Episode 11: Succeeding in 4x strategy games

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David Eckelberry: It's the stories you build with those peers and other real humans **[00:00:10]** that ultimately make any kind of multiplayer experience so much more than the sum of its parts.

Howard Chen: For Star Trek, it's more than that. It's a Star Trek game, right?. It's a Star Trek experience. **[00:00:20]** I can definitely see how that is going to help the overall user retention and user journey for your game.

David: Ultimately, this is an entertainment experience and it has to be an entertainment experience that they want **[00:00:30]** to be a part of for the long term. While you may still be working, a lot of you are working from home, and we know that a lot of our play hours do happen during many people's office hours. **[00:00:40]**

Tamzin Taylor: The 4X strategy game genre is home to some of the most loyal gamers around, when they found the right game for them, of course. While players tend to stay faithful **[00:00:50]** to their favorite titles, the genre can certainly be really tough to crack. A great example of a successful 4X title is Star Trek Fleet Command. But how did they find success and what **[00:01:00]** key insights did they learn? And what does it take to succeed in the 4X genre?

Dirk Primbs: Welcome to another episode of Apps, Games, & Insights. We're your hosts, Dirk Primbs and Tamzin Taylor. **[00:01:10]** In this episode, we are exploring the 4X strategy game genre and what it takes to find success in that. Joining us today is David Eckelberry, General Manager and Vice President **[00:01:20]** at Scopely, and Howard Chen, Developer Growth Consultant at Google Play who recently published a white paper on the 4X strategy games genre.

Tamzin: [00:01:30] Great to have you both with us, guys, thank you very much.

David: Thanks for having us.

Howard: Absolutely. It's fun to be here.

Tamzin: Great. Let's kick off and tell us a little bit about yourselves. What's your background? What are you most proud of?

David: Wow, that's a lot. I've **[00:01:40]** been working in games for about 25 years now. I started in paper and card games, transitioned to digital games, both PC console. Then for the last eight years or so, I've been in the mobile **[00:01:50]** space. Working in service-based games, working in free to play games. That's been my background. For the last three years, I've been at Scopely as Vice President of Game Design for Scopely and more **[00:02:00]** recently in the last year, General Manager for Star Trek Fleet Command.

Howard: Yeah and I don't nearly have as much experience as David in industry, but I was in gaming for a handful of years working at companies like **[00:02:10]** Disney and Electronic Arts, where I worked on both mobile and their premium HD titles, focusing

mostly on product management, life services, merchandising **[00:02:20]** and just operating a live game in general. Recently, I've been at Google Play for about a year working as a Developer Growth Consultant, where I kind of leverage what we have available **[00:02:30]** at Google Play and sites data and I help developers achieve success.

So point out opportunities give guidance in terms of road maps and ultimately to serve as a neutral **[00:02:40]** consultant to help raise the ecosystem for mobile in general. Games always been a part of my life. I've been playing games almost as long as I remember. 4X strategy, more recently a mobile is **[00:02:50]** probably one of my most favorite genres in general.

Dirk: We heard the term a few times 4X strategy. For the uneducated among us, me included, what exactly refers

[00:03:00] the term too. Maybe, Howard, you wrote a whole paper on this. So give us the 10,000-mile overview of what we're talking about.

Howard: Yeah. I did write a **[00:03:10]** paper and the genre is very exciting. David, feel free to hop in at any moment. In general, 4X is a multiplayer strategy genre. It incorporates like base in **[00:03:20]** army building, where in real-time, players are competing against one another for resources, digital real estate, and in some form some server reputation. **[00:03:30]**

There are thousands of players in each server where the goal of the player as well as kind of like their social alliance, is to be part of an elite club, **[00:03:40]** where they're chatting with each other. They're like, we are top of the server, it's great. For some, they even compete to be the king of the server. There are different names for the genre, and some **[00:03:50]** developers will call it a strategy MMO, SLG game, et cetera.

David: Empire Builder.

Howard: Empire Builder, yeah. Empire Builder, but 4X has more recently **[00:04:00]** caught on as a name. And it really makes sense because of what the 4X stands for. The name is borrowed from the PC genre, which the 4X capture the four motivations **[00:04:10]** that people are playing this game. Explore, I'm emphasizing the x, of course, and expand, exploit, and exterminate. It's one of the older genres on mobile, **[00:04:20]** and has been popularized by developers like Machine Zone for the past six or seven years and saw tremendous success.

There are new developers entering the genre today, and they're innovating. **[00:04:30]** It's still one of the largest genres on mobile. And it's a really exciting space to be in which is why it's great that David is here with us to talk about Star Trek, which has been on the forefront of innovation.

David: I've been **[00:04:40]** in this space for about six years between Machine Zone and prior and now with Scopely. It's an interesting space, and it is changing a great deal. We can look at the **[00:04:50]** older games that you mentioned of Machine Zone, Game of War, and they in their own era, were home to a number of innovations. What people neglect is emphasizing how important that **[00:05:00]** kind of multiplayer aspect is, the social aspect is.

Just like a PC MMO of a bygone era, these games have alliances and social centers to them. Those social **[00:05:10]** centers are the glue and the retention fabric of these games. The most important thing that people hang around in for the long term is because of the social network **[00:05:20]** that they become a part of, that they build, that they lead. You know ultimately, there is a very old saying in the MMO space of which 4X is a sub-genre of in that you **[00:05:30]** cannot win a race to create content with your players.

You cannot create content faster than your players will consume no matter what the content is. Even as grindy as the content is **[00:05:40]** back in the old PC MMO era of $15 a month, where the developer is essentially incentivized to make grindy content to stretch out value overtime to get **[00:05:50]** the next month subscription, no matter how grindy that was as developers, we can't make content as fast as our players consume it, and so be it.

