

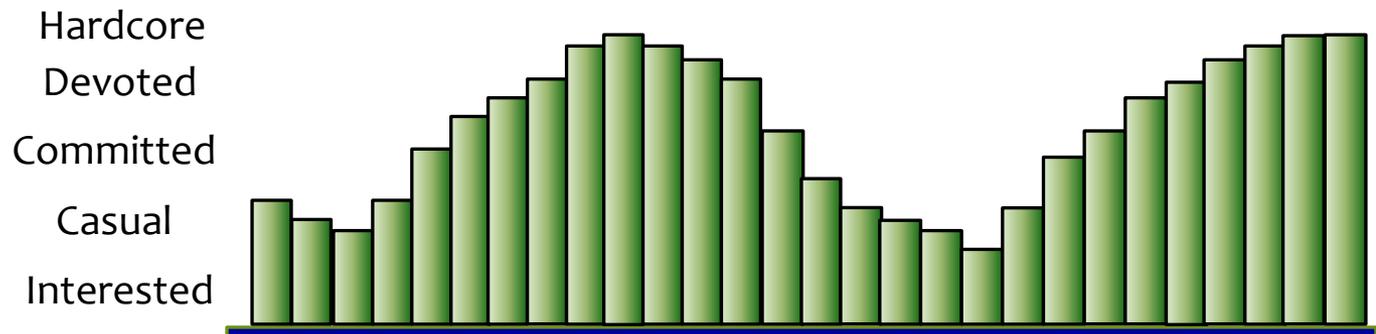
Casual

Committed



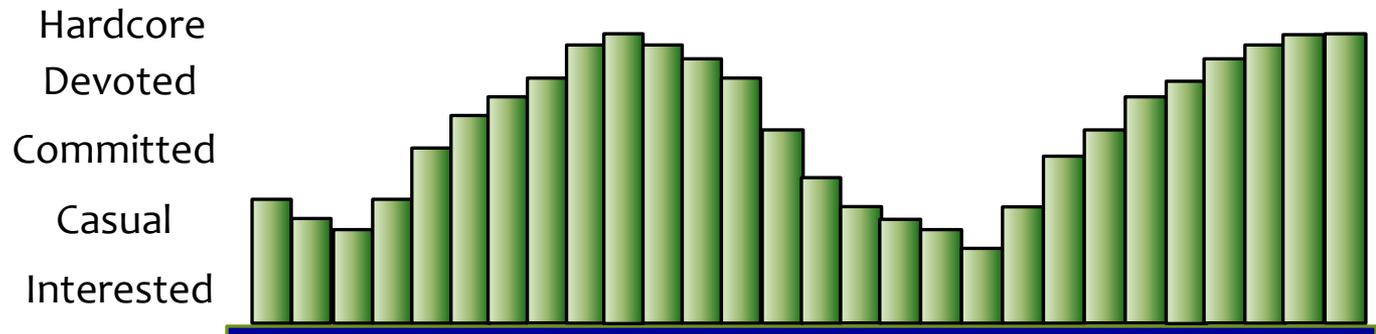


Imagine if you could **map** your player's **commitment over time**. As an example, the graph below shows that this player, despite a momentary lull, has effectively made this game a lifestyle choice.



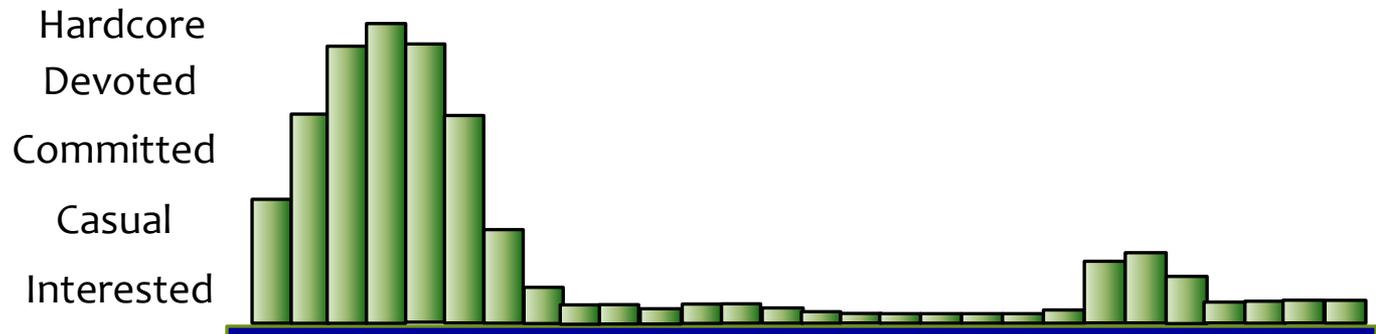


Note that this implies **backslide**: a player can choose to stop being hardcore at any time. Hobbies get dropped all the time.





Whereas this graph shows a game that is **initially compelling** but fails to hold long-term interest. Note that this might be fine if you're making a single-player box product game.





It is sobering to think of what effect the Playstation hacking event had on **DC Universe**, since players couldn't log on to maintain their emotional investment.





Social connections.



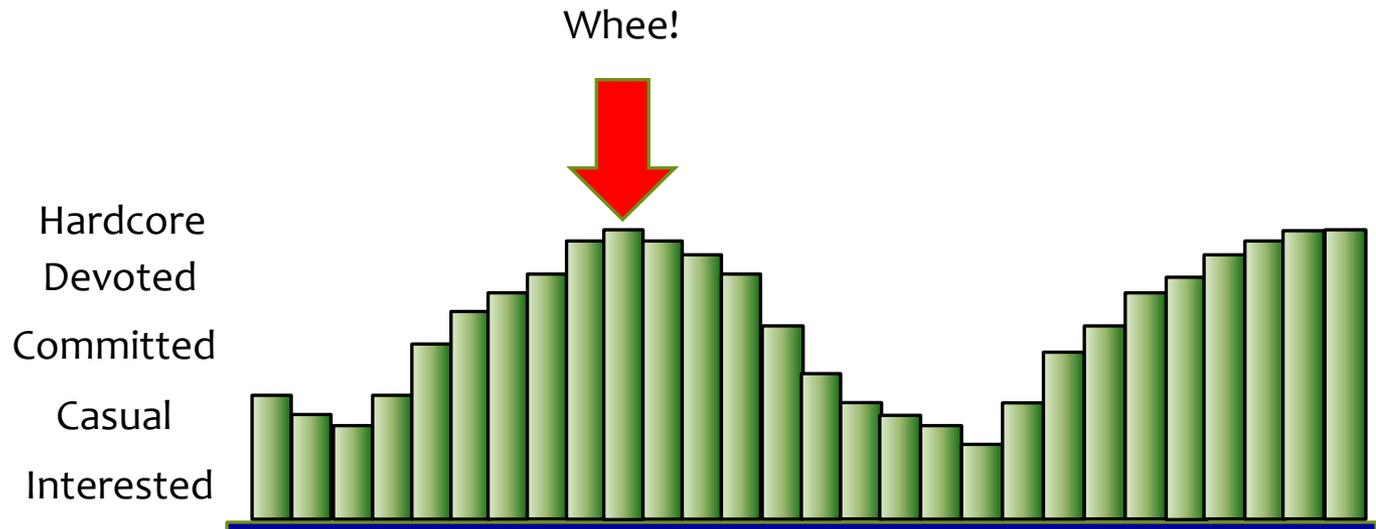


A sense of **ownership**, such as that of virtual property or pets.



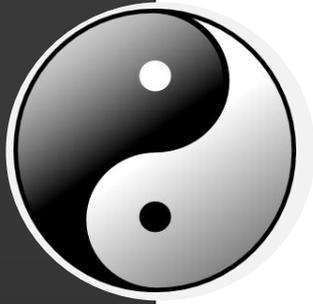


Fortunately for those of us who love making games, making them **fun** is probably the best way – and so we tend to focus on it.



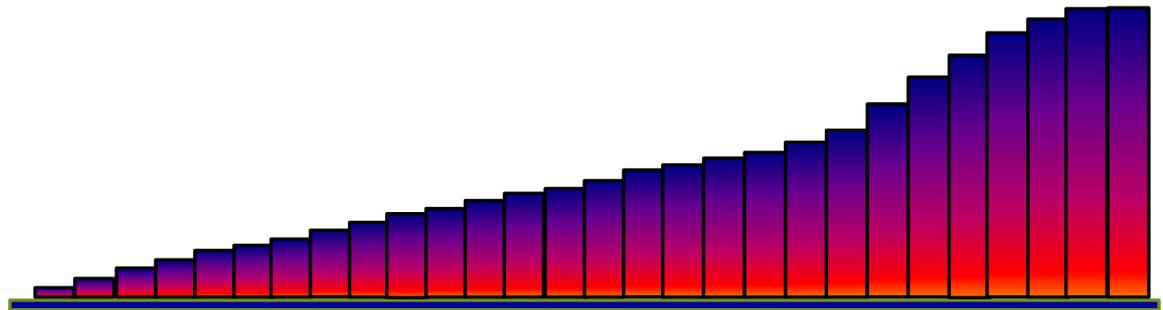


The problem is that fun is based largely on **novelty** – i.e. experiencing new and interesting things. Different game designs are more susceptible to problems of novelty than others.



