



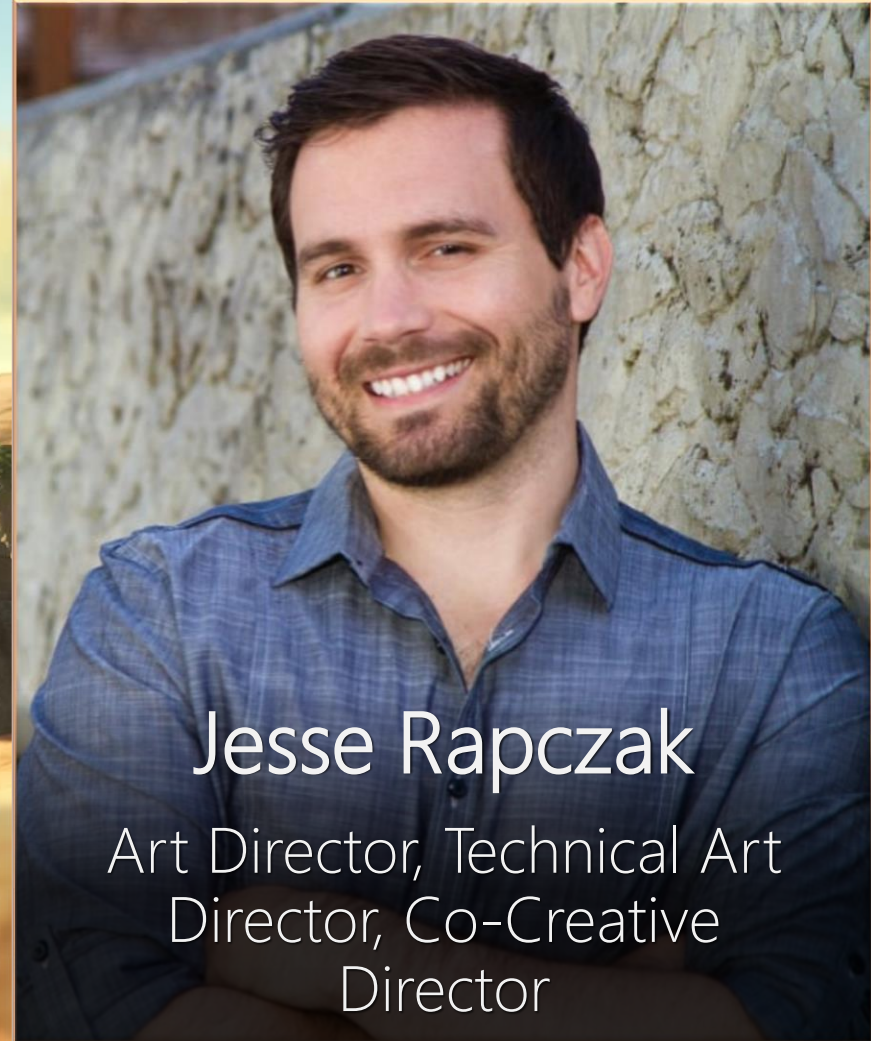
LESSONS FROM THE TRENCHES OF EARLY ACCESS

WELCOME!



Jeremy Stieglitz

Lead Designer, Lead
Programmer, Co-Creative
Director



Jesse Rapczak

Art Director, Technical Art
Director, Co-Creative
Director

ARK: WHY EARLY ACCESS?

- Large scale pre-release testing is cumbersome and insufficient for indies
 - Early Access is a great model for games that have Emergent Gameplay.
- Emergent Gameplay made better through Emergent Development
 - We can't possibly think of all the awesome gameplay ideas up-front, need to see how users are actually playing and enjoying the live game.
- Community Suggestions and Feedback make the game better
 - Establishing a healthy community is a key to Early Access success!

A lush forest scene with a waterfall and a person in the background. The scene is set in a dense forest with tall evergreen trees. A waterfall flows over a rocky ledge into a pool of water. In the background, a person is visible, standing near the waterfall. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

EMERGENT DEVELOPMENT

Designing new features and balancing existing content over the course of development based on continuous quantitative data & qualitative assessment, while gauging the sentiment of the players following each new change.

ORIGINAL ARK PITCH DECK

- What follows was our entire design document, a series of sign-posts to guide us rather than a detailed blueprint for all the game's mechanics.
- ARK's "Emergent Development" methodology was conceived and iterated on in response to live feedback from the community, driving us to create a "Feature Scorecard" system we use to decide whether to act.



