Lessons Learned in the Trenches: Turnaround Stories Running…..

xyDn98IRzwcPeV0qO
RxxSWLfUwMdGdoVXM
YNPYCzenTJVmjdpTr

Rich Vogel

25 years building Online Worlds

https://www.linkedin.com/in/rich-vogel-093425/

DATA SCANNING

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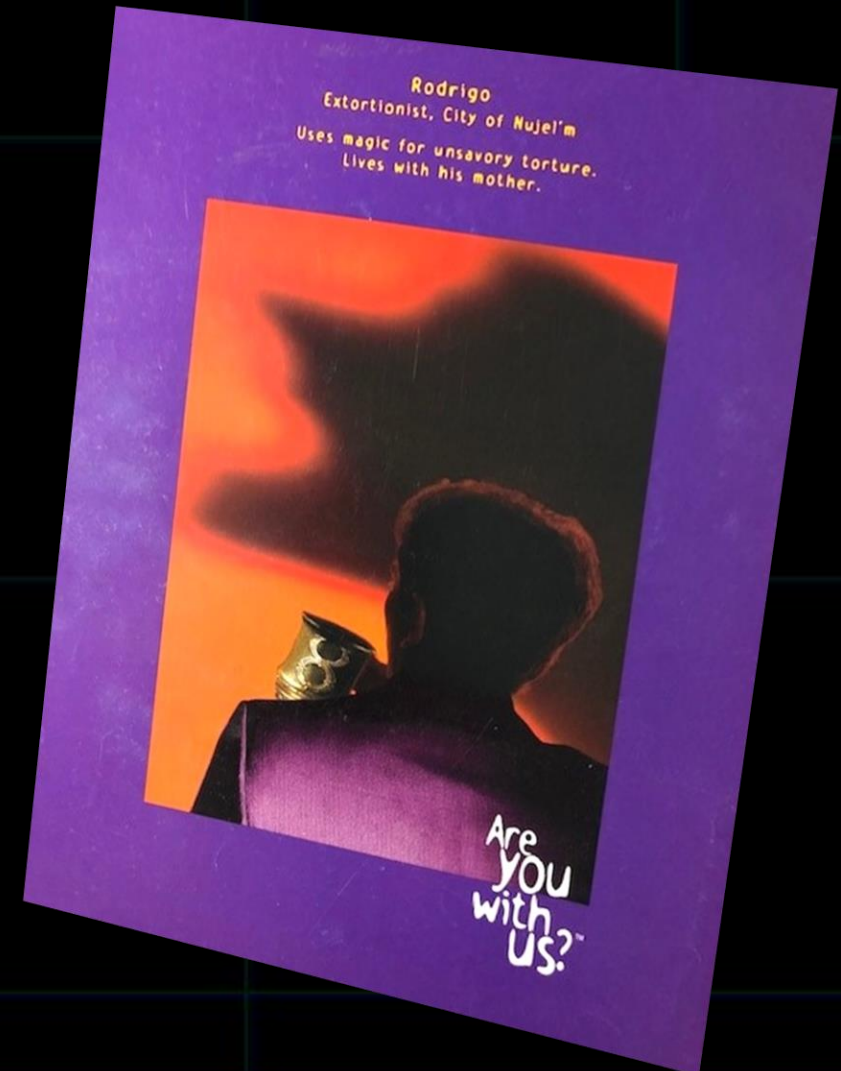200
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ULTIMA ONLINE

DATA SCANNING

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The Promise

A rich graphical online world where your alter ego can live out a fantasy life among hundreds of thousands of real players around the world

Going Live

The first seamless open-world PVP sandbox able to hold thousands of players with more than 300 million square feet of playable space

DATA SCANNING

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Going Live

Players from around the world, with more than 20 cultures in every time zone on earth, could play together

DATA SCANNING

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Going Live

Just some of the features at Launch:

- Player can affect the world
- Robust crafting systems
  - Vendors
  - Maker's mark
- Housing
- Open skill-based system
- Advance customization System
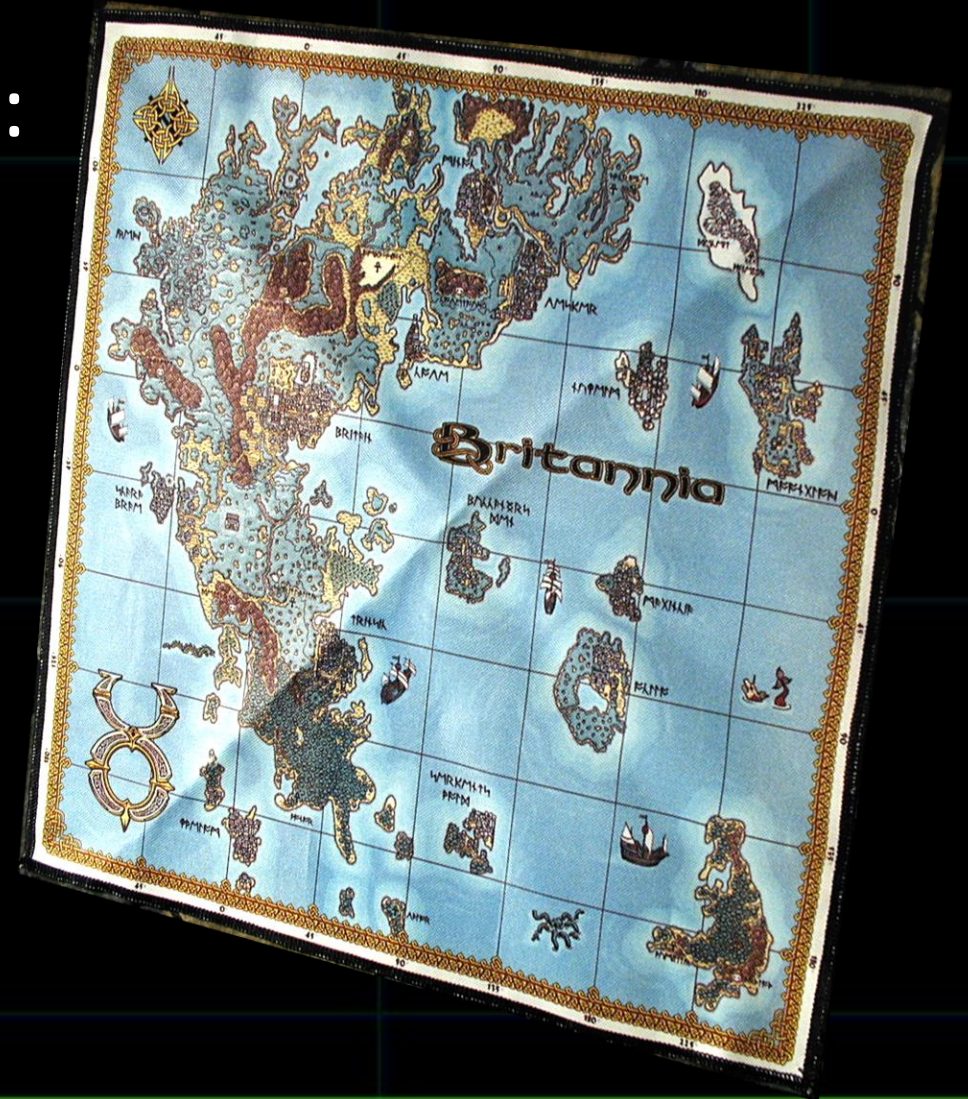
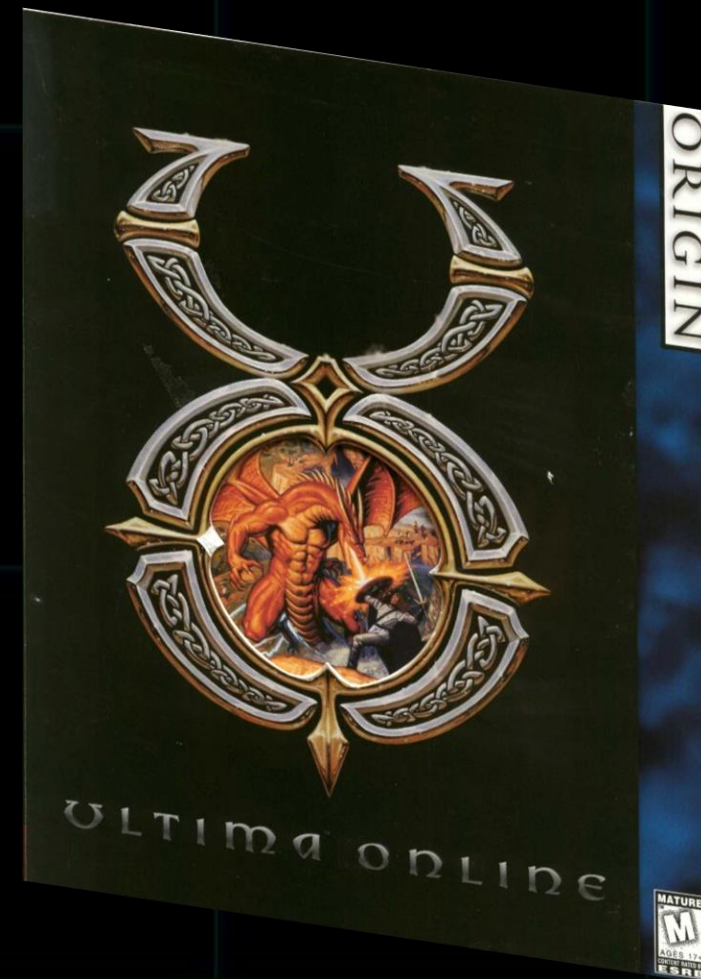# Going Live

