Reimagining Simulation Sports as an Independent Developer

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Who we are.

Who we are.

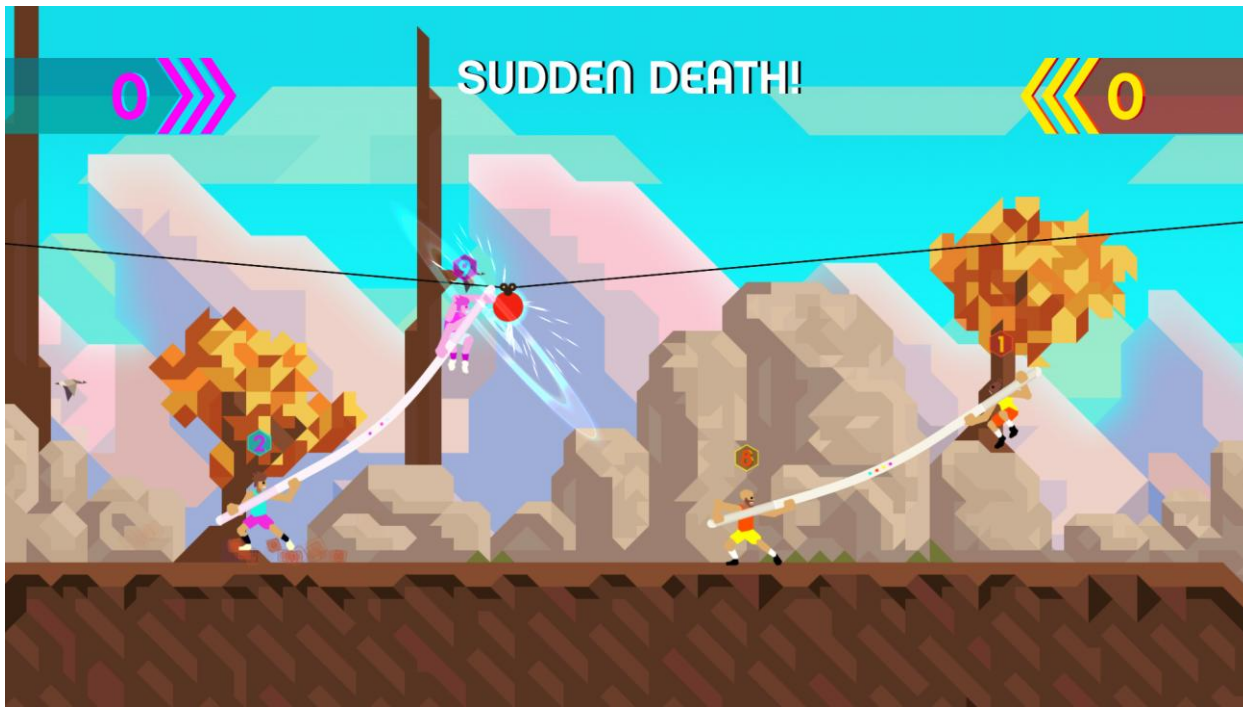# What are simulation sports titles?

"Arcade" Sports?

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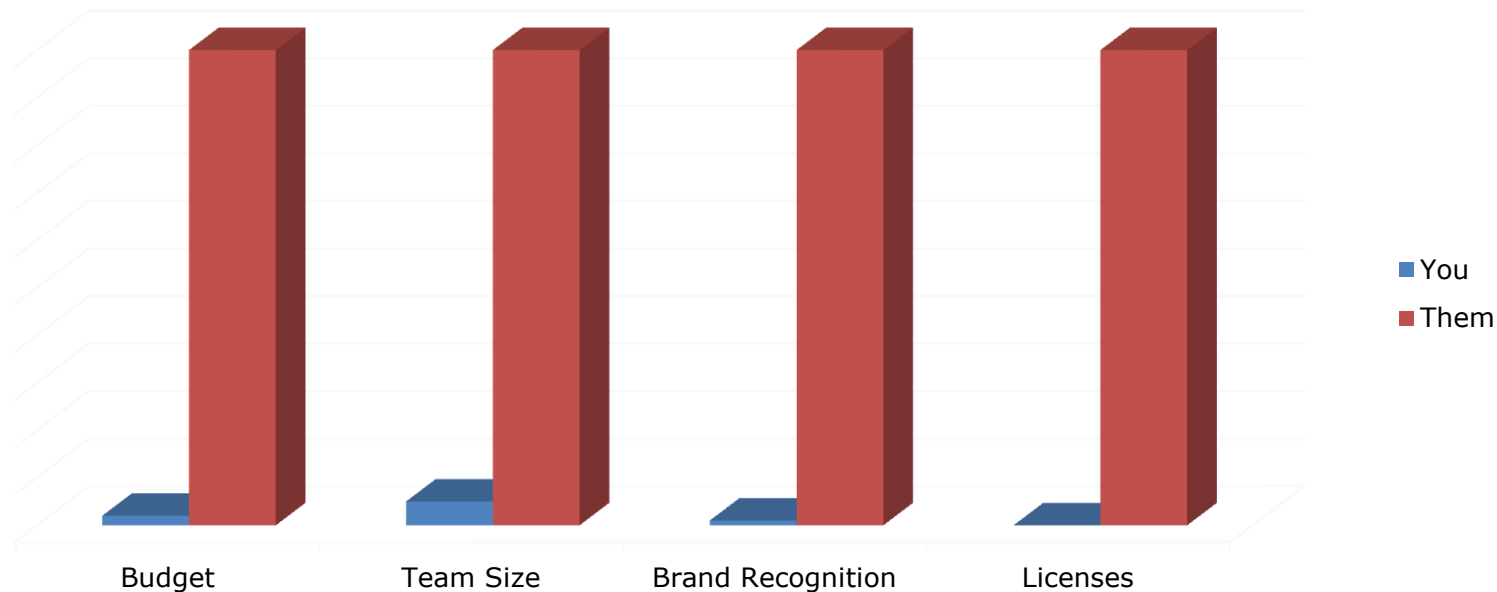
"Arcade" Sports?

