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Running in-game events for fun and profit

playfab

I. Summary

In-game events keep a game fresh and interesting by introducing special elements or types of gameplay on a limited basis. They are a great way for game operators to keep players engaged, build a healthy economy, and meet performance goals. In this paper you'll learn about the different kinds of events, plus practical advice for planning your own events.

II. Fiction vs. mechanic

From a player's point of view, in-game events serve much the same purpose that real-life events do: They're a way to try new experiences or go to new places, or just a way to do something cool that you tell your friends about later. From a game operator's point of view, live game events are one of the most important tools to manage the game. Events can be used to launch new content, boost engagement, fix an unbalanced economy, or test revenue strategies on different segments.

Regardless of purpose, every event thus has two sides: the mechanic and the fiction.

The event mechanic describes what is happening behind the scenes in the game, whether that's temporarily increasing a loot drop or connecting a series of challenges together to create a quest. In other words, the mechanic describes the event from a developer's point of view. The event fiction, on the other hand represents the player's point of view. What is the in-game reason for the event? How does it fit in with the overall story and gameplay? In narrative games, an event fiction can be very elaborate, and tie in with a longer story. In casual games, the fiction may be quite simple, with only a few lines of text and an image.

It's important to keep track of both mechanic and fiction when running events, because the same mechanic may be used repeatedly with different fictions, to varying degrees of success. In other cases, there may be great response to a particular fiction, but if there's a significant drop off in players who complete the event, the mechanic may need to be modified.

Here's an example from an RPG where crafting (assembling useful or ornamental items from basic elements) is popular:

Name	Goal	Mechanic	Fiction	Duration
<i>Harvest Festival Contest</i>	Rebalance the in-game economy by getting players to stop hoarding raw materials	Increase crafting rate of success by 3x, prompting more players to craft straw sculptures	<i>The long harvest season is over. Celebrate by entering your straw sculptures in the Harvest Festival Contest.</i>	1 week

III. Types of events

Events can be run for very different reasons. Broadly speaking, there are five main types: Monetization, Marketing, Fun, Content, and Tactical.

Monetization events

There are two basic kinds of monetization events. The first is intended to get players to spend, while the second is used to keep in-game economies healthy.

In the first type of monetization event, players need an incentive to spend. That can be as simple as a sale or promotion dressed up with an in-game fiction. A more complicated example would be a special map that was only playable for a short time, or a series of challenges with a time limit to finish. Players seeking access to the map or help in order to finish the challenges would be prompted to make relevant in-app purchases.



Even well-planned games have economy problems. Players might start hoarding certain materials, or decide to value something the developers never intended to be that valuable. Some players can develop huge balances of virtual currencies that they never spend. Just like their analogs in the real-world economy, these actions can cause inflationary or deflationary pressures on the game. Events provide a way of balancing supply and demand.

In the previous example of the Harvest Festival Contest, increasing the rate of crafting success is designed to get players with large stores of straw and other materials to use them up. Another example would be an event designed to get excess virtual currency out of an economy.

One way to do this would be to auction or lottery off something exceptionally valuable to players: naming rights to an upcoming castle, for example, or guaranteed rare aesthetic items.

Marketing events

In-game marketing is used for the same reason that moviegoers now see 10 minutes of trailers before the actual film: *We know you came to see/play this one thing, so while we have your attention, we're going to promote other games/movies to you that are similar.* Games can go further than movies, however, and actually reward players for watching a game trailer or, more commonly, for actually downloading and trying out another game.

Marketing events just take that mechanic (play this new game, get a reward in the original game) and attach a fiction to it. This is usually done with games that are similar in tone. (For the same reason, moviegoers at an R-rated action flick rarely see trailers for cuddly children's films.) Rewards can be as straightforward as added virtual currency or more elaborate, such as new virtual goods created in the style of the second game.

Fun events

Successful live games do more than just look for monetization opportunities. To attract and keep players, games need to actually be fun. Events can help with that by giving players new ways to enjoy the game.

For example, multiplayer games can hold special contests where a guild's success means each player in the guild gets a rare virtual item. A limited-time quest in another game could reward players with special achievement trophies. Creative and satisfying fictions are particularly important in attracting players to these kind of events.