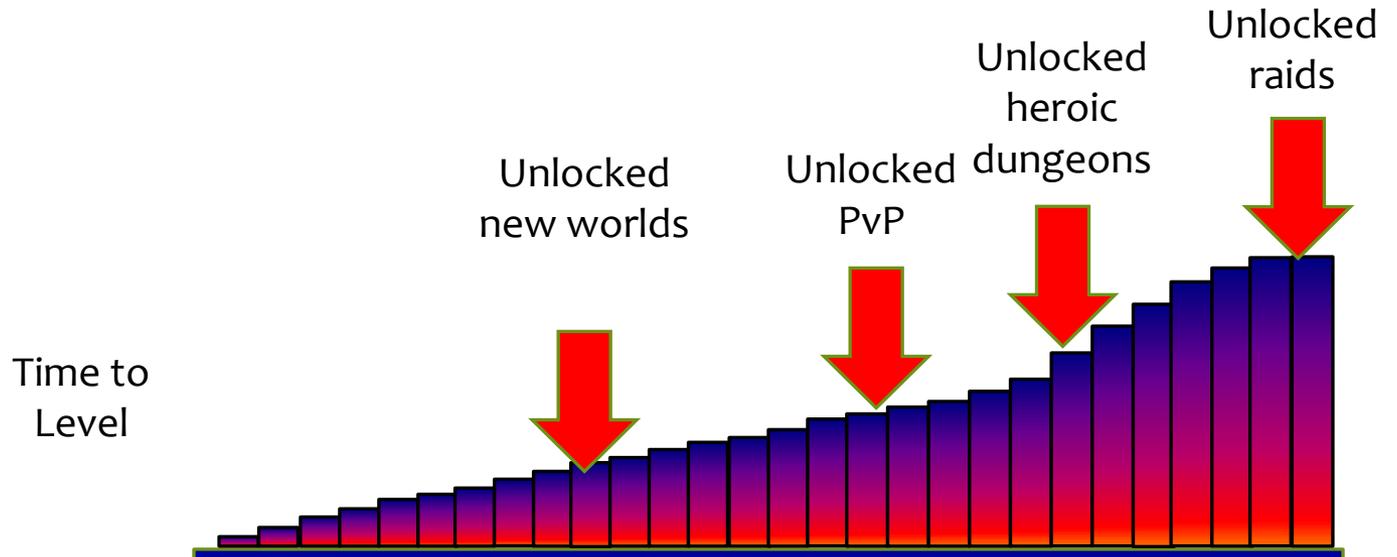
Which is why many games have a graduated reward system (i.e. the exponential levelling curve). We want a **Bruckheimer-like** early experience, but know we can't sustain that content pace forever.

Time to
Level



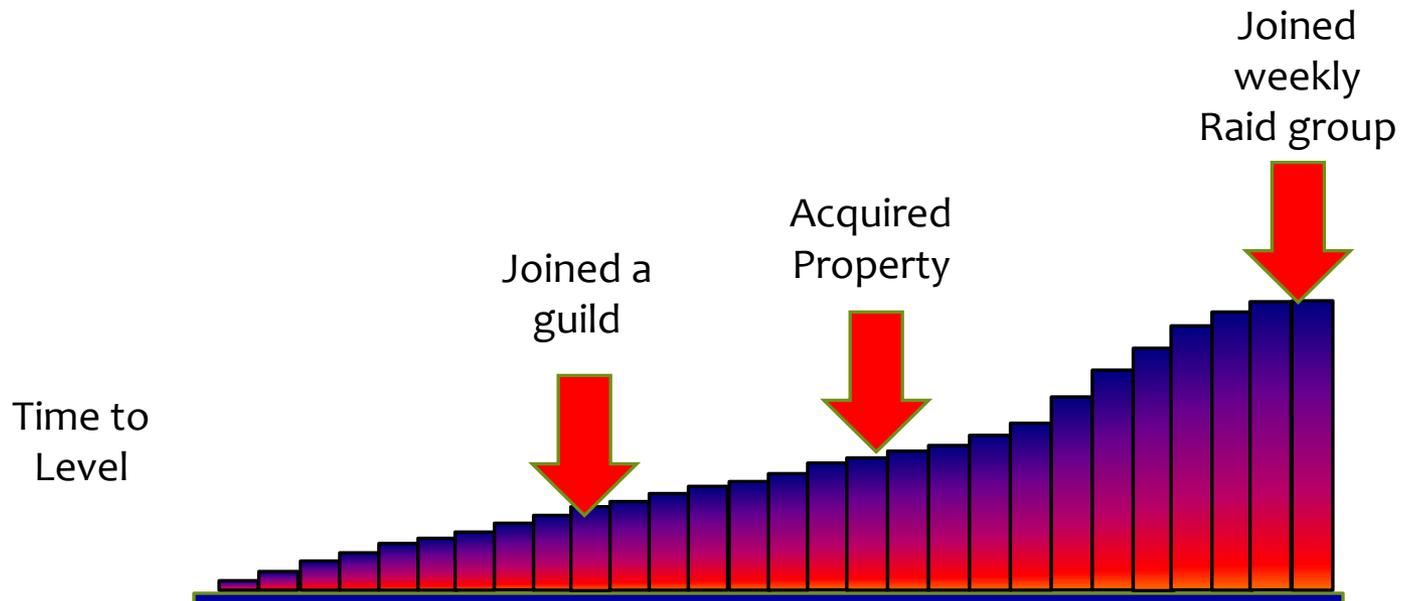


All of this is why we **unlock content** with game progress. We want to be sure there's significant new fun events to be had later.





Also, after the initial curve is where we hope to leverage some of the other techniques to get players **invested** in the space.



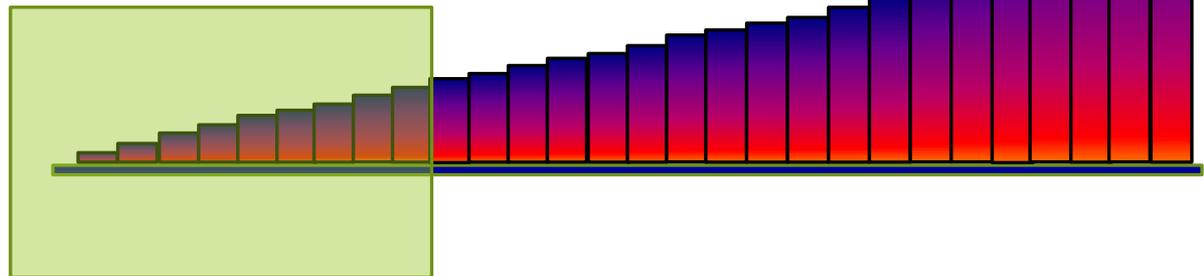


This is as much to ensure that the designer can control the initial experience, and ensure that the player's investment-building gameplay is **predictable** before your horizons starts to expand.

“For the love of god, leave nothing to chance!”