Simulation Problems

● Budget – you cannot recreate reality regardless of how large your budget is.

● Reference – people compare everything to real life and expect it to work that way.

● You must disrupt these expectations because you cannot meet them!

Competitive Landscape

What does this mean for you?

● You must do something that offers a new kind of experience – something NOT offered by any of the existing competitors.

● Your overall direction has to be orthogonal to these other games – you cannot hope to "catch up" or intersect with them at some point down the line.
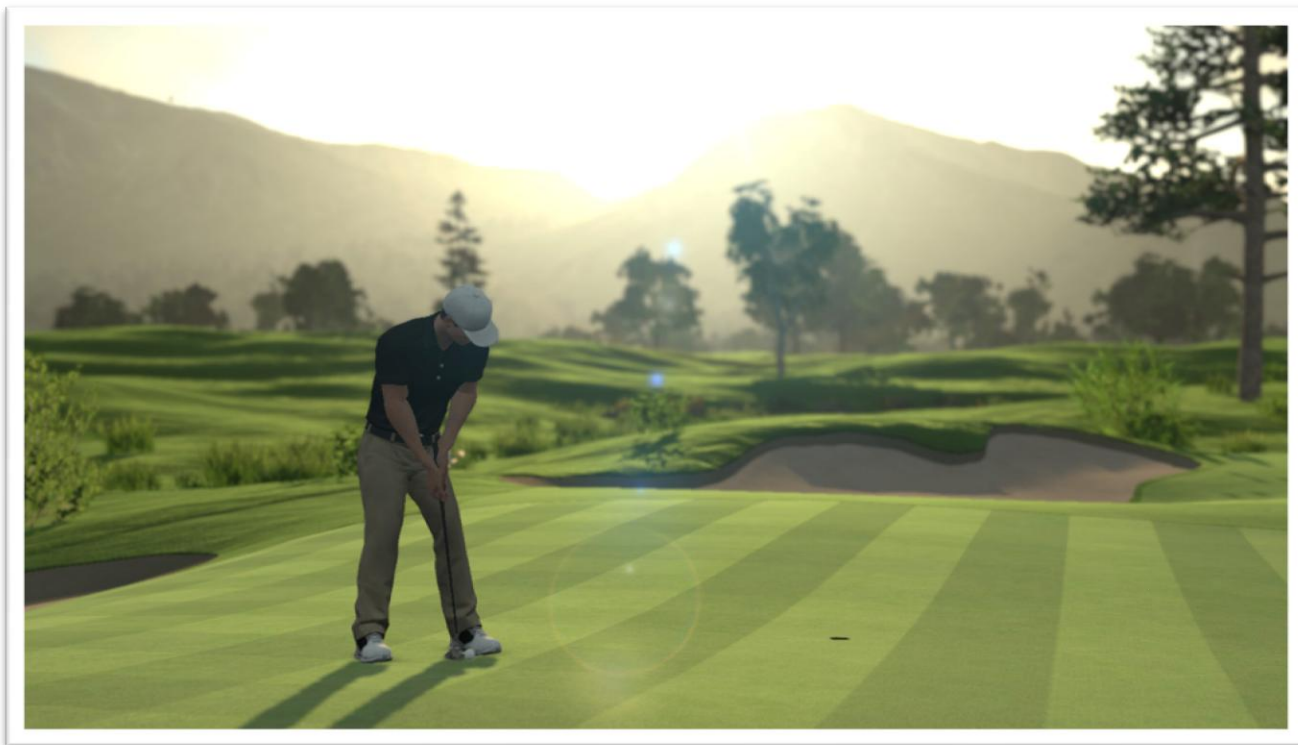
How do I do this?

1. It must be a full product strategy.
2. You must offer a kind of experience not available in the competitive products.
3. You need to execute to a high level on those innovations.

The Golf Club

Why make a golf game?

- Gap in the market
- Passion and expertise in the studio
- Opportunity for innovation
- Scope was achievable within the budget

Early Targets

- Visual Fidelity
- No broadcast presentation
- No licenses
- No loading times between holes
- Challenge – no boosts or attributes
- Simple, expressive controls

Innovation

- Course Generation, Editing and Sharing
- Cross-platform UGC sharing
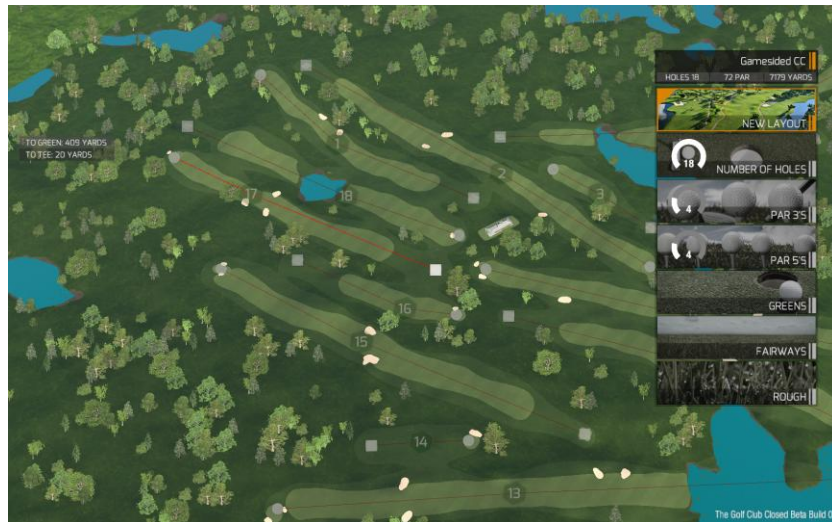- Asynchronous multiplayer

Design Overview

- Procedural generation
- Course designer
- Rapid prototyping
- Gameplay tuning/difficulty
- Presentation
- Multiplayer
- Progression

Procedural Generation

- Initially was going to be a one-button feature with a set of dials.
- Necessary for cost-saving.

