

*"OKAY, ONE MORE ROUND..."*

# **DESIGNING FOR REPLAYABILITY & RETENTION**

# RETENTION

- Term widely used in F2P business
- Tells you how many players still play after time

# REPLAYABILITY

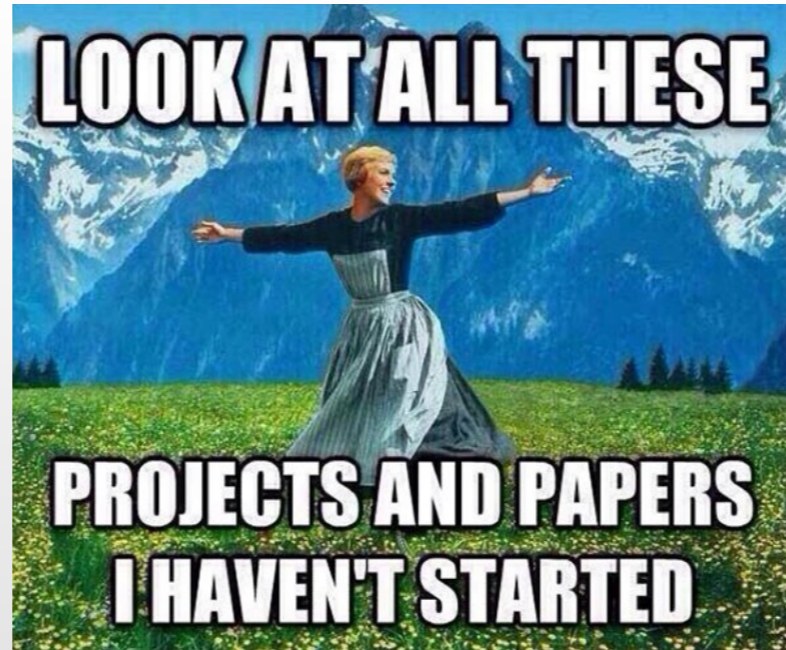
- Similar term, from player standpoint
- Tells if a game is worth playing more than once

**Addictive Patterns**  
**Retention Metrics**  
**Game Design**

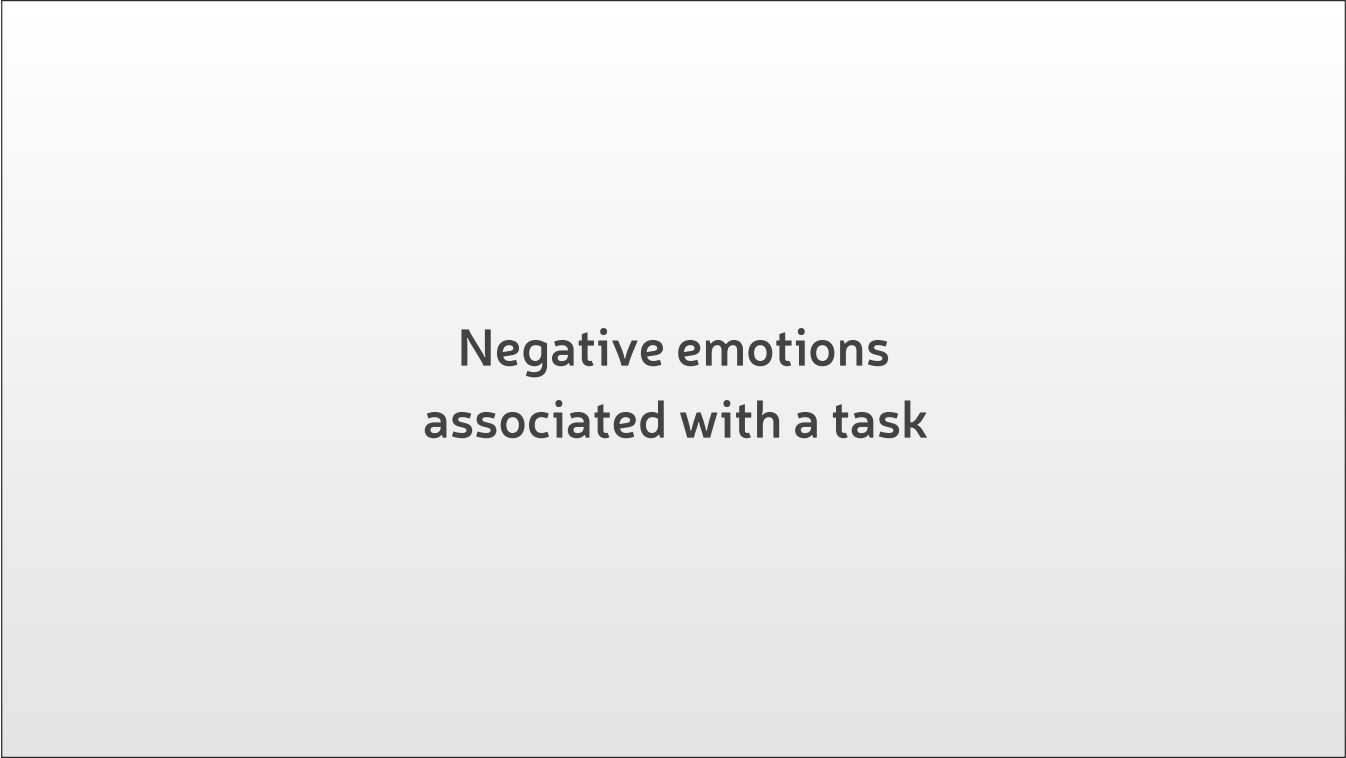
- Talk Not about:
- fostering addictive behavior
- KPIs, churn rates, rolling retention

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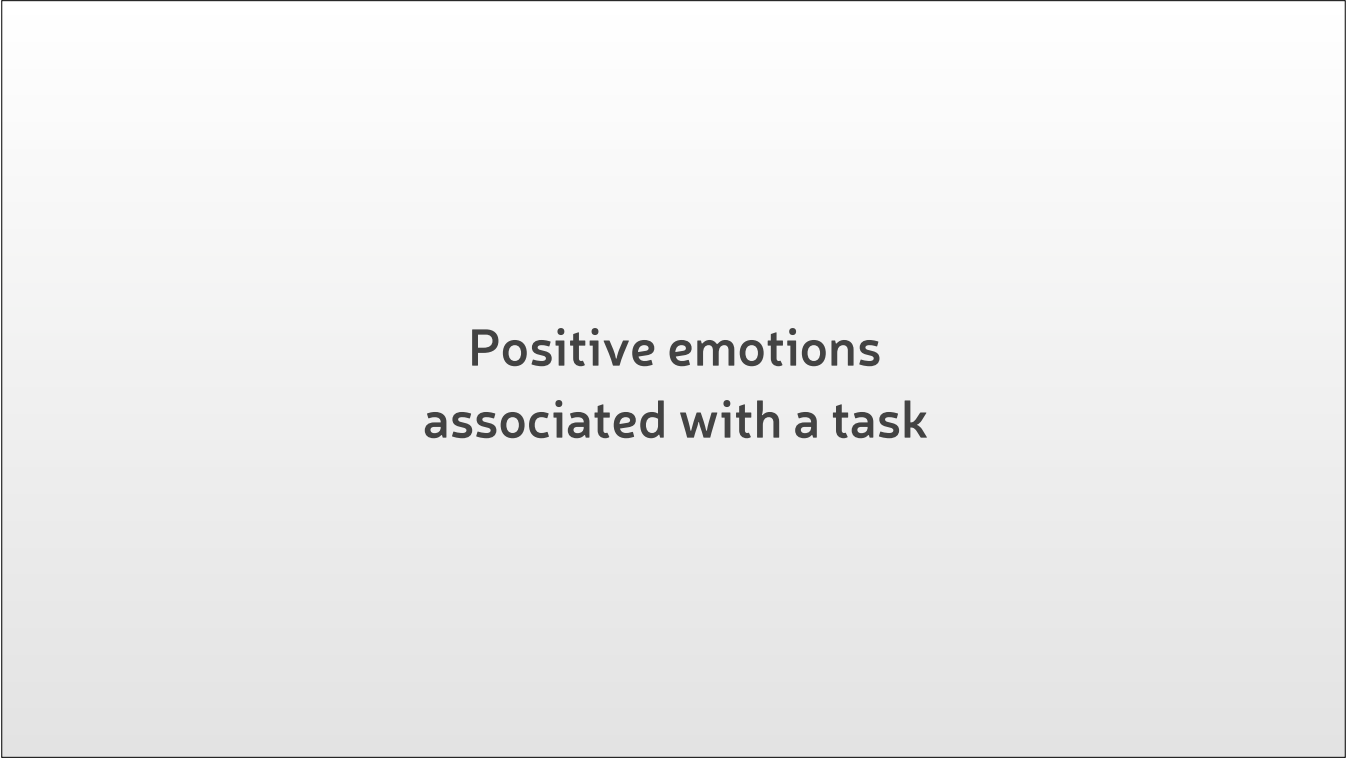


- Procrastination: Delaying a task you don't want. Do something else instead.
- How everybody who's not a sociopath does their tax returns
- Procrastination is an emotional problem



**Negative emotions  
associated with a task**

- Procrastination:
  - Avoiding a task because of negative associated emotions
  - Project self into doing task, then feeling bad
  - Switching to a less objectionable task
- 
- If we don't do things that make us feel bad
  - Feeling good will make us want to do things



**Positive emotions  
associated with a task**

- Talk is about creating positive emotions
- Players connect emotion with game → players come back
- Then, make the game replayable
- Addictive patterns can emerge from this
- Your values drive you to light side or dark side of force
- Have a responsibility to not be dicks

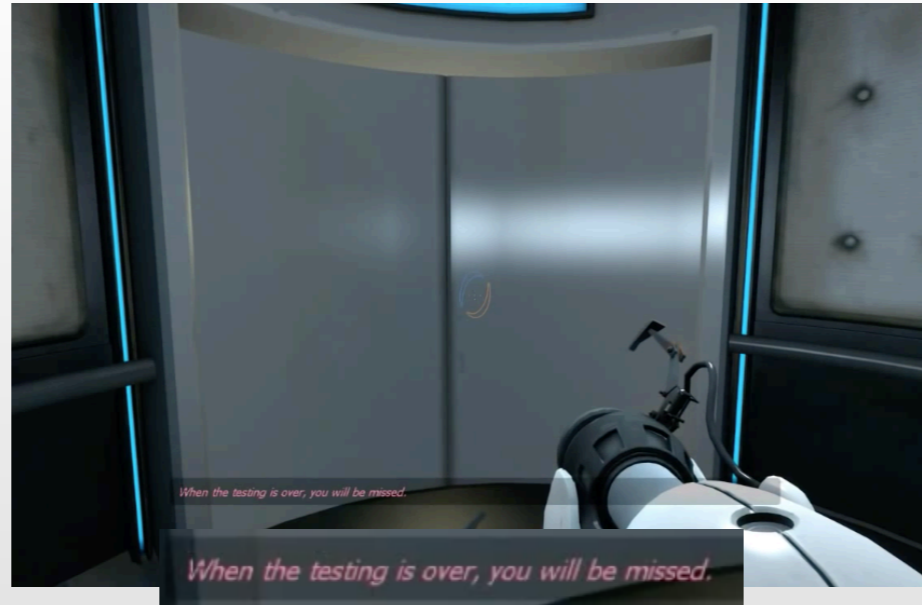
# DESIGN METHODS

- *Foreshadowing*
- *Progression & Mastery*
- *Near Misses & Close Calls*
- *Variation*
- *Natural Exit Points*

# **FORESHADOWING**

- Process of hinting at event in the future
- Makes players wonder what will be
- Creates mystery and anticipation
- Traditional media doing for years

## NARRATIVE



Portal

- Classic narrative foreshadowing
- Books & movies, doing for ages
- Design can also foreshadow

## WEENIES



*Uncharted 2*

- Weenies in Level Design
- Give sense of direction and goal
- Hint at future gameplay
- Can convey mystery

# UNLOCKABLES



Assassin's Creed Odyssey

- Skill tree gives sense of what's to come
- Longing for useful skills
- Careful of resentment of basic skills

## HINTING AT MECHANICS



*The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*

- Always clear when a player can't currently solve problem
- Teases game's depth without adding much complexity
- Best when only obvious in hindsight
- When looking back, great sense of progression

# **PROGRESSION & MASTERY**

- Give players a sense of getting better
- Make it enjoyable to look back, and ahead

## LONG-TERM GOAL



*Rocket League*

- Overarching gameplay goal
- Bigger than the current round, chapter, etc.
- e.g. “Final Boss”, or “Easy to learn, hard to master”
- Flying is long-term-goal
- Gives something to train towards

## VISIBLE PROGRESS



*Assassin's Creed II*

- Sense of accomplishment when looking back
- Sense of commitment
- Skill trees great example again

## SENSE OF MASTERY



Can't Drive This

- Invisible tile-sequences
- Pseudo-precognition effect
- Sense of mastery

# VARIATION

- Great factor with modern marketing as well
- Streamers play, still a reason to buy and play yourself
- True for replayability, not just variation

## INITIAL CONDITIONS



*Don't Starve*

- Change Initial Conditions
- Procedurally generated biomes
- Make sure variation is well done! -> Biomes
- Just quick: Biomes are randomizable areas with certain rules (enemies, items, etc.)
- Benefit: Reliance on system vs system instance
- System instance can be learned by heart
- System must be grokked

## PLAYER CHOICES



Fallout 4 / Image by kingqueenjack on nexusmods.com

- Fallout gives players freedom
- Come back to play again, differently
- Experience entire spectrum of gameplay

# ADJECTIVES



Just Cause 3

- Focus on design adjectives over verbs
- Builds emergent gameplay
- Players surprise themselves → Stories to tell
- Player agency drives retention

# **NEAR MISSES & CLOSE CALLS**

# NEAR MISSES



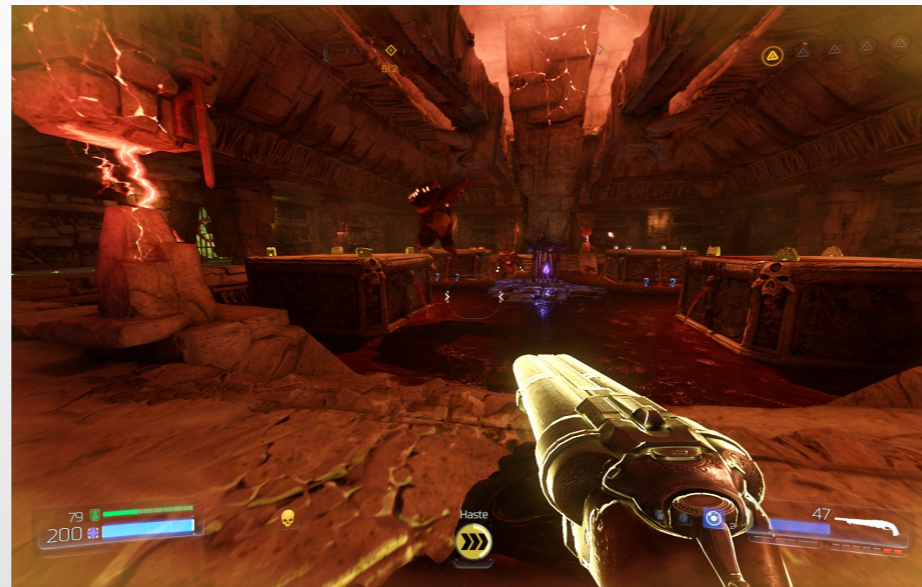
- Design for near misses, over clear losses
- Sense of “If I just tried again...”
- Slot machines do this, but evil

# NEAR MISSES



- Same outcome, feels worse
-

## CLOSE CALLS



Doom

- Design for close calls, over safe victories → “I should practice more”
- Doom has dynamic difficulty
- Demons weaker, player stronger when almost dying

## NEGATIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS



Mario Kart

- Negative Feedback Loops
- Level the playing field
- Draw bad players and good players to both succeed BARELY

# NATURAL EXIT POINTS

- A place to stop playing
- Often overlooked
- Don't exhaust players
- Give them the option to put game down at sensible points
- Build anticipation to come back instead

## SAVE POINTS



*Resident Evil*

- Save points provide option to exit
- Lets player rest
- Emotionally straining games need downtime
- Games benefit from downtime → player reflects and processes
- Avoid frustration from losing progress

## GAMEPLAY BEATS



Uncharted 4

- Dividing gameplay into beats with clear cuts
- e.g. Chapters with cutscenes
- Clear point to stop playing
- Great place to set up cliff-hangers and foreshadows
- Books have been doing this for ever

## GAME OVER SCREEN



Cluster Truck

- If your game is built on short rounds → game over important
- Screen should be super quickly avoidable
- Losing sucks, no matter what you do
- Motivation to keep playing is lowest
- Threshold to keep playing should be lower

# TOPICS WORTH LOOKING UP

- Player Feedback
- Broadcasting player actions
- Trophies
- Variable Ratio Reinforcement

- Be cool about the methods you use
- Gameplay addiction is a serious issue
- What would Uncle Ben Do?



- With great power comes great responsibility

**THANKS!**  
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