The core team was Ex MUD developers
- Systems-based design
- Data Driven Design
- God and God Light Client
- Powerful scripting system
- Real-time event system
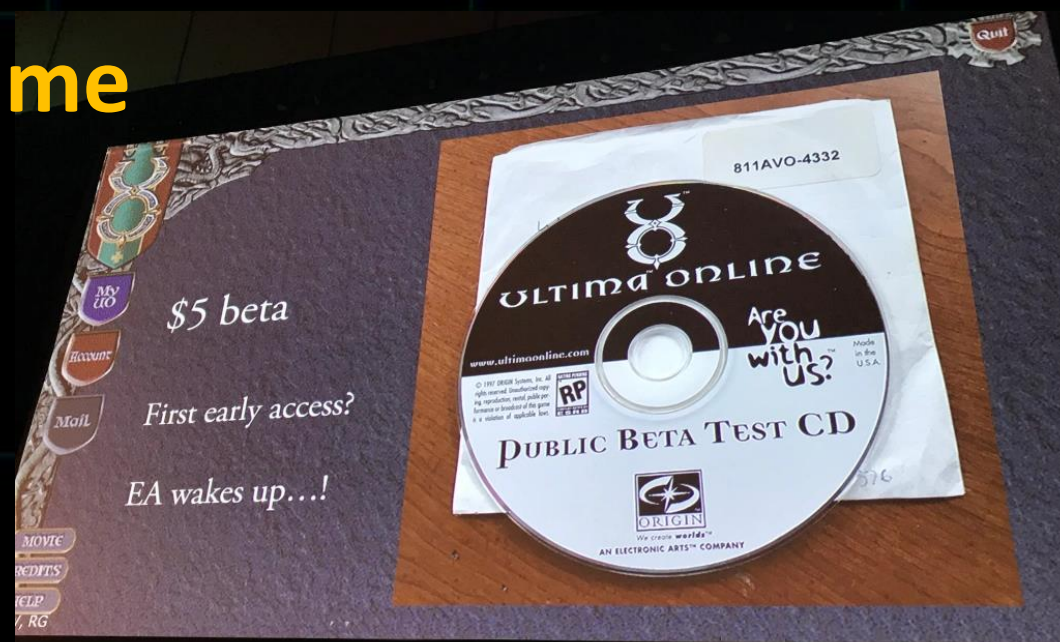- Version Control/Branching

The Challenges

We were not ready for Prime Time

DATA SCANNING

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ORIGIN

ULTIMA ONLINE

The Challenges

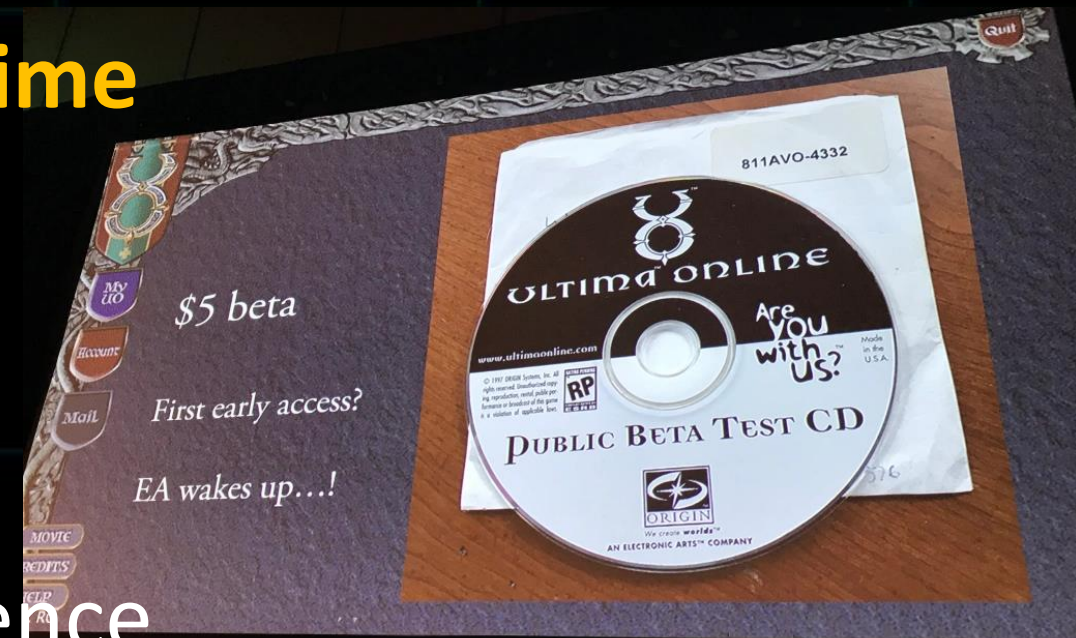**We were not ready for Prime Time**

Thousands of Verified Bugs

The Challenges

We were not ready for Prime Time

Thousands of Verified Bugs

1,000 cuts = Poor Player Experience

The Challenges

We were not ready for Prime Time

Client/Server Stability

Select which shard to play on:	Latency:	Packet Loss:
Legends	46ms	0%
Atlantic	46ms	0%
Lake Superior	46ms	0%
Great Lakes	46ms	0%
Chesapeake	46ms	0%
Catskills	46ms	0%
Siege Perilous	46ms	0%
Origin	91ms	0%
Pacific	93ms	0%

Sort By: TIME ZONE % FULL CONNECTION

The Challenges

We were not ready for Prime Time

No time to harden systems

The Challenges

We were not ready for Prime Time

No time to harden systems

Exploits

The Challenges

The first seamless **open-world PVP sandbox** able to hold thousands of players with more than 300 million square feet of playable space

The Challenges

Player Behavior

- **No boundaries were set**
- Designs Systems that encourage bad behavior
- No player moderation tools