Another type of fun event comes with games where players spend time dressing up their avatars or other characters. An in-game fashion show gives players a chance to show off their creations, and have the community vote for their favorites. These images can be shared outside of the game as well, with players posting images of their characters to a game's Facebook or Instagram account. This also encourages players to share their game success not just with other players, but with their non-playing friends as well.



Content events

Live games are always adding new content, from extra levels in mobile games such as *Candy Crush Saga*, to major updates and new player modes, such as *Planetary Annihilation: Titans*. Content events are designed to highlight the new content, and so have similar goals to a marketing event. Instead of encouraging players to try out a new game, content events encourage players to keep playing (or come back and play) the existing game.

One example of this would be in MMORPGs, where perhaps a new dungeon is being released, six months after launch. To persuade players to explore the new dungeon, the loot drop rate for that dungeon is temporarily increased for a set period of time. In the "fiction" of the event, players are told that the new dungeon boss has just moved in, so it's easier to win rewards than it will be in a few weeks, when the boss has installed his pack of security wolves.

Tactical events

This is where deep knowledge of a game's players and what motivates them can really pay off. Savvy game operators with easy access to business intelligence tools can take insights gleaned there and use them to create tactical events.

For example, say that a particular strategy game finds that its players spend the most money after they've reached level 10 in the game. Getting to that level normally takes players around three weeks, but a particular cohort of players is taking longer. A tactical event is launched with the fiction that more help is needed in a different part of the kingdom. The mechanic of the event is to tripling the XP (experience points) for everyone in the cohort. The result is getting that cohort to level 10 faster than they would have otherwise, and thus be in more of a position to spend.

IV. Planning: 5 steps to get started

Successful events start before game launch, not after. Game operators need to think ahead so that they can make sure that any tools they need to run events are available to them. That may be as easy as checking the live game operations platform the game is using, or as difficult as persuading the game's producer that adding the ability to upload new content is worth postponing a fancy new animation feature. In some cases, it may not be clear which tools are needed until midway through the planning process itself, so aim to start as early as possible. To learn more about game operations tools, download our paper: [The game operator's toolkit: The essentials and beyond](#).

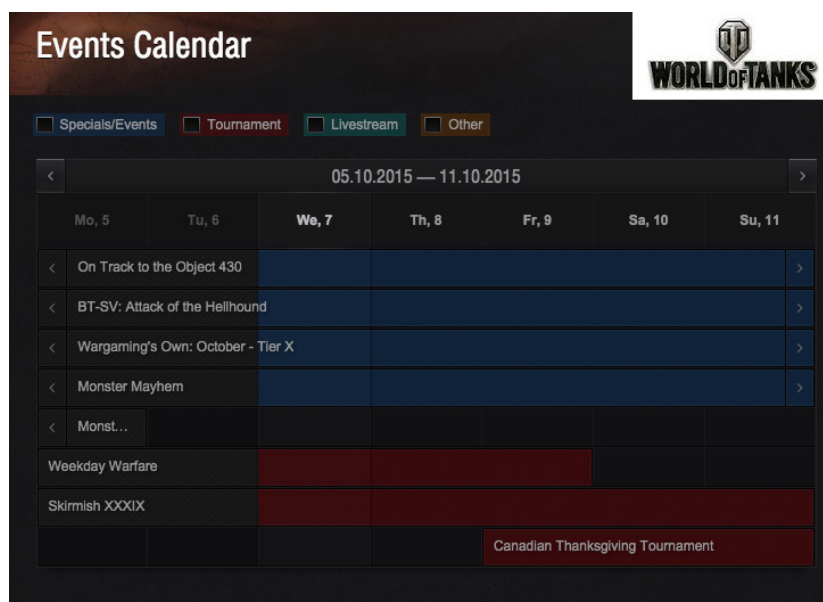
1. Begin with a calendar

It doesn't matter whether you use Excel, an online calendar, or project planning software, but set up a calendar for at least the first three months after launch. Add the following items:

- All in-game events already planned, classified by type if there are many of them
- All planned technical updates to the game, including patches or launches on new platforms (iOS after Android, for example)
- All planned marketing or user acquisition campaigns.

Look for obvious conflicts, such as a live event planned to launch in the middle of a technical update, or obvious gaps, such as the lack of a live event in the week after a major user acquisition buy. Look also for any general holidays or seasonal events that are coming up in those three months. Halloween and Christmas in the United States or Golden Week in China are obvious opportunities, but major sports events such as the World Series or the Rugby World Cup can also be the inspiration for themed events in all kinds of non-sports games.

If you are planning many regular events for your game, you can re-use some of this calendar in a public version, so that players can keep on track of when tournaments and other regularly scheduled events occur. A good example of this comes from Wargaming's [World of Tanks](#):



2. Write a list

Next, write up a detailed list of all planned events, together with their goals, their mechanics, their fictions, and their duration. What dependencies do they have? Are there art assets that need to be obtained, or dates that need confirmation from marketing before being set?

Here's the start of a list for a game called *The Very Sad Penguin*, showing off the types of events discussed above. A complete version of this list would also include an event's duration, required assets or other dependencies, targeted player segments, and specific key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the event's success.

Name	Type	Goal	Mechanic	Fiction
<i>My Private Ice Floe</i>	Monetization	Get excess virtual currency out of the game so the economy stays balanced	Auction off 10 special ice floes that winning players will be able to name and control	<i>Sometime a penguin just wants to be alone. Make the highest bid of pebbles and you could have your own ice floe, no seals allowed.</i>
<i>Penguin Welcome Wagon</i>	Marketing	Promote a new game, <i>The Even Sadder Penguin</i> , to players of a previous game	Give players of the first game extra virtual currency if they try out the new game	<i>Say hello to your new penguin neighbors! Try out "The Even Sadder Penguin" and then return home with some lovely parting gifts: 20 extra gold pieces!</i>
<i>Penguins on Parade</i>	Fun	Encourage players to show off their game avatars	Create an in-universe selfie booth and award virtual items to players with the best dressed penguins	<i>Are you ready for this month's Penguin Parade? Get 5 pebbles just for entering!</i>
<i>Antarctic Arcade</i>	Content	Promote the game's new arcade mode	Add an extra loot drop for all players who finish any of the arcade's mini games	<i>Polar fun for all ages! Waddle down to the Antarctic Arcade and win special Opening Week prizes!</i>
<i>Gentoo Jump Start</i>	Tactical	Allow players to move quickly through certain levels with low spend rates, so they can get to higher levels faster	Increase XP by 2x on all low spend levels	<i>Gerald the Gentoo is visiting for the weekend. Use his help to speed your way across the ice.</i>

3. Diversify

Look over the list you've just created. Do all the events have basically the same mechanic? Is there a month of monetization events without anything else planned? Is the "surprise" triple score bonus set for the same time and day every weekend? Start rearranging the calendar, or add new events to break up patterns.

Consider player type, as well. Take the player personas that guided the game's development and consider whether the planned events will appeal to the different groups of players. No idea who your players will be? Start with [Bartle's classic four types](#): Killer, Achiever, Socializer, and Explorer. Are there events that will appeal to each group or are they all aimed at the Socializers?

Think also about localization. Even if the game is only in English, players in Europe have different holidays and sporting allegiances than those in North America. And don't forget about seasons. Many North American games soft launch in Australia, for example. Don't base an event around leaves falling and color changing when it's the beginning of spring down under. Ideally, events should be able to be targeted to specific segments of players, including by region.

4. Measure everything

Track the performance of each event. Did it meet its goals? Was wild success one week followed by total failure the next? Examine what the winning events have in common. It could be a popular mechanic, a particular style of fiction, or even a specific set of art assets. Not sure? Run the event several times, changing only one element each time. When the successful items are isolated, re-use them in other events.

Look also for patterns in the events as a whole. Does participation drop if too many events are held the same week? Are players getting used to predictable timing and waiting to spend until certain events each month? Are certain types of events more popular with new players than older ones?

5. Modify and repeat

A month after launch, the list of events from Step 2 may look totally different. That's a good thing. The promise of live games lies precisely in all the detailed data that game operators can command to improve their games. Successful events will be dressed up in many hats and sent out to entertain players frequently. Unsuccessful events will be deleted from the Excel chart and forgotten.

Continue to plan. Stay at least three months ahead of schedule but leave room for the events you don't know you need yet: in-game economy balancing, a tactical event to boost engagement, or just a wacky idea someone in the art department had.

V. Conclusion

Game operators take center stage after launch, and their ability to run fun and engaging events can make the difference between a game that's a success and one that never catches on.

When the curtain goes up, will you be ready?



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