Ultimately, the reason that the players **[00:06:00]** consume all of your content, then what? Why are they going to hang around? They're going to hang around if they built a network of friends that they're there chatting about, for hours of the day. They could be chatting about the game, their **[00:06:10]** experiences of the game, and even their own lives. In real life, these are the kinds of things that the real committed members of MMO experience, including in this 4X space. That's the glue that **[00:06:20]** will keep them around forever.

As developers, it's our responsibilities to create ways to glue them together, ways for them to interact in meaningful and interesting ways **[00:06:30]** that foster that sense of community and social hub on their own alliances, on their servers, and even in the game in general and places outside the game. While we do our **[00:06:40]** best to personalize and segment content for the different audience members, this is a massive innovation point for the 4X genre.

It is still true at the end of the day, why your experience is personal **[00:06:50]** to you, it's the choices you make in the game, and the choices that your friends, and peers, and alliance mates, and enemies make that make it dynamic, and interesting, and compelling for the long **[00:07:00]** haul. The stories you're talking about telling aren't the stories that as cool as our narrative is and as cool as the Star Trek stories we tell, it's the stories you build with those peers **[00:07:10]** and other real humans that ultimately make any kind of multiplayer experience so much more than the sum of its parts.

Dirk: You're talking about stories here, right? You basically **[00:07:20]** provide the core narrative of the universe everybody plays in, and then people enhance that through their playing and the decisions they make. How aligned is **[00:07:30]** Star Trek Fleet Command with the official Star Trek Canon? Is there a place somewhere in the official storyline that is safe and protected from hardcore **[00:07:40]** fans? [laughs]

David: Well we don't, I mean from our point of view, for our game, we don't want it protected. We want the fans really messing things up to a great degree **[00:07:50]**. We want them to be using it as a starting point and have the cool content character ships, but we want them to craft their own stories. In the long term, we want a **[00:08:00]** Star Trek

Bridge where Kirk, and Picard, and Joy La Forge, and Data, and then, Janeway can all be sharing a space together **[00:08:10]**.

It's... in a way, when I was a very young boy, I had *Star Wars* action figures and I had *Transformer* action figures. And granted, we can't do that kind of IP blending, but **[00:08:20]** the notion that we have characters across different chronologies and sub-IPS of Star Trek is a large part of the appeal and it's part of where we want to take the game going forward.

We started with a **[00:08:30]** subset of the Star Trek IP when we launched the game, but our long term plans are going to revolve really around adding to that. So that's the many different kinds of Star Trek IP's **[00:08:40]** like next-generation discovery that we're adding to the game now. Also, as CBS has continued to make new content, like, *Discovery* Season 3 just came out, we want to be **[00:08:50]** working hand in glove with them. We talk with them a great deal at least once a week about what their plans are, what our plans are.

We work with a writer who's been writing with them

[00:09:00] for a number of years and writes comic books for them, and he writes a lot of our stories, you know, and that all gets crafted together so that our players who are very die-hard Star Trek fans, **[00:09:10]** many of them, they want to see the quality of content creation of stories and narrative and choices that feels like they're in the living, breathing world of a Star Trek **[00:09:20]** 24th century and beyond.

Tamzin: You've talked about how you're giving users that agency over the gameplay, and they've got access to all the characters they love. What else is making the game so **[00:09:30]** successful in your mind?

David: A few things. I think that one of the ways that the 4X genre is changing or evolving is a kind of hybridization. You see **[00:09:40]** different games in this genre not being so pure exterminates which was really a hallmark of the early versions of the game, of the game genre I mean, where you would **[00:09:50]** see that it was all PvP all the time. We've seen better retention results both in the short term and in the long term when you give **[00:10:00]** players a healthy amount of PvE kind of content.

For Star Trek, that really started from the early days of the game. You land in the game, and there you're talking to Scotty and **[00:10:10]** Kirk and soon other famous characters of the next generation, et cetera universe, and that appeal will be there for fans. It really onboards them onto the universe. It **[00:10:20]** is a post user acquisition but early user retention and getting them to feel that this is really the Star Trek game they want and the world they want to stay a part of.

[00:10:30] That narrative experience and RPG experience and MMO experience blending those genres across, that's something you see Star Trek doing and you see our competitors doing **[00:10:40]** as well. If you go and take a look at a lot of our competitors in this space, you see more RPG elements more than anything as a sub-genre coming into this experience, whether that was Final **[00:10:50]** Fantasy or Status Survival. All the games in these genres are experimenting with how do we hybridize to provide a broader

experience to our different users **[00:11:00]** that goes beyond the crush your enemies and see them destroyed with your minds, that kind of thing.

Howard: Also opens up to like different players on mobile **[00:11:10]** because if you're focusing too much on just the exterminate and want to destroy everyone personalities, you are really limiting your overall pool of users who will come and play the game because mobile **[00:11:20]** as we know, it's a broad platform where you can have people who install your game who come from games like Candy Crush, like a one end of the spectrum to people who are playing **[00:11:30]** Battle Royale games and other core competitive games. That's one thing that I really appreciated with Star Trek is that it doesn't throw me into the sandbox, like fend for yourself **[00:11:40]** moment immediately.

I feel more so does it better than other games with IP is that it pulls you into this world and narrative that takes its time. It doesn't force you **[00:11:50]** to be one player or another immediately and you can hang out for a while, check out the mechanics, and go from there. One thing I do want to add especially when it comes to Star Trek is

[00:12:00] not just games that are throwing an IP, but Star Trek really crafting a narrative around the IP and not just using like an image of an actor for user acquisition, **[00:12:10]** because a lot of times IP is done for user acquisition, but for Star Trek, it's more than that.