The Challenges

Player Behavior

The more power you give the player to affect the world, the harder it is to control them.
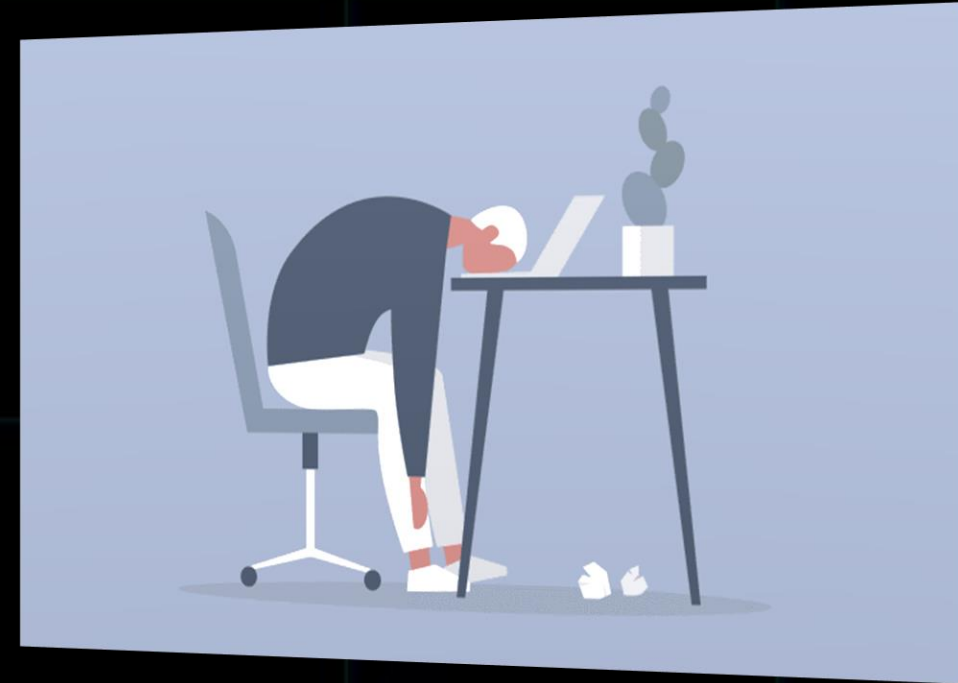
Challenges

Could it get any worse?

- Bad Press
- Negative Community Sediment
- The power of a connected community on a public company

- A Class-Action Lawsuit

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The Challenges

The team was burnt out
- 9-month death march
- Additional nine months post-launch
- 12 out of 64 continued Two months post-launch

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The Turnaround

Build back Player Trust

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The Turnaround

Established a 24/7 Police Force

The Turnaround

- Fixing A, B, and C Bugs
- Fixing Exploits
- Stability Fixes
- Deployed Test Center

The Turnaround

- Community Management
  - Hire Community Managers
  - Hire Counselors
  - Support local fan sites
  - Meet the Devs
  - UO Fan Fairs

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The Turnaround

Designing social systems to handle
Player behavior

- Player Moderating tools
- Reputation System V10
- Reporting tools
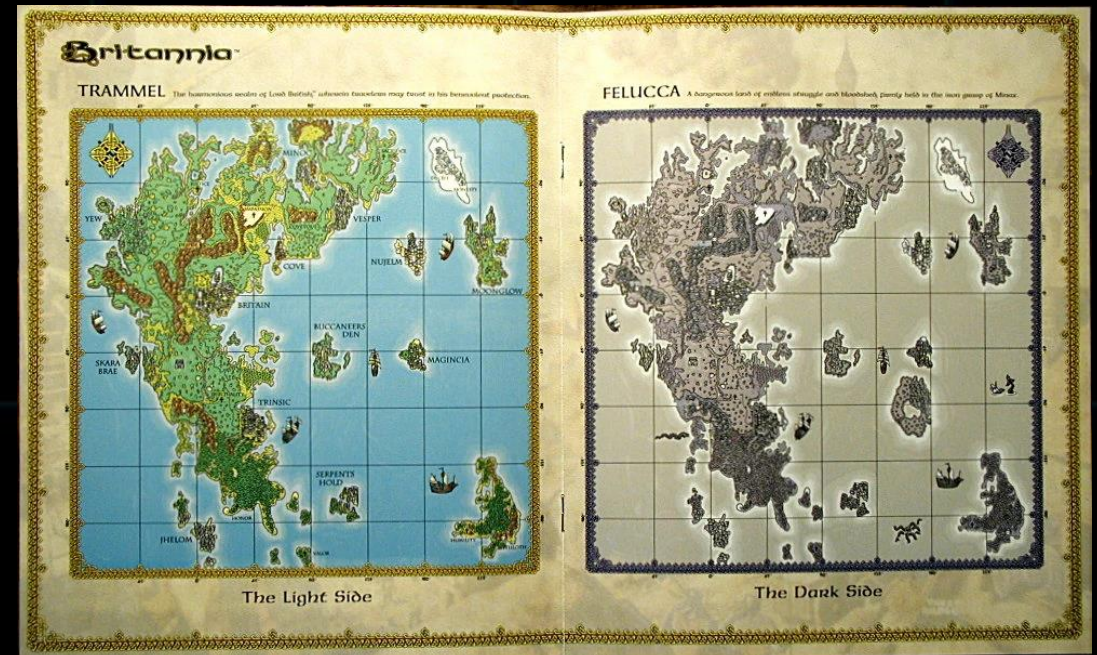- Designing systems that are more player friendly

The Turnaround

Dividing the world into PVE and PVP areas:
- Trammel – The light side
- Felucca – The dark side

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The Promise

An immersive 3D world where your alter ego can live out a fantasy life in the Star Wars Universe among hundreds of thousands of real players around the world

Going Live

The **core team** was **Ex-UO** developers:

- Systems-based design
- Data Driven Design
- God and God Light Client
- Powerful scripting system
- Real-time event system
- Analytics

The Challenges

Service Stability

- **Registration** was very unstable – the majority of players could **not** register their game for 48 hours
- **Time Warps** - the game databases could not handle the number of transactions per second and locked up.
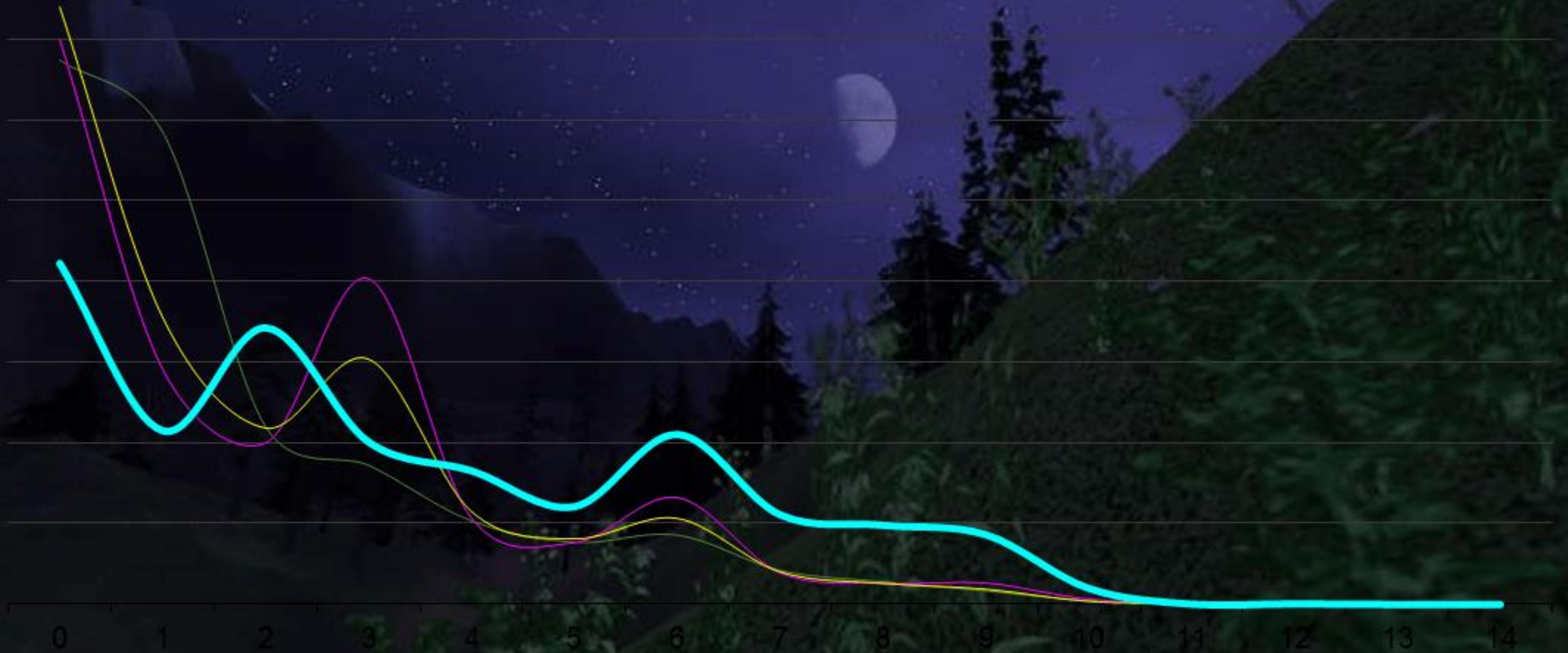
The Challenges