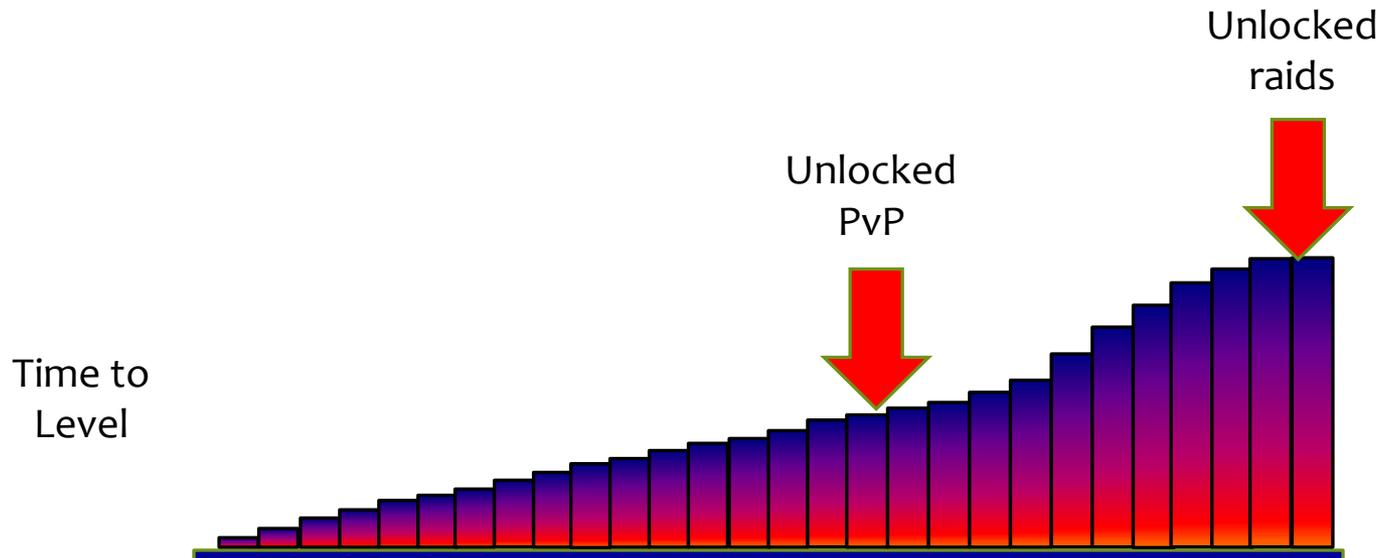


Time to Level





There's a downside to this philosophy, though. Hiding this complexity also tends to make it hard for our hardcore gamers to **jump directly** to more hardcore gameplay if it turns out they want to.



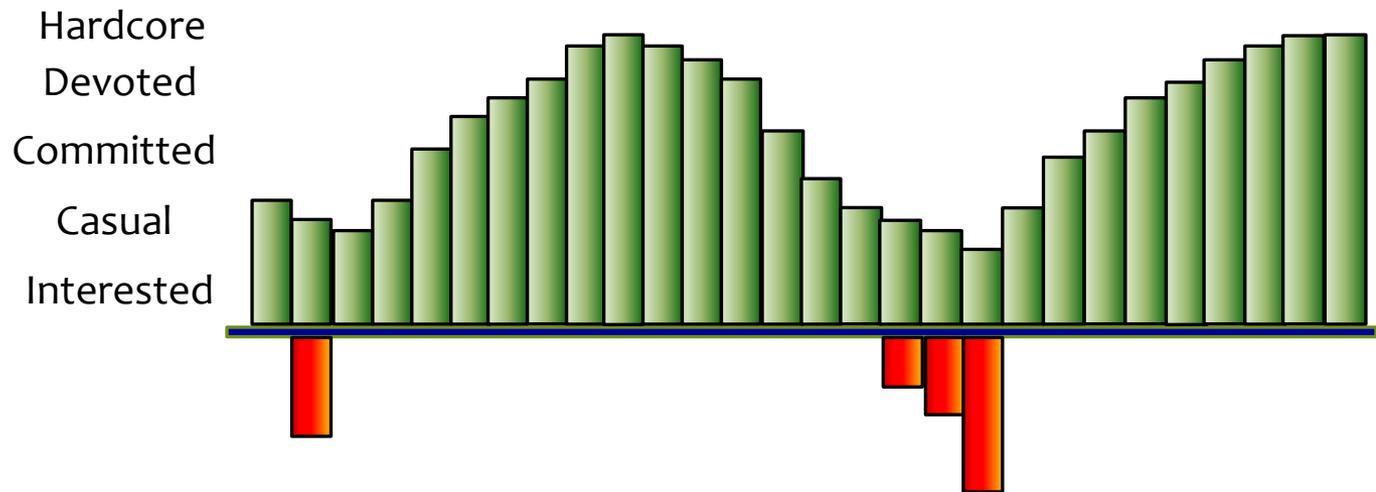
Why is investment important?



Pain

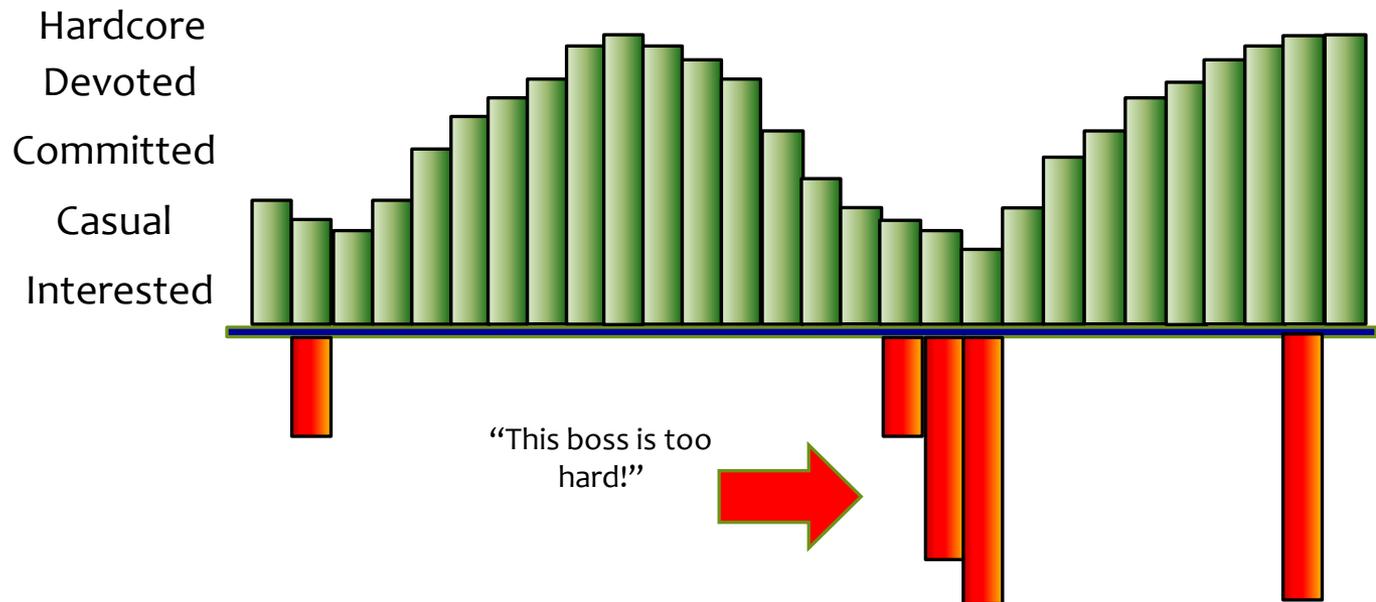


Pain is the idea that sometimes there are events in and around your game experience that make the player want to quit your game.



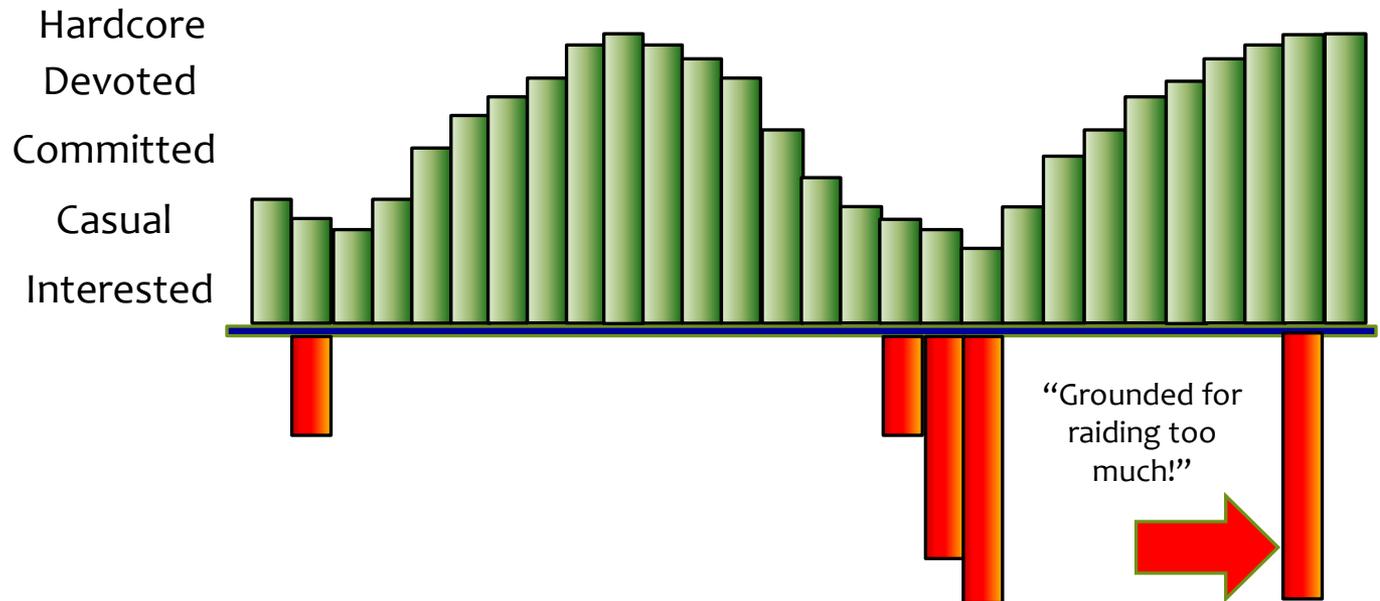


Pain can be thought of as anything that makes the player **question his commitment** to your game. Some of these are within the control of the game designer.





