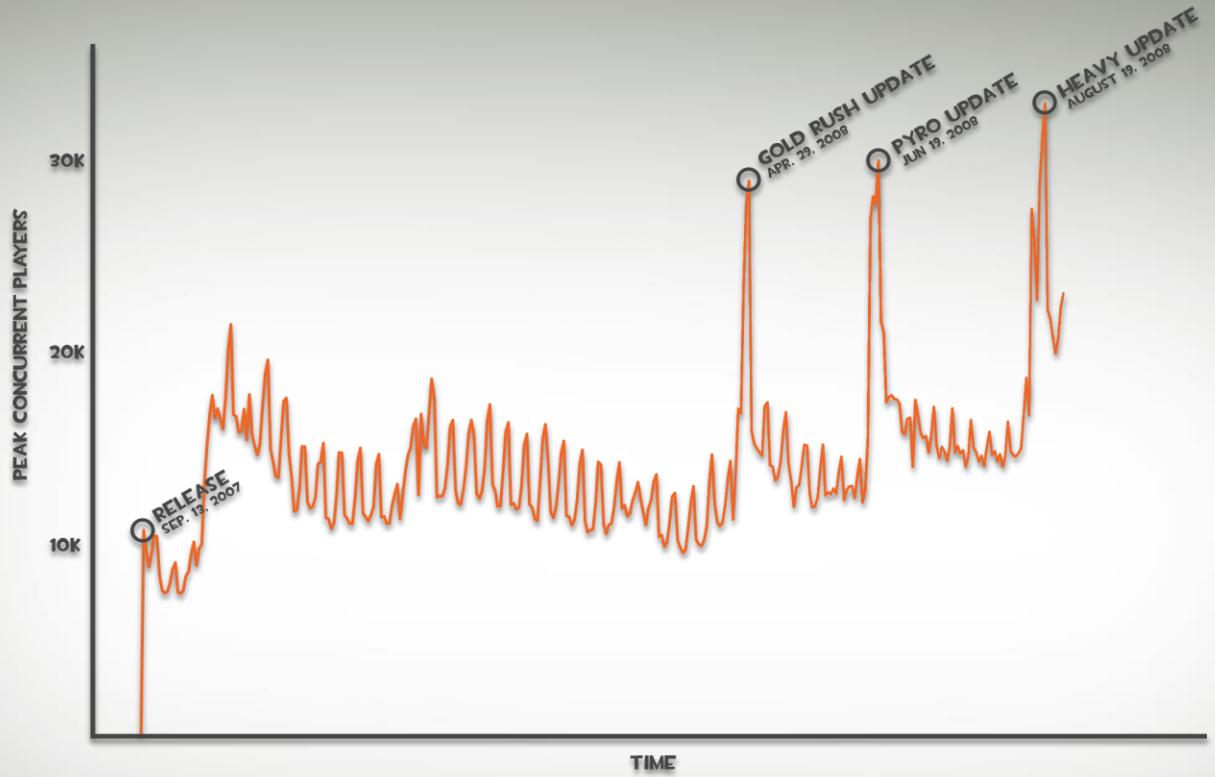
ROBIN WALKER
VALVE

COMMUNITY AND COMMUNICATION IN GAMES-AS-SERVICES

WHY THIS TALK?

- Plenty of experience with Games-as-Services
  - Half-Life 1, Counter-Strike, TF Classic
- Launched Team Fortress 2 in 2007
  - Learned of a missing piece



TEAM FORTRESS 2'S FIRST YEAR

TEAM FORTRESS 2

- Growth through communication
  - 500k to 3M players, 20% YoY
  - Team of 15
  - No marketing expenditure
- Applicable
  - Freely available tools
  - Already been replicated by 3rd parties

HOPEFULLY

- Show you how to do the same
- Expand concept of communication
  - It isn’t one directional
  - It isn’t just marketing
- Start further conversations
  - We’d love to hear what’s working for you

COMMUNICATION

- Around the Product
  - Highlighting improvement
- External to the product
  - Forum posts, blogs, emails

