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Soft Launch :
The keys to a successful launch
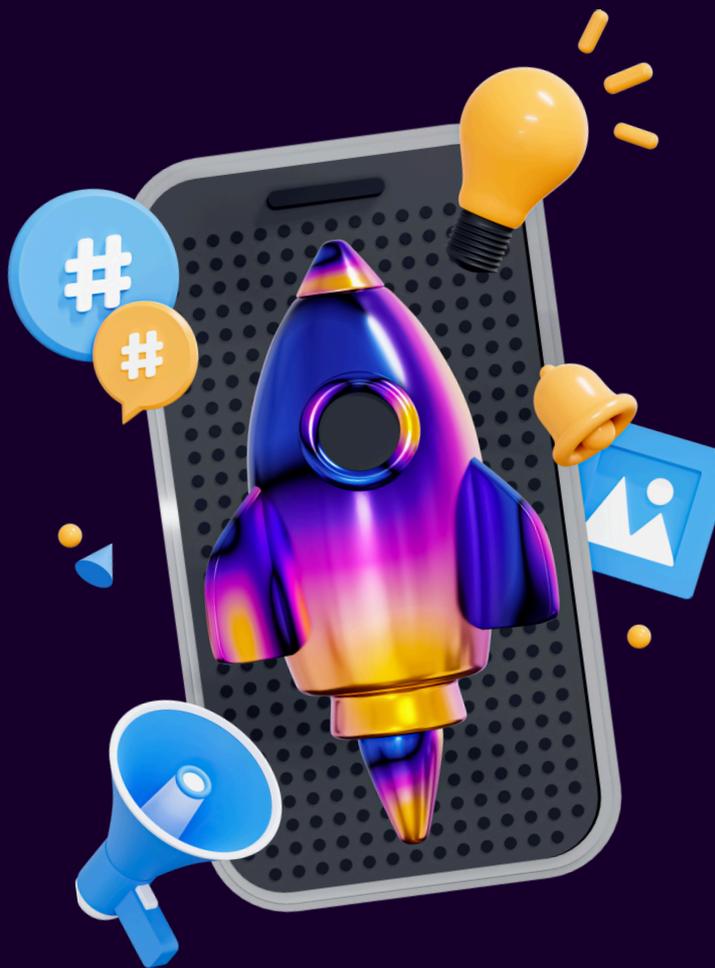
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INTRODUCTION

The soft launch of a game is an exciting and tense moment, eagerly anticipated by production teams. After months, or even years, of work, their efforts are finally put to the test by users. These users will provide the first indicators of the game's appeal, quality, and monetization potential.
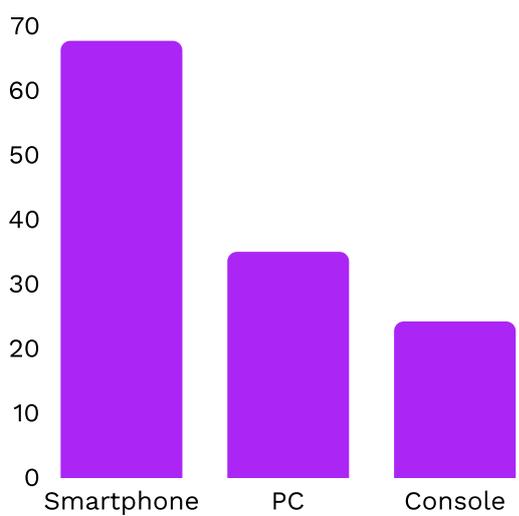
Preferred platforms for players

In 2024, **67.7%** of players prefer smartphones as their gaming platform. Making a solid debut in the market is therefore essential for ensuring long-term success.

With experience from over 35 soft launches, including Everdale by Supercell, Tekken by Bandai Namco, Tuscany Villa by Gnejoy, Cookie Jam by Jam City, Rambo Strike Force by Sandsoft, and others, Addict Mobile shares its tips for a well-executed and successful soft launch.