Some are **less so**.





Even if overcome, pain can affect your player's investment. Sometimes positively – overcoming a difficult obstacle can make the player even more invested. Nicole Lazzaro calls this **hard fun**.



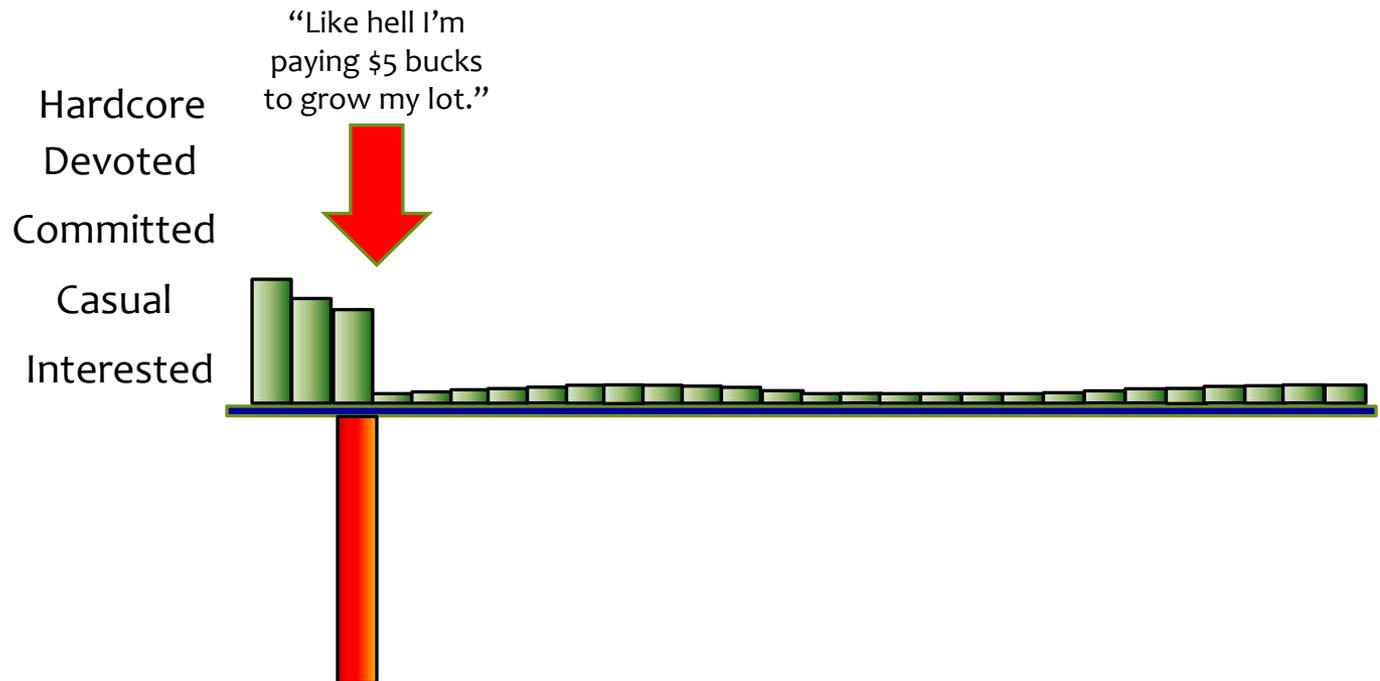


Of course, this too is a **balancing act**. Make it too hard, and players will quit.



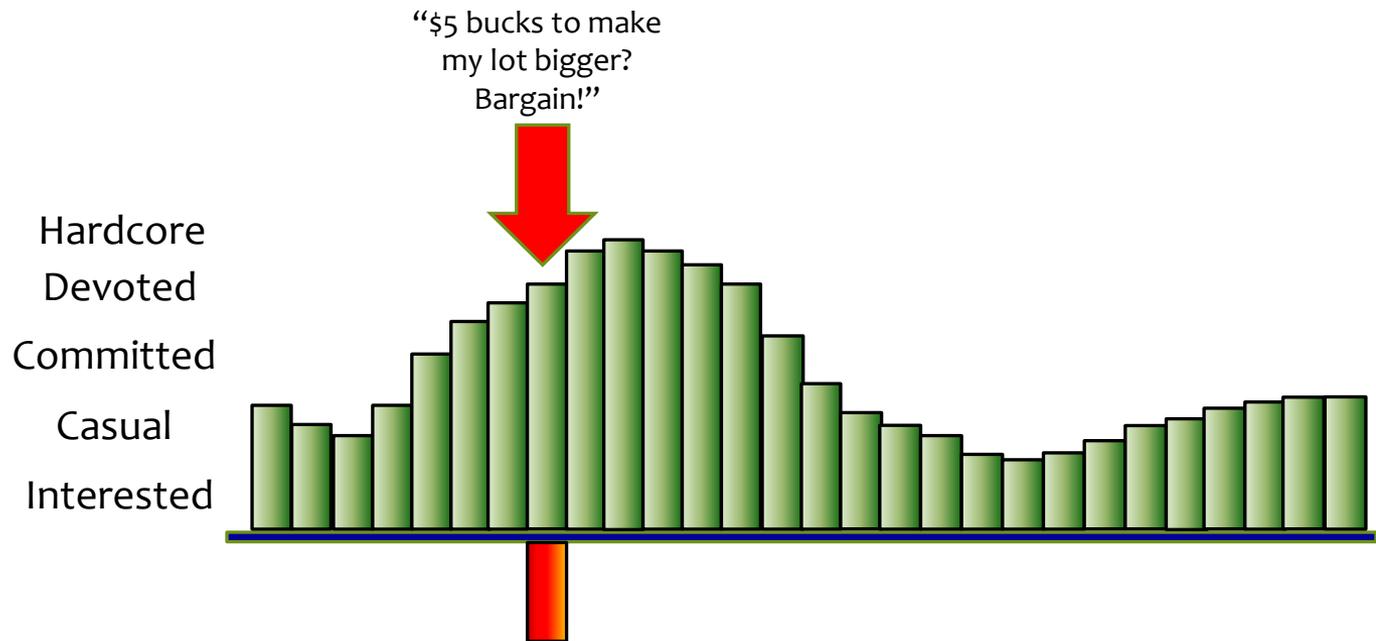


The most common problem I see in most free-to-play games is a gross miscalibration of pain vs. investment. Players encounter **barriers** they cannot overcome, and feel no investment, so feel no desire to do so.





But ask them to make that decision once they're invested in the game, and they're suddenly **happy** that their hobby is enriched.

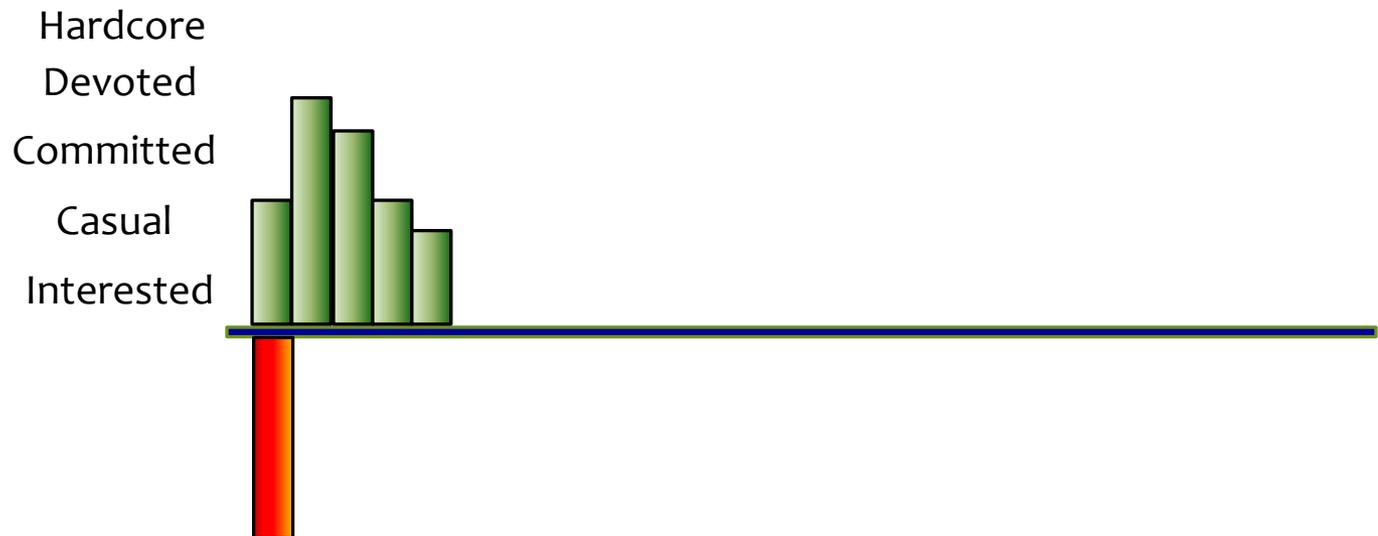




An interesting place to consider this is in the **box sale**.