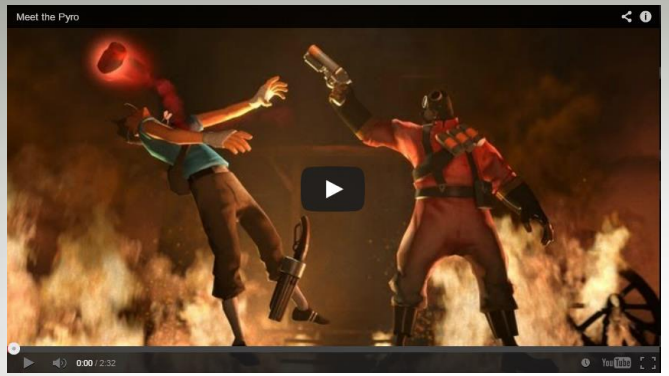
COMMUNICATING AROUND THE PRODUCT

TF2 SERVICE PROCESS

- Major updates every 1-2 months
- Communication process
  - Launch with a landing hub
  - Followed by 3-4 days of information
  - Update actually ships

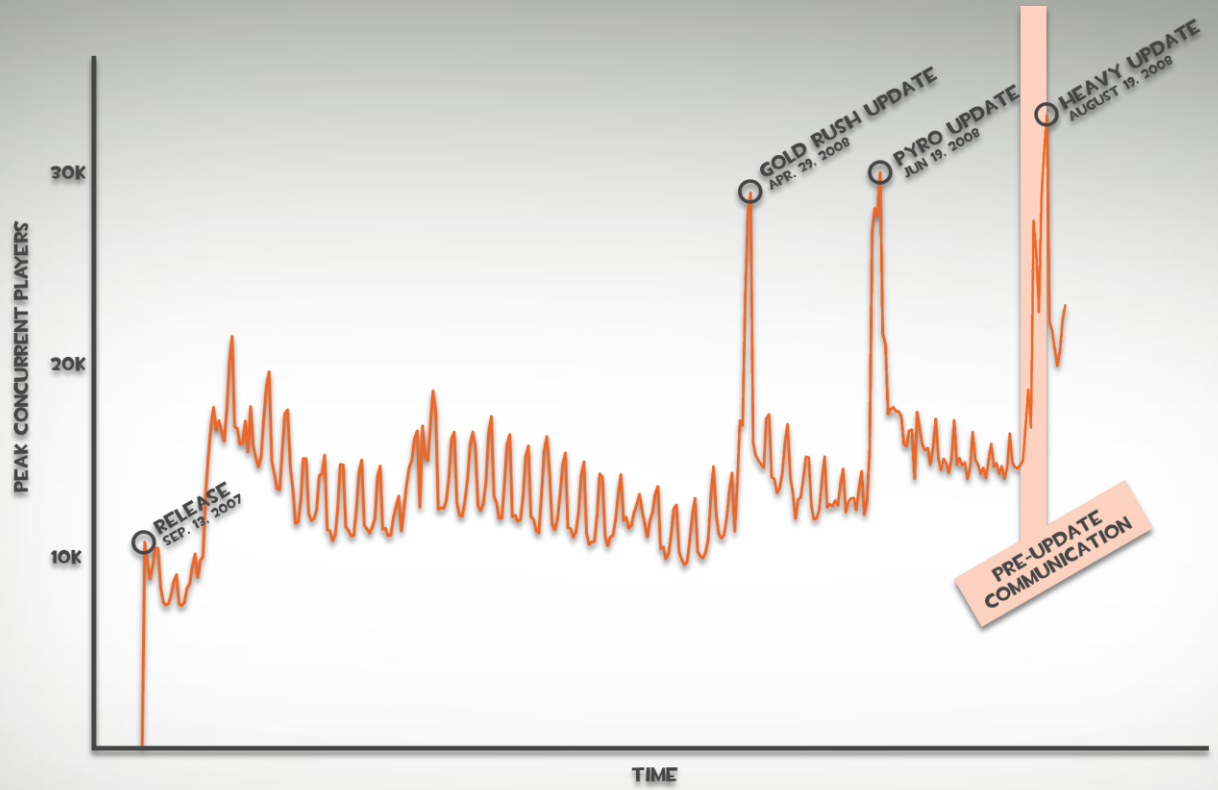
COMMUNICATION LAUNCH

Heads up for news pages. Start anticipation for players. Place for them to keep checking.