It's the Star Trek game. It's a Star Trek experience. I can definitely see how that is going to help **[00:12:20]** the overall user retention and user journey for your game.

David: Absolutely. There are so many different user types that come into these games, and certainly, come into our game. To reply to what you said there, **[00:12:30]** Howard, we have players who are Candy Crush players who love Star Trek who came into our game. They're not veterans of the 4X genre. We have those two who come in and also **[00:12:40]** like, or at least don't hate Star Trek and wanted to try something new. But I think the biggest commonality we had of every user test we do, or every user survey we do is **[00:12:50]** the overwhelming majority of these players like Star Trek.

It may or may not be their absolute favorite science fiction IP, but it is certainly one of their favorites, and they look forward to it, **[00:13:00]** they think wonderful things about different ones. They'll argue incessantly online as any Star Trek fan was, what was the best version of Star Trek out there? We try to **[00:13:10]** participate and encourage those discussions by making them the different crews be good at one thing or another, and that makes it feel like we're joining the greater Star Trek **[00:13:20]** conversation, and our fans appreciate that.

Dirk: That tells me immediately that you will not give us the gift of picking a favorite yourself, right?

David: I grew **[00:13:30]** up more with NextGen so it's easy to make it my favorite, Picard was kind of my captain. I think that's true for probably most but far from all of our fans. **[00:13:40]** I know from a plurality point of view, it's not a majority, but NextGen scores the highest on ours from a-- has the most but still not the majority of our fans, which really get broken up across different age **[00:13:50]** groups and genders. I think the

diversification of the genre represented a little bit by Star Trek has also made us a better home for women who'd like **[00:14:00]** to play Star Trek or 4X games.

The different characterizations in the narrative, not to overly label things because we definitely have high-end players who **[00:14:10]** are into that experimental gameplay who are both men and women. But I think that opening that space up to give the PvE experience and give progression goals that aren't just about crushing your enemies, **[00:14:20]** has provided a more diverse set of players' goals that they like to stay in the game. A part of that also, to go back to Tamzin's original question, why have **[00:14:30]** they stayed, is we have a really aggressive content schedule of releases.

We're releasing new stuff into the game all the time. While we may not win that treadmill, **[00:14:40]** we are doing everything we can to give users something great coming around the corner. Every month of the year has something new to look forward to, regardless of what player **[00:14:50]** you are in Star Trek.

Howard: Something that you mentioned there, David, too that stuck out to me was giving players progression and some things that we've seen happen in more recent titles. Don't get

[00:15:00] me wrong, I think that the tried and true 4X Formula, the exterminate games, there's still a place for that on mobile.

Progression is something that players can hold on to and they're working towards something that **[00:15:10]** they won't lose, and a character collection, a crew is one thing. In the older 4X games, a user can come in and just take away all your progression in one swoop. You'll wake up in the morning and see your **[00:15:20]** bases completely gone. That's very punitive, and some people don't like that. For your title, as you mentioned, David, giving that progression and sense of stability is pretty important, **[00:15:30]** at least in the early game.

David: Absolutely important. It's really critical that in the early days of bringing on users, you want to give them every reason to want to keep playing. You want to expose all the carrots of **[00:15:40]** the wonderful things to come in terms of the amazing content that you and other higher-level players on your server are talking about. You want to really show off the amazing things to come and to **[00:15:50]** take a step back. While we go forward in this conversation, narrative is part of that.

The narrative of the game can provide an ending on a cliffhanger, or I got to see the next chapter, I got to see the next **[00:16:00]** story, I need to keep playing, I need to keep progressing and growing in power so I can defeat this tougher enemy that I'm exposed to who can then unlock the next part of the narrative. They really **[00:16:10]** do want to work hand-in-hand if they're done right. **[unintelligible 00:16:13]** but till the board is part of that, yes, the bitter end is going to have their competition, is going to go head-to-head and as they want to and feel.

[00:16:20] The other part of that there was also finding meaningful progression for everyone, or at least as many as you can in your game. As they bridge that early game experience to the mid-game, they feel like they're continuing **[00:16:30]** to progress and continuing to find opportunities, right, and that goes across everything. That's the events

you build, the content you build, the IP you craft, all of that **[00:16:40]** needs to find a home for the different players at their different points along the journey of where they are in your game.

Tamzin: David, one of the findings we see on Google Play is this **[00:16:50]** sub-genre of strategy games can sometimes have problems with churn. Does your game struggle with that? How do you approach it?

David: We're really happy about the **[00:17:00]** retention of our players. It's our number one metric that we care most about is players regardless of their type, regardless of their spend levels, regardless of their game history. The only way **[00:17:10]** to make a game and to make a healthy community and to make a healthy business is that players continue to play, and the only way to grow your game is the same thing. You can't turn over and bring a new group of players **[00:17:20]** in every month if you're just leaking them out.

Now, what is well known about this genre is that we shed users in this genre in the early days pretty aggressively, **[00:17:30]** you would say, sadly aggressively, right. So your day 30 numbers on a game in this genre are going to be significantly worse than they would be in a more casual title to use the real example Candy Crush. **[00:17:40]** The great advantage of the genre historically that remains to this day, regardless of how the hybridization is going is the users who are there on whether you want to say two weeks **[00:17:50]** or 30 days, the odds of being there at 60, 90, 120, 365, now for Star Trek 720 and beyond are really really strong.

So when

[00:18:00] we find users who love this genre, they're going to be around. You treat them well, you give them good stuff, give them a wonderful game experience, they're going to be around for a long period of time. **[00:18:10]** They play the game many, many hours of their day and they stay around in that game for a very long time, whether they spend in the game or not. Obviously, the per-user metrics of a **[00:18:20]** user who does monetize in the title are going to be a bit higher than the free players.