The Game Shipped too Early
- **Content Tools** came online **late** in development
- The **timeline** for developing the game was **unrealistic**
- Too much **dynamic content** and not **enough hand-crafted experiences**
- The **tools** still needed lots of work to get the type of content needed

The Challenges

It didn't hold

Percentage quitting by month of sub life

The Challenges

The game's timeline was set with the movies

- Jedi being rare
- IP restrictions and high fan expectations

The Challenges

Negative Community Sediment
- Bad Press
- Fan Expectations – **Devs over promised and under delivered**

Reviews

STAR WARS GALAXIES

- GameSpy: the "green banana" award for unripe game
- CGW:

STAR WARS GALAXIES: AN EMPIRE DIVIDED

Like all MMORPGs, *Star Wars Galaxies* can be addictive once you get started. It's the Stockholm Syndrome effect– learning to love your captor. Once you find a few trades you enjoy, the skill system is good, and there are numerous dangling carrots to keep you building one skill or another. A large-scale story has been promised for the coming months, but for now, the biggest problem facing the game is that the world, outside of the popular cities, seems rather empty. It's enjoyable, but it's just a complex version of the same old treadmill, albeit now you can get on the cooking treadmill when you get bored with fighting.

VERDICT ★★★★
Might get a whole lot better.

GDC

The Turnaround

Building Back Player Trust

- Fixing Stability Issues
- Fixing bugs at a pace QA could keep up with
- Optimized all the databases to scale
- Added Jedi system in 4 months (bad idea)
- Iterated content to be more compelling and fun
- Faster response with Texted Base Customer Support
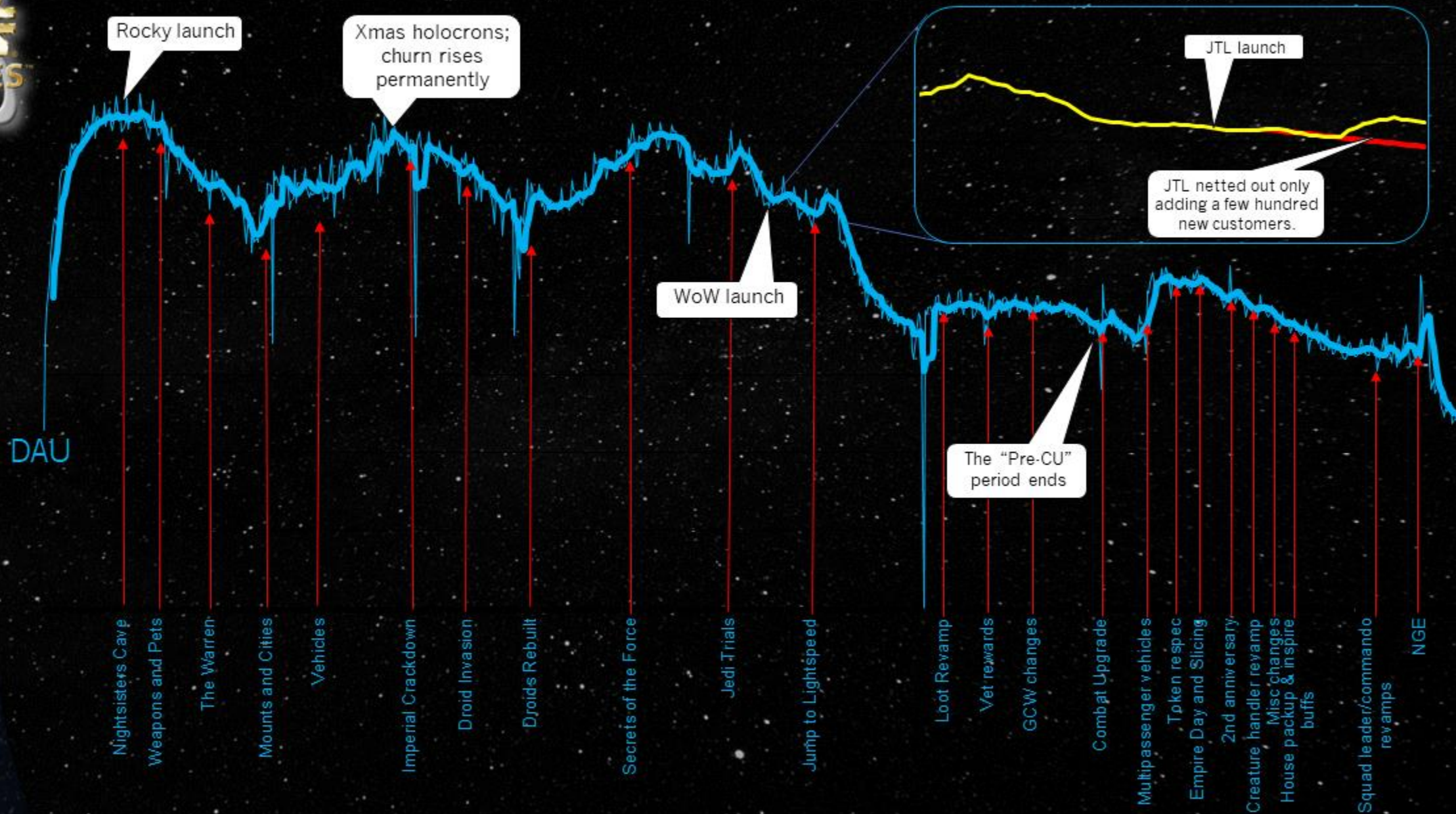- Better live event driven process

The Turnaround

The First 12 Months of Going Live

- Added more social systems like dancing and music professions.
- Re-implementing the Jedi System with the community
- Improved combat to be more compelling and fun
- Formed a SWG Council to interface with SWG fans
- Released Jump to Light Speed expansion

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# The Destruction

New Game Experience

- Changed the core foundation of the game
- Basically, World of Warcraft in Space.
- SWG was the only game at SOE that started to grow again after WOW was released.
- High churn the first month of release
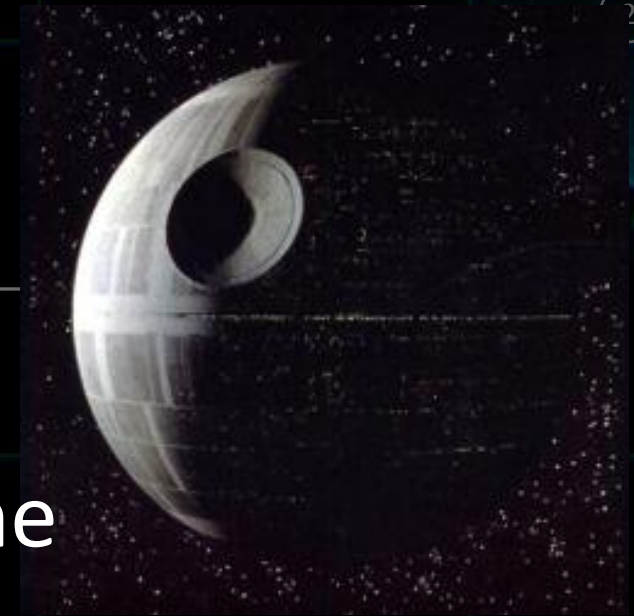
The Destruction — The NGE impact