PART 1 :

Define the objectives, budget and timetable of your soft launch

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Before launching your game, it's essential to test various aspects. That's the purpose of a soft launch: testing different elements of your game with a small segment of your potential audience to validate key components. **From user experience (FTUE - First Time User Experience) to monetization and retention**... each case has its own soft launch phase.

It's crucial to reserve a polished version of the game for a broader audience to maximize revenue and long-term success. The soft launch helps **gather as much insight as possible without exhausting your audience or exceeding costs.**

Note: The mobile gaming world is vast (hyper-casual, casual, midcore, hardcore), so not all actions apply universally. However, Addict Mobile's recommendations cover most cases.

Before starting your soft launch, define what you want to observe, analyze, or adjust.

OBJECTIVES

A soft launch helps address several challenges. Depending on your goals, specific KPIs will need to be monitored. Here are the four main objectives of a soft launch:

FTUE / BUG SOLVING

Churn rate
UX : Time spent, user behaviour
QA / Bug Report

ACQUISITION

CPI
ARPU / ARPPU
Buyers Rate
ROAS / CPA

RETENTION

Rate at D1, D7, D14 and D30

MONETIZATION

IAP = ARPU, ARPPU, Buyers Rate
IAA = e-CPM, Fill rate
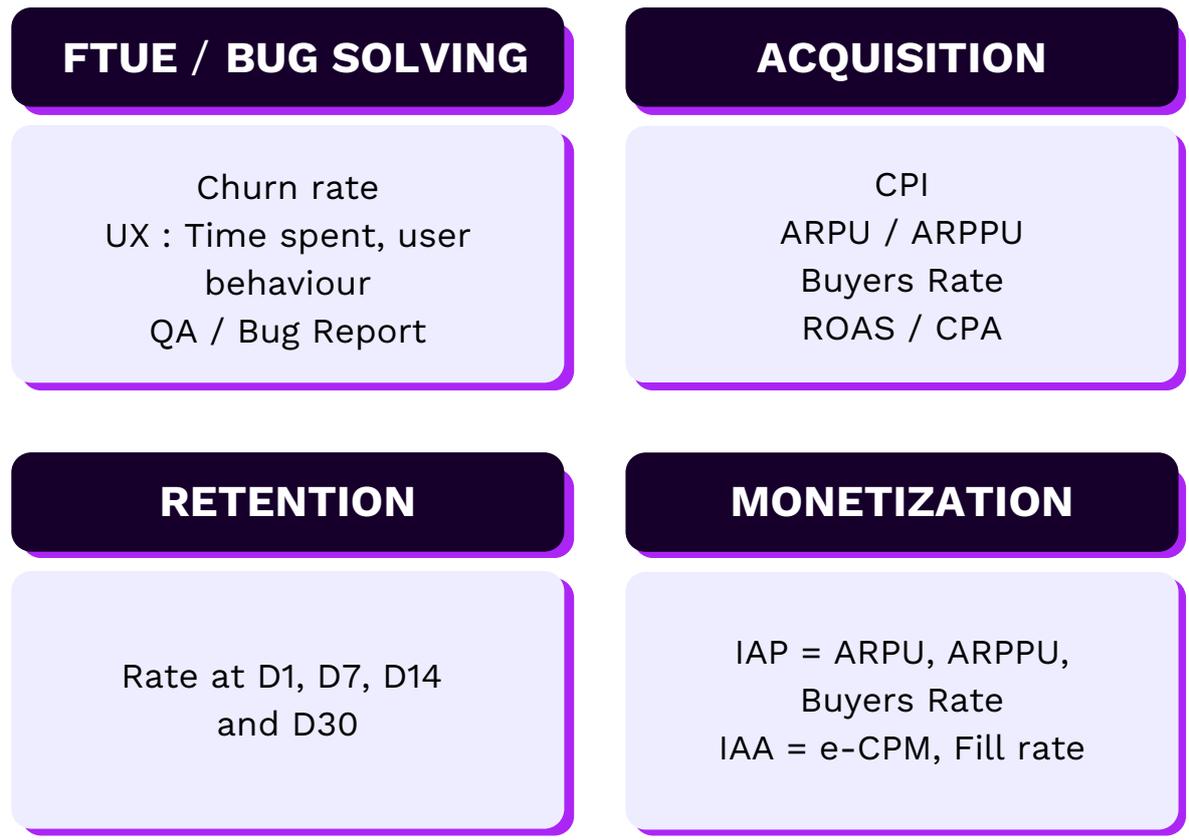
Setting clear objectives allows you to evaluate each step of the soft launch, as well as its duration. At the same time, **implementing a tracking tool (e.g., Adjust, Appsflyer, Kochava, Branch, Singular) is essential for analyzing key KPIs effectively.**