Hardcore Multiplayer First Person Survival-RPG

Stranded naked and starving on a mysterious island, you must hunt, harvest resources, craft items and build structures to survive. Use your cunning and resources to tame or kill the primeval creatures roaming the land, and team up with or prey on hundreds of other players in a large-scale multiplayer online first person environment!



TOP FEATURES

- Definitive Online Survival
- Tame, Train and Ride Exotic Creatures
- Eat, Drink and Mind the Weather
- Harvest, Craft, Build, Level-Up and Customize
- Master The Island's Challenges and Discover Its Secrets



DEFINITIVE ONLINE SURVIVAL

- **Tribe System**

Pool your resources and work together.

- **Hardcore Mechanics**

Protect your physical inventory because it can be lost, looted or stolen.

- **Large-World Persistence**

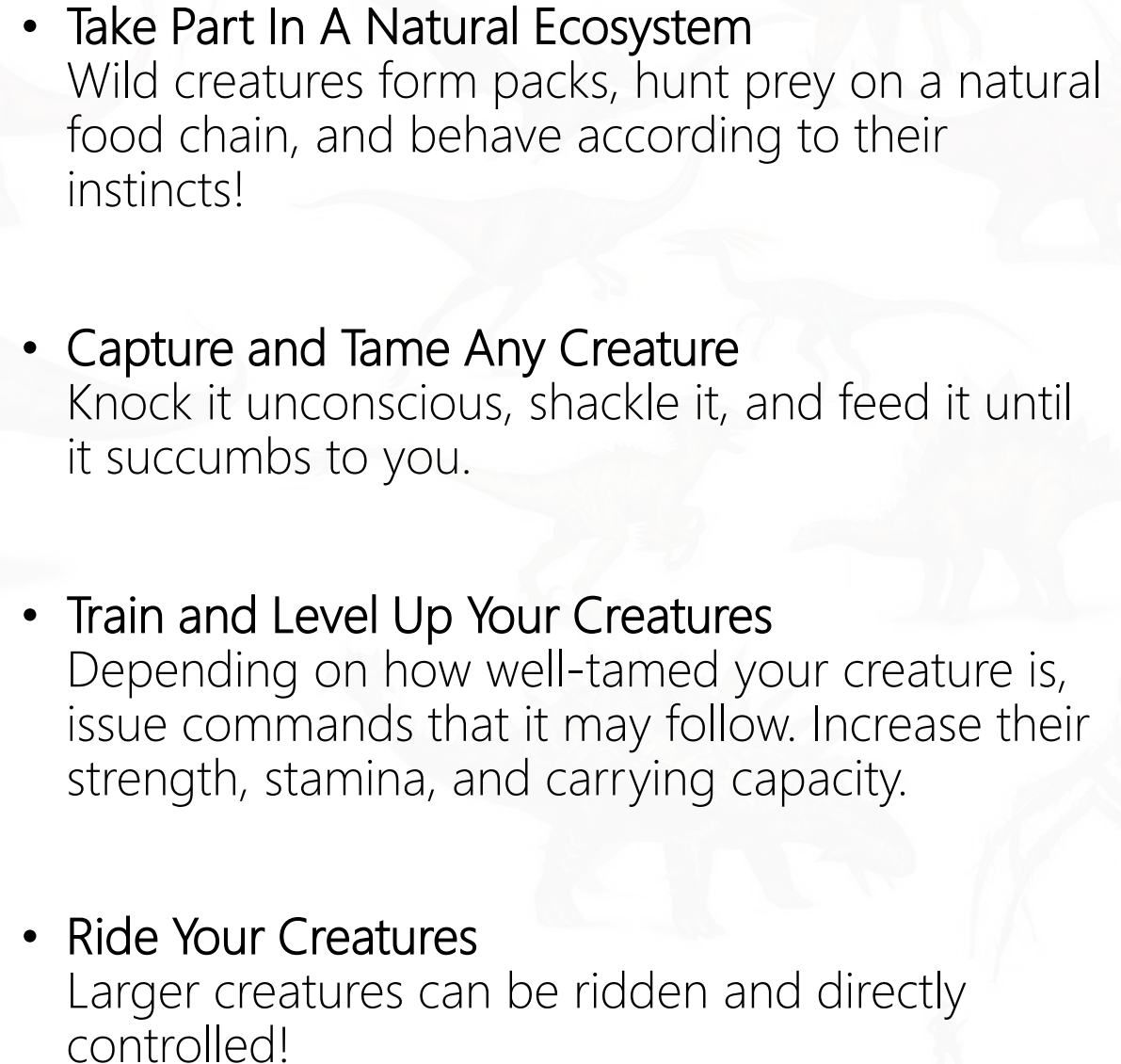
Your character, everything you built, and your pets stay in-game when you leave.