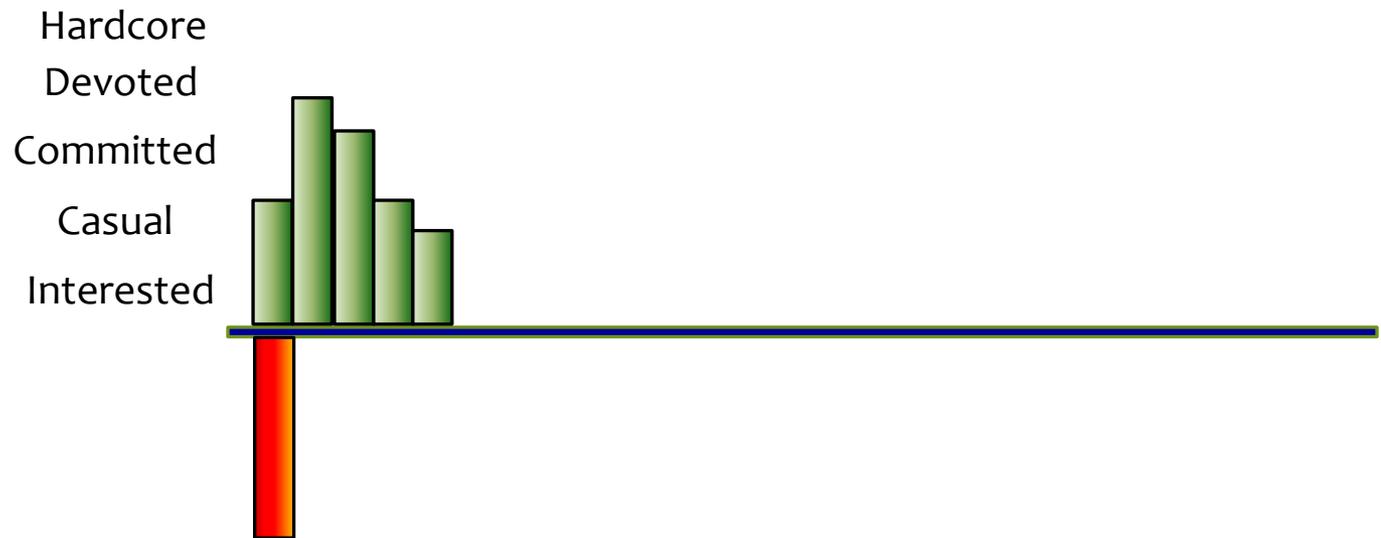


Spending \$60 bucks on a game is a huge pain point, but once a player does so, he usually will be somewhat invested – to **validate** his purchase.





Economists call this the **sunk cost fallacy**.





By contrast, free to play games don't have that pain point, but they also don't have that initial investment. Players have a much easier time putting down a FTP game. Designers building investment is **paramount**.

Hardcore
Devoted
Committed
Casual
Interested



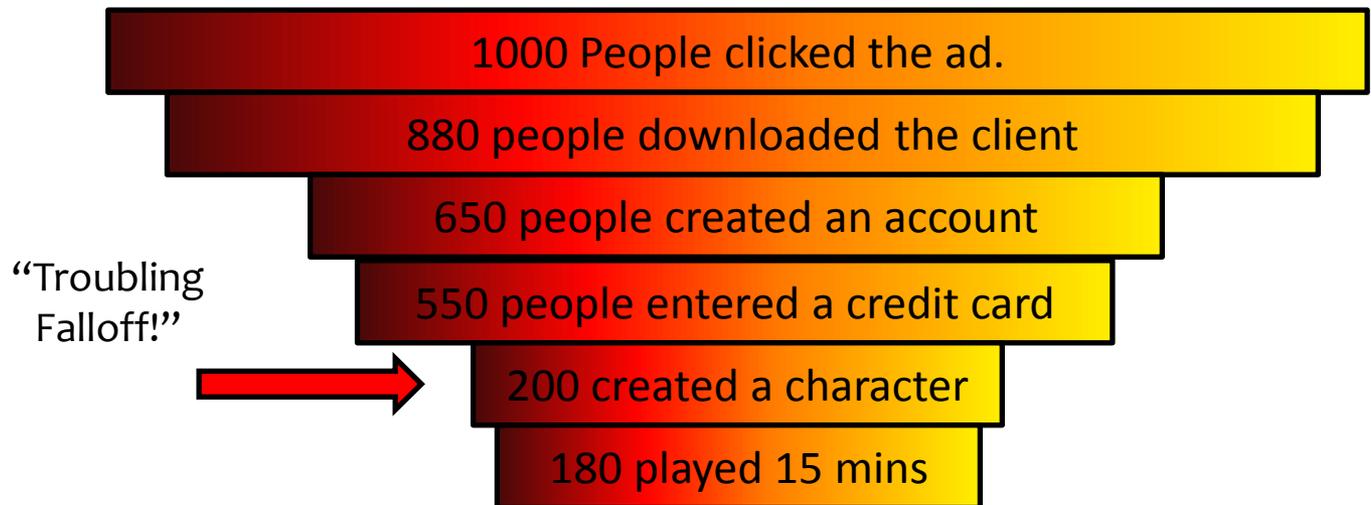
So what's the cornerstone of designing multicode games?



Layered Design

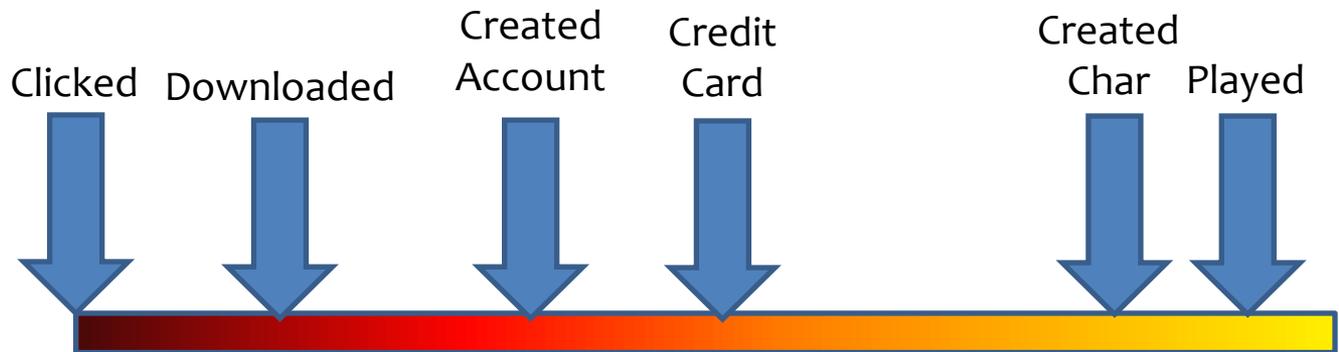


Many marketing guys already have a similar design impetus outside of the game. Some of you may be familiar with the **funnel charts** they use to track prospective customers all the way into the game.