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Here are a few examples of Soft Launch Analyses

UX & bug solving

The first step is to observe **how users interact with the game and fix major bugs.** The goal is to ensure that the next steps of the soft launch aren't compromised by critical issues or a poor user experience (UX).

Example: If all players stop progressing at level 3, the difficulty might be too high. Adjustments should be considered to fix this.

Level 1   Level 2   Level 3

KPIs to monitor

- Churn rate   • Time spent   • QA
  • User Behavior   • Bug Report

STEP 2

Acquisition

Acquisition is about **bringing users into the game to determine the cost of acquiring a player or buyer.** This step helps evaluate key metrics like CPI and the game's overall profitability through UA.

KPIs to monitor

- CPI
- Buyers Rate
- ARPU
- ROAS
- ARPPU
- CPA

STEP 3

Retention

Based on this recruited audience, retention provides **a clear indicator of the game's potential**. Retention plays a major role in determining **whether a game will succeed or fail**. You could have the best acquisition and monetization strategies in the market, but if retention is too low, the game will flop.

KPIs to monitor

- Retention rate at **D+1**, **D+7**, **D+14**, **D+30**
- Sessions per user
- Time spent per user

STEP 4

Monetization

Depending on the game's business model, it's crucial to either **convert players into buyers (IAP) or maximize ad revenue (IAA).** By testing this during the soft launch, you can assess the game's ability to generate revenue and adjust monetization mechanisms to improve profitability.

KPIs to monitor

IAP
ARPU, ARPPU, Buyers Rate

IAA
eCPM, Fill rate

TIMELINE AND BUDGET

Defining these two elements is essential to anticipate the costs of the soft launch and structure the game production team accordingly.

The budget allocated to user acquisition will depend on the number of users needed to gather relevant data for KPI analysis.

How many users do I need to recruit?

In which country, and therefore at what CPI?

For how long?

It's also important to define the duration of the soft launch with a clear plan detailing each phase, iterations, etc.

A soft launch often takes **longer than expected**, as more updates to the game are typically needed than initially planned. That's why it's essential to **allocate a budget and establish a timeline upfront.**
Since the soft launch phase generates little to no revenue, production and acquisition **costs can be significant**, making careful planning crucial.

FOCUS ON APP STORE OPTIMIZATION

Before starting your soft launch, **take the time to test and optimize your game's store page with a focus on <u>ASO</u>.** As the name suggests, App Store Optimization (ASO) involves optimizing your store page on Android and iOS. This is a critical step that should never be overlooked.

Why?

- It **maximizes the conversion rate of users** landing on your store page.
- It **helps optimize the acquisition costs** of your ad campaigns by encouraging more users who click on your ads to download your game.