- **Meta-Universe**

A constellation of Islands represents the network of official servers you can conquer.



[illegible]

- 
- **Take Part In A Natural Ecosystem**
Wild creatures form packs, hunt prey on a natural food chain, and behave according to their instincts!
 - **Capture and Tame Any Creature**
Knock it unconscious, shackle it, and feed it until it succumbs to you.
 - **Train and Level Up Your Creatures**
Depending on how well-tamed your creature is, issue commands that it may follow. Increase their strength, stamina, and carrying capacity.
 - **Ride Your Creatures**
Larger creatures can be ridden and directly controlled!

EAT, DRINK AND MIND THE WEATHER

- **Mind Your Status**

All physical actions come at a cost, and various ailments with distinct status effects can occur based on your well-being, such as Starvation, Dehydration, Exhaustion, Poison and Fever. Knowing your physical limits is crucial!

- **Eat and Drink To Survive**

Each plant & type of meat has unique nutritional properties, and access to fresh water is critical.

- **Temperature Matters**

Time of day and weather alters the temperature causing you to hunger or thirst more quickly. Build a fire or shelter to protect yourself!





HARVEST, BUILD AND CUSTOMIZE

- **Gather Resources**
Chop down trees, mine metal and other precious resources.
- **Craft Weapons, Tools and Parts**
You'll never survive or build anything useful with your fists alone.
- **Build Shelter and Other Structures**
Build massive multi-level structures composed of architectural building blocks like walls, windows, doors, security gates, trap doors and more.
- **Liven Up The Place**
Paint, place signs and decorative objects to customize the look.

MASTER THE ISLAND'S CHALLENGES AND DISCOVER ITS SECRETS

- **Explore Unique and Varied Environments**

Use your map to find and explore natural and unnatural structures, above and below ground and underwater.

- **Find Exotic Creatures and Rare Blueprints**

Random exotic creatures may become powerful pets or formidable foes. Rare blueprints teach you how to build mysterious items beyond your wildest imagination.

- **You're Not Alone**

Communicate via placed signs, proximity text & voice chat or long-distance radio. Use GPS coordinates and landmarks to find other players.

- **Conquer The Island**

Challenge gigantic mythical Super-Creatures and uncover the keys to understanding the island's mysterious origins.





SOME EMERGENT FEATURE ADDITIONS

- Platform Saddles
- Rafts
- Unique Dino Abilities
- Official Mods
- Roleplay Food Recipes
- Furniture
- Extended Tribe Mgmt
- Flare Gun
- Swords
- Shields
- Magnifying Glass
- Spyglass
- Bear Traps
- Plant Species X
- Grappling Hook
- Lance
- Dino Breeding
- Camera
- Fishing
- Splitscreen
- Per-Pixel Painting
- Hairstyling
- Tribe Alliances
- UI Changes
- Dino Groups
- Artifact Trophies
- Smoke Grenades
- Outside Game Alerts
- QOL Changes
- Server Config Options