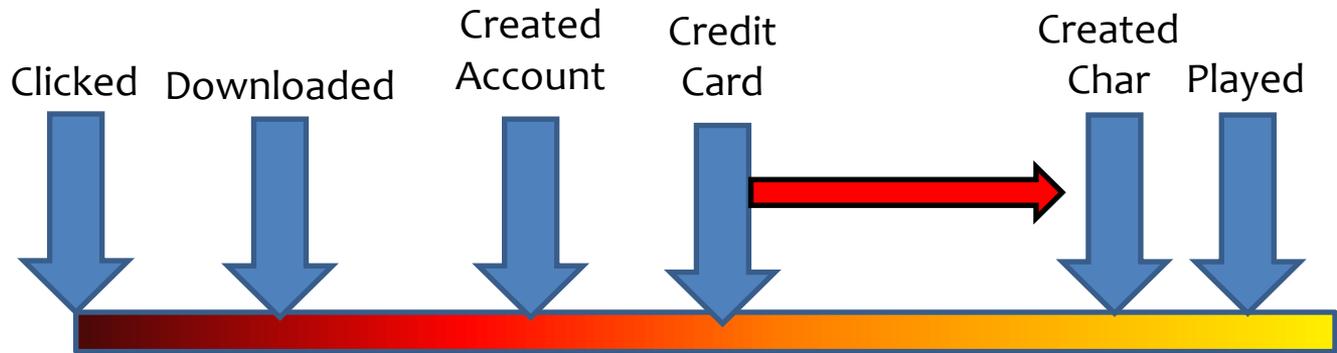


This is just **another way** to look at our investment chart. It may be better. Use whichever makes it easier to see the panic points.





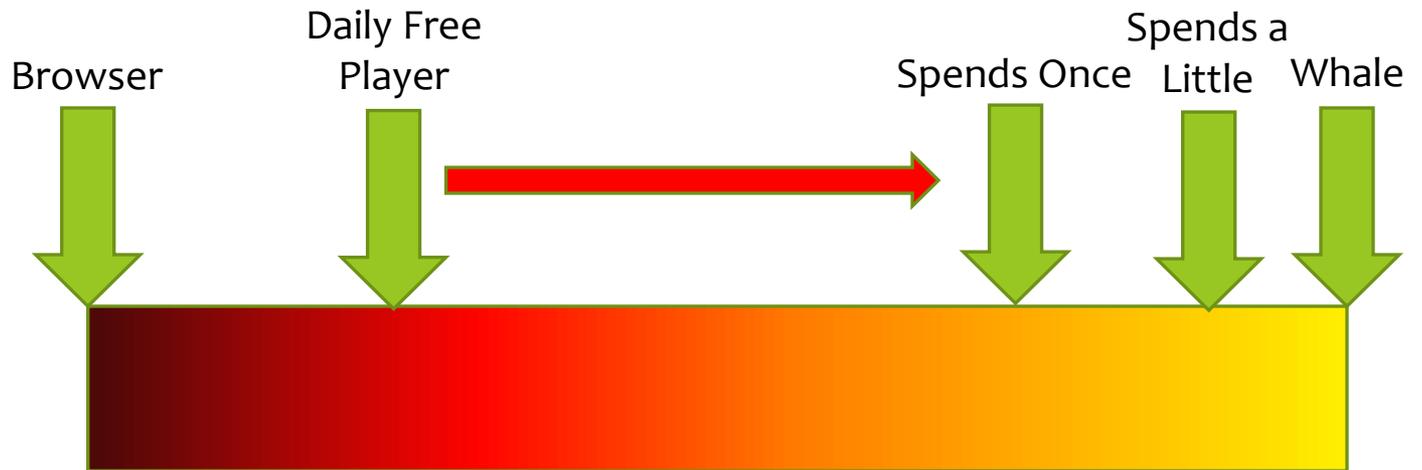
When you can see these panic points, you can then attack the **weakest links** – the places with the biggest falloff, or largest impact jumps.



Need to increase investment here!”

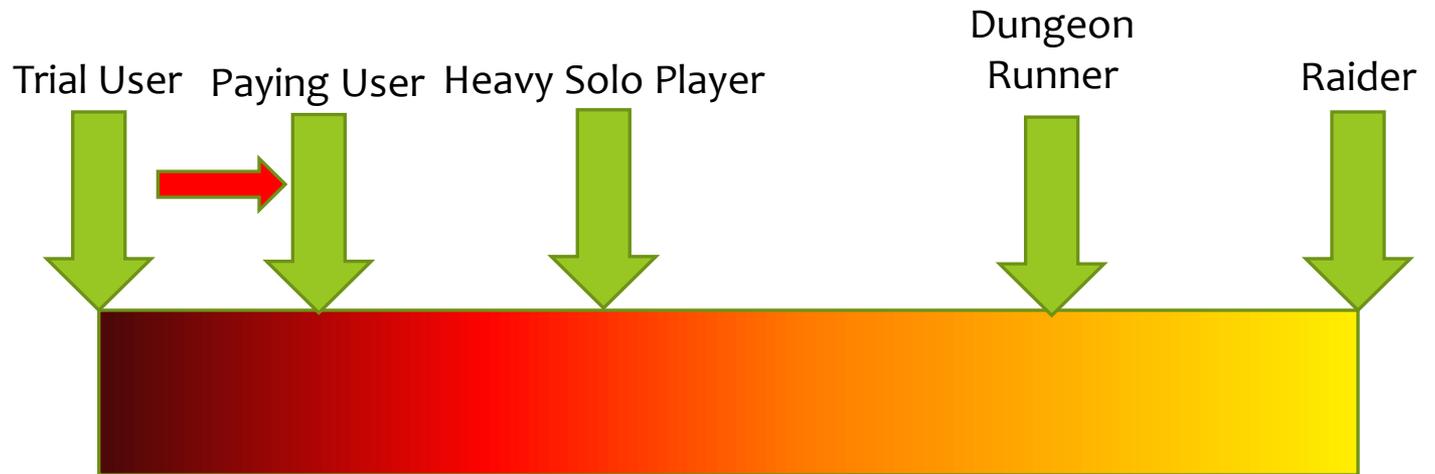


Designers should be doing this as well. In general, we do. For example, facebook game designers tend to worry about how to get players to spend their **first dollar**.



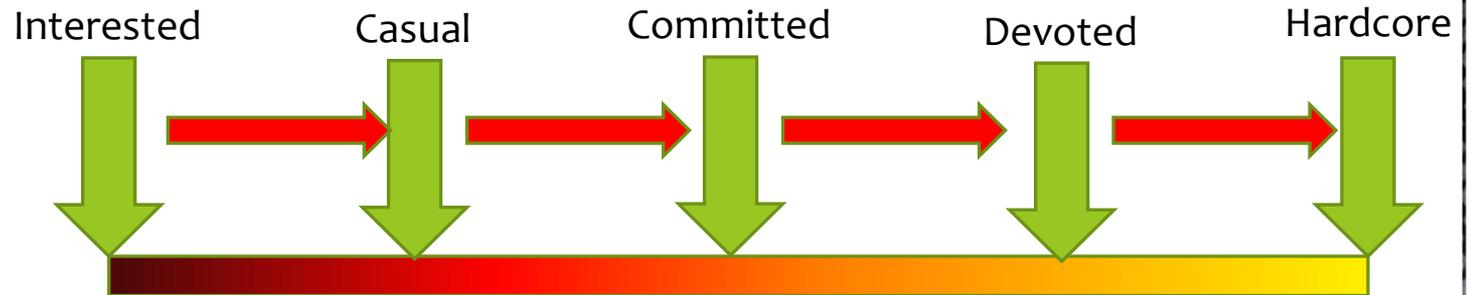


We tend to focus on jumps that have **very direct business impact**, such as converting trial customers into paying ones.



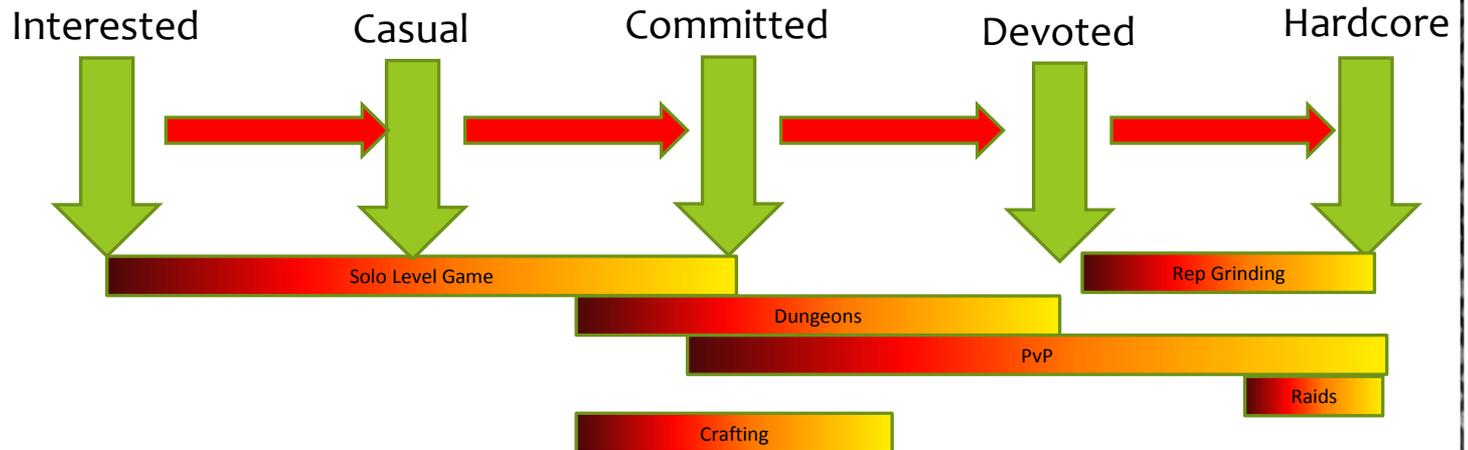


But if our goal is to increase the number of devoted and hardcore players, we need **breadcrumbs** all the way up and down the line.