Course Designer

- Quickly realized we needed an editor.
- Initially assumed way out of scope – a prototype proved us wrong!
- Built to work with a gamepad from the beginning.
- Very robust, fully featured: **almost 50K courses created to date**.

Rapid Prototyping

- Had a playable game within 1-2 months.
- Re-used existing assets wherever possible.
- Valuable for proving/disproving design theories.

Gameplay Tuning

- No level/attribute system

- Focus on performance and expressive controls.

- Slowing down the pace.

Presentation

Presentation

Presentation

Presentation

Presentation

Presentation

Presentation

● Did have commentary – but a fresh take on this kind of feature.

- Casual, "caddie" like.
- Used in-house talent.
- More flexible, lower cost, sounds new.

Multiplayer

- Asynchronous play only
  - No waiting!
  - Ghosts mean always someone online
  - Seamless turn-based play
  - No PS Plus or Gold requirements!
- One of the hardest expectations to disrupt

Progression

- Primarily in the form of a "Career" mode or "Franchise" mode.

- Probably the #1 request from community.

- What does this even mean in a UGC game?

- Too big, didn't understand the requirements.

Development Overview

- Early Access
- Telemetry
- Community
- Self-publishing
- QA+Cert
- Technical Risk
- Cross-platform sharing

Development Stats

- Average team size: 10
- Average number of artists: 2
- Months of development:
  - 12 to Early Access Launch
  - 16 to full launch
  - 24 to 1.0

Early Access

- Immensely valuable.
- PC version running early long before PS4/XB1 Unity was ready.
- Needed to stress test servers
- Wanted to sanity check designs.
- Needed telemetry to tune the game.
- Boy did we get feedback!

Early Access

- We actually did a closed beta on Steam before we launched Early Access.
- It was invite-only and done so we could manage the feedback and not have the entire thing fall-over.
- We ran it for only a couple of months.

Early Access

- Big success – we stayed in EA for 4 months.

- Launched sim with consoles.

- Pushed weekly and then monthly updates which was disruptive to the team.

- Got critical feedback from the community.

Telemetry

- We gathered extensive telemetry – every shot is stored on the server and contains everything needed to recreate for the ghost.

- Also includes valuable debug information about stick performance, etc.

- We used it extensively to analyze performance and tune accordingly.

Community Building

- Primarily work-for-hire, largely invisible.
- UGC game needs people to engage with game for success.
- Needed evangelists for unknown product.

Community Feedback

- Swing meter
  - So much early noise for 3-click "traditional" method – hard sell on PC.

Community Feedback

- Shot shaper
  - People hated this so much in all its incarnations and the result is a compromise.
- Keyboard/mouse
  - Don't launch on PC without kbd/mouse
- Multiplayer
  - People really want lobbies

Community Feedback

● The game wasn't just reimagined by us in an ivory tower – it was also reimagined by the community through their early playtesting.

Self-publishing

• Critical to controlling pricing, sales, PR, brand presentation, patching

• Do not underestimate how much effort this is

• Huge effort for website, tutorial videos, TPR, patches, festivals, etc.

• Even as a reasonably sized company we struggled.

QA + Cert

- External QA critical for consoles especially with our UGC/online feature set.

- We had multiple fails at first-party

- Resulted in non-simultaneous ship across regions

- You need external QA for a game of this scale.

Technical Risk

1. Unity was not even alpha on console when we committed to using it.
2. We utilized DX11 compute shaders for procedural generation and weather effects.
3. We were implementing a cross-platform UGC system which had never been done before.
4. We were implementing a new kind of asynchronous multiplayer.
5. We were chasing a very aggressive visual benchmark.

Cross platform sharing

- First ever indie game to do this.
- Realtime cross-platform course sharing – not curated.
- Courses have distinct meta-data, leaderboards, difficulty ratings.

Cross platform sharing

• Our pitch: as a UGC game, having access to that content is critical to the UX – blocking off-platform content is basically handcuffing your platform.

• We read the TRCs closely and tried to understand the intention so that the plan we presented was respectful.

• Talk to your account managers – they are awesome!

Cross platform sharing

- Start early. We built the system with the intention but always had a fallback.

- The process took months – despite nobody ever saying 'no' – we did have to demonstrate that we had the best interests of the users in mind.

- Main concern was user identity and ability to not be harassed, exposed to content, etc.

Cross platform sharing

- It made "sense" for us - and also conveniently required NO WORK by first-party - we did all the heavy lifting - they just had to agree to let us do it - we didn't ask for any special work on their side.

- We were always willing to concede and work with them - as were they.

- Was a really cool feature that I think users just "expected" - users don't get why not.

Commercial Overview

- Pricing
- Licensing
- PR
- Partnerships
- Store/Sales/Discounts
- Retail

Commercial Structure

● Not a yearly iteration – differentiating from incumbents.

● Service based – buy once + get a bunch of free updates (we've done multiple free updates including major features).

● Paid 'mode' updates and potentially paid content down the road.

Pricing

● Pricing is so important as it shapes the perception of your game.

● There's an impulse to price low.

● We knew we weren't going to be "full price" - we wanted to make a statement that we were not competing with that - and recognized we also didn't have the depth of features.

Pricing

- We wanted though not to devalue the game - it is a really deep experience - so we've got this 'mid-way' price point of $34.99.

- Room for discounts, but is quite clearly NOT a full price.

Pricing

- Generally speaking good reaction to the price.
- Discounting does move units – so it's good to have room.
- We also are in a sweet spot where we are eligible for retail - for many programs and partners $39.99 is the minimum retail price.

