

Where the Whales live: the pyramid model of F2P design

Nicholas Lovell

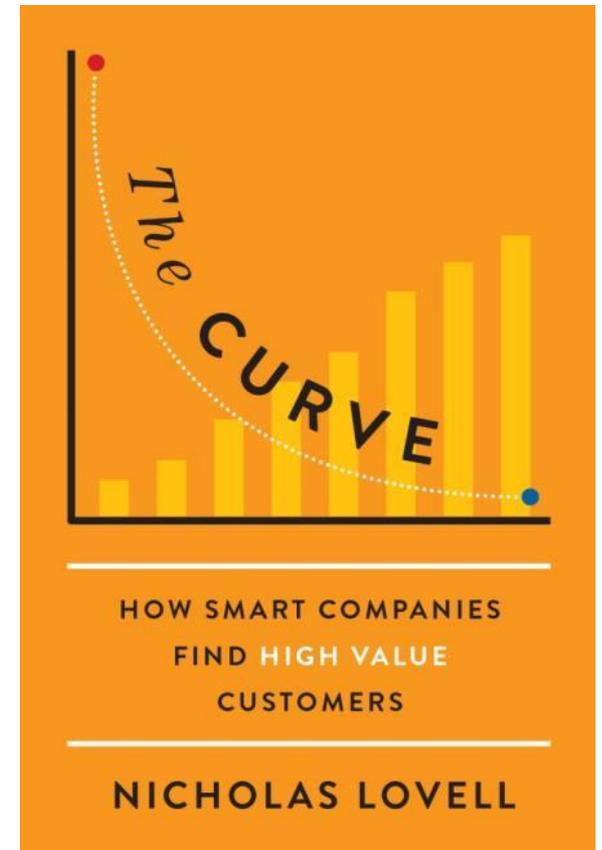
GDC Next



THE BUSINESS OF GAMES

Nicholas Lovell, GAMESbrief

- Author: *The Curve, How to Publish a Game, Design Rules for Free-to-Play Games*
- Director, *GAMESbrief*
- Clients have included: *Square Enix, Channel 4, Channelflip, Exient, Firefly, Rebellion, Supermassive and many more*
- Masterclasses on *F2P game design*



This talk is a poster

(your business)

acquisition

You can get new customers through paid installs, organic installs (word of mouth and chart position), PR and advertising. You can also use technical viral techniques such as Facebook Connect, and cross promotion to drive downloads from existing players of your games or those of other studios.

Techniques: Paid install, organic, PR, advertising, virality, cross-promotion

retention

Keeping your customers is the secret to success. You need to get smarter at making the customers that you do get stay with you longer. Retention is about giving players good reasons to want to keep coming back to your game.

Fix the leaky bucket! If your retention is poor, money spent on acquisition will be wasted.

monetisation

Monetisation needs't limit players' fun. The core of free-to-play is variable pricing. It is about allowing non-paying players to play for free forever while your biggest fans should be able to spend lots (and we do mean lots) of money on things they really value.

the Funnel & the Pyramid

(your game)

The superfan game is where your superfans live, whether measured by time or by money. It is typically social, often asynchronous multiplayer and competitive. A superfan game is not necessary at launch; you need to be sure that the core loop and retention game are fun before you worry about the superfan game.

Examples: Clash of Clans, Stronghold Kingdoms, Running a guild in an MMO

The retention game sits above the core loop and encourages players to come back frequently, whether that is weekly, daily, or several times a day. Techniques include game loops of different lengths, clear indicators of progression, rewards, and appointment mechanics.

Examples: Collecting points, levelling up, accessing new in-game items

The core loop is the central point of engagement with your game, and what prototyping is made for. For mobile games, you should be able to finish one core loop in the time it takes a barista to make a macchiato. Free, unrestricted access to the core loop means that your game can be free to play forever, for all users.