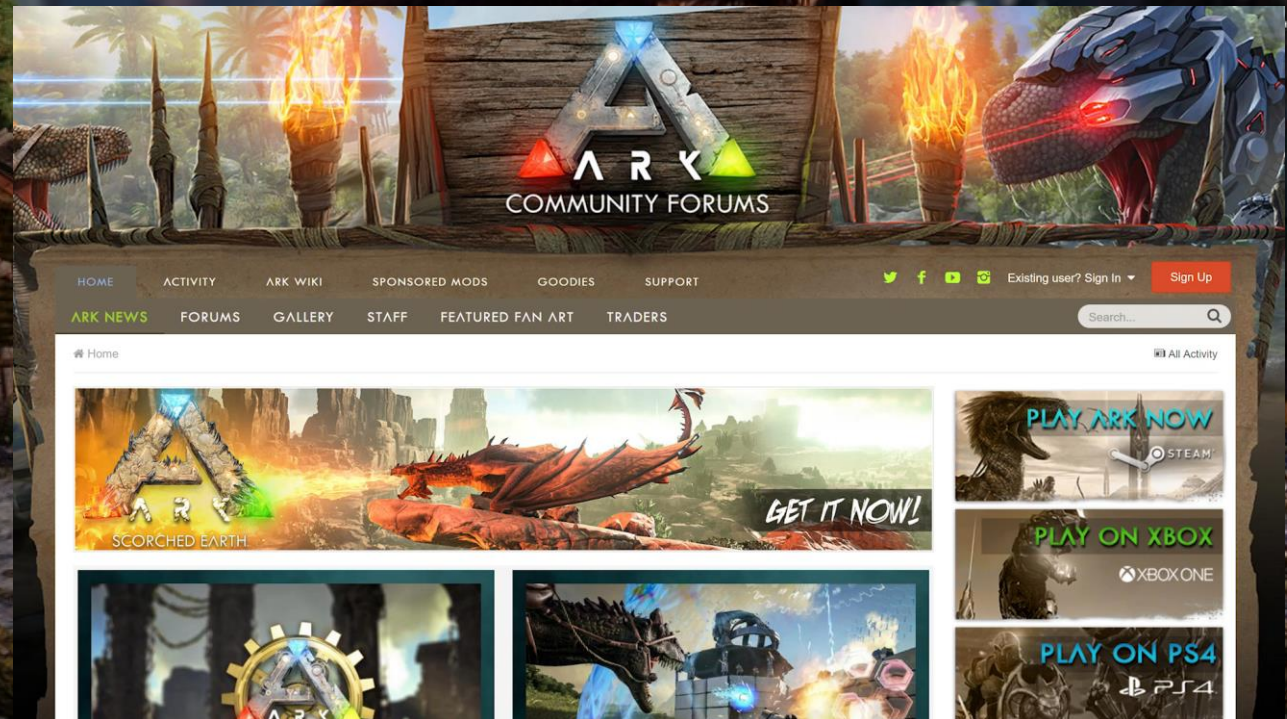


FOSTERING COMMUNITY

Lots of good feedback and gameplay ideas come directly from the people playing your game every day, so get them excited about the future, keep the conversation flowing, and reward them for being a big part of development.

GET THEM EXCITED

- Hype can be good
 - Patch Notes
 - Teasers
 - Announcements
- Spread the word
 - Media Alert / Press Release
 - Trailer, Screenshots, engaging visual presentation for every Release
 - Post on STA.com and Steam, mirror on Reddit, social media, consoles, etc.



KEEP THE CONVERSATION FLOWING

- ARK Community Crunch
 - Latest cool stuff from the Community
 - Fan art, videos, ARK IRL, Mod Spotlights, Fanmade Dossiers, Screenshots
 - Content Sneak Peaks
 - Smaller Announcements like Sales, Merchandise, Gameplay Tweaks
- ARK Digest
 - Dev Team Q&A



REWARD THEM

- Give back to the community
- Callouts
 - Community Crunch
- Contests / Prizes
 - ARKitect, ARK Videos, ARK Ansel Contest, MOD Contests
 - Sponsored Mods
- Serious Stuff
 - Exploit Bounties



RESULT

- Community is PASSIONATE
- Community is ENTITLED
- Community has a VOICE and IDEAS to contribute to development

... but ...

- You shouldn't *always* listen to what they are saying. How do you decide?





PULLING A SIGNAL FROM THE NOISE

Using a Feature Scorecard, we decide what we should work on, separating good ideas from the noise.

FEATURE SCORECARD QUESTIONS

ADD THEM UP (Zero, Positive, or Negative):

- 2pt: Do WE want it?
 - How hyped is our team? Easy vote!
- 2pt: Does the Community want it?
 - Are players passionate or apathetic?
 - Tends to be the "loudest in the room."
- 2pt: Is it good for new players?
 - Will this help or hurt them?
- 2pt: Is it beneficial to development?
 - Does it get us closer to shipping the core game feature spec?
- 1pt: Does it lack controversy?
 - Or is the community strongly divided?
- 1pt: Is it easy to implement?
 - Ask the team's Producers!
- 2pt: Can we do a great job with it?
 - Ask the team's content creation Leads!

FEATURE SCORING EXAMPLE

- Maximum: 12
- Danger Zone: < 2
- Predicted Failure: < 0

✓ Yes: Adds Points

✗ No: Subtracts Points

— Neutral: No contribution

TEK TIER						2
FEATURE SCORECARD						RESULT
WILDCARD WANTS IT 2	COMMUNITY WANTS IT 2	GOOD FOR NEW PLAYERS 2	BENEFICIAL TO DEVELOPMENT 2	LACKS CONTROVERSY 1	EASY TO IMPLEMENT 1	WE CAN DO A GREAT JOB 2
✓	✓	—	✗	✗	✗	✓

ABOUT THOSE STEAM REVIEWS

- Steam encourages users to provide any type of feedback via Steam reviews – not just based on a game's merits.
- *Recent Reviews* biases the score to last 30 days.
- "Review Bombs" are an informative response to your actions as a developer.
- Can be extremely useful... but take reviews with a grain of salt!



HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

Hindsight is 20 / 20 – Let's Test our Feature Scorecard and see how it works out



SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

"This will be a great idea!" – Jeremy Stieglitz

SOTF

0

FEATURE SCORECARD

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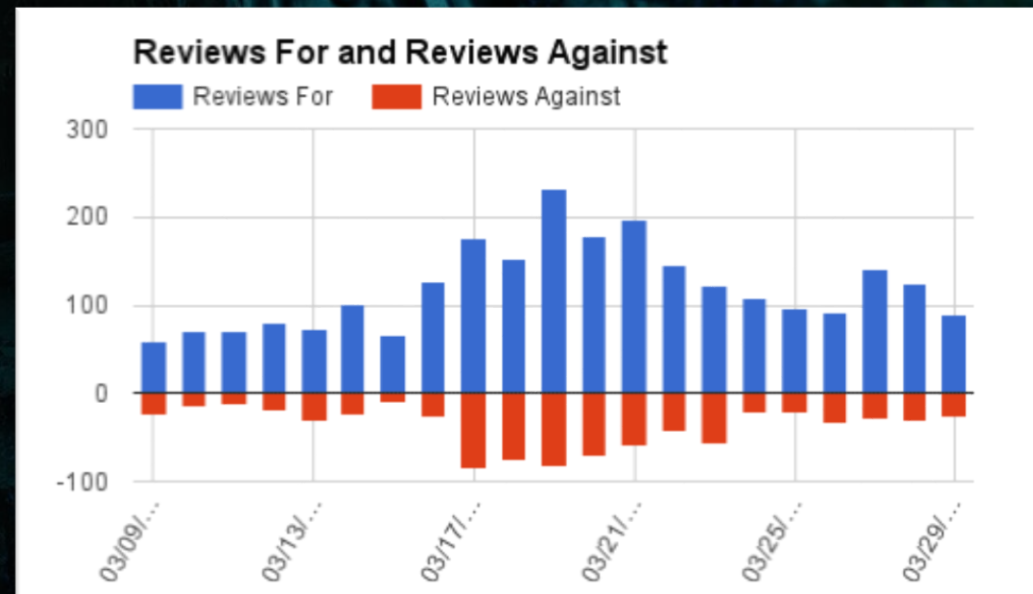
EASY TO
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SOTF						0
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WILDCARD WANTS IT	COMMUNITY WANTS IT	GOOD FOR NEW PLAYERS	BENEFICIAL TO DEVELOPMENT	LACKS CONTROVERSY	EASY TO IMPLEMENT	WE CAN DO A GREAT JOB
✓	✓	—	✗	✗	✗	—

- Separate product driven by perceived demand from vocal community
 - Silent majority didn't care
 - Expensive to develop
 - Unsustainable CCUs
- = FAILURE



The background image is a desert scene with several saguaro cacti in the foreground and middle ground. The ground is sandy and light-colored. A semi-transparent dark brown rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title and a quote. The title 'SCORCHED EARTH' is in large, white, sans-serif capital letters. Below it is a quote in a smaller, white, italicized serif font, followed by the attribution '— stonecutter (Steam User)' in the same italicized serif font.

SCORCHED EARTH

"the fact that studio moneygrab still in busines [sic] is a shame."

— stonecutter (Steam User)

SCORCHED EARTH

4

FEATURE SCORECARD

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SCORCHED EARTH

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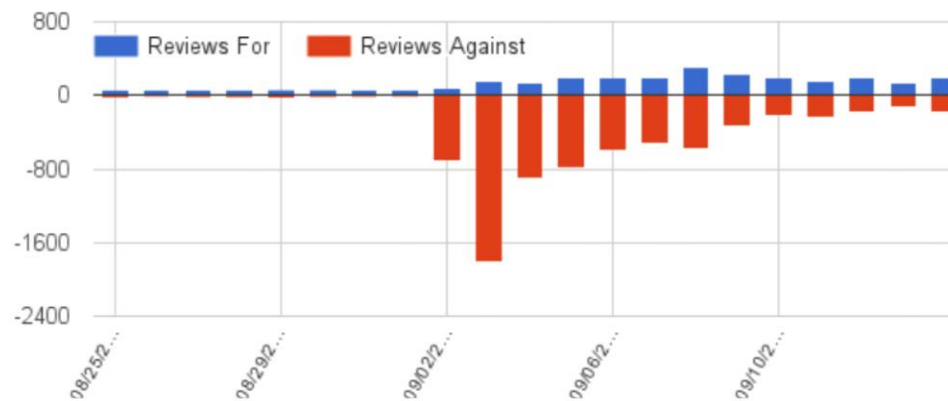
FEATURE SCORECARD