Pricing

- Don't under-price your game - if you offer a completely new experience that isn't available elsewhere - price accordingly.

- Consider that very low priced games cannot go to retail.

Licensing

- We didn't have any!
- Golf is an individual sport anyway - you want to play as yourself.
- UGC courses eliminates the need to generate a large volume of official content.
- Licenses are expensive - can be 20% of total budget!

PR

- Procedural Generation attracted a lot of press interest.

- Cross-platform sharing - FIRST!

- Underdog angle - even though we worked on all the big titles the fact that we were launching a competitor at all was a story.

- Oddball factor – it's not common for an indie developer to release a title in this space.

Partnerships

- Greg Norman Course Designer
    - Lend authenticity to the tool
    - Used for real-world course design
    - Not a full endorsement/branding
- ProTee
    - Simulator partnership - official game of these simulators, comes bundled with hardware
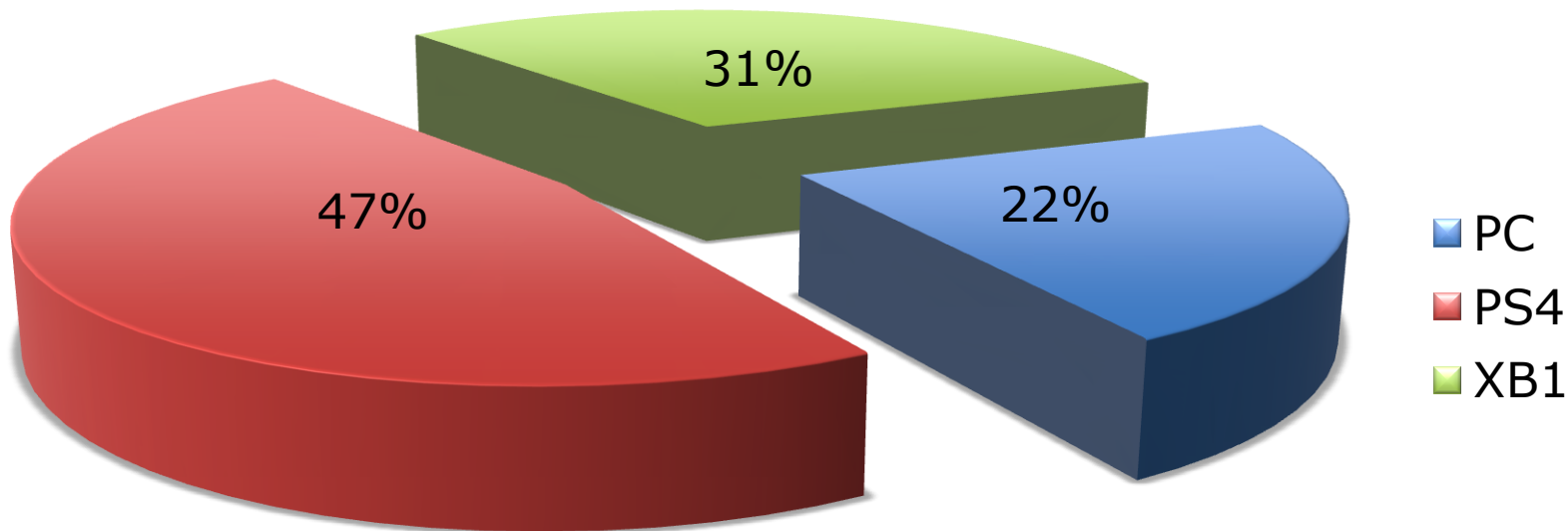
Storefronts, Sales, Discounts

