

How Games Find Players & Make Money

A Go-to-Market Overview for Game Studios

Jon Hanson, Skill Tree Marketing | Saudi GFX Seminar Series · July 2026



What this session covers

SESSION 1 OF 2 · INTERACTIVE + LIVE Q&A

- 1 The wishlist-first funnel: how players discover and buy games
- 2 How Steam decides which games to surface (show to new players)
- 3 Built-in marketing vs. paid reach, and when each matters
- 4 A real go-to-market plan, taken apart piece by piece
- 5 A live poll and open Q&A along the way

Key terms, in plain language

SO WE'RE ALL ON THE SAME PAGE

Wishlist

A player saves your game on Steam to be reminded at launch. Your pre-launch demand list.

Surface

When Steam shows your game to players who were not searching for it.

Velocity

How fast wishlists come in over a short time, not just the total.

Convert

Turn attention into action: a page visit into a wishlist, a wishlist into a sale.

Beat

A planned marketing moment: an announce, Next Fest, a demo, or a sale.

Organic vs. paid

Organic is reach you do not pay for. Paid is ads. Owned audience is people you can reach directly (email, Discord).

Most games never get seen at all.

Discovery, not development, is where most studios lose.

The good news: a small team controls more of it than they think.



The wishlist-first funnel

THE CORE MODEL



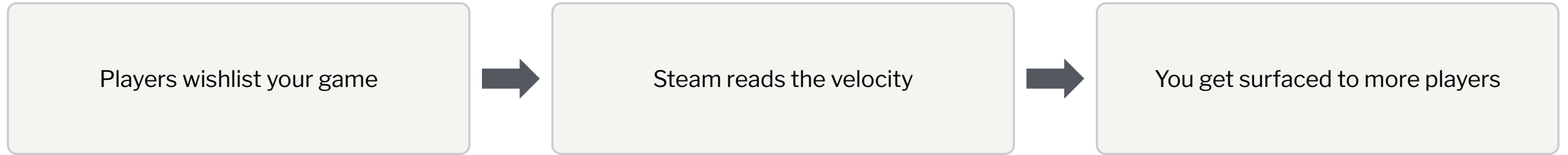
The wishlist is the pre-launch currency: it captures demand before you have a product to sell.

■ Convert = turn attention into action: a page visit becomes a wishlist, a wishlist becomes a sale

■ Velocity = how fast those wishlists come in, not just the total. Steam rewards the speed

How Steam Discovery works

HOW THE STORE WORKS FOR YOU



- Velocity feeds the Discovery Queue, 'Popular Upcoming,' and launch-day visibility
- Beats (planned moments: an announce, Next Fest, a demo, a sale) create the spikes Steam reads
- Reviews and launch-window sales then compound that visibility, or quietly bury it

Built-in marketing vs. paid reach

KNOW WHICH JOB EACH ONE DOES

BUILT-IN / ORGANIC

- Mechanics that spread on their own
- A sharp hook and shareable moments
- Capsule, trailer, Next Fest, demo/playtest
- Creators who play because they want to
- A Discord and wishlists you own

PAID REACH

- Ads, boosts, user acquisition
- An accelerant, but not a substitute
- Only works once the game converts
- Best pointed at proven moments and beats
- Amplifies demand; it can't manufacture it

Where's your game right now?

INTERACTIVE · SHOW OF HANDS OR DROP A NUMBER IN CHAT

1

No Steam page yet

2

Page live, few wishlists

3

Wishlists building

4

Launching soon

We'll tune the rest of the session to where the room is.

The levers that actually matter

WHAT A SMALL TEAM ACTUALLY CONTROLS

1

The hook

One reason to notice it

2

Capsule + blurb

Your storefront ad

3

The trailer

Hook in 5 seconds

4

Next Fest + demo

Real signal, real velocity

5

**Creators +
community**

Reach you own

Case study: Minimo

LOW DRAG LABS · 200-PLAYER CO-OP ROGUELIKE · A SKILL TREE CLIENT

~90K

net Steam wishlists in ~100 days, on
~\$6K total paid spend

Organic led

of signups came from organic and
referral. Paid was the spark, organic the
fire

13K+

playtesters and 12K Discord community,
an owned audience pointed at launch

Zero to a launch-ready community in about three months, on a shoestring. Here's how.

Anatomy of a plan that worked

A REAL PLAN, TAKEN APART

- 1 The hook: a 200-player co-op roguelike, chaos at a scale no one else offers
- 2 The capsule direction: lead with that 200-player scale, the thing that stops the scroll
- 3 The creative: localized trailers plus the wildest co-op moments, made to be shared
- 4 The community engine: a repeatable playtest feeding Discord, email, and creators
- 5 The wishlist plan: a sequence of beats that compound instead of resetting

The same five parts sit behind almost every plan that works.

The hook, the capsule, the creative

MINIMO, PART 1

- Hook: a 200-player co-op roguelike. The scale itself is the selling point
- Capsule direction: show the 200-player chaos, so co-op and roguelike read at a glance
- Creative: a localized trailer set, plus the funniest run-ending moments, built to share
- Reach: IGN + Gametrailers coverage, a 1M-subscriber creator played it free; creator videos drew 577K organic views

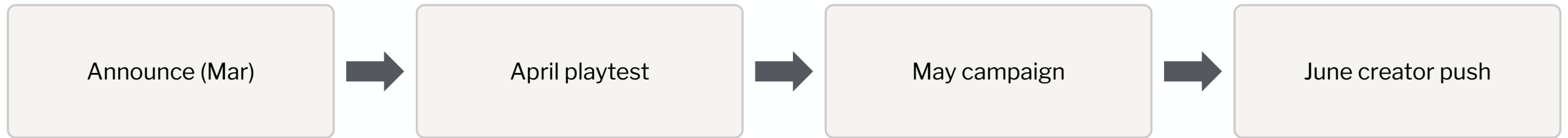
The community engine

MINIMO, PART 2

- Made the playtest the primary Steam call to action, so people came because they wanted to play
- Every test fed the community: Discord went from 5 messages a day to spikes near 1,300
- Email did the quiet work: ~55% open and 12% click, plus a refer-a-friend waitlist
- Owned audience (people you can reach directly, any time): a community you point at every beat

The wishlist plan, beat by beat

MINIMO, PART 3



Organic (reach you don't pay for) did the heavy lifting: 99% of signups on ~\$5.3K total.

- Announce with a \$1K YouTube boost drove ~20K wishlist adds in week one; trailer sites picked it up, social media spread
- An organic April playtest added ~6K more, proving the engine repeats without paid
- A \$5K creator push drove 4,117 signups and 13,241 Discord messages in a single week

Case study: Empulse

1047 GAMES · EARLY-ACCESS LAUNCH · A SKILL TREE CLIENT

~319K

wishlists banked from Next Fest, PC Gaming Show, and an always-on funnel

Community

of those wishlists + sales, many were driven by a community focused campaign leveraging creators, Discord, and using ads to reinforce. A multi-channel approach.

\$2.10

best-channel cost per install (TikTok), yet broad paid stayed disciplined to the beats

Spend where it converts, in plain terms:

Early on, ads mostly reached players who couldn't buy yet. So we kept broad ads to minimum spend and saved the budget for the moments that actually turn into sales, the launch and each content update. Same money, better timing.

What actually moves the needle

SPEND YOUR SCARCE TIME HERE

MOVES THE NEEDLE

- A sharp, legible hook
- A capsule that converts at thumbnail size
- Wishlist velocity around real beats
- A demo or playtest that creates signal
- A few well-matched creators

LOOKS LIKE MARKETING, BUT ISN'T

- Endless logo and brand polish
- Posting into the void with no hook
- Broad, untargeted paid before you convert
- Press blasts with nothing to say
- Chasing platforms your players aren't on

Questions?

Type them in the chat or unmute, whatever's comfortable.

No question is too basic. If you're wondering it, someone else is too.



What you should leave with

SESSION 1 RECAP

1

How players discover and buy games today: the wishlist-first funnel and Steam Discovery

2

The difference between built-in marketing and paid reach, and when each matters

3

What a real, well-run go-to-market plan looks like from the inside

Next: build your own plan

Come to Session 2 with a game in mind: a real project or a hypothetical one.

We'll build it live, together.