ICON

TITLE

CALL-TO-ACTION

SCREENSHOTS & VIDEOS

DESCRIPTION

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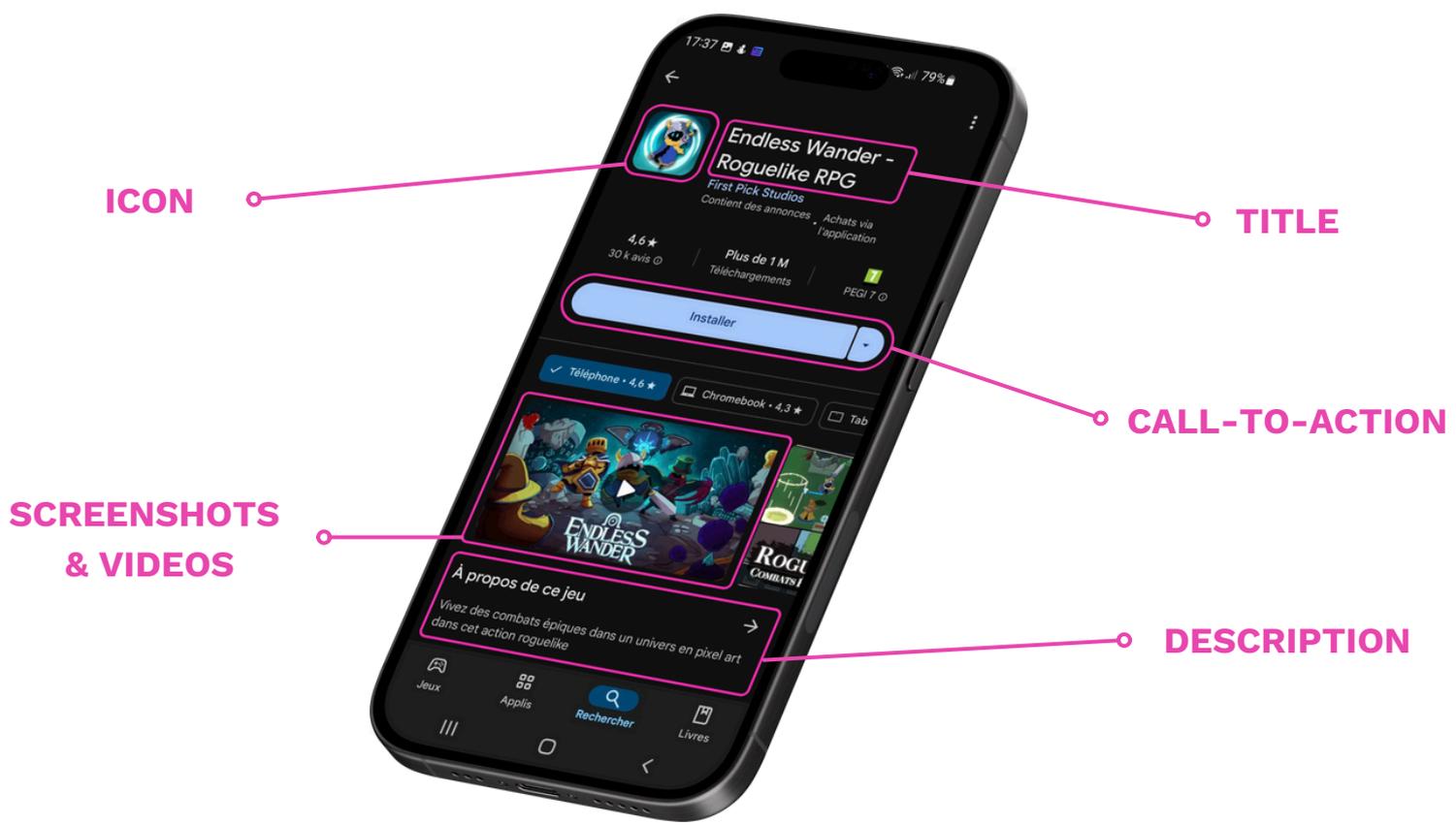
An app store page that improves conversions by **5%, 10%, or even 15%** is a valuable asset for maximizing installs and reducing costs.

The soft launch is the perfect opportunity to test and iterate on different versions of your store page. **Elements such as the logo, title/subtitle, screenshots, and description can all be A/B tested.**

To analyze your app store page's conversion rates, there are several methods available:

✚ Use Google's free Developer Console tool

Tools are available to test your Android page: *Store Listing Experiments*.

This tool lets you A/B test store pages with a defined audience and gather conversion data for each variation.

This tool is highly recommended as it allows for precise testing and quick insights, which can then be applied to your iOS store page.

You can also perform A/B tests on iOS, but the available tools are more limited compared to Google Play.

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✚ Analyze conversion rates (installs / clicks)

It's essential to evaluate the conversion rate and track users coming from acquisition campaigns during your soft launch.