- Digital only game - Steam, PSN, XBL.
- Price-parity across all platforms and regions.
- Available in NA, SA, Europe, Australia/NZ.
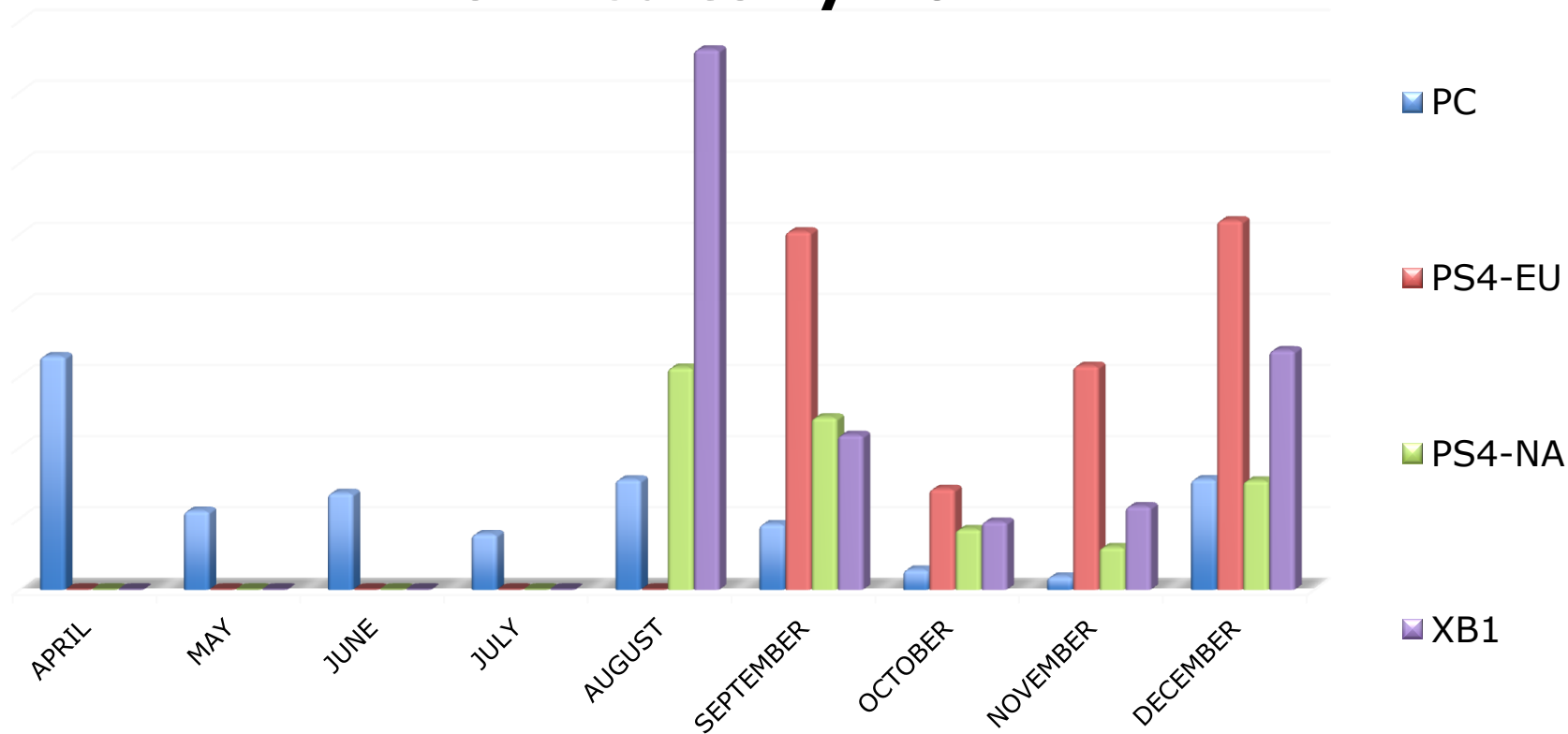