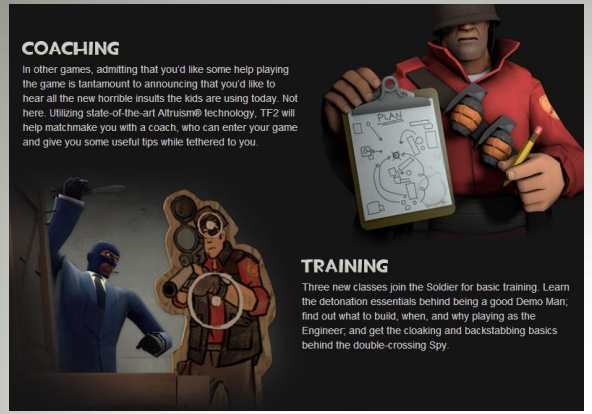
INFORMATION DUMP

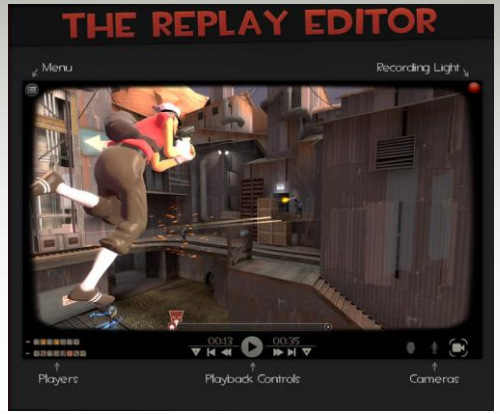
Reveals update identity, generally in narrative form. Ignites speculation.



DAILY COMMUNICATION RELEASES

Create 24 hour windows. Measure communication itself. Gather feedback before release.

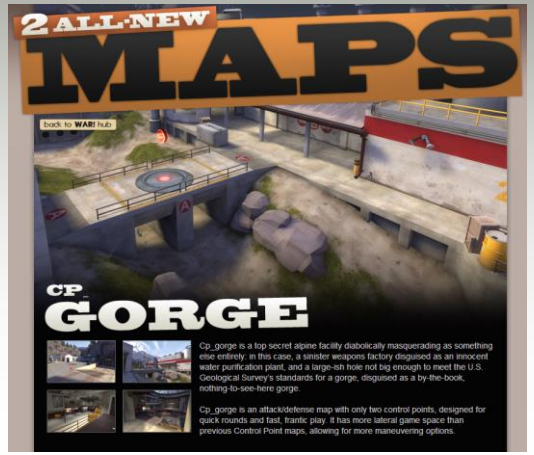


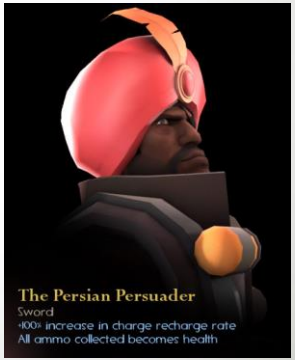


STEAM DEV DAYS

HIGHLIGHT FEATURES

Position new features. Increase visibility to new players. Increase perceived value.





HIGHLIGHT GAMEPLAY CHANGES

Gameplay speculation. Increase perceived value. Connect to other communication.