It is still true that once you get over that initial, "Whoa, this game is a bit more **[00:18:30]** complex than my Candy Crush moment. It is more involved and it is more to take in. It's a gamer's game." As polite as you can make your onboarding and as hand-holding **[00:18:40]** as you can make your onboarding, at a certain point, some of your users might say, "This is the game genre, that's not for me." You want to make that as easy as **[00:18:50]** you can.

You want to make that as fun as you can, uh, narrative laden as you can that it's Kirk and Spock and whoever telling you what you need to know, instead of **[00:19:00]** me, some high-handed developer putting down the rules of a competitive and cutthroat universe. All of those things help but you still want to craft an experience that **[00:19:10]** is more about the long-term, because I could change the early game experience immeasurably to make it kinder, funnier, easier but then I'd be hiding the necessary complexity, **[00:19:20]** growth progression, all those things that are really integrated and integral to a 4X genre game.

They are going to lose some players and we accept that. The **[00:19:30]** important thing is to lose as few as possible and to give the users that you do have to treat them like the important VIPs that they will always be in your game.

[00:19:40] Tamzin: Amazing. How did you originally and maybe as you continue to reach out to those really hardcore Trekkies as well as their broader audience. Do they have to be treated differently?

[00:19:49] David: Oh yeah, **[00:19:50]** absolutely. They are VIP players. The genre is home to that, that these users stay around for a long period of time. We have a customer service team that's relative to some of the **[00:20:00]** other genres significantly larger, significantly better trained, and significantly developing personal relationships with fans now that have been in the game for years, and want to keep going into **[00:20:10]** the game for years to come.

They have their own account managers, and they are incredibly tailored and well-tuned to the desires, interests, and focus **[00:20:20]** of different kinds of players that you want to treat them so very carefully. Because It is a genre that's going to have a smaller user base, comparatively to a more casual game. **[00:20:30]** With that comes certain responsibility that the users you bring in and that you keep to these regular players of your game, losing them is always a small tragedy. **[00:20:40]** And we do everything we can to treat them with respect and to treat them with the care that they deserve for spending so much of their time with us.

[00:20:49] Tamzin: Absolutely fascinating. Thank you, **[00:20:50]** David. I think, Howard, David shared some pretty interesting takeaways. I think if anyone listening is seeking to build a 4X game, they should pay attention to you. Is there

[00:21:00] anything else that you saw in your white paper to share with us?

[00:21:04] Howard: Yes. Some of the things that come top of mind are very complementary to what David had mentioned is that, let's talk about user loyalty. **[00:21:10]** First and foremost is that when it comes to retention, even at day 28 retention up to date 28 to day 30 retention, we have seen improvements for the genre, actually, year over year. **[00:21:20]** We're talking about a 10%, to a 16%, improvements to D2 through D28. Overall, having the hybridization more structured **[00:21:30]** progression, I think, has been helping retention.

But let's talk about the users afterwards, the sticky users. One thing that we do see as this is for the strategy genre as a whole, so not just **[00:21:40]** 4X Games, but its parents genre strategy of which 4X is a big part of. Users in this genre are very likely or more likely than other mid-core genres like role-playing **[00:21:50]** games, and MMOs to only play one genre. What I mean by that is just looking quickly at the metrics, and this is based off of June, so a couple of months ago now.

Strategy game player **[00:22:00]** is 30% likely to only play one genre. While if you look at role-playing games, 20% are likely to play one genre, and MMOs 20% to play one genre. **[00:22:10]** By itself, strategy game players are very loyal to that one game that they are playing. And of those players, I think like upwards of 90% are only playing one game **[00:22:20]** within the strategy genre. Loyal, committed to their maybe it's the group, the

alliance, their social circles, it's hard to change, the cost of switching to another game is high **[00:22:30]** because all of your friends in social settings are all in this group.

One thing that we also do see, though, of the users who are playing strategy games, who are playing other games, what are they playing? **[00:22:40]** Well, they're playing games like shooter games, Battle Royale, first-person shooters. They're playing games like MOBAs, and less likely to be playing other mid-core competitive genres strategy. **[00:22:50]** It's interesting where a role-playing game player, someone who is playing like a character collector termbase RPG battler game is more likely **[00:23:00]** to play other mid-core genres.

While strategy game, they're really sticking with their guns, and if they are playing other games, it's very complimentary game genres that don't take away from. **[00:23:10]** You can play both a shooter game and a strategy game, or a 4X game because a Battle Royale game is very in the moment, 30 minutes session, you're done. No commitment. We're talking about **[00:23:20]** a very committed user base here and developers who are getting into the space need to recognize that too. Because if you want to come into the space, you can't just look at the market sizing of **[00:23:30]** 4X strategy games, just because that's going to be our player base.

You got to do something beyond that and provide an experience that is unique to why you want to play that game, which is what Star Trek **[00:23:40]** has done to come up as one of the top in the class for the genres. They have this value proposition for not just Star Trek fans and others but also just, **[00:23:50]** you just have a more comfortable onboarding, I guess for lack of a better term. Overall, just committed users that fits in totally what we know about our player base.

They play

[00:24:00] a little bit of other games, but they tend to be the games that are less focused on progression. They're going to be diving into something casual relatively. They might be a core gamer so that casual experience might be a shooter instead of Candy Crush, **[00:24:10]** but they're going to look for breaks from different things. They don't play other games in the genre, the genre generally and Star Trek are rather demanding for time. **[00:24:20]** The players who get into this game or the genre, generally, they're going to play online for hours of the day, literally. They play it like an old school PC MMO.