- Planning to launch in Japan/Asia/China.
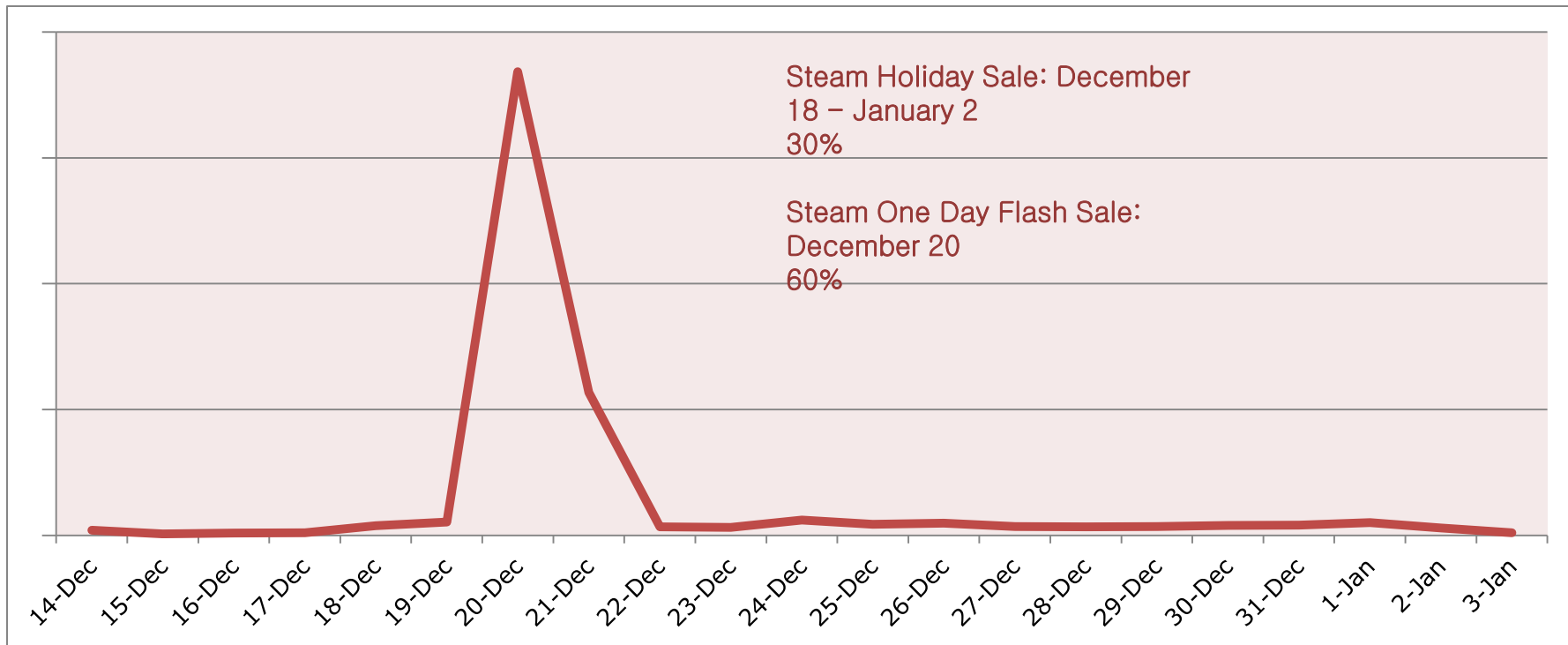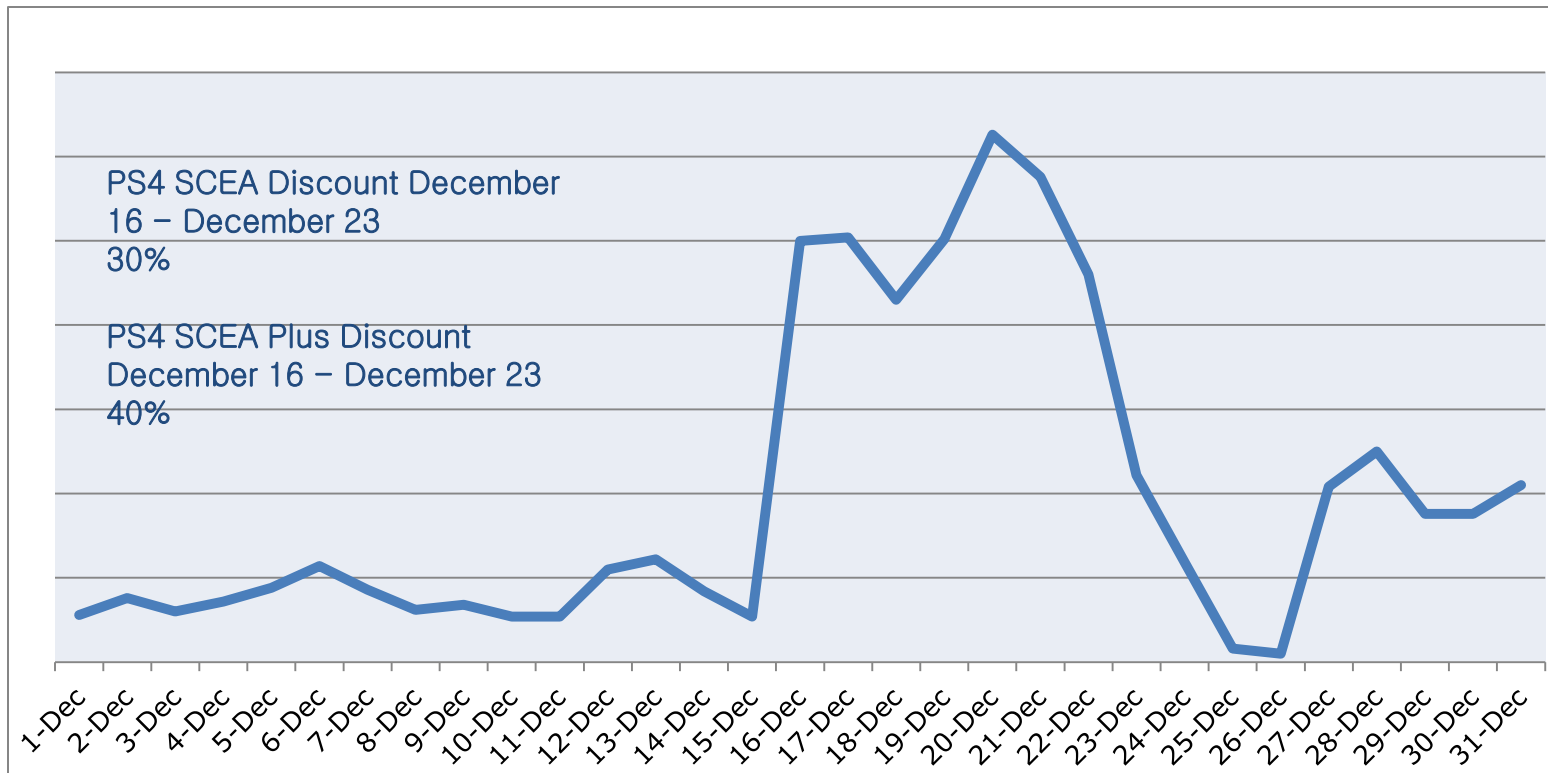
Sales by Platform