Examples: One run in Jetpack Joyride, harvesting crops in Farmville, one match in League of Legends

super-fan game

retention-game

core loop

FREE

Monetisation should not spoil your game's design. Studios that make their designers focus on the funnel can end up churning out players in the core loop and the retention game. By seeing your game as a pyramid, it's easier to see that freeloaders and low-spending players are the foundation of what you do. Treat them generously while also enabling fulfilling engagement towards the top of the pyramid.

Allow people who love what you do to spend lots of money on things they truly value.

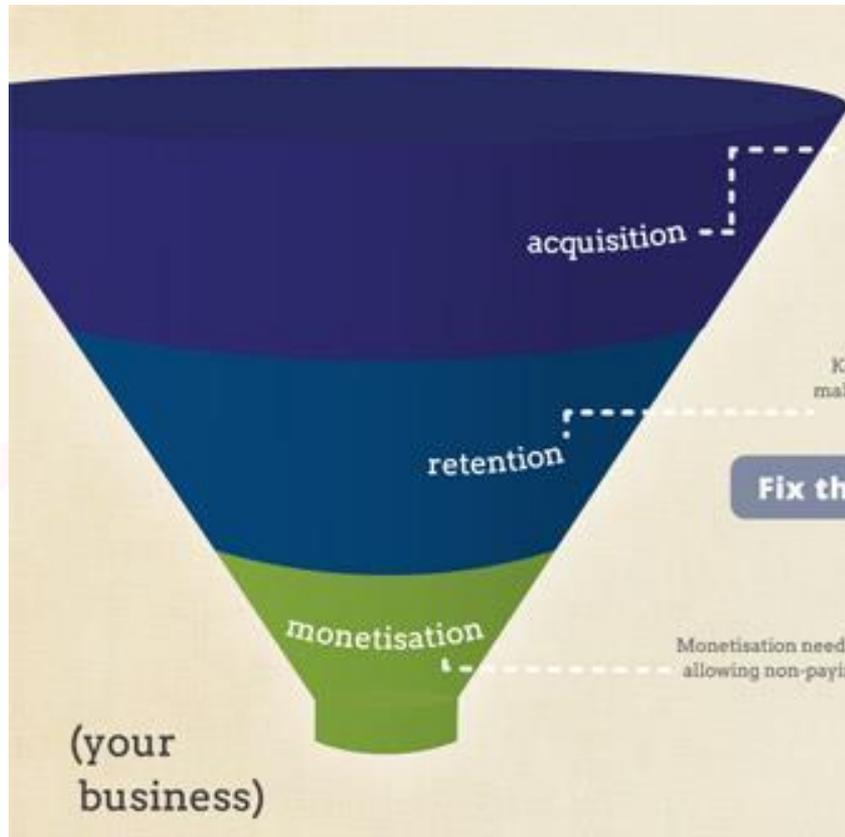
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GAME *brief*

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The Funnel is familiar



- ACQUISITION: How do I get people through the door cost-effectively?
- RETENTION: How do I keep people coming back for more?
- MONETISATION: How do I build money-making strategies into gameplay

How to maximise the Funnel

- Use metrics
- Maximise whales
- Eliminate freeloaders

WRONG!

What I say in Design Rules

Rule 7: Be free to play forever

“I believe that you should enable your gamers to experience nearly all of your game for free. Make your game truly free”

Design Rules for Free-to-Play Games

Nicholas Lovell
& Rob Fahey

What about the superfans?

“Allow those who love what you do to spend lots of money on things they truly value”

The Pyramid is new



- The Core Loop is the beating heart of your game
- The Retention Game is what keeps players playing
- The Superfan Game is where the whales live

The Core Loop

The Core Loop

- It's the heart of the game
- It's what many would call "gameplay"
- It's ideal for prototyping
- It's where FUN lives
- Ideally, it would be short enough to pass the Starbucks test
- And it's free!