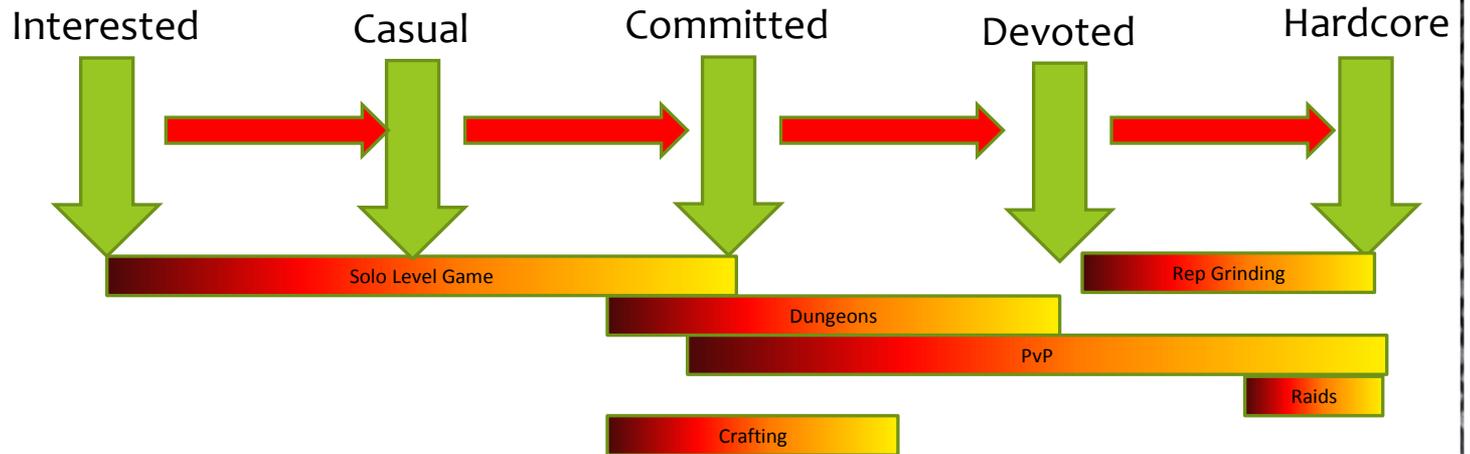


MMOs early on are all about the level game, but more features get layered on as the player advances. The good news is that a bored player has more **verbs** he can take part in.



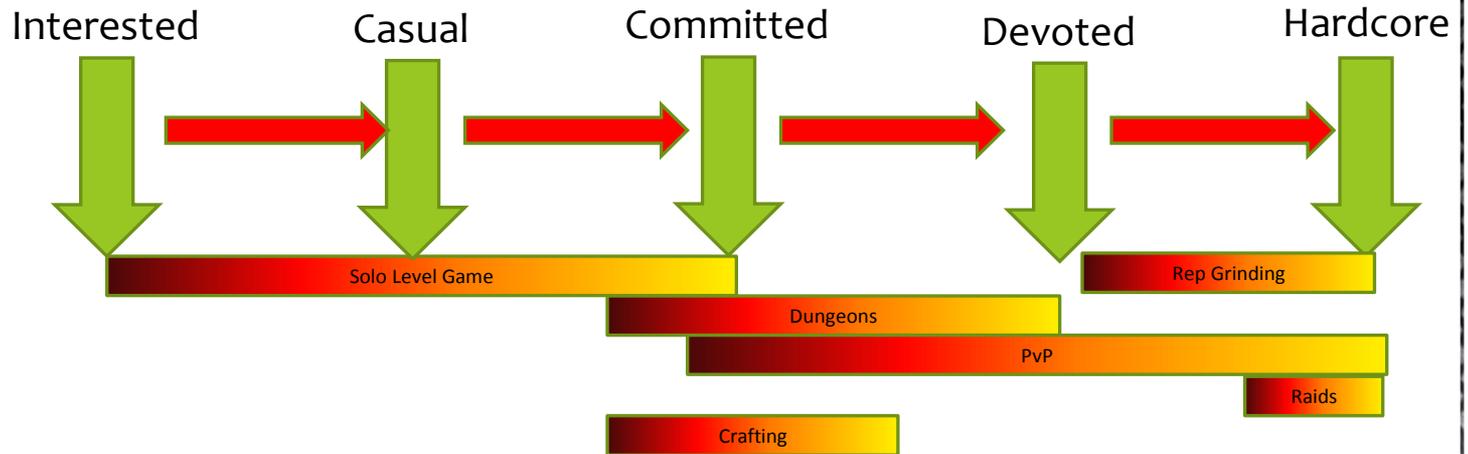


Very frequently, designers are prone to saying **absolutist** things, like 'raiding is for the hardcore' or 'crafting is for lighter, social gamers'.



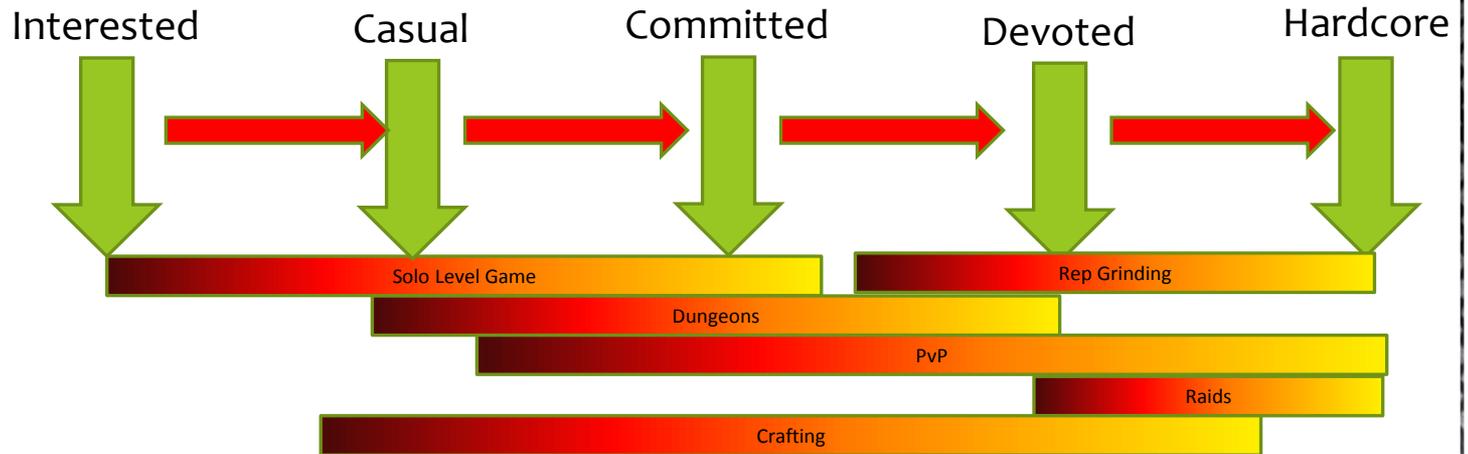


But the narrow bands can lead to disappointment. For example, if a player **runs out** of the solo content he's enjoying before he encounters the magic of your dungeons or crafting, he isn't invested and is liable to wash out.





And while you may never get Joe Casual into a raid, **expanding the investment reach** each feature helps to ameliorate boredom, and find something in the game that stairsteps their interest upwards.





Fighting Cliquism



One of the problems with the hardcore is that they tend to be **proud** of the fact that they are so.





This can lead to unfortunate social dynamics where the hardcore players are actively antagonistic towards **new blood** trying to move up the investment ladder.