- PC
- PS4
- XB1

47%

31%

22%

Steam Holiday Sale

Steam Holiday Sale: December 18 – January 2
30%

Steam One Day Flash Sale: December 20
60%

PSN SCEA Sale - December

PS4 SCEA Discount December 16 – December 23 30%

PS4 SCEA Plus Discount December 16 – December 23 40%

XB1 Sales - December

Microsoft Discount December 28 – December 29 50%

26-Dec 27-Dec 28-Dec 29-Dec 30-Dec 31-Dec 1-Jan 2-Jan 3-Jan 4-Jan 5-Jan 6-Jan 7-Jan
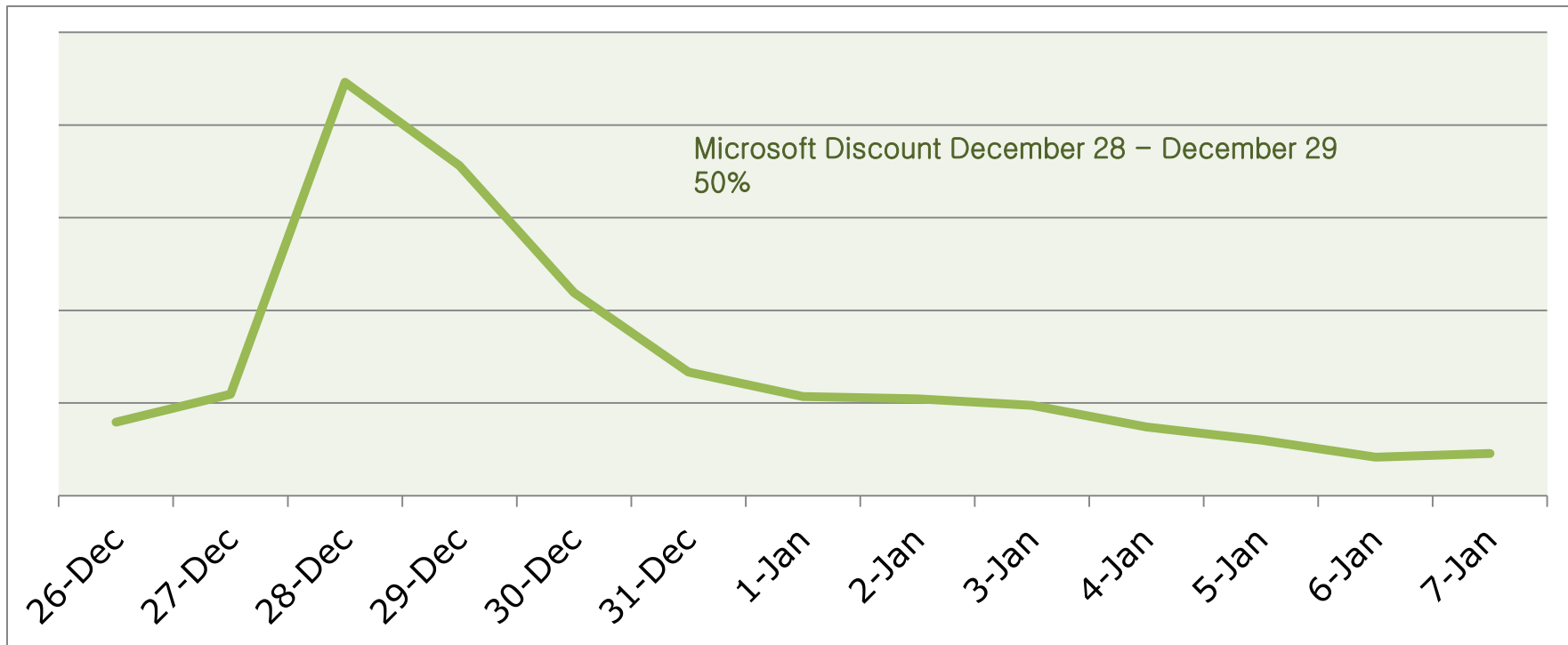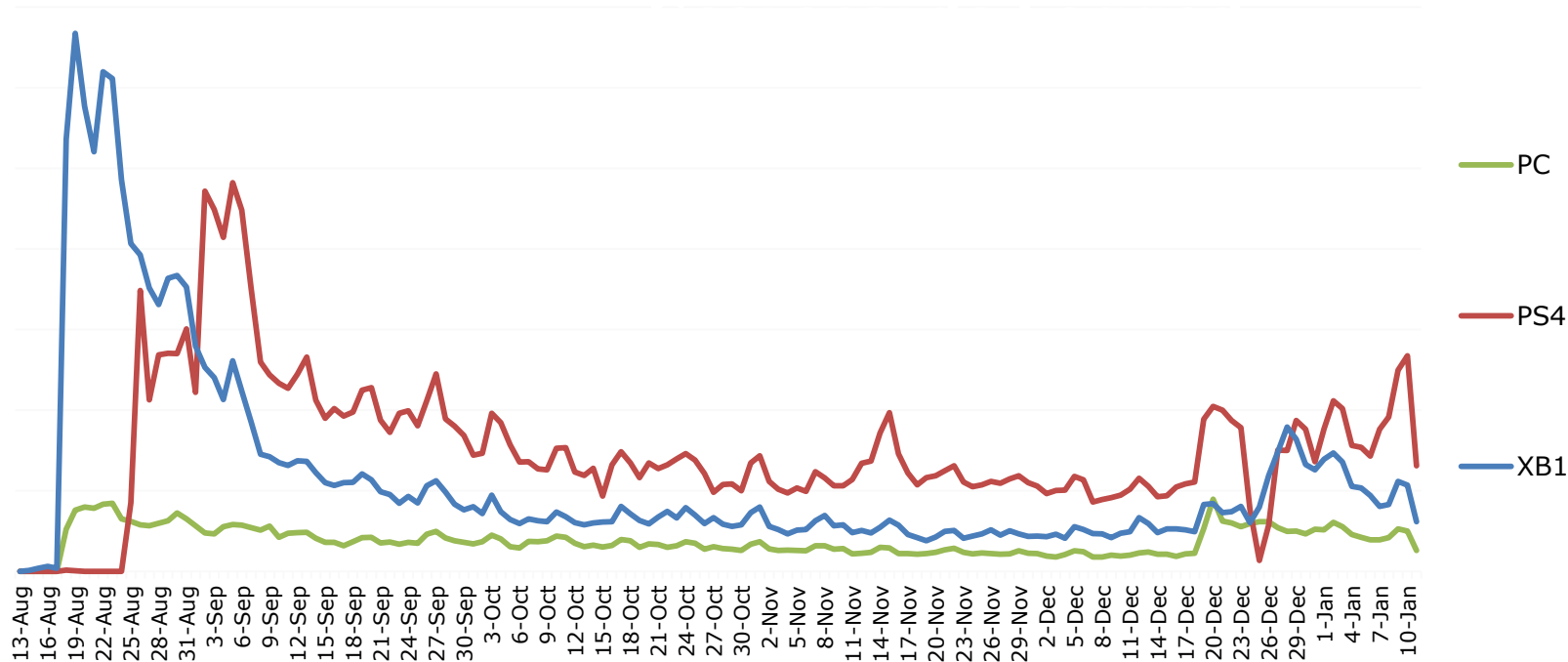
Community Activity