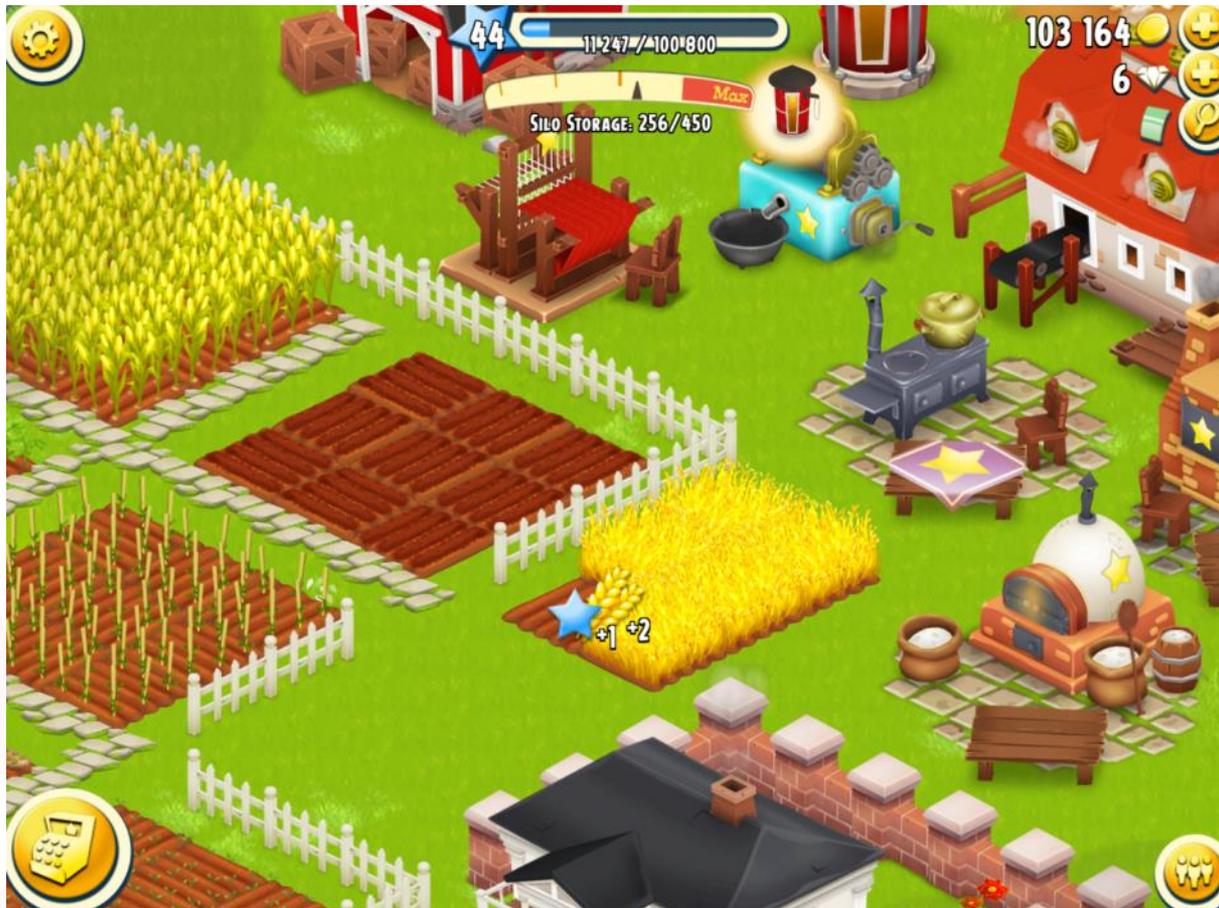
Core Loop



Core Loop



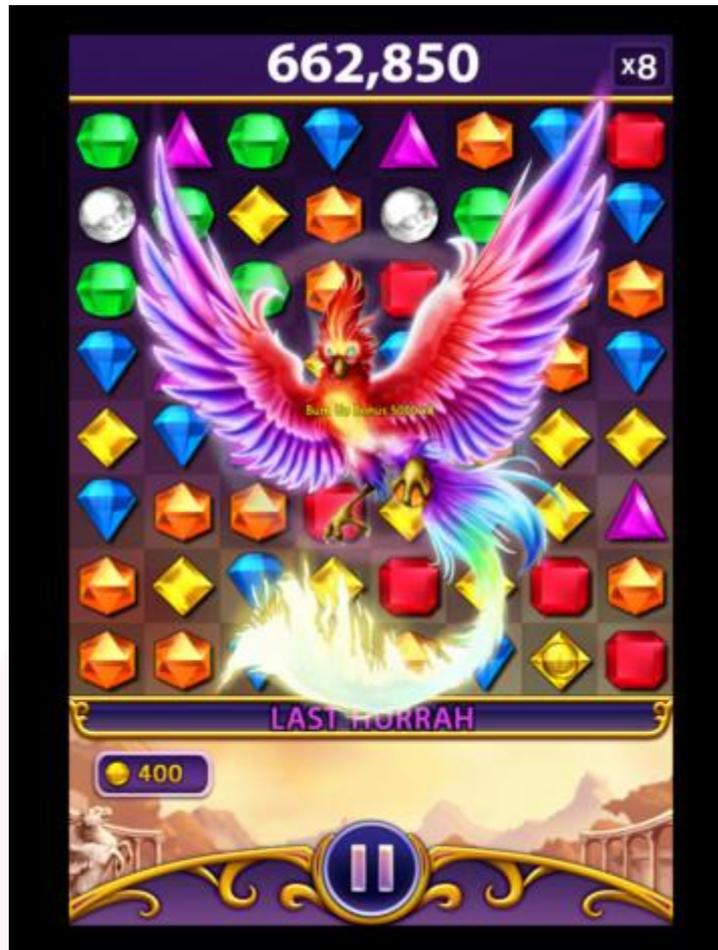
Core Loop



Core Loop



Core Loop



Core Loop



Core Loop



Core Loop



An apology

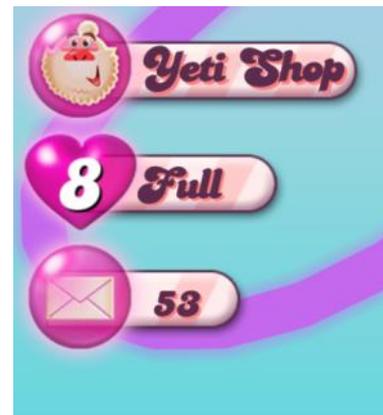


Core Loop



The core loop should be free

- If you use energy, use it **elegantly**
- “Come back this afternoon!” **Not** ‘pay up or leave’.
- Engaged freeloaders should be able to play for free forever, even if there’s a wait mechanic.



The Retention Game

The Retention Game

- The Retention Game is what keeps people coming back for more
- It can work over days, months, weeks or years
- It has been around in AAA games for decades, but F2P has some of its own twists

Retention Game



Retention Game



Retention Game

HIGH SCORES

RANK	SCORE	NAME
1ST	10000	BOB
2ND	10000	JWC
3RD	10000	SKT
4TH	10000	TBS
5TH	10000	MNM
6TH	10000	WKJ
7TH	10000	SVD
8TH	10000	WHO
9TH	10000	TRN
10TH	10000	JWC