Note: This method is less precise and provides fewer insights compared to Store Listing Experiments. It involves testing on a similar audience: **2 different store pages over 2 distinct periods.** Addict Mobile recommends organizing this test phase carefully.

Here are some tips:

- **Facebook is the most effective platform for testing** as it allows precise targeting, particularly on Android. On iOS, ATT limitations may hinder data accuracy.
- **Focus only on Facebook News Feed or Instagram News Feed (avoid stories):** Maintain a controlled environment. For example, Facebook's Audience Network has very different conversion rates.
- **Select an affinity target that will be identical on the 2 tests**. Avoid lookalikes, and focus on a specific interest.
- **Set up the same campaign set-up** (bidding, socio-demo...).

Use only one creative whenever possible, and ensure the same format is used across tests. For example, testing a static image versus a video could impact conversion rates significantly.

✚ Some service providers offer A/B testing of your store pages

Certain companies offer paid services that provide detailed and in-depth analyses for your app store pages.

PART 2 :

Avoid burning out your audience

PART 2

Avoid burning out your audience

Choosing the right country for a soft launch is strategic: avoiding the target market of your official launch helps protect your core audience and the game's reputation. High-ARPU regions (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany) are typically reserved for the hard launch. However, they can be used to quickly test the economic viability of hyper-casual games through CPI and retention data, as long as the soft launch is brief and targeted.

CHOOSING COUNTRIES BASED ON OBJECTIVES

BUG RESOLUTION
Select countries with low-cost users, meaning those with a low CPI.

Choose a country close to your target audience to evaluate CPI and ROAS. If the goal is to test targeting, creatives, etc., most countries will show similar behavior.
ACQUISITION

RETENTION
In this case, it's recommended to select countries with similar usage patterns to your audience (Tier 1 countries).

Prioritize countries with purchasing behavior (IAP) or eCPM (IAA) similar to your audience. Top ARPU countries with smaller populations are ideal.
MONETIZATION

Another important factor to consider is the language of the game. If your game is only available in a single language, usually English, two distinct approaches should be considered:

1 For games with little text or simple gameplay: **Language has minimal impact**, and the game can be launched in **almost any region.**

If the game includes **text or more complex mechanics, language will have a big impact**. In this case, you'll need to choose an affinity country, either English-speaking or with a large English-speaking population. **2**

Finally, if you plan to conduct your soft launch on a single operating system, keep in mind that **KPIs can vary slightly between OSes**. Additionally, iOS penetration is limited in certain regions.

WHAT ABOUT THE OS?

The choice of OS is another key question.
Should the soft launch be conducted on both operating systems or just one, and if so, which one?

The chart below shows that developers tend to test on Android or both OSes but rarely on iOS alone.

60% of tests are performed on both OS
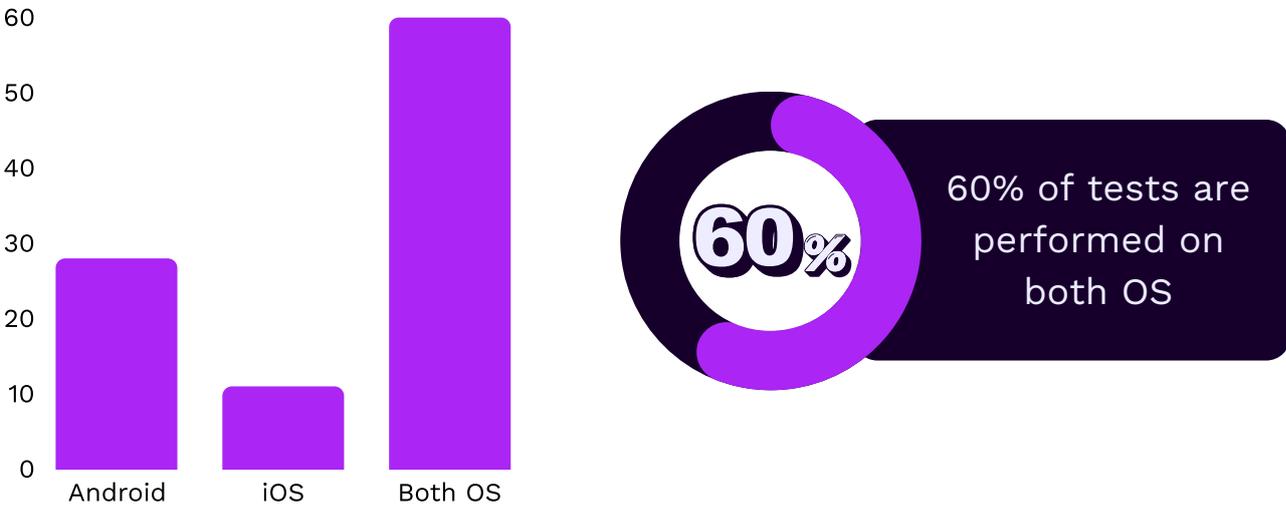
ANDROID