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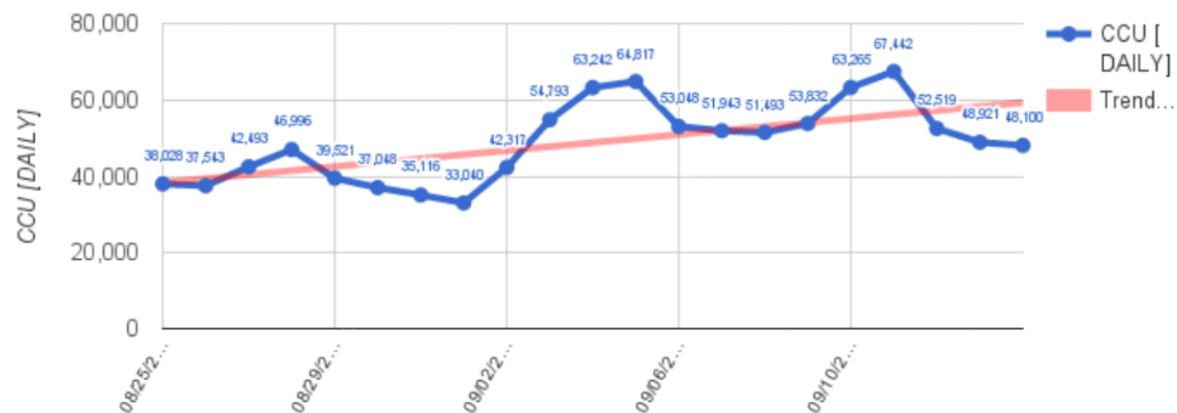
WILDCARD WANTS IT	COMMUNITY WANTS IT	GOOD FOR NEW PLAYERS	BENEFICIAL TO DEVELOPMENT	LACKS CONTROVERSY	EASY TO IMPLEMENT	WE CAN DO A GREAT JOB
✓	—	—	✓	✗	✗	✓

- Premium Expansion Pack Developed in "Secret"
 - Hugely controversial in community and press
 - Giant review bomb but...
 - #1 on Steam for over a week
 - ARK #2 on Steam at same time
 - Highly Rated (82%)
 - 27% Increase in Daily CCU
- = SUCCESS

Reviews For and Reviews Against



CCU [DAILY]



A lush, mossy forest floor with a large rock and a dinosaur leg in the background.

DINO REBALANCE (NERF)

"WHAT THE ♥♥♥♥ where you thinking doing this, are you devs even using your head?" – Sauro (Steam User)

DINO NERF

6

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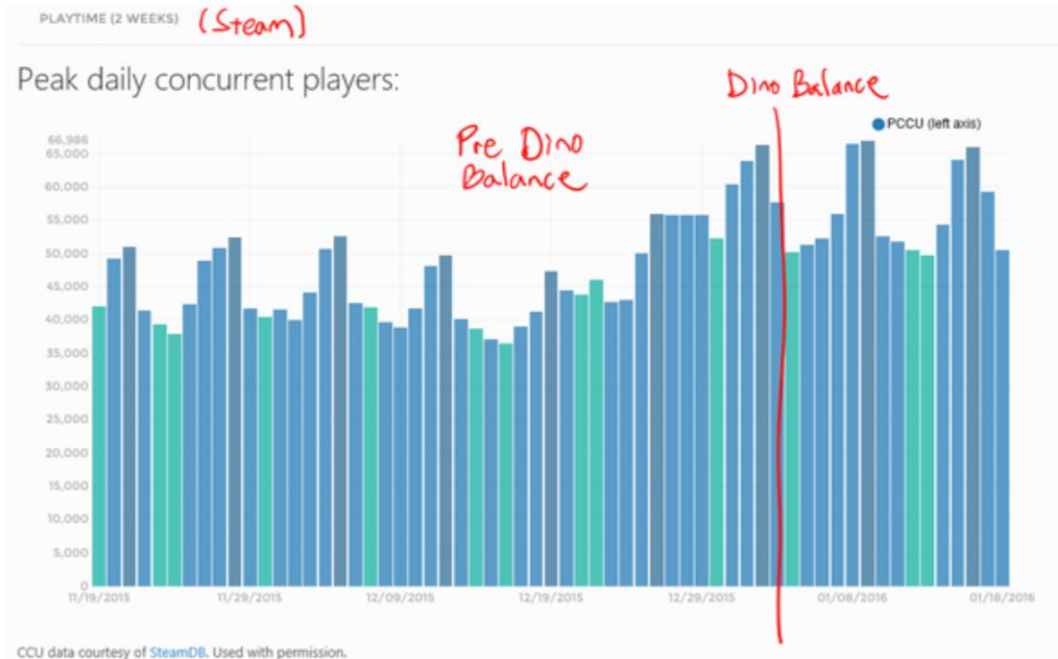
DINO NERF