- Twitter followers: ~5000
- Website visits: Over 700% growth from announce to launch.
- Video views: ~ 379000 views
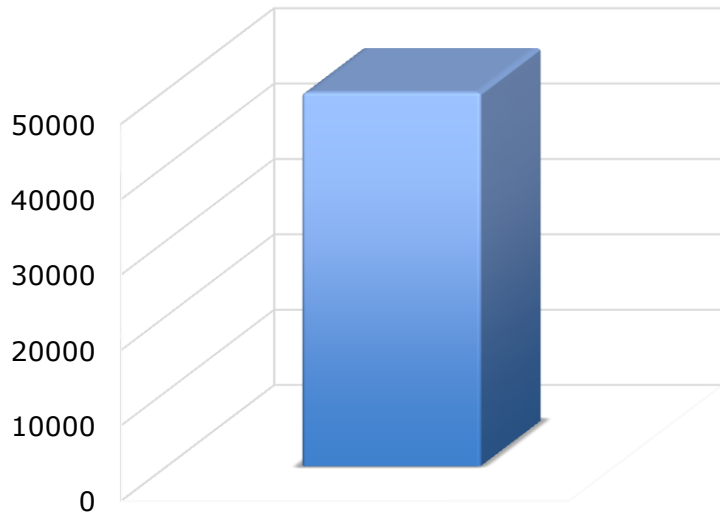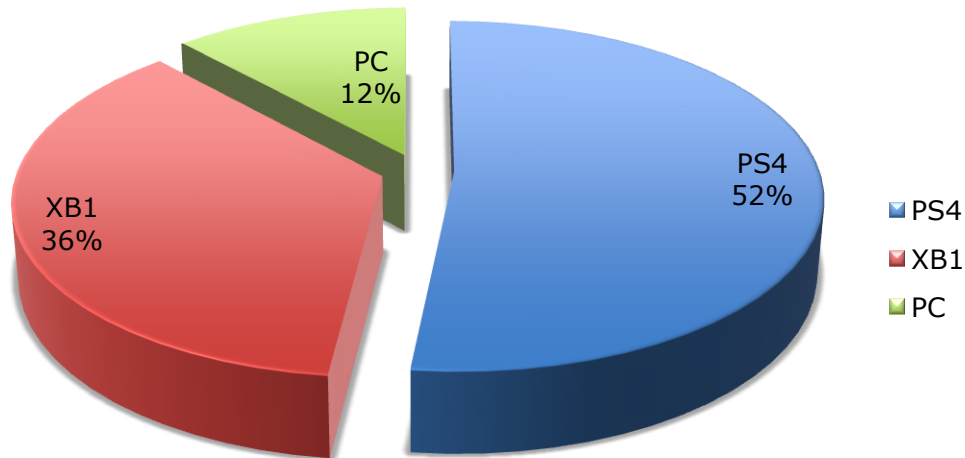- Forum activity: ~95K posts by over 3000 members.

Rounds Played/Active Users

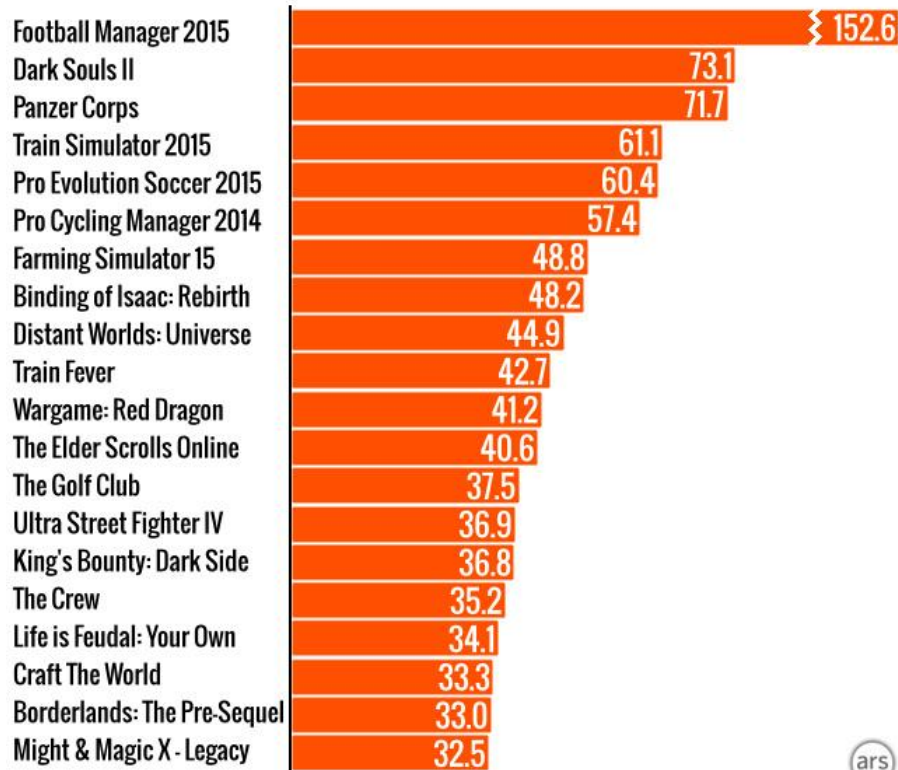# Courses Created/Total Rounds

Courses Created

Rounds Played

MOST PLAYED 2014 RELEASES ON STEAM
 Mean number of hours per owner (>20K owners)

Game	Hours
Football Manager 2015	152.6
Dark Souls II	73.1
Panzer Corps	71.7
Train Simulator 2015	61.1
Pro Evolution Soccer 2015	60.4
Pro Cycling Manager 2014	57.4
Farming Simulator 15	48.8
Binding of Isaac: Rebirth	48.2
Distant Worlds: Universe	44.9
Train Fever	42.7
Wargame: Red Dragon	41.2
The Elder Scrolls Online	40.6
The Golf Club	37.5
Ultra Street Fighter IV	36.9
King's Bounty: Dark Side	36.8
The Crew	35.2
Life is Feudal: Your Own	34.1
Craft The World	33.3
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel	33.0
Might & Magic X - Legacy	32.5

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Retail

- Big gulf in potential audience between digital-only and retail.
- Especially true in well-established genres.
- New brands – extremely hard to be known.
- Shelf recognition is hard.
- Need a partner because it's expensive.

Retail

- Way to grow to the 'next level' of user base.

- Golf especially skews older and reaching those people you have to be at retail.

Where do we go from here?

- eSports - few sports games in the eSport space.
- User-focused content.
- Tool building.
- Art style - does it have to be realistic?

Summing up

- You have to be unique - offer something new
- You have to execute on that innovation
- You need a full-product strategy
- You need to adapt your development process
- Resist the urge to compete - you have to disrupt

Thank you!

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