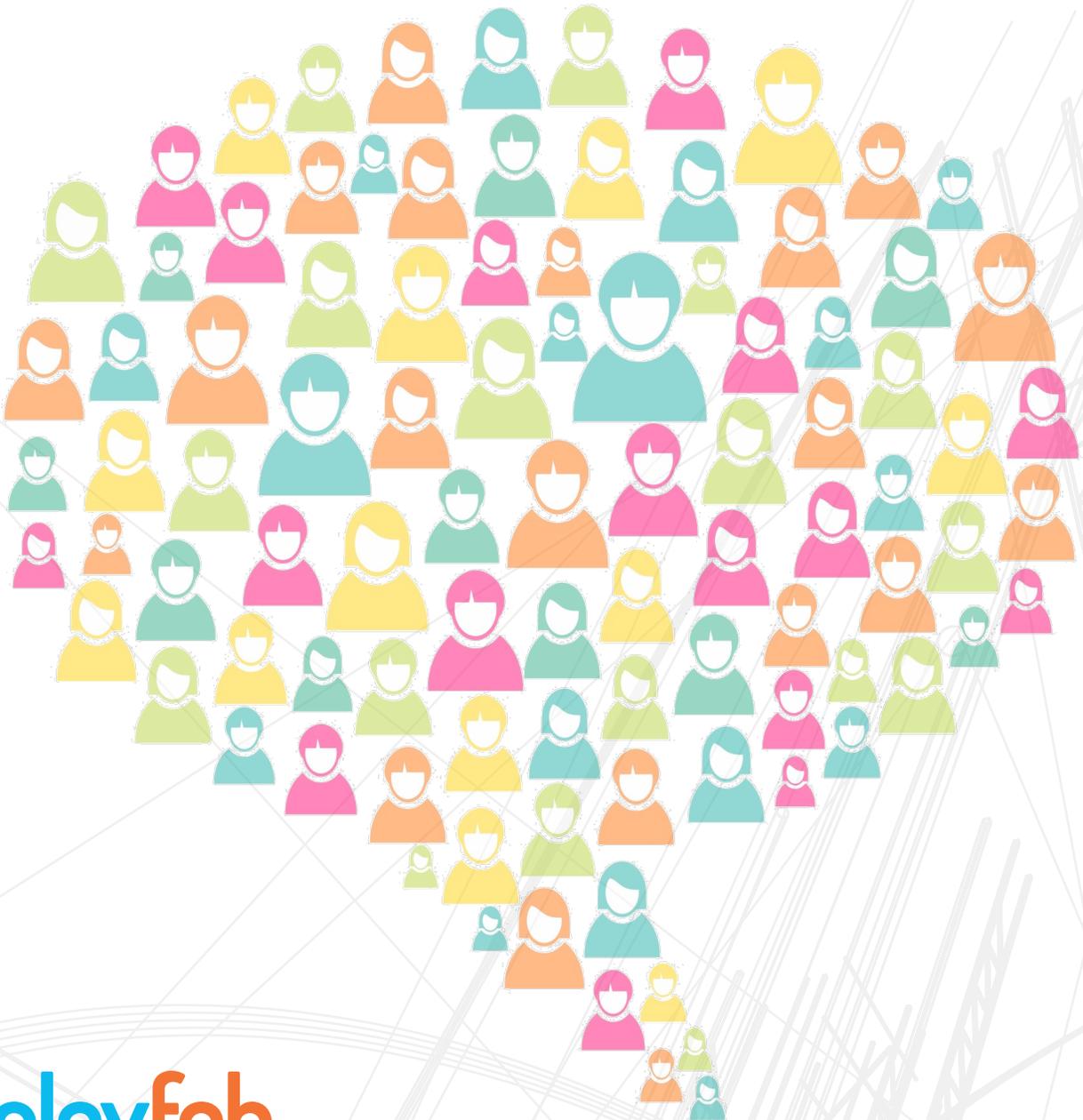


User acquisition basics for every game



playfab.