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✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓

- Dino stat adjustment (nerf) necessary to balance the game
 - Highly controversial with existing players
 - Slight review bomb but...
 - Increased Player Counts
- = SUCCESS

Reviews For and Reviews Against



The background image is a screenshot from the video game 'Swamp Fever'. It depicts a dark, swampy forest environment. In the foreground, a player character is seen from behind, wearing a dark, textured jacket and blue rubber boots, wading through murky water. In the middle ground, a large, dark, multi-limbed monster is visible, holding a long, silver sword aloft. The background is filled with tall, thin trees and dense foliage, with sunlight filtering through the canopy, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding environment.

SWAMP FEVER

"Swamp Fever is the worst thing I have ever experienced."

– Jonathan (Steam User)

SWAMP FEVER

0

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SWAMP FEVER

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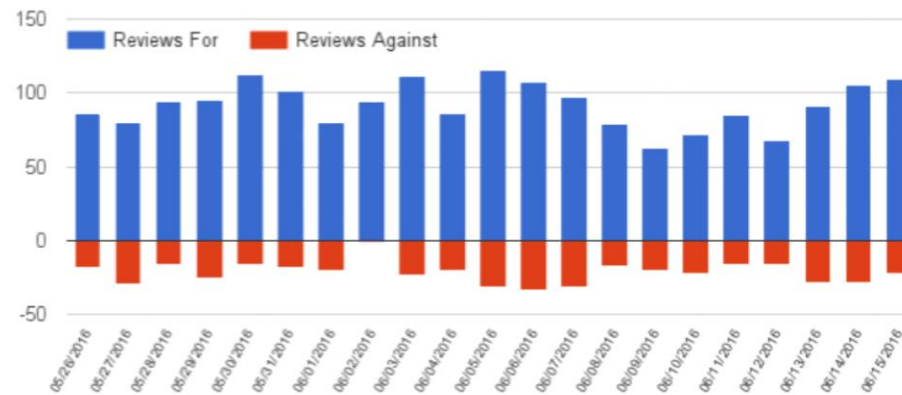
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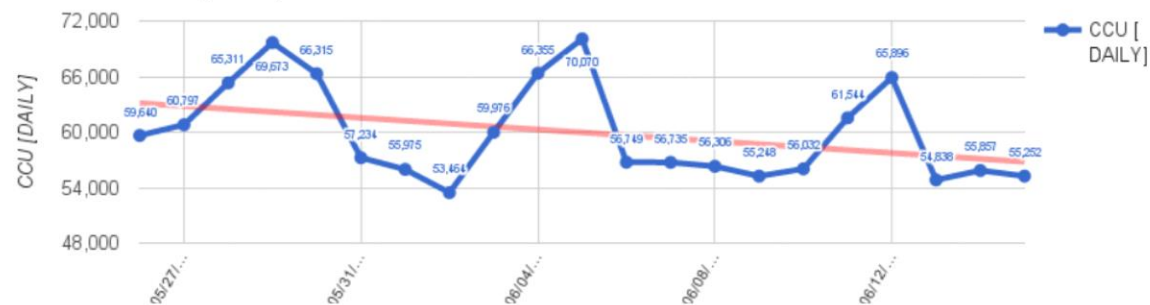
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✓	—	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗

- Communicable disease feature
 - Extremely hard to cure and very bad for new players
 - Community hated it
 - No review bomb but...
 - Steady downward CCU trend
- = FAILURE**

Reviews For and Reviews Against



CCU [DAILY]





CROSS-ARK

"They did it! Those F&^ING MADMEN"*
- Nutrientpolecat (reddit)

CROSSARK

4

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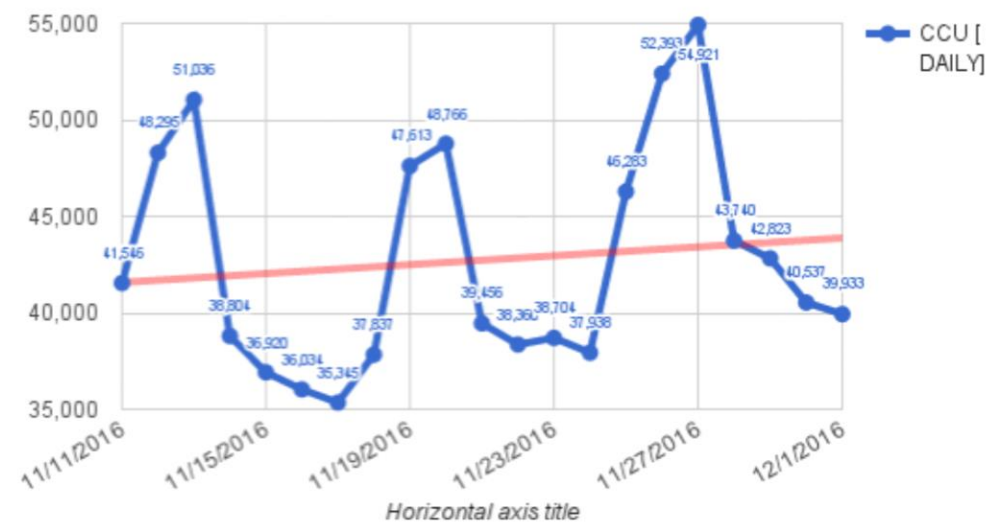
WILDCARD WANTS IT	COMMUNITY WANTS IT	GOOD FOR NEW PLAYERS	BENEFICIAL TO DEVELOPMENT	LACKS CONTROVERSY	EASY TO IMPLEMENT	WE CAN DO A GREAT JOB
✓	—	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓

- Allows free movement of characters and items between servers
 - Enabled cross-server raiding
 - Highly controversial but...
 - Game became more dynamic
 - Steadily Increasing CCUs
- = SUCCESS

Reviews For and Reviews Against



CCU [DAILY]



SHEEPGATE

- Jobby Smith (Steam User)

SHEEPGATE

- Jobby Smith (Steam User)

SHEEPGATE

- Jobby Smith (Steam User)

SHEEP

0

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SHEEP

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✓	✗	—	✗	✗	✓	✓

- Sheep creature inspired by Steam Awards Nomination, to be added if ARK won its category
 - Vocal players felt bribed
 - Quick onset of negative press
 - Mild review bomb
 - Community was already happy
 - No direct positive effect
 - Quickly adjusted our messaging
- = FAILURE

Reviews For and Reviews Against



CCU [DAILY]





FUTURE TEST CASES

Examples of using the Feature Scorecard to guide further development!



TEK TIER

*"Prepare for the battle of the century!"
- DaEndGame on survivetheark.com*

TEK TIER

2

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TEK TIER

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✓	✓	—	✗	✗	✗	✓

- Controversial because some players don't like Sci-Fi
- Adds significantly to end game, part of long-term content goals
- Not critical to shipping but...
- We want to do it
- Week after launch – highest Steam CCUs ever (over 100k!)
- So Far So Good!



UNDERWATER BASES

*"With this new Tek Tier will come the long awaited in-game mechanic of underwater bases. We've been waiting for this one **for years!**"*

*[Ed: ARK released June 2015]
– darkfelt on SurviveTheArk.com*

UNDERWATER BASES

-2

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UNDERWATER BASES

-2

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✗	✓	—	—	✓	✗	✗

- We already publicly committed to this
- Community wants it
- Potential technical issues but...
- Risk vs. Reward still favors the Reward – not a huge content investment, and may open new gameplay opportunities.
- Leap of Faith: We are doing it anyway!



SUMMARY: HOW WE MAKE ARK DECISIONS

- Foster a healthy community and keep our finger on the pulse, use a combination of channels to engage players across media.
- Collaborate on emergent feature development and balancing, but don't just rely on community vocalization or voting...
- Instead, create a balanced Feature Scorecard to help decide what work gets done.
- Reserve the right to take calculated risks and override the data!

KEYS TO ARK'S EARLY ACCESS SUCCESS

- Live and Breathe Emergent Development
 - Maintain an open mind about directions the game should go.
- Content, Content and More Content
 - Optimization & non-critical bug fixes are important but new content is what brings in players and keeps them playing during Early Access.
- Nobody Buys What They Can't See
 - Combine sales with content updates to stand out.
 - Reinforce updates through Media Alerts, Influencers, and Social Channels



THANKS! QUESTIONS?

P.S. We're Hiring! ->

BOOTH 1335

Tribe of Wildcard is recruiting seasoned survivors! Come to our base in South Hall (Booth 1335).

Senior Engine Programmer
Senior Gameplay Programmer x2
Technical Artist
Environment Artist
Senior Animator x2
Producer
Writer (Contract)
QA Manager
Senior Art Director
Senior Concept Artist
Senior 3D Artist



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