One example is the fact that the **definition of hardcore** will change as your game lives. What is hardcore the day you launch may be middle of the road a year later as you add content and they get more expertise.



The trick here is that you want to **accelerate** the rate that new blood can get to where the hardcore are, but if you dumb down the hardcore experience, the hardcore will come to resent the new players.



Hardcore disliking casuals fights against our goal of increasing player investment, and may actually **fight against** the design goals of the game, if you have a deep massively multiplayer endgame component.



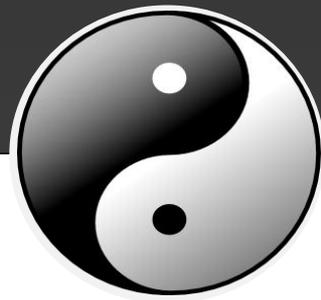
Steps should be taken to encourage your experienced players to **value new blood**, and help them up the investment ladder, while still maintaining the challenge level that maintains hardcore investment.





And in any game, **social ties builds investment**, so giving players an excuse to forge new ones is always a good idea.





In Conclusion



1. Figure out what **hardcore** means for your game – and who it means it to.



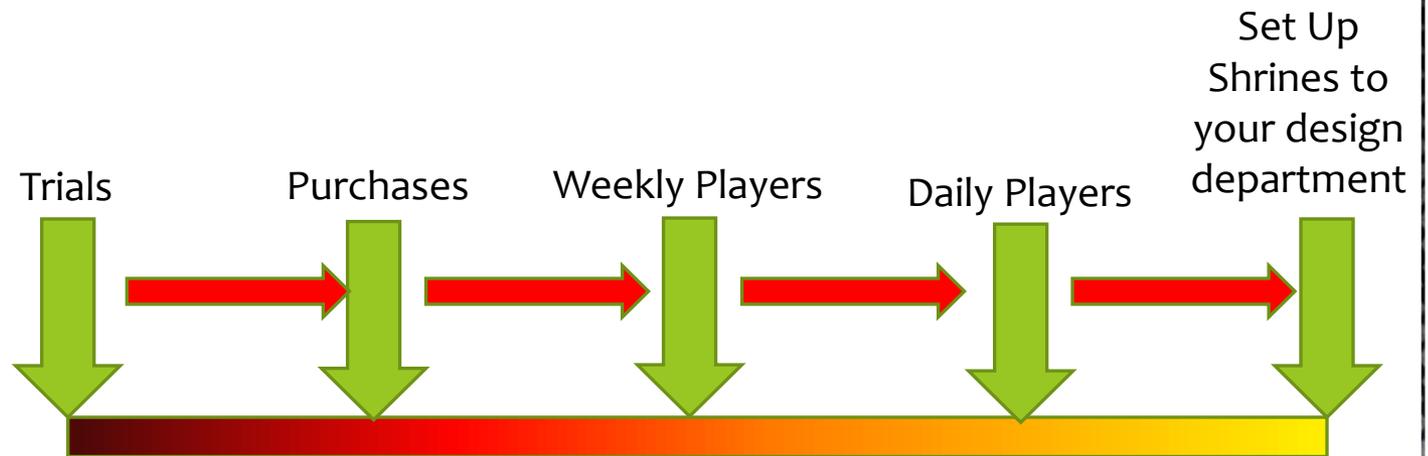


2. Don't think of hardcore/casual as binary, but as a **spectrum**.



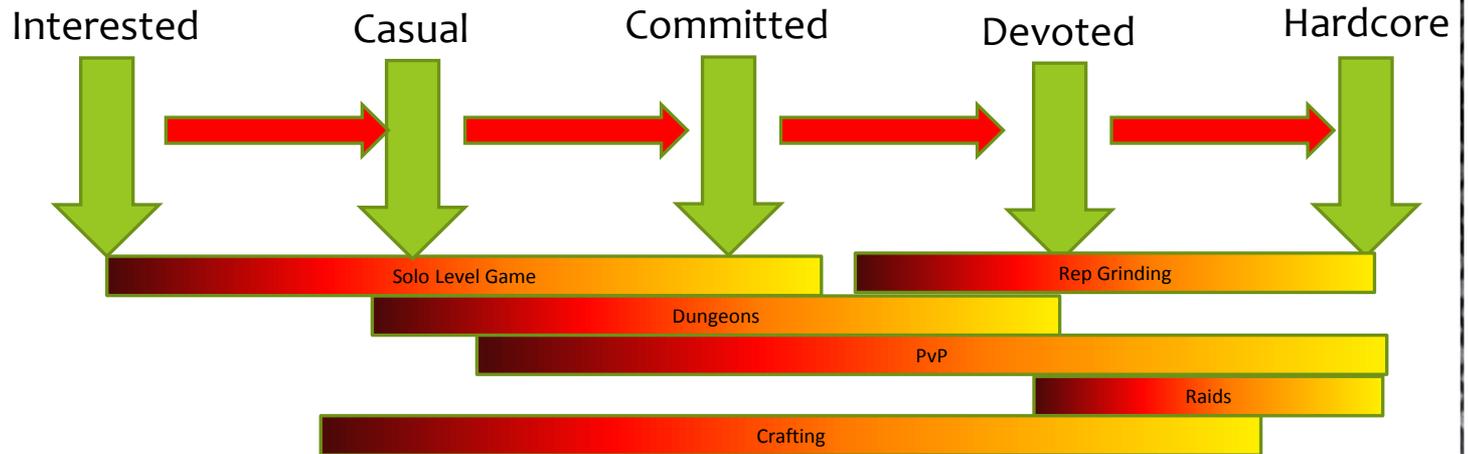


3. Use metrics to identify the breaks in your spectrum, and figure out how to **stairstep** players through each step.



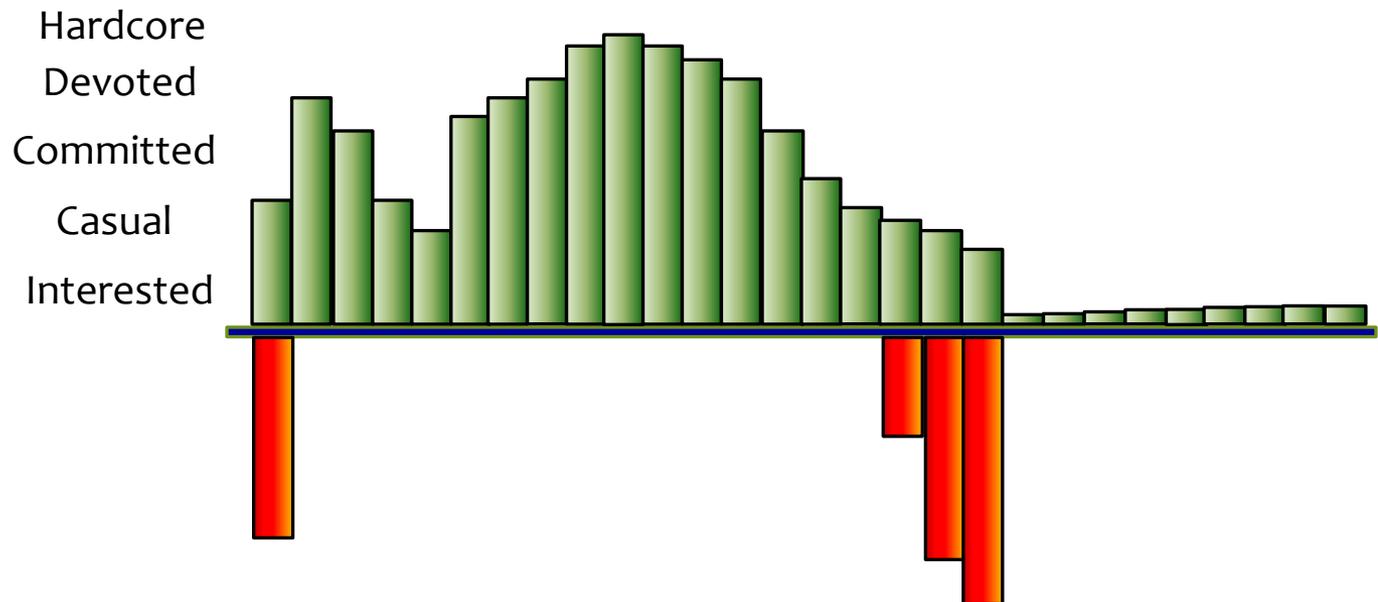


4. Figure out which features apply to which audiences, and **widen** those audiences if at all possible.





5. Understand the role investment plays in terms of the **pain points** you intentionally introduce to your design.





5. Put in mechanics that encourage players to **help other players** up the investment ladder, because it helps them at the top end.



Questions?



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