CREDIT 0



Retention Game



Retention Game



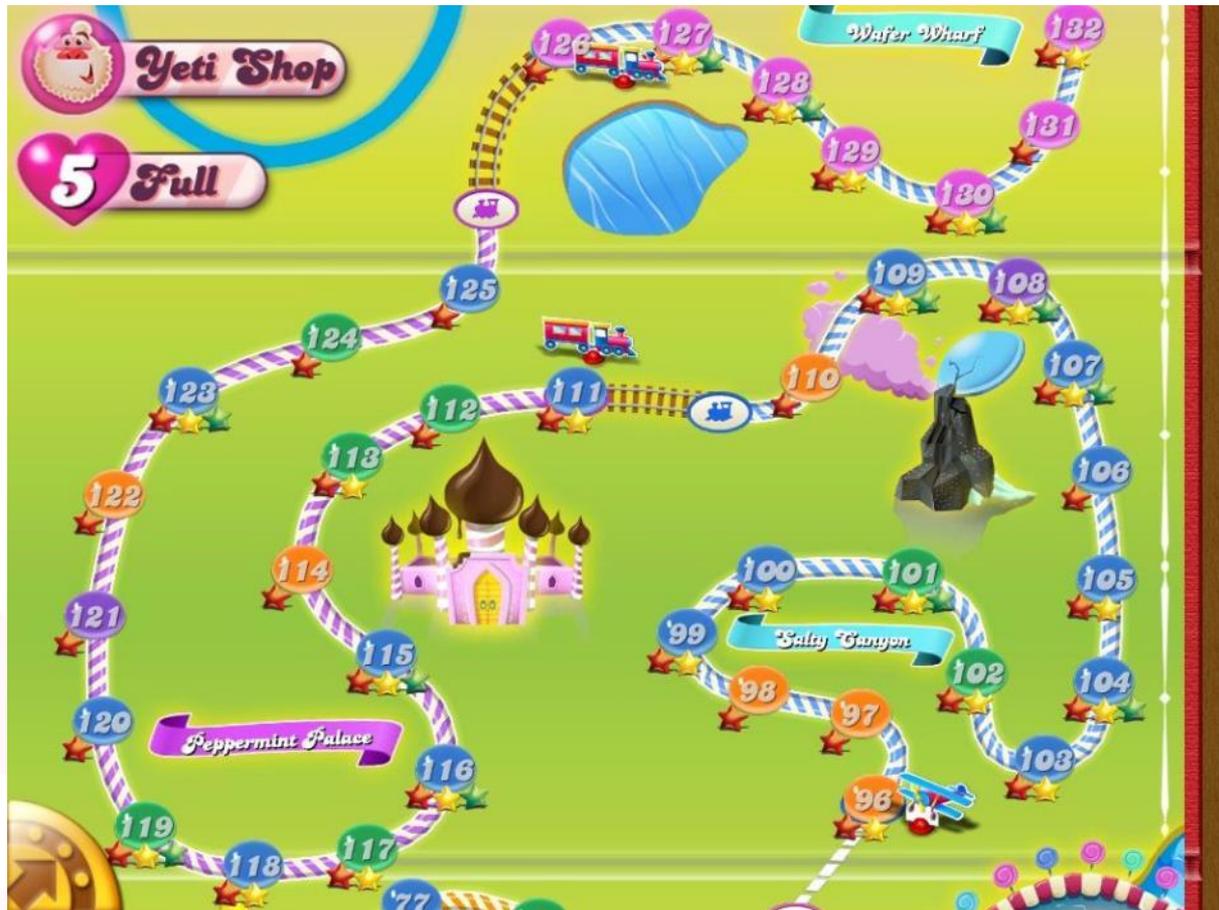
Retention Game



Retention Game



Retention Game



Retention Game



Retention Game



Owners

The Vanguard

PvP Status

Closed

Location

Travelling between Shantyville and Texan

Expected arrival: 2010-11-05 02:16

Play next road encounter

Return to Shantyville

- Accept truces from all NPC traders
- Accept truces from all members of friendly factions

Retention Game

The screenshot displays a game's item shop interface. At the top, there are five category tabs: "All", "Fruits", "Vegetables", "Grains", and "Flowers". The "All" tab is currently selected. On the left side, there is a button labeled "Click for Specials!". The shop is organized into a grid of eight items, each with an icon, name, and detailed statistics. Each item also has a "BUY" button and a price tag. The items are:

- Lilac**: Sell for: 75 Coins, Harvest in: 10 Hours, XP Gained: 1, Price: 35
- Pumpkins**: Sell for: 68 Coins, Harvest in: 8 Hours, XP Gained: 1, Price: 30
- Spinach**: Sell for: 95 Coins, Harvest in: 14 Hours, XP Gained: 2, Price: 35
- Artichokes**: Sell for: 204 Coins, Harvest in: 4 Days, XP Gained: 2, Price: 70
- Rice**: Sell for: 96 Coins, Harvest in: 12 Hours, XP Gained: 1, Price: 45
- Raspberries**: Sell for: 46 Coins, Harvest in: 2 Hours, Price: 20
- Daffodils**: Sell for: 135 Coins, Harvest in: 2 Days, XP Gained: 2, Price: 60
- Cotton**: Sell for: 207 Coins, Harvest in: 3 Days, XP Gained: 2, Price: 75

Retention Game



Retention Game

» ALL 2,460,678 PLAYERS «

1		"sn4r3" 9,223,372,036,854,775,807	>
2		"DarkGamingLord" 9,223,372,036,854,775,807	>
3		"Mirasabri" 37,926,192	>
4		"DonnMega" 29,793,040	>
5		Me 29,772,450 (Top 5%)	>
6		"Tatard" 29,588,960	>
7		"ernor63" 29,507,920	>
8		"druidie" 29,436,900	>
9		"ftdrew" 29,345,440	>
10		"cydog88" 29,340,940	>
11		"raliu" 29,226,830	>
12		"golda8" 29,185,040	>
13		"bytcasey" 29,153,150	>

» ALL 8,945,984 PLAYERS «

1		"oliver.letterer" 9,223,372,036,854,775,807	>
2		Anonymous 9,223,372,036,854,775,807	>
3		"DarkGamingLord" 9,223,372,036,854,775,807	>
4		"gnfz" 99,999,999,999,999,999	>
5		"RubalJ" 46,771,700	>
6		"husssooon" 37,926,192	>
7		"鄧紫棋" 36,761,460	>
8		"Ericot1" 31,085,980	>
9		"TheSteffenMan" 30,078,532	>
10		"moonsabre" 30,578,410	>
11		"Travis Busa" 30,238,800	>
12		"wag94" 30,153,770	>
13		"sgr843z" 29,942,240	>

Retention - summary

- Score
- High Score
- Levels
- Narrative
- To get to the end
- Completion
- Progression
- Achievements
- Appointment mechanics
- Nested Loops
- Quests

The perils of AAA

- AAA has tended to think of the Retention Game as ASSETS
 - Levels
 - Artwork
 - Narrative
- For F2P, DESIGN is more important
 - Systems
 - Mechanics
 - Emergent narrative

Retention is the heart of F2P

- Retention is at the **heart of the funnel**, and at the **heart of the pyramid**
- **Track** your retention rate, churn or duration
- Don't get to Alpha and say "Well, that's the Core Loop nailed, now let's tack the Retention Game on"
- Learn to **prototype** the retention game
- It will be the **core of your success**

The Superfan Game

The Superfan Game

- The Superfan Game is where a game becomes a **hobby**
 - A small proportion of your players
 - A huge time commitment to the game
- A different kind of game altogether: competitive, collaborative, highly social
- This is where the biggest spending happens

What makes a Superfan Game?

- Kongregate high ARPPU game:
 - Mean spend \$116; Median \$16
 - 40% of revenue comes from 2% of players who spend >\$1,000
 - 90% of revenue from players spending \$100 or more
 - Top whale has spent \$6.7k
- “Every high ARPU and high revenue game on Kongregate has a strongly social and competitive end-game”

Common features of a Superfan Game

- Guilds/leagues
- Guild warfare or leaderboards
- PvP (either synchronous and asynchronous)
- Visible status & character progression
- Guilds/leagues (it bears repeating)

The Superfan Game



The Superfan Game



The Superfan Game



The Superfan Game



The Superfan Game



House 6
"The Free Folk"

Glory Rank 1

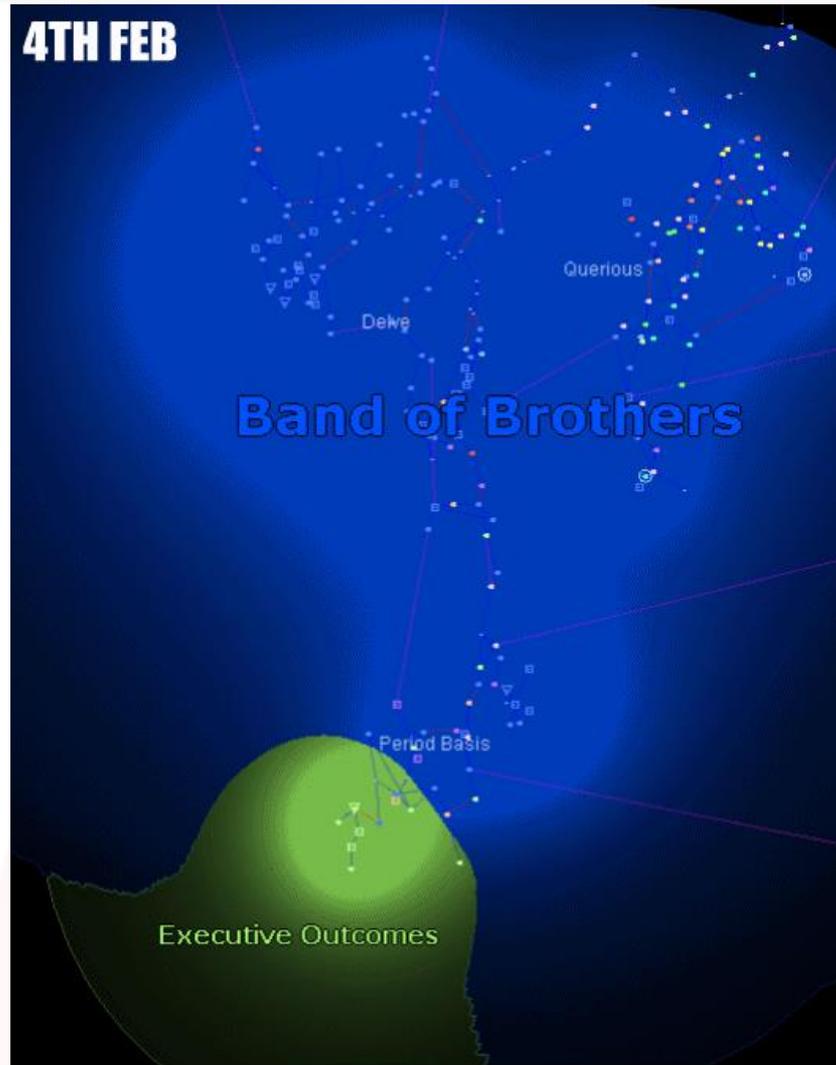
Factions	6	Marshall	FroZsen
Total Points	624,520	Faction	† Tea Party †
Members	81	Glory Victories	0

Faction	Points
 Dragons' End	56,499
 The Holy Templars	101,627
 † Tea Party †	121,586
 Knights Of The Sword	61,137
 My Faction	34,989
 Tea Party-The Dark Angels	227,632

The Superfan Game



The Superfan game



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The Superfan Game

- The Superfan Game may not be MVP
- The super-fan would not exist without freeloaders
- Showing off, having followers, being more skilled and more successful
- Love your freeloaders!
- “We treat every user as if they were a whale”
– Robert Winkler, CEO 5th Planet Games

The Pyramid inverts the Funnel

- The Superfan Game is where the hobbyists live
- The Retention Game is the heart of your F2P game
- The Core Loop is where the fun lives!

- The free game is the foundation on which the rest of the Pyramid is constructed
- The Pyramid and the Funnel are symbiotic

The Pyramid and the Funnel

(your business)

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