- Android offers **greater flexibility**

- **Faster updates**, enabling **greater responsiveness**

- Data is **more granular and detailed**

- **Retention** and **monetization** are generally **lower** than on iOS

APPLE

- **Less flexibility**

- **Longer update times**

- **Less detailed and granular** data (due to ATT)

- iOS users are often **highly engaged** and are an **important source of long-term revenue**

WHAT DO BIG PUREPLAYERS DO?

■ % of games choosing this country (TOTAL = 52 games)

Data from 2021 study

■ % of games choosing this SL country (25 games)
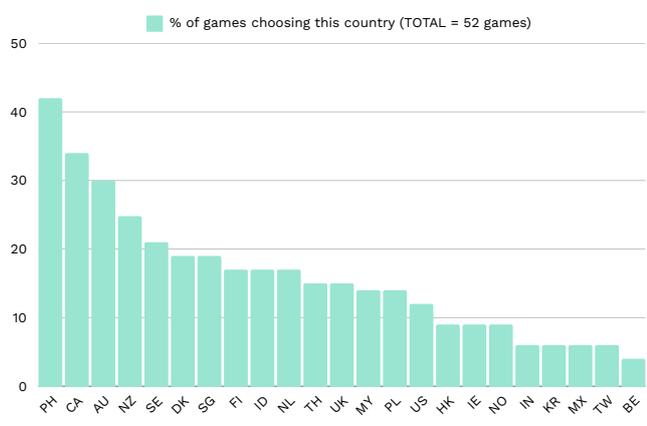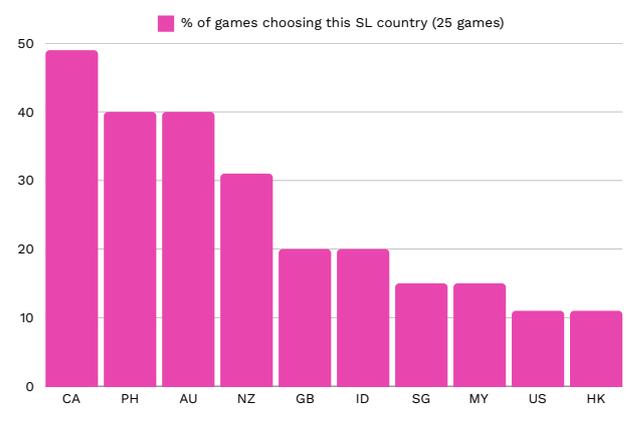
Data from 2023 study

The top 4 countries chosen for a soft launch have remained the same over the past two and a half years.

WHICH COUNTRIES SHOULD YOU CHOOSE FOR YOUR SOFT LAUNCH?

As mentioned earlier, your objective will determine the geographical area for the soft launch.

✚ UX & Bug solving focus

PHILIPPINES:
Ideal for testing UX and bugs, as CPI is very low and volume is high. However, this market should be avoided for monetization and retention testing.

MYANMAR, THAÏLAND, INDONESIA:
Similar to the Philippines but slightly more expensive, so the Philippines remains the preferred choice.