The core users are going to be the biggest **[00:24:30]** predictive, I think you could make a user's thing. Are they playing the game just about every day or they're playing it for hours of the day? That user is not going anywhere. Those are the users that are going to hang around **[00:24:40]** and going to be in your game. You need to give them both the social structures and some of the content that gives them good value to be playing the game for hours a day because that's the user **[00:24:50]** who wants to play this genre.

David: I'm sure the server's being live for 24 hours a day also helps [chuckles] in that as well where other people can plot to attack **[00:25:00]** you at 3:00 in the morning, and your push notifications better be waking you up, if that's the case. That definitely helps engage more.

Dirk: I always make the joke in moments like this that probably **[00:25:10]** the system administrator of a really high-class MMO can talk on the same level as the administrator of, let's say, the London Stock Exchange. Maybe **[00:25:20]** the stakes are even higher if you're about to win an important battle. [laughs]

Howard: Oh, definitely. These alliances have anywhere from 50 to almost 100 players, but **[00:25:30]** of course, we want the excitement, we want the thrill of anything could happen at any moment, but it's also true that we make it very clear that players earn like 12 hours a piece shield just by playing **[00:25:40]** the game a little bit every day. Don't forget, don't neglect to turn on that button, but we definitely want it to be true that our players can take a break from the game, whether that's, "Hey, I'm getting **[00:25:50]** on a plane," or "Hey, I want to go to sleep." Activate a 12-hour shield, be restful.

Let's all have good work-life-game balance in our experiences. We want players to not feel that **[00:26:00]** some desperate anxiety that they have to have the phone next to their ear. The wonderful thing about that social cohesion, just like you have an alliance and this person's getting attacked and, "Oh, somebody's actually going to text him," and then the whole **[00:26:10]** alliance of his friends trying to defend him and coming in and defend off attackers. It is at all levels an experience of a community that is sharing that and doing their best to **[00:26:20]** preserve and help one another and to show one another what that can be.

Someone could steal some of your resources, but we protect a lot of them in different ways. We give you like a shield **[00:26:30]** that "Oh, you got attacked. Okay, you've got 10 minutes. This is your time window to log in and activate a real shield or organize your defenses." There are mechanisms like that in Star Trek, **[00:26:40]** and I think in a lot of games that are going to come out to make it a little less punitive, that battles can happen and there's threats out there in the big scary dark Star Trek universe.

There's Borg and Khan and other things, and other players **[00:26:50]** definitely a threat too, but we want players to have a good time that's not about living through fear. We want a universe that is enjoyable. You want the player coming back to it out of

[00:27:00] looking forward to the next log on, not being afraid of what bad thing will happen in the next log on. That's something for game developers to know that, ultimately, this is an entertainment experience, and it has **[00:27:10]** to be an entertainment experience that they want to be a part of, for the long term.

Tamzin: I love the idea of community and messaging people on discord at 3:00 AM to turn your shield on. **[00:27:20]** What other mechanisms and tools do you provide to help your community plot, communicate, and align?

David: In-game, they have their alliance messaging, they can level **[00:27:30]** up their alliance, and they can see where their alliance members are, they have their own kind of map of the galaxy. You can see where all your alliance mates are for where their homes are, and things like that. **[00:27:40]** We're going to be doing more stuff like that in a very coming soon variety of the game. We have more features that are emphasizing the alliance nature of going out and claiming **[00:27:50]** space and sharing that experience with the rest of the people that you play with.

To be honest, we also accept that discord is part of the game or life right now. We don't **[00:28:00]** try to substitute every possible element of that at all because we have our own discord channel that we communicate and make big messages out. We have ways of news blasting inside the game, **[00:28:10]** but we have community mods and game developers that hang out on our discord channels because we don't want them to just have a community with each other and their alliance and the greater members of players.

[00:28:20] In the big picture, you as developers are part of that community. The ties that you build, the trust that you build with your fans is critical **[00:28:30]** because, look, something's always going to someday go wrong. We have mistakes, whether it's a server goes down, or we make a mistake in a balancing value of a ship, or we have to **[00:28:40]** make a tuning adjustment. The more trust we built and developed with the people who play our game and ourselves because we are big players of our own game.

[00:28:50] When we share those moments and share those experiences and make the players know that we are fans of the Star Trek universe. We're fans of the Star Trek Fleet Command game, **[00:29:00]** and we want to be able to be a part of their community respectfully. That means that when we communicate with them, it's always done **[00:29:10]** with respect. When we have to communicate something that they might view as negative, the more trust we have with them

in that moment is critical to the success of Star Trek Fleet Command, of Scopely, and **[00:29:20]** as any developer making long term service-based games.

Howard: Yes. Something I wanted to call out as the importance of that trust. It's something I didn't really think about before you mentioned it, **[00:29:30]** actually, David. That trust is important because overall the community, the top of the funnel is not growing as quickly as it may have been like seven years ago when you're seeing Superbowl ads **[00:29:40]** with Rob Gronkowski playing Mobile Strike, or whichever the title was. Installs actually from what we realized in our own data for the genre, actually **[00:29:50]** decreased nearly 30% year over year.

It's 30% less users and that trust of why players want to play a game is really important and really emphasizing that. I like that you said that, David, **[00:30:00]** because with the less top of funnel, sustainable growth is important, and if you don't have the users trust your competitors, they're ready for that, too. It's becoming, **[00:30:10]** again, because of that percentage of players only playing one game in the genre, they have to trust that you are doing the right thing for them, and it seems you're taking the right direction doing so.

Dirk: If I may be curious **[00:30:20]** here for a second. Did you see things change and shift over the past couple of months at all? If people listen to this, maybe with some delay, we're still in the middle **[00:30:30]** of that COVID nightmare, we still are sheltering at home for the most part and having these things. Did that bleed into how you craft your narratives or how your players behave at all **[00:30:40]** or is your game the happy place for the people who are stuck at home and actually finally can spend even more time on it?

David: To a great degree, I am thrilled **[00:30:50]** that players were able to find a happy refuge from the ravages of the real world of 2020 COVID most outstandingly. In the big

picture, I think our retention did tick up **[00:31:00]** a little bit, but the most obvious thing that stood out is our engagement hours per day climbed up a lot in April through June. It tapered back down a little bit since then. It hasn't fully regressed, **[00:31:10]** if you will, back to February numbers or something like that. Often you would expect in a mobile game, warm days, summer breaks for people, you know seasonality exists **[00:31:20]** in games like this.

You would expect numbers to have reclined and now maybe start to be climbing up a bit as cold weather intrudes and up over most of the Northern Hemisphere **[00:31:30]** and winter is coming, and people do tend to play more games these months as they are more trapped inside by rain and snow, but that hasn't happened. Our retention numbers have gotten up **[00:31:40]** a bit. Now we do build a roadmap of our features that didn't anticipate COVID. Of course, it acknowledges it, but I think the biggest thing we did was we just tried to give **[00:31:50]** more events, the things that can be more dynamic.

We can't just suddenly put a whole bunch of new stories in, but we can run a bit more events, we can have our live operations, a performance team **[00:32:00]** that is giving more content, like, "Oh, we're going to make Saturdays have more stuff, or we're going to make even Wednesdays have more stuff." While you may still be working, a lot of you are working from home, and we know **[00:32:10]** that a lot of our play hours do happen during many people's office hours oddly enough. I don't know why that is. I don't know what the correlation there is.

Dirk: No correlation.

David: No correlation whatsoever. **[00:32:20]** These are games that need to both plan a long term vision about the content you're going to release, but then you always need to be adapting to how that content is performing and what **[00:32:30]** the world is bringing to you. I would have said there's no way we could really prepare for a global pandemic, but we tried to adapt in little ways we can. Just like sometimes there is an **[00:32:40]** earthquake or monsoon and giving out more piece shields so that players who are playing from the afflicted regions, can shield up and know that they're safe in the game, go handle your real life.

There are **[00:32:50]** little moments like that where the real world can intrude on our game, but really, we don't view it as a negative thing entirely that we want to be responsive to the real-world concerns and

[00:33:00] realities of our customers and players.

Howard: Star Trek is really part of the forefront, like user experience, protecting it, I think that you mentioned. The game can support kind of this increased play such as **[00:33:10]** through COVID or something like COVID where the players are not exhausting themselves because the game was created to support that if the user so choose to play more. We did see of the new user **[00:33:20]** funnel day 28 an improvement from players who are active playing on day 28 before playing about 90 minutes per day on average, across the genre going towards 99 to **[00:33:30]** upwards to a 100 minutes.

If you couple that with improved retention, which we saw again about 16%, 17% improvement retention on day 28th and more sessions. Stickiness has improved

[00:33:40] for 4X in general, where users are playing about like two or three more days per month. All these things add up towards this engagement, more users, more sessions, more time, and the game is supporting it **[00:33:50]** or the games need to support it. Games who are not supporting more play sessions without it being apparent that you're hitting these pinch points and progression points. It's important as well.

For COVID I'm seeing multiple **[00:34:00]** things, but one of which is if the game does not scale and is not sustainable, the gaps will show very quickly, and something that it seems like your team is having no problem with.

David: [00:34:10] I wouldn't say it's challenging. It's no problem. I think my team would know that we're working very hard to adapt-

Howard: Got it.

David: -the realities, but I think you're right in the big picture. **[00:34:20]** Every one of those little increases adds up. Even COVID didn't see like numbers double. People are still people, we've changed how we behave. We don't become different people. People who are completely **[00:34:30]** out of interest in this genre, probably aren't going to come in, but some of the people somewhere in between, that's where it all adds up. You get another session per day.

You get even a **[00:34:40]** 10% relative increase in day 28 or whatever the metric you're going for, we've seen that we've reduced long-term retention significantly in the last **[00:34:50]** year. Every one of those things adds up and makes a game that was like doing okay to be doing good. It makes the game that was doing good go to great. makes the game that is doing **[00:35:00]** great to industry-defining, or at least maybe for a country. We're really happy with how Star Trek has been doing, but we're never satisfied because we still see ways that we can make the game better.

[00:35:10] We're constantly debating the best way to do that. Constantly debating it within ourselves and constantly asking our players to participate in that discussion of how to make the game **[00:35:20]** better. You need to stay that ruthless humble combination that really can drive you to realize that we're happy about our success, but **[00:35:30]** how do we do better tomorrow? That never ends. We can get a great report card, so to speak of our KPIs and we can look at it and go, "Great."

Have a happy hour over Zoom or whatever to have a **[00:35:40]** drink, and then tomorrow it all starts over again, about wondering how do we make the next week, the next month, the next year, more thrilling and more **[00:35:50]** entertaining for everyone involved? If you came from a different game background, if you came from a universe of console or PC, that was, "Hey, we made a fantastic game. It's gone gold, everyone,

[00:36:00] vacation and well-earned deserved."

There are wonderful games in that space, of course, still coming out. I think that what everyone should realize is that **[00:36:10]** it's not just that it keeps going, but it keeps going and it burns hotter. If your game is successful, if you're going to plan for success in this genre, you don't **[00:36:20]** think, "Okay, the game will launch. We've got the core engine done and everything's going to be fine and we'll pull back our investment." No. If

your game is going to do well, if you're going to plan for success, you're going to **[00:36:30]** increase your investment.

You're going to increase your headcount. You're going to allocate more development time and money for performance and live operations and events, and even things like server **[00:36:40]** costing and hosting. You're going to plan for additional spending in technical areas because success is going to have its own cost. Costs that you'll happily willingly pay, but **[00:36:50]** all of that, you need to go into it. If you're planning for success, you're planning for ongoing development costs that go up more and more over time to match the success of the **[00:37:00]** game you've crafted.

If you plan for the reverse scenario where it's like "We're going to cut all of our investment after we've realized a great soft launch to live," well, you're in for some rude surprises, my friends.

Tamzin: [00:37:10] Wise words from David. Spend more money to make more money.

[laughter]

David: I mean, point of fact, yes. I mean, that's what it takes. That if you want to retain those fans for the long-term, **[00:37:20]** you're going to be providing them with an experience that wasn't fire and forget is the reality of it.

Tamzin: Is there anything that your team has learned through lockdown and having to adapt to **[00:37:30]** obviously the increased engagement that you are now going to apply in the future?

David: I think there are a lot of things that as we work as a team together, we had a unique challenge and advantage **[00:37:40]** perversely enough. The Star Trek team is already like many Scopely teams co-located around the world. We were well-experienced with doing VC all the times a day because a lot of our teams **[00:37:50]** are separated by eight hours of time zones apart. That actually prepared us pretty well for suddenly, "Everyone work from your home."

It still had challenges and there was definitely a sense **[00:38:00]** sometimes that we're trading on the relationship equity that we've built with one another, and it's hard to rebuild that relationship equity with one another. I think that what we have learned **[00:38:10]** is we have to make that investments in our teams the same way I've talked for a while now about investing in your players. We need to find opportunities for us to let our **[00:38:20]** hair down.

We need to find opportunities for us as hard as we're working, yeah, the proverbial happy hour. When we've done one-on-ones or small group meetings, we have to make sure that **[00:38:30]** we're knowing and building our team still. We're going to have important subject matters to talk about, but take the 10 minutes with your team to see how everyone's doing. Not with **[00:38:40]** some throwaway line that management training has told you how to do, but actually be invested in your team and your staff and the people who work with you and work around you and work for you.

[00:38:50] They need to know that you're there for them to support the development team in a real and meaningful way. Whether that's buying them desks and chairs

[00:39:00] or a second monitor, little financial commitments like that, or just them being able to talk to you about how much it sucks to have a meeting with a child screaming in the background. **[00:39:10]** Yes, it really does. How can we help solve and how can we adapt to schedules that have to be a little bit more adaptable than when we're all in the office for these set number **[00:39:20]** of hours?

Tamzin: All right, David. I've got a big question for you. Where do you see the future of 4X gaming?

David: That's a big question. Obviously, naturally enough, Scopely has always been interested. Any developer **[00:39:30]** that I've ever worked for is always trying to prognosticate and it's not an easy task. We think about what we want to build because we're players in the genre ourselves. What would we want to **[00:39:40]** do next? How would we want to change and experience and grow and experience of Star Trek that isn't something we're already doing?

A lot of the spaces, coming back to the start of our conversation is about **[00:39:50]** inviting more players in growing the audience. Part of that has been about hybridization, and part of that is about how we think about long-term player management. We **[00:40:00]** have players in these worlds and these, I guess, galaxies for Star Trek that are having very different experiences. We have a very different experience for someone who comes into the game, now, **[00:40:10]** two years on from its release, versus the experience of someone who's been in from two years or a few of them in soft launch even longer than that.

A lot of what I think about now is how do we **[00:40:20]** get those players to share experiences and at the same time, how do I make their experiences personalized? That tension is really challenging because I **[00:40:30]** want to give them content like, "This month is all about Star Trek, DS9. Cool," but how do I give content for that player who's been in the game for a few weeks, or **[00:40:40]** the player who has been in the game for a few years?

That is where the challenge of the future feels like it lies for this kind of game, where I can give crafted **[00:40:50]** experiences that yes, make your progression still feel meaningful and tie into the progress and acknowledge the effort you've made and investment you've made in this game, but **[00:41:00]** at the same time, allow players along a whole wide arc of that progression lifetime to meaningful embrace and interact with one another. **[00:41:10]** That is the greatest challenge of the kind of genre like this.

This is where our smart people are trying to focus their time right now. If you craft a wonderful engaging **[00:41:20]** experience, and you allow the players opportunities to invest and give them great choices to invest, players have a lot to do in Star Trek and they have different paths to go down. **[00:41:30]** Some players are more interested in building their perfect crew and some players are interested in improving their favorite ship. This I think is a way that the genre is evolving and doing good things with.**[00:41:40]**

It's not, "Buy this pack, it's the pack you need. Here's a full-screen takeover. Do this and this is the only thing you should do." No, I want to give the players ways that they can choose to progress with **[00:41:50]** their time, and if they choose to make a purchase, ways that they can choose to make a purchase in their investment.

[00:41:55] Howard: Yes, and on their own terms too.

[00:41:56] David: Absolutely. Regardless of where that player is

[00:42:00] in his life cycle or progression scheme or how long he's been playing, giving him the choices is really important to us. We see that has succeeded very well on Star Trek. **[00:42:10]** Every time we've backpedaled and we've run experiments about, "Should we try to push this thing at new players especially," the answer is always, "No, not really." No spender regret, no **[00:42:20]** player regret, no investment regret.

It's our jobs to give great value to our players and to give them great choices about how they want to experience the game and everything else will follow. **[00:42:30]** Not exactly organically, because it's a lot of hard work for us, but will follow. I think we've seen an innovation there as well, whether that's some kind of subscription plan, whether that was done on a platform **[00:42:40]** level or done in the game level. The popularity of battle passes in the last couple of years has really taken off.

As you probably know, Star Trek added a battle pass this year. We hacked it in a **[00:42:50]** little bit at the start of the year and then invested in the tech once it proved itself out from a KPI point of view. Another suggestion to developers out there. If you have an idea about something you want to add to the game, put it out to a cohort, **[00:43:00]** put out even the kind of somewhat hacky version that would be very difficult to maintain, but more or less hits the right notes, get some feedback and go, "Okay, this is worth investing in."

This **[00:43:10]** is something that has very much succeeded with a variety of tests with Star Trek and sometimes not succeeded with a variety of tests in Star Trek. Yes, players will have to suffer a little bit of their user experience here, **[00:43:20]** extra menus and unclear language a bit, but we'll be able to validate whether this is worth investing in making a better experience.

Dirk: All right. If there is somebody planning **[00:43:30]** to build a 4X game right now or actively working on it, David, maybe for you, are there three tips that you have to share for developers when it comes to building and maintaining a successful **[00:43:40]** 4X strategy game?

David: I think that the first thing to know is that this is a genre that takes more investment. That your development time pre-release, if you're starting with, "I've got **[00:43:50]** a great team of smart people. How long is it going to take?" Well, first of all, you're going to budget years and then budget whatever you budgeted, your original budget somewhere **[00:44:00]** depending on just how clever you are between 25% and 100% more time than you thought is the reality of the situation. Especially if you're not licensing core engine tech, you're not making a sequel, **[00:44:10]** or you're not licensing someone's tech.

It's a genre that requires significant upfront investment before players are ever going to be testing anything. There are so many **[00:44:20]** moving parts to this genre and they're just all requirements. It's not entirely different if you go back 15 years ago, everyone wanted to make a PC MMO. **[00:44:30]** That upfront investment is hundreds of millions of dollars these days, literally. It's not quite there but do realize that **[00:44:40]** it's not nothing. It's probably tens of millions of dollars to bring a product from nothing to launch in a real core game mid-core.

Technology is racing ahead. **[00:44:50]** The cost of better and better graphics. 4X games aren't known for their prettiest graphics compared to some games in the kind of mid-core space of a typical, perhaps RPG. **[00:45:00]**

[00:45:00] But they're not nothing. The cost to entry is just going up. It's going to take a significant investment of tools, technology, art. You're going to employ all kinds of mitigation **[00:45:10]** strategies for all of those things, but just know going in that this is not like making a casino game that you might realistically hope to turn out in three to six months.

That is **[00:45:20]** not the space you're going to be in. Tip two, going back to what I said earlier is, plan for an ongoing development stream that goes on for a long period of time. If your game is **[00:45:30]** successful, you're going to want to continue investing in it. I guess if it isn't then whatever, but why plan for that? You're going to trim development costs, true, but whether you're self-investing or you're **[00:45:40]** going to investors for it, no one wants to hear that version of reality.

You should plan for a realistic scenario of ongoing investment to your players. I think the other thing **[00:45:50]** I'd add is as soon as possible, you're going to be given your own rounds of feedback, whether that's behind the proverbial mirrored glass and watching people play. Getting a small **[00:46:00]** cohort of players in your game as soon as possible and making that your golden cohort of evangelists is the next thing I think about in a development lifespan. **[00:46:10]** You're not even in soft launch. You're a true alpha.

I know well, the games industry-- I was about to say a bad word. A beam's industry uses alpha badly these days when they actually **[00:46:20]** mean beta. I don't know what all these terms can mean anymore, but a true alpha of incomplete technology, understanding acceptance, you are a feature incomplete. **[00:46:30]** Grabbing a few hundred users at that level or a stable cohort of a few hundred users to give you real-time feedback and become your evangelists, become part of the **[00:46:40]** first tier of your community, could become eventually mods for you on your message boards and discord and all that sort of thing.

You want to create the seed of that critical **[00:46:50]** social experience as soon as you can. You can't give them a terrible experience, but you can give certain members of that cohort, incredible value of being first **[00:47:00]** about how special that is, rewarding that experience and making them a part almost of your dev team. That can give you so much honest feedback, can give you **[00:47:10]** so much life to what you need, where so many development teams might come at it from, "We're looking at the KPIs, we're looking at the products."

You want all those KPIs because of **[00:47:20]** all the anecdotal experience of those 200 people you have working for you, with the 500 people that are playing your game, it's hard to analyze the words that are coming out of their mouth. Sometimes it might be **[00:47:30]** troubling to analyze the words that are coming out of their mouth. At the same time, you need to listen to your most passionate dev who really believes in the vision of your game. Listen to **[00:47:40]** that guy and listen to the dozens of most active players out there.

Even if you can't do the thing they most want, even if you can't follow the prescription, **[00:47:50]** the diagnosis that they're providing you with where there are problems, is probably pretty accurate. Listen as much as you can. That was kind of three things.

Tamzin: Excellent, **[00:48:00]** words of wisdom. Thank you so much. It's been a fantastic podcast. I feel like Dirk and I didn't need to be here. You guys have got it covered. Awesome. Thank you so much, Howard, as well. It was great to have you **[00:48:10]** here and hear more about some of the insights from your white paper.

Howard: Thank you very much. It's been a great chat.

David: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed this.

[background music] **[00:48:20]**

Tamzin: Many thanks, David and Howard, for joining us today and sharing your amazing insights. Thank you, our listeners, for tuning in. If you have **[00:48:30]** any thoughts on the topics covered on today's episode, we would absolutely love to hear from you. You can find us on Twitter, at #googleplaydev.

Keep an eye out and subscribe to **[00:48:40]** our podcasts for the next episode coming very soon. Until then, keep playing, keep learning.

[background music] **[00:48:50]**

[00:48:54] [END OF AUDIO]