I. Summary

Getting players to try a new game is one of the biggest hurdles developers face — the best game in the world will still fail if no one plays it. Planning a user acquisition (UA) strategy is thus a key part of game operations.

There are three types of user acquisition available to games:

- **Earned:** Players referred from external non-paid channels (e.g. social sharing, search, press)
- **Paid:** Players referred from external paid channels (e.g. ad campaigns)
- **Owned:** Players referred from internal channels (e.g. a game’s blog or social media posts)

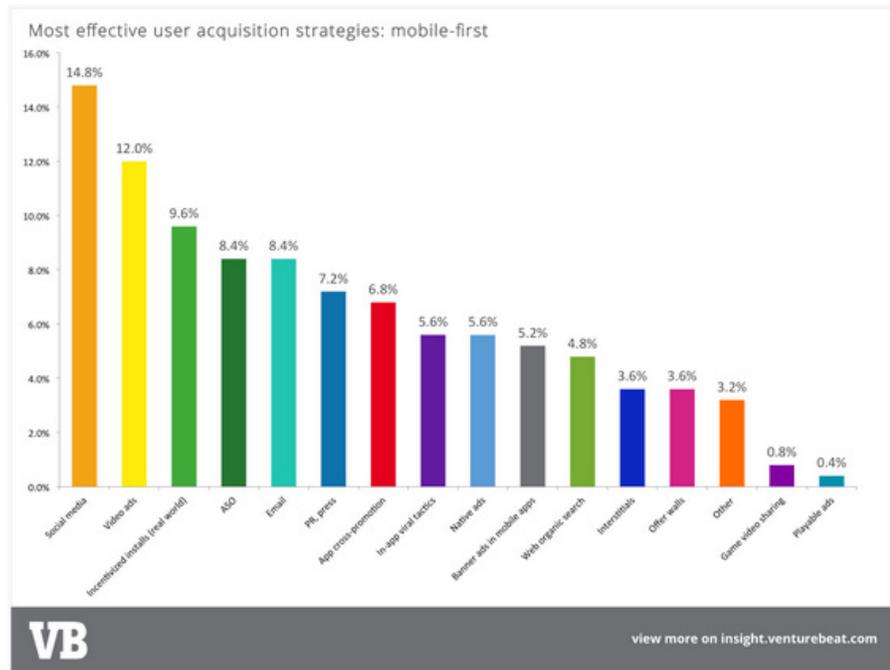
In this white paper, you’ll learn the basics of each type of user acquisition, plus the keys to success for any UA strategy.

II. Earned user acquisition

Ad campaigns aren’t the only — or even necessarily the most effective — way to get players to download your game.

Social media, app store optimization (ASO), organic search, and coverage from game media and popular streamers are all forms of user acquisition that cannot be directly purchased and thus must therefore be “earned.”

As this chart from [Venture Beat Insights](#) shows, social media is rated more effective than all other forms of UA strategy. App store optimization is ranked higher than all but two kinds of paid ads: video and incentivized installs.



Social media

The best advertisement for your game is happy players, but it's not enough to simply hope they will tell their friends. You need to make it not only easy for players to share the game, but fun and rewarding as well. This means building sharing features into game play from the beginning. (You did start planning your UA strategy earlier than a week before launch, right?)

If your game has built-in social integration, such as with Facebook, do you make it easy for players to select their friends to play with and against? Can they set up leaderboards that only show people they know? And can they share those leaderboards on their social media feeds?