INCREASE NARRATIVE VALUE

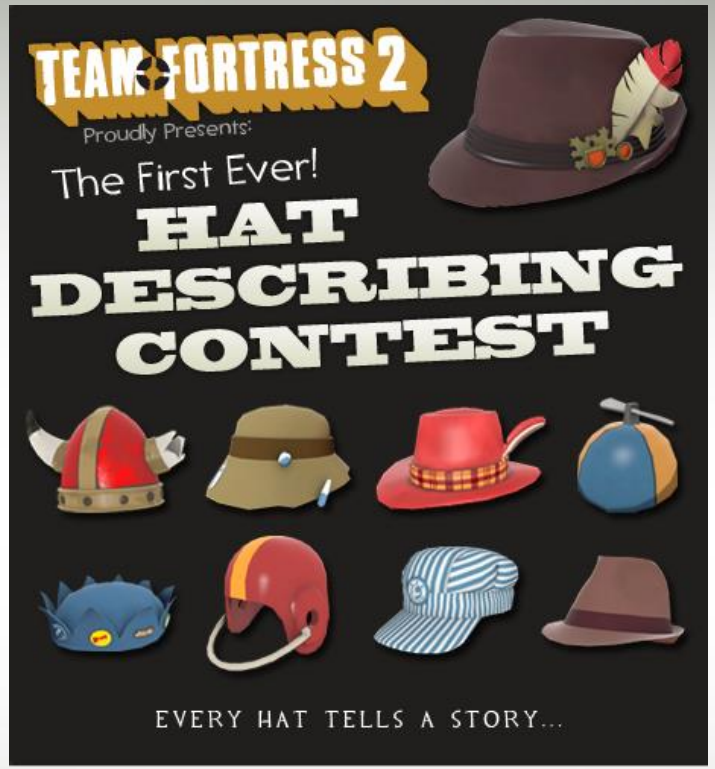
In-game elements that reflect it.

META GAMES

Players generating visibility by having fun. Community competing with itself.

CONTESTS

Feed community competition. Often broader appeal than in-game meta-games.



CONTESTS

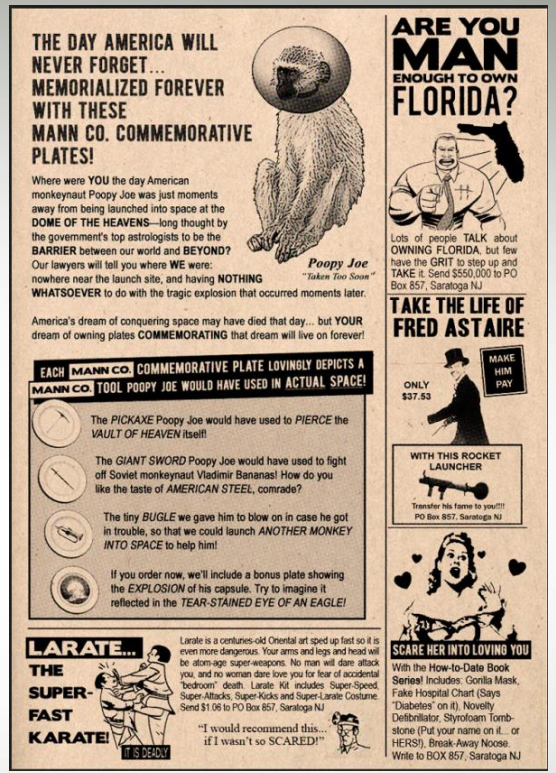
Can be a solution. Results directly imported into the game.

MORE IMPORTANTLY

Communication that matters. Meta-Games with permanent effects on the game.

POLLS

Straightforward, easy to implement. Not very interesting.



FILL YOUR COMMUNICATION WITH HINTS

Surround existing features with seeds of future updates. Like concept art for the community to see.

BI-DIRECTIONAL COMMUNICATION

Delivered something customers wanted, because they selected it.

Dota 2 9th January Patch – Content Analysis

by Matthew 'Cyborgmatt' Bailey on January 10, 2014

This week's Dota 2 update has arrived bringing a number of new item sets, league passes and some hidden goodies behind the scenes such as third party Compendiums.

Back End Changes

Updated Strings

Some strings regarding the game status in ranked MM when dealing with leavers.

"DOTA_Chat_LowPriorityCompletedExplanation" "This game will not count as completed unless you stay until the end of the match (and there are players on both teams present)."

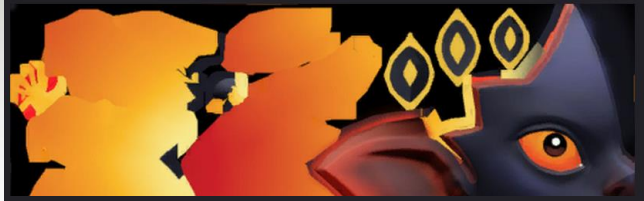
"DOTA_Chat_SafeToLeaveRanked" "This game is now safe to leave. NOTE: Stats will be recorded, including updates to matchmaking rating."

"DOTA_Chat_SafeToLeaveAbandonerRanked" "Abandonment by %s1. This game is now safe to leave. NOTE: Stats will be recorded, including updates to matchmaking rating."

"DOTA_Chat_SafeToLeaveAbandonerAFKRanked" "Abandonment by %s1 due to inactivity. This game is now safe to leave. NOTE: Stats will be recorded, including updates to matchmaking rating."

Phoenix

The first place holder material for Phoenix is now in the files.



Terrorblade

Terrorblade now has an active entry in the npc_heroes data file.

npc_heroes.txt

```
21077
21078    //=================================================================================
21079    // HERO: Terrorblade
21080    //=================================================================================
21081    "npc_dota_hero_terrorblade"
21082    {
21083        // General
21084        //-------------------------------------------------------------------------------
21085        "Model"                     "models/heroes/terrorblade/terrorblade.mdl"         // Mo
21086        "SoundSet"                  "Hero_Terrorblade"                      // Name of sc
21087        "IdleExpression"            "scenes/terrorblade/terrorblade/exp_idle_01.vcd"       /
21088        "HeroID"                    "109"
21089        "Enabled"                   "0"
21090        "HeroUnlockOrder"           "1"
21091        "Role"                      "Carry"
21092        "Rolelevels"                "3"
21093        "Team"                      "Bad"
21094        "Portrait"                  "vgui/hud/heroportraits/portrait_terrorblade"
21095        "ModelScale"                "1"
21096        "CMEnabled"                 "0"
21097        "NameAliases"               "tb"
21098        "url"                       "Terrorblade"
21099
```

LEAKS: UNINTENDED COMMUNICATION

Hard to avoid. Not as world ending as you think. Actually, kind of useful.

Uncovering them is a game in itself.

TRY COMMUNICATING EVERYTHING

Even achievements can be games. Ship only names & icons.

COMMUNICATION AROUND THE PRODUCT

- If possible, it should:
  - Be fun to “play”
  - Reward attention
  - Matter to the game itself
  - Be attractive to new players
  - Teach us

THE DEV TEAM

- Tight integration between game and communication
  - Do everything: design, build, communicate
  - No ‘live’ team
  - Luckily, this is game design
- Culture of listening
  - Reading feedback is valuable work
  - Give them time to do it
  - Make them responsible for the community

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Forum posts, blogs, emails

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- Bug report in forum
  - Post a reply
  - Then go fix it

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- But then…
  - Harder to fix
  - Involves tradeoffs
  - Can’t be fixed
  - Shouldn’t be fixed
- External communication
  - Changed community conversation
  - Added friction

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- We need to be able to change our mind
  - Perhaps now, perhaps months later
  - So even if we do fix it now, may have cost later
- This is the whole point of Games-as-Services
  - Customers change the product

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- Bad communication is worse than none
  - Ongoing future cost
  - Destroys trust
- Value is in the bug fix
  - External communication increased risk

COMMUNICATION

- Improve the product
  - Doesn’t reduce future options
  - Reaches all customers, present & future
  - Actually solves issues
  - Generates clean feedback

WHEN TO USE EXTERNAL?

- Solve problems that updating the product won’t fix
- Example: Dota Report System
  - Weren’t getting usable feedback
  - Iterations not visible to users

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- Make sure we're addressing the real problem
  - User requests for communication may be the result of product or service failure
  - Example: Diretide

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

- Can generate significant value
  - Interesting to players & new players, reward attention, matter to the game, teach us, etc.
- Example: Blogs
  - Not so great: regular posts
  - Better: rare, high value.

WRAPPING UP

COMMUNICATION

- Think about how communication fits
- Approach communication broadly
  - Make it worth “playing”
  - Listen to your customers
  - Create channels for them to improve you
- When customers are unhappy
  - Improve your product

THANKS

- Email:
  - robin@valvesoftware.com
- TF2 update communication:
  - http://www.teamfortress.com/history.php