Actual cancellations versus projected cancellations without NGE, first month

Announcement date of NGE

Launch date

25% quit

Projected
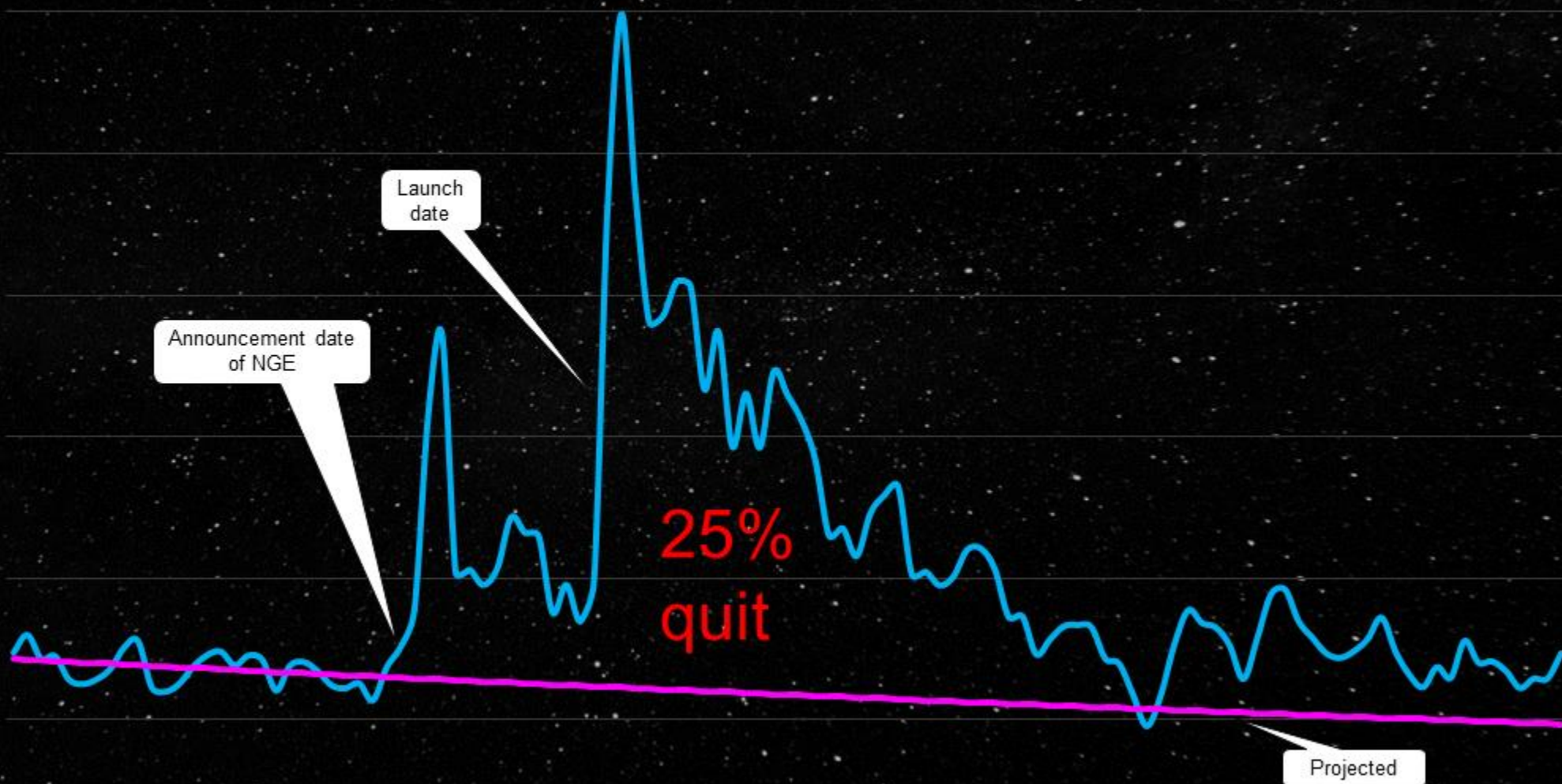
The Turnaround

For the next six years, the live team did an incredible job of marrying the new NGE gameplay with many of the older features, bringing back much of the "world" that had been lost.

Bespin, entirely built by players.

Today, across a dozen fan run servers, there are still thousands of active users.

STAR WARS GALAXIES

...is now a classic.

Galaxies was the Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru simulator we never knew we wanted.

PC Gamer
@pcgamer

Remembering Star Wars: Galaxies, the fallen MMO that should have been revolutionary: trib.al/ivtT25y

VARIETY

Ranking the All-Time Best 'Star Wars' Video Games

10. "Star Wars Galaxies" (2003)

KILL SCREEN

12.17.15

REMEMBERING THE BEAUTIFULLY BORING MMO STAR WARS GALAXIES

Star Wars Galaxies was an MMO that almost changed the world

By Chris Thursten May 04, 2021

The rise and fall of an MMO with limitless potential.

KOTAKU AU | See Games Differently

Star Wars Galaxies Left a Black Hole

GDC

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STAR WARS
THE OLD REPUBLIC

LUCASARTS.   BIOWARE   EA

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raUxRRTAllyx7CzIq
cysbL6w8IOaPRPQ3G
wG4EmVLs47QkYaNCO

The Promise

A continuation of Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic where players can choose from eight different classes to join the battle between the Empire and Rebel alliances.

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Going Live

Epic BioWare game with 1,500 hours of gameplay, 175,000 lines of fully voiced dialogue, 4,200 in-game cinematics, multiplayer questing, eight different classes, and 17 Star Wars Planets to explore.
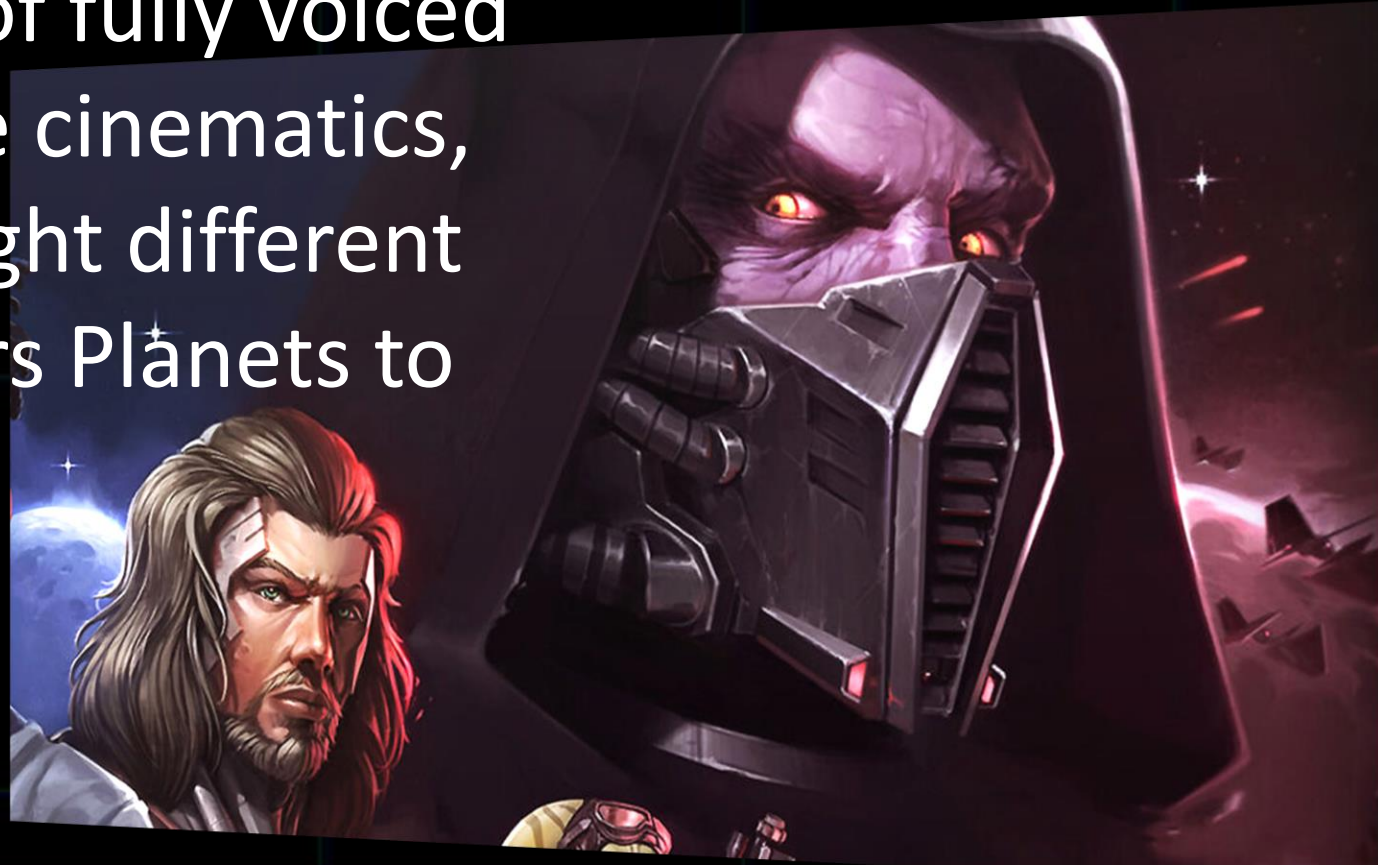
Going Live

Star Wars The Old Republic had a very clean launch:

- 1.2 million people in less than 24 hours
- Great player experience at launch
- Multiplayer mission system
- 85 Metacritic Rating
- Very few critical bugs
- Robust BI and data analytics for player insights
- Hire a team of SDATS to write automated scripts to stress test the game
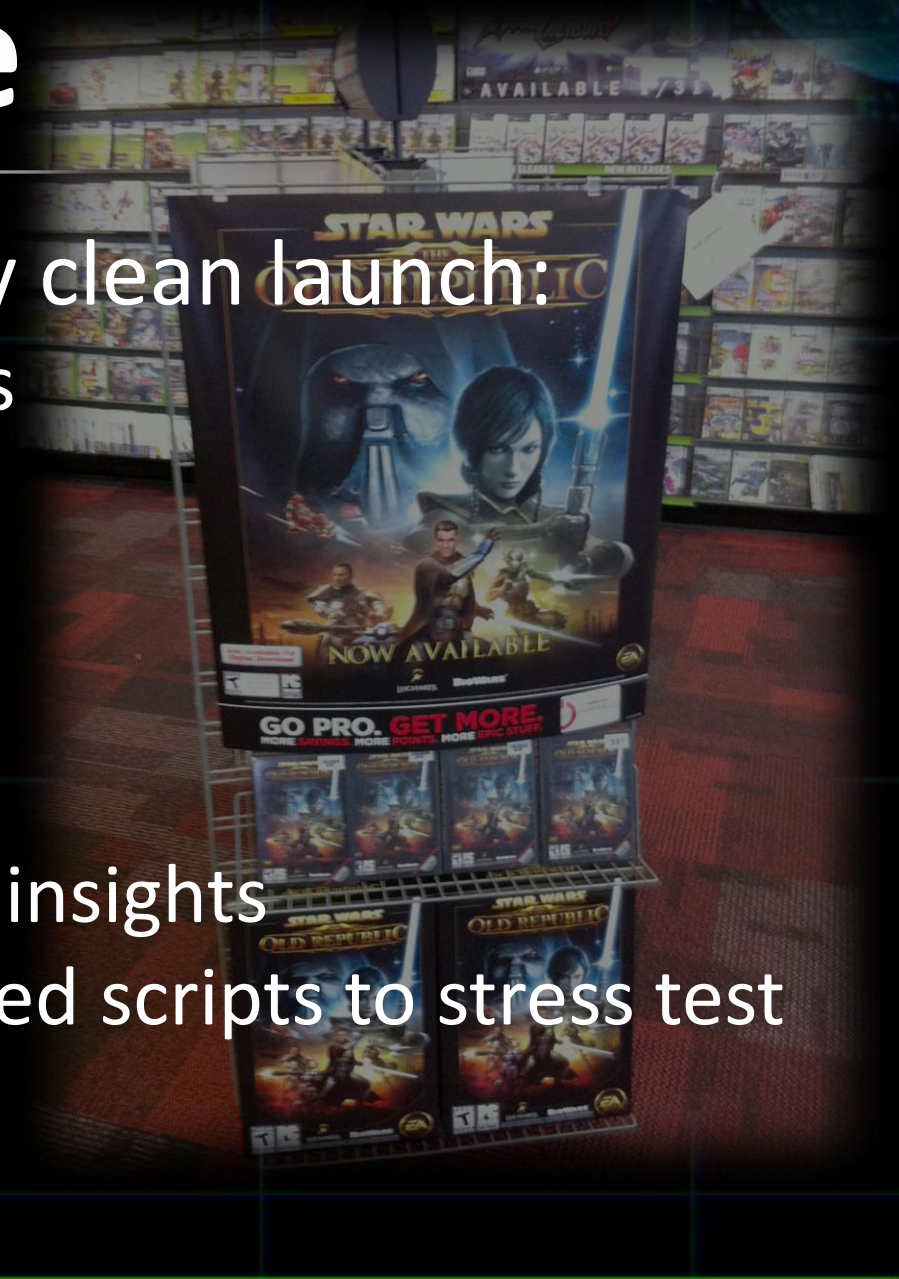
The Challenges

Tech Debt

- Poor tech choices at the start of the project
- Some key pipelines came in late for content
- Very few systems were in place for dynamic content
- Could not roll out a premium plus model at the beginning
- Shard based – character transfers

The Challenges

Disperse Population Problem

- Opened too many shards the first week of launch
- No quick way for players to transfer to other more populated shards
- Mega-shards were 10 months out

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cysbL6w8IOaPRPQ3G
wG4EmVLs47QkYaNCQ

The Challenges

Too much high-quality handcrafted content
- Very little systems-based content
- Players were consuming content at a very fast rate.
- Our pipelines could not support our content treadmill for growth

STAR WARS
THE OLD REPUBLIC

The Challenges

Box product way of thinking
- Polish and make the best game possible at launch
- Not thinking about the content treadmill in terms of velocity and predictability.
- Fire and forget marketing and PR campaigns
- The game at launch is just the beginning
- Followed traditional MMO box product plus subscription
- Not a critical success in the eyes of EA Executive Leadership
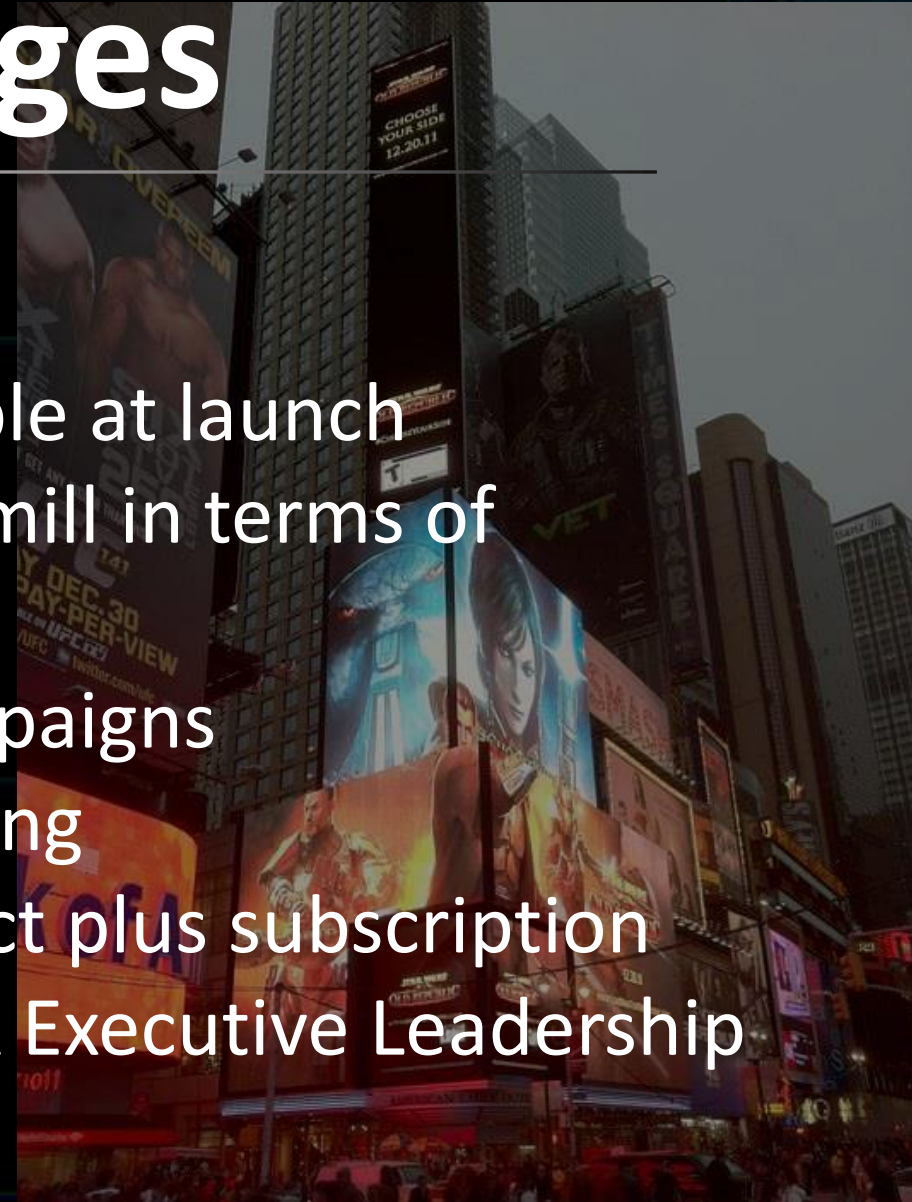
The Challenges

- **The Problem –**
  - **~200 hours of hand-crafted content per class, eight classes**
  - **Around 185,000 lines of voice-over dialogue**
  - **4,200 cinematics**

HOW IN THE HELL ARE WE GOING TO KEEP THIS UP?

The Turnaround

Fixing the content pipeline issues (Team of Teams):

- Before Alpha, we broke down the team into 33 autonomous multi-disciplinary feature teams

- Expanded to 30 Producers

- Formed a design and tech review board made up of TDs and DDs

- Put the groups that had dependencies next to each other

- Monthly Team meetings

- Quarterly reviews

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The Turnaround

Fixing the content pipeline issues:

- Rebuilding content pipelines for faster delivery, including more emergent gameplay
- Divided the production team into three teams:
  - Live – bugs, minor updates, live service issues
  - Dev Team 1 – release 1
  - Dev Team 2 – release 2

The Turnaround

Fixing the content pipeline issues (Team of Teams):

- Optimized our content pipelines (Dedicated Tools Team)

- Hired contractors from game programs across the country

- Found Co-Dev partners

- Outsourced large pieces of Art and Audio

- Developed **blueprints** for POIs that could be easily modified

The Turnaround

Fixing the dispersed population issues:

- Offer seamless character transfers without CS support
- Built Mega-shards – 250K per shard

The Turnaround

Going Free-to-Play:

- Removed Subscription fee
- MTX with both virtual and RMT sales
- Ethical Monetization

DATA SCANNING

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Key Lessons Learned

Part Two

It's not a sprint, it's a marathon

It's not a sprint, it's a marathon

You don't get time off when the product ships.

It's not a sprint, it's a marathon

Don't launch a release on a Thursday or Friday!

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It's a service not just a game

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You are not making a **plane**; you are building an **airport**

Live Services Operations*

```
                          ┌─────────────────┐
                          │      Live       │
                          │    Services     │
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Marketing/PR

- Worldwide Promotion
- UA/CRM
- Works closely with dev on update cadence

Community

- Focused on retention
- Works w/ MKTG/PR & dev team
- Customer facing voice for the game
- Composed of a lead and territory leads
- Provides community feedback/sentiment

Dev Team

- Focused on retention and monetization
- Develops ongoing content and features for the game
- Balancing and tuning
- Triages releases

Dev Ops

- Hot fixes, bug fixes, incremental updates
- Security and fixes exploits
- On call 24/7
- BI/Analytics
- Includes Live Producer, Engineers, QA, Designers, and Data Analysts

Live Ops

- Quality Assurance, Service Monitoring, and Maintenance
- Deployment
- Fixes issues outside the game
- On call 24/7
- Composed of a SAs, Build and Release Managers, QA, and NOC personal

Customer Service

- Monitors service
- Works directly with players on their issues
- Email support only
- Support for limited hours but coverage in all territories

Team size starts small in Closed Beta and grows to full live operations team in Open Beta.

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Short-term vs Long-term Thinking

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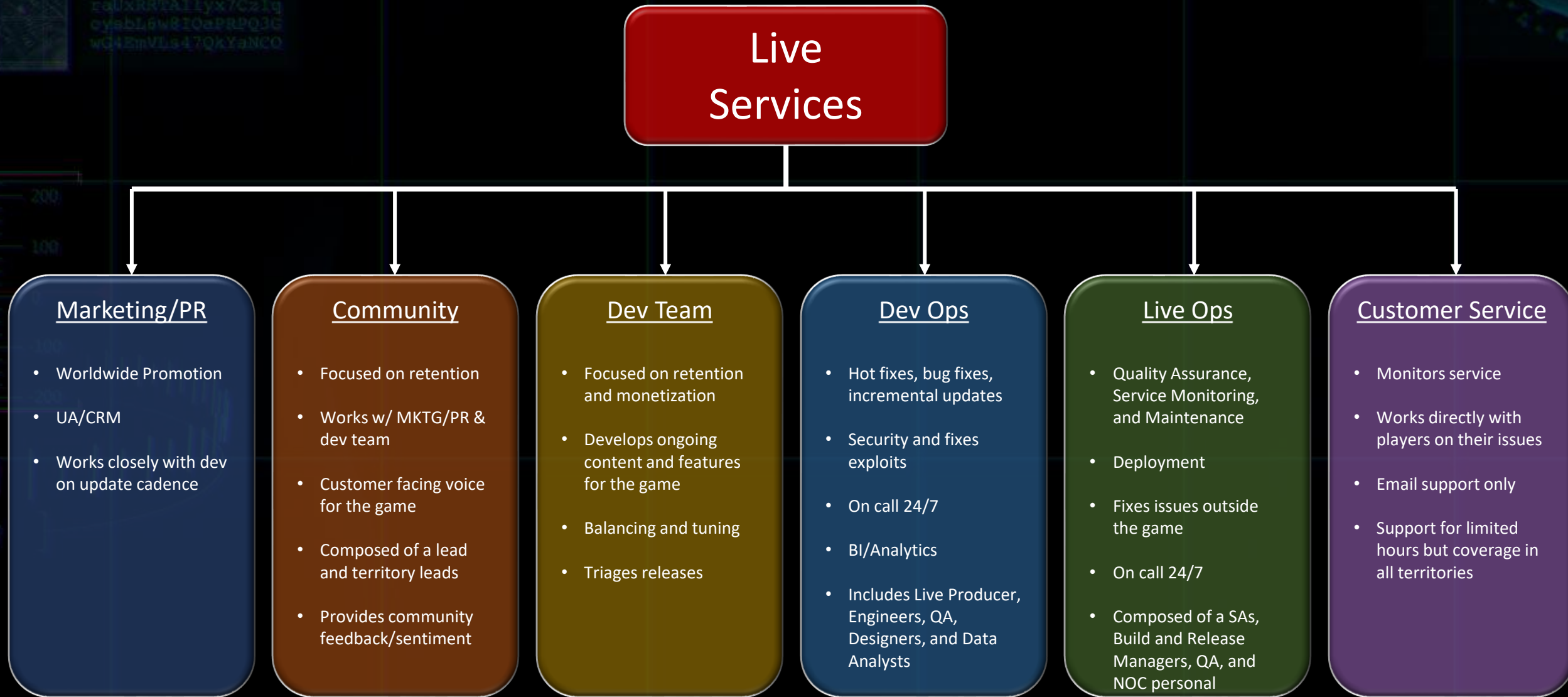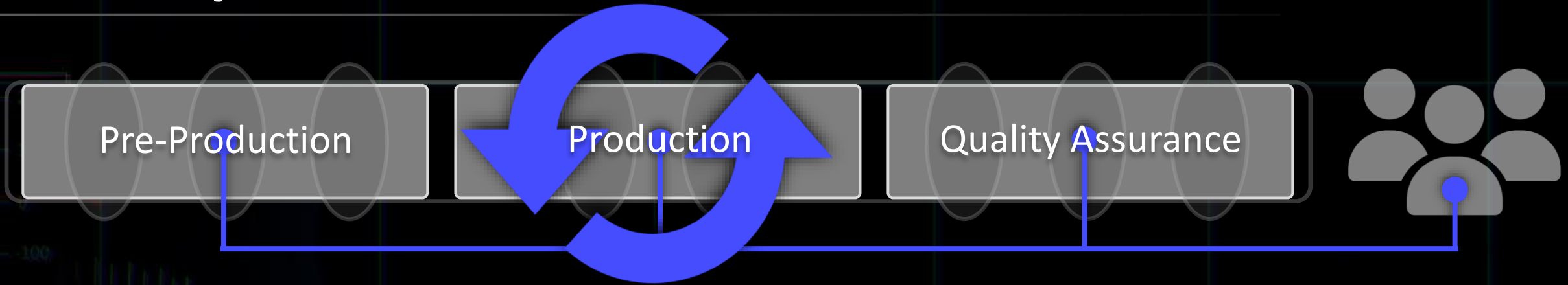raUxRRTA1lyx7CzIq
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Short-term vs Long-term Thinking

Building the best product possible game at
D1 vs. continuously delivering

Development Process

| Pre-Production | Production | Quality Assurance |

It is all about continuously releasing content...

Content updates, analytics, community feedback, and CS incident reports drive the team's ongoing LIVE release schedule.

Short-term vs Long-term Thinking

You must be in this for the long haul

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Short-term vs Long-term Thinking

You must be in this for the long haul

Launch is just the beginning

Finding the Right Cadence

Figuring out the right amount of content per release

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Finding the Right Cadence

Figuring out the right amount of content per release

Establish goals for each release

Finding the Right Cadence

Figuring out the right amount of content per release

Don't over promise

Cadence = Heartbeat

How quickly the team can respond to issues as well as update the game at a good cadence is critical for success

Cadence = Heartbeat

The release does NOT have to be PERFECT

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Cadence = Heartbeat

The release does NOT have to PERFECT

Velocity and Predictability

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Your heartbeat is Everything

Things that affect your heartbeat…

- **Content Treadmill**
  - **Number of changes** in a Patch
  - **Complexity** of assets
  - Level design
  - Handcrafted(**snowflakes**) vs System Design

Things that affect your heartbeat…

- **Infrastructure**
  - Tools and Pipelines
  - Branching
  - Build and deploy systems

What does a good heartbeat look like…

- Hotfixes (emergency fixes)…..
  - Partial build around 45 min
  - Full build > around 4 hours
  - Deploy to live less than 6 hours
  - 85% of fixes are done on the server without changing the exe files

What does a good heartbeat look like…

- Hotfixes (the right way)…..
  - All data is stored on the server
  - Design systems are data driven
  - Automated QA testing
  - A scripting language is used to develop game systems

What does a good heartbeat look like…

- Weekly patches – bug fixes, store updates, small additions…..

- Monthly patches – weapons, abilities, level enhancements….

What does a good heat beat look like…

- Quarterly – Seasons, new levels, characters, modes, and skins…..

- 9 to 12 months – significant content and features drop(usually themed)….

DATA SCANNING

xyDn9SIRzwcPeV0qO
RxxSWLfUwMdGdoVXM
YNPYCzenTJVmjdpTr
Ge4pmezs2DW3CzUdh
raUxRRTAllyx7CzIq
cysbL6w8IOaPRPQ3G
wG4EmVLs47QkYaNCO

Measure Twice, Cut Once

KPIs, community sediment, and surveys aid in setting the goals for each release.

Key Performance Indicators

Help define what success looks like for each release

Business KPI Dashboard/Updated Weekly

- Community Sediment
- Peak Concurrent Users
- Bug Count Curves
- DAU
  - New Players
  - Returning Players
- **WAU**
- MAU

- Cohorts - D1, D7, D15, D30
- Average Play session per user
- Retention Rate
- ARPU
- ARPPU
- Conversion
- NPS

DATA SCANNING

xyDn98IRzwcPeV0qO
RxxSWLfUwMdGdoVXM
YMPYCzenTJVmjdpTr
Ge4pmezs2DW3CzUdh
raUxRRTA1lyx7CzIq
oysbL6w8ZOaPRPQ3G
wG4EeVLs47QkYaNCO

Predictive Analytics

- Forecasting
- Trend Analysis
- Machine learning for CRM initiative

Case Study SWOTOR…

- Built a built an Analytics Team a year before launch

- Established a vocabulary everyone could understand

- Built Dashboards for CS, Live Ops, the studio leadership, and design

- Established daily meetings to review the KPIs during launch

Case Study SWOTOR...

- 30 days out from launch, went to biweekly meetings to review KPIs with all core leadership

- Deep Dives per quarter and after a major release – all core leadership was invited.

- High-level Game Dashboards in locations around the studio

- Monthly Team meetings

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xyDn98IRzwcPeV0qO
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YNPYCzenTJVmjdpTr
Gd4pmezs2DW3CzUdh
raUxRRTA11yx7CzIq
cysbL6w8IOaPRPQ3G
wG4EmVLs47QkYaNCO

Community Engagement

You are in an emotional relationship with your community

xyDn98IRzwcPeV0qO
RxxSWLfUwMdGdoVXN
YNFYCzenTJVmjdpTr
Ge4pmezs2DW3CzUdh
raUxRRTA1lyx7CzIq
cysbL6w8IOaPRPQ3G
wG4EmVLs47QkYaNCO

Community Engagement

Get comfortable with Failing in Public

Community Management...

- Can't be passive
- Don't manage like a PR campaign
- Talk to them honestly and not like a PR mouthpiece
- Careful about what you promises
- Look for evangelists
- Setup Developer Diaries

Case Study UO…

- While trying to solve exploits, we made mistakes. A good example is Housing

- I remember telling people to put their valuables in the bank, not at home. Your house is not secure.

- Well, I was threatened with emails, and I had a letter left by my front door threatening to break into my house.

Case Study UO...

- We learned how to be honest and transparent with our community despite the resistance we got internally at EA.

- This helped build trust with the community.

- We attended many UO gatherings across the country

- We learned to have open design discussions with the community on new systems before implementation.

- A good example is the reputation system in UO.

Case Study SWG…

- With the difficulty at Launch and is a well-recognized IP made it hard to have an open dialogue with the community

- Lucas Arts was very concerned about bad press due to the movie releases around SWG.

- We had to persuade Lucas Arts about the value of being honest and direct with the community.

Case Study SWG…

- We formed an SWG Council that hosted key influencers in the community to meet with the developers.

- This helped build trust with the community.

- We had an open dialogue with the community on key features like the new Jedi System before it was implemented

- We ran SWG Con in California for our players to meet the developers

Case Study SWTOR…

- We developed an escalation process and had legally approved responses to several scenarios just in case we had to respond to issues in real-time.

- We participated in many fan gatherings across the country.

- We attended Gamescom, PAX, Comic-Con, and Star Wars Celebration to interact with our player base

Lessons Learned in the Trenches: Turnaround Stories Running…..

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