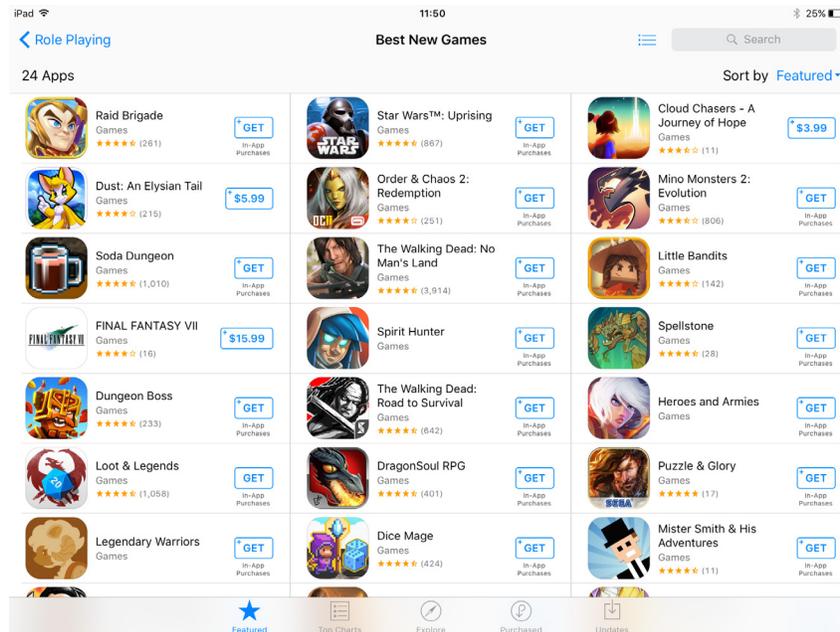
The most popular social media posts are those with images. How easy is it in your for game for players to take and share screenshots of their avatars or epic kill shots? And even if it's easy, is it fun? Does it disrupt the game, or have you built social elements into the core game loop? Do players earn rewards for their social achievements?

Don't forget about email. Make it easy for players to invite their firends by providing pre-populated and personalized messages with a link to download the game. Just be clear about what you're asking players to do: [Kim Kardashian: Hollywood](#) ran into controversy in 2014 when the line between in-game and real-world tweeting seemed blurred to some.

App store optimization

Forty percent of people find apps simply by browsing an app store, [according to Google](#). But with [thousands of new games added each day](#), it's important to stand out:

- **Visual appeal:** Have you picked good screenshots that highlight the best features of your game? Does your video show a player winning something? And what about the only image of your game that most app store browsers will see: the icon? Compare the icons below of various role-playing games currently available for iOS. Which are you likely to pick?



- **Keywords:** Game titles and descriptions need just as much care as images. Take advantage of [keyword research tools](#) such as those offered by Google and Bing and test out possible words to describe your game.
- **Ratings:** Good ratings mean higher placement in searches and more platform support. Don't just use the default ratings request as soon as the game opens, wait until after a player has accomplished something within the game and tailor the request's look and language to the style of the game. Other tips can be found on the [PlayFab blog](#).

Organic search

Take the keyword research you used for ASO and apply it to good old-fashioned SEO. While search engines are a smaller discovery category for games than other kinds of apps, 15% of users still use them to find games, according to Google. Create a landing page for your game that includes all the same visuals you created for the app store, along with links to where players can download the game, plus any other assets you have, such as playthroughs or forums.

Platform support

Whether on console, PC, or mobile, featured placement on the platform will increase downloads tenfold. Reach out to the business teams at Apple, Google, PlayStation, Steam, etc. as early as possible, but at least two months prior to launch. Is there a particular technology or feature the platform wants to spotlight? Tell the business team how your game shows it off and keep in touch throughout your development cycle. Finally, show you can handle the traffic: Games that fold under high traffic are just as frustrating for the platform team as they are for players.

Game media and reviews

The line between traditional press and online commentary is particularly blurred when it comes to games. At one end of the spectrum are general interest publications that occasionally cover games, such as the *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*; at the other end are player reviews on retail sites. In between are general game sites such as PocketGamer and IGN, genre-specific game sites such as RPGamer, and YouTube and Twitch personalities whose play-through reviews of games can get millions of hits. Finally, sites such as MetaCritic aggregate all of it.

The first step, therefore, is to decide who you want to reach. Create one email list for game media and another for video streamers. Check that the people you're emailing actually cover the kind of game that you've built. Most media sites make it easy to find contact information, but LinkedIn and Quora can help as well. For livestreamers, start with these lists for [YouTube](#) and [Twitch](#).

Next, write up a short email introduction for your game that includes links to both a download and where to get more information. Include a couple of good screenshots and an embedded video that shows off the game in less than a minute. The text should explain (briefly!) what the game is about, and anything newsworthy about it. Is a celebrity attached? Does it riff of something in the news? Was it built by orphans raised by wolves? Tailor this to the contact: Local news sites will care more about local studios, and game-specific sites will be impressed by art credits that may mean nothing to a non-gamer journalist.

III. Paid user acquisition

Ads are the most traditional and familiar way of attracting players. They're also expensive, and so their cost needs to be carefully weighed against the game's revenue potential. There are several different ways of calculating this. Frequently used acronyms include:

- ARPU: Average revenue per user. ARPPU stands for average revenue per paying user.
- CPA: Cost per acquisition. The amount it costs to acquire a new player.
- CPI: Cost per install. The amount it costs to get someone to download your game.
- CPM: Cost per *mille*, the cost per thousand impressions.
- CTR: Click-thru rate.
- D1/D7: Number of days after install, used to track retention.
- eCPM: Effective cost per *mille*, it equals total earnings/(total impressions x 1000).
- IAP: In-app purchases.
- IPM: Installs per *mille*, the number of game downloads per thousand impressions.
- LTV: Lifetime value of the revenue produced by an individual player.
- PPI: Pay per install, a type of advertising campaign.
- ROI: Return on investment.
- ROAS: Return on advertising spending
- RTB: Real-time bidding, a type of advertising campaign.

In simple terms, the CPI should not exceed the ARPU, but there are endless complications. For example, some ad campaigns will have high installs but low conversion to active play. Others might have low installs, but high conversions to paid users. In each case, the acceptable ratio of paid UA to revenue needs to be calculated before the campaign and then checked against actual results after it has started. Calculating a player's LTV might simply include IAP spend, or, in some games, include a combination of IAP, ad revenue, and a value assigned to the other players the first player brings to the game. Meanwhile, an ad campaign targeted at increasing initial game installs might not care about LTV at all.

Paid UA campaigns are one of several things that can be tested during a game's soft launch period. If the key performance indicators (KPIs) of the early campaigns aren't being met, a soft launch offers an opportunity to test and tweak new campaigns ahead of the expensive main launch.

Burst campaigns

Spending a lot of money to get a huge number of installs when the game first launches is both an example of a "burst" campaign and another form of app store optimization. Games with a high volume of downloads over a short period of time can make it to the top (or near the top) of best-selling charts, giving them more visibility. This is particularly useful at the launch stage, when a burst campaign can be paired with other earned and owned UA techniques for a coordinated push.

Burst campaigns usually spend a huge portion of a game's overall marketing budget in just the first week. Ads can be targeted via a range of ad networks and appear to players anywhere from Facebook to inside other games. As with getting featured placement, a burst campaign will send a rush of traffic to the game, so it's important to make sure the game will stand up to the surge.

"Incent" ads are those that directly or indirectly give people a reward for taking a particular action, such as downloading games. Burst campaigns that rely only on incent ads are more rare now,

however, as app stores have grown in size and sophistication. Running an incent campaign to get an unknown game into the Top 10 of Apple’s App Store is still theoretically possible, but it would be prohibitively expensive and both Apple and Google now try to limit the impact of such one-off campaigns. Incent ads still have a role to play, however, and can be used to target engagement within the game instead of just downloads.

Because burst campaigns may bring a flood of new users with little interest, they can increase volume while hurting both engagement and ratings. In contrast, “sustainable” ad campaigns are those aimed at acquiring users (and keeping them) over the long term. Sustainable campaigns target likely users and aim for quality over quantity.

Ad types and networks

Regardless of when and how much you spend on paid acquisition, it’s important to pick the right ad channels for your game. In addition to incent ads, discussed above, other ad types include banner or interstitial ads that are essentially static images, video ads, and playable ads that let users play a short version of the game. Note that not all install ads (those with direct links to download the game) are incentivized, only those that offer something in return for doing so.

Paid ads can also be served on a variety of platforms: in other games or apps, social networks, game-focused websites, and paid search ads. And don’t forget about email, which can be among the cheapest paid options, if not as effective.



Email and social campaigns can be set up and run independently (Fiksu has some good advice for those looking to run ads on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)), but going beyond those platforms means picking from scores of ad networks ready to market your game.

Make sure the ad network you choose supports both the kind of game you’ve created and the audience you’re looking for. Spending on the widest possible audience may seem seductive, but you want to be able to target the people most likely to play your game. Ad networks also specialize based on type of ad and

kind of platform, though the main ones now cover most bases.

Not sure where to start? AppsFlyer’s [Gaming Performance Index](#) provides useful data on the top 25 ad networks by retention and volume. Facebook and Chartboost are tops on both Android and iOS, with Google AdWords, Vungle and Supersonic also appearing in roughly the same spot among the Top 10. Twitter, on the other hand, comes in at #6 for iOS, but falls to #16 for Android.

Finally, don’t put all your eggs in one ad basket. Working with multiple ad networks may require more upfront work on your part, but it will enable you to compare the effectiveness of a variety of campaigns. This is of particular importance if you are doing a soft launch for your game, as you can then direct the much bigger launch spend on those campaigns that work the best.

IV. Owned user acquisition

Finally, make the most of your own communication channels. Start with a web page and social media accounts. Perform the same keyword vigilance mentioned above to make sure that the web page is findable, and consider separate landing pages for each platform. Put the game's trailer on YouTube, and add other videos such as developer or artist interviews. Recruit friends to make a Let's Play video of the game and share that as well. If there's a long lead time between when the game is first announced and when it launches, a developer blog is a great way to keep up interest.

Studios with existing games have even more options, since they can cross-promote the new game both from existing social media accounts and forums, as well as from inside their other games.

Now take all of this content — the blog posts, the videos, the diaries — and promote the heck out of it on your social channels. Building visibility for your game is useful not just for launch, but the post-launch period as well. Lapsed players may still be following the game on Facebook or Twitter, making those excellent channels for re-engagement efforts.

V. Keys to UA success

Every game will employ a different mix of user acquisition techniques, but ultimately UA success comes down to three things:

Attribution tracking

If you don't know where your players are coming from, you don't know whether your user acquisition strategy is working. Attribution services such as Kochava and Tune allow you to follow a player from the first Facebook ad or app store search that brought them to your game and follow their behavior afterwards. If one of your campaigns is paying a higher CPI to attract a certain kind of player, attribution tracking is how you determine whether the extra money is worth it.

Defined Metrics

LTV, or lifetime value of a player, is the foundational metric. Without knowing this information, what may seem like a reasonable CPA in the abstract could turn out to be what causes your studio to run out of money. To paraphrase Charles Dickens: "LTV \$20, CPA \$19.60, result happiness. LTV \$20, CPA \$20.60, result misery."

Other metrics to track are the conversion rate from game install to playing the first game, plus retention at day 1, 7, and 30. If your KPIs aren't being met, find out why. Is there a problem with the game, or are you targeting the wrong kind of player.

Testing

Create different text and visuals for every ad type and keep track of what performs better, and where. Ad platforms usually offer this service, but you can do your own A/B tests simply by putting different messaging on social media or in app stores and then keeping track of the relative conversion rates. Segment your audience as much as possible: Do certain ads or ad types work better in Android over iOS, or in Europe over North America?

VI. Further Reading

Companies that offer user attribution platforms and other online marketing services offer a wealth of information on each of the topics covered here briefly. A few of our favorites are:

- **App Design Vault:** [How to Successfully Pitch Your App And Make Sure It Gets Reviewed](#)
- **AppsFlyer:** [The AppsFlyer Gaming Performance Index](#)
- **Fiksu:** [CPI, Cost per Loyal User, and App Store Competitive Indexes](#)
- **Game Analytics:** [The 7 Deadly Sins of Mobile User Acquisition](#)
- **Google:** [How Consumers Really Find and Use Your Apps](#)
- **Tune:** [Mobile Marketing Essentials series](#)

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