✚ UA, retention, monetization focus

Canada / Australia:
These are traditionally the most-used countries for soft launches to **simulate the behavior of U.S. users**, as they are English-speaking and have high ARPU (Average Revenue Per User).

> It's advised to look for alternatives to these two countries, as they are highly competitive and expensive (since most publishers launch their games there).
> Ideally, save these markets for the hard launch.

New Zealand:
Similar to Canada and Australia but **less competitive,** making it a better option.

Sweden/ Finland/ Denmark (Nordics):
Like New Zealand, these countries have smaller populations but **high monetization potential.**

Netherlands/Belgium:
These countries are **highly recommended**. Their user behavior closely resembles Tier 1 countries but at a **lower CPI compared to Canada, Australia, or New Zealand.** English is widely spoken, which minimizes risk. Belgium (BE) is also a great alternative, offering low CPI and strong ARPU for games with simple English content.

United Kingdom:
Like the U.S., this is a **key market for your game**. Avoid testing here in a soft launch unless under specific circumstances.

🇺🇸 What about the USA?

The U.S. is a key market. However, a soft launch there could exhaust your audience with a game that isn't fully optimized.

That said, it also provides the best benchmark for your game across all areas: user acquisition, monetization, retention, and more.

As a result, some game developers choose to run tests in the U.S. to gather tangible insights.

50%

The U.S. generates over 50% of lifetime revenue for most games.

Most of them, however, limit the test volumes to avoid "burning" their audience.

In conclusion, it's crucial to define your strategy before launching campaigns to avoid jeopardizing the success of your official launch.

BRIEF

PART 3 :
KPI analysis & Action plan

KPI analysis & Action plan

During a soft launch, it's crucial to have a clear strategy and implement marketing actions to monitor the evolution of the KPIs that matter.

WHICH KPIS SHOULD YOU TRACK?

The KPIs mentioned in Part 2 are often similar for most games: retention, DAU, ARPU, ARPPU, buyers rate, CPI, and ROAS.

There are **2 types of KPIs to consider**:
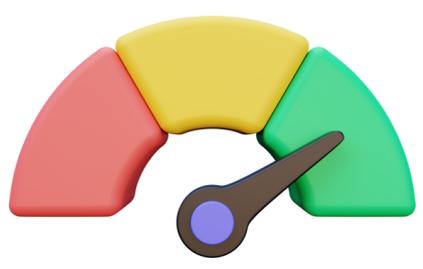
- **Related to the quality or appeal of the game:** Retention, DAU, CPI.

- **Related to monetization:** ARPU, ARPPU, buyer rate, ROAS

It's important to note that Type 1 KPIs are essential for a game's success, while Type 2 KPIs can only be optimized if the game is appealing and can acquire a significant number of users at a controlled CPI.

The opposite is not true: even with strong monetization through IAP or IAA, if players churn quickly or it's hard to attract a large number of users through User Acquisition, generating revenue will be challenging.

That's why it's essential to focus on **improving the game itself, retention and user experience,** before optimizing monetization strategies. It's much easier to refine monetization mechanisms than to overhaul the game's design or core gameplay.

3 KEY KPIS

✚ Retention

This is the **1st indicator to monitor** before moving forward with anything else. Depending on the type of game and its monetization model, retention goals will vary. It's important to set clear D1, D7, and D30 retention targets.

> **Be careful to be realistic about objectives**, as overly ambitious targets are common. Note that D1 retention often reflects D7 and D30 retention. Early adjustments can significantly improve these KPIs before long-term data becomes available.

When analyzing retention, it's essential to monitor it by **OS, country, acquisition source, and organic traffic**, and to track how it evolves with each game update. The mobile gaming industry generally uses the following retention benchmarks:
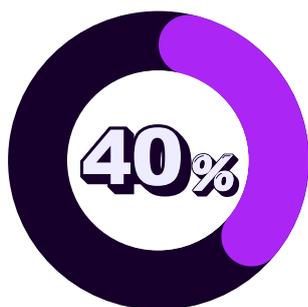
40%	20%	10%
D1	**D7**	**D30**

However, these levels of performance are rarely achieved. The goal is to get as close as possible to these benchmarks.

✚ CPI

Another key KPI is the **cost of acquiring a user and the potential volume at a controlled cost.** While CPI isn't the ultimate goal, it's a critical indicator for evaluating future high-volume acquisition campaigns during the hard launch.

The creatives, game style, or presentation might not resonate well. In such cases, it's crucial to rethink the acquisition strategy and optimize these elements:

1 **Test different sources** to benchmark, including Meta, Google, and Video Ad Networks like Unity or Applovin. Meta is essential due to its precise targeting capabilities and the granularity of the available data.

Focus primarily on Android, as the limitations introduced by iOS 14.5 in April 2021 make **Android a better option for obtaining detailed insights.** **2**

3 **Test different geolocations** to identify if certain cultural specifics create differences in performance.

Develop a creative strategy tailored to attract players: **4**

- Highlight the game's key features
- Gameplay vs. Trailer
- Identify which graphic elements appeal most to your audience

The soft launch provides not only insights into player behavior and game performance but also helps refine the UA strategy to maximize budget efficiency.

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✚ IAA / IAP (Monetization)

Once retention data is solid and monetization is in place, you can focus on optimizing it.

IAA (IN-APP ADS)

For games relying on ad-based monetization (IAA), the following points should be addressed to maximize results:

Define ad placements
frequency per user/session, UX integration...

Negotiate with ad networks
that supply the ads.

Set up a waterfall
typically via a mediation platform, for optimal performance.

Optimize your eCPM
floor price, fill rate...

Unlike IAP, **IAA is simpler to manage.** The success of an IAA-based game primarily depends on strong retention and the ability to attract a high volume of users at a low CPI. Monetization follows from there.

IAP (IN-APP PURCHASE)

The goal here is to seamlessly **integrate in-app purchases into the UX to encourage players to spend.**

The key KPI to track is ARPU, which reflects the result of ARPPU and **the buyers rate**. Addict Mobile observed that the buyers rate is the most impactful metric to improve, as it **significantly influences ARPU and overall game revenue**. At large volumes, ARPPU remains stable (under consistent conditions), so the critical factor is the game's ability to generate buyers. Increasing the buyers rate from 8% to 10% can make a substantial difference at scale.

To optimize ARPU, a methodical approach is required:

Clear objectives
And a clear direction

Adapt your acquisition strategy
Depending on the users to target (OS, countries, optimization for installation or purchase, targeting, etc.).

Compare comparable data
Do not compare the data from an install-optimized campaign VS a purchase-optimized campaign.

Organic VS acquisition
Organic data allows you to observe users' "natural" behavior without any interfering elements.

Iterating on monetization and monitoring performance metrics is essential to identify which aspects of the game or offer can improve results. To achieve this, **avoid testing multiple changes at the same time**, as it will make it harder to determine which adjustment had a positive or negative impact.

Acquisition campaigns are often blamed when a game fails to deliver satisfactory metrics (ARPU, retention, etc.). However, UA teams cannot perform miracles if the game doesn't appeal to players or monetize well.

Tips: Benchmark organic data versus acquisition data to determine whether the issue lies in marketing or the product itself.

MAKING DIFFICULT DECISIONS

The success of a soft launch depends on **the game itself, the strategy in place, and the team's reactivity to iterate, test, and repeat.**

However, it's crucial to be ready to make important decisions, as a soft launch reveals the game's potential and long-term viability.

Depending on the studio's financial and human resources, as well as its ambitions, the duration of a soft launch can vary from short to extended.

However, it's important to be ready to make tough decisions, which could include:

✚ Hard Launch (worldwide release)

There's no such thing as a perfect game. But when the game delivers satisfactory metrics, the UX is polished, monetization is ready, and UA has been tested, it's better to proceed with the **hard launch** to reach a **global audience.**

The advantage of mobile games is that they can continue to be optimized, updated, and expanded with new content after launch, so the hard launch is not the end.

More importantly, it allows you to start **generating revenue and supporting the game/studio's development.**

Extend the soft launch ✚

A soft launch is usually planned for a limited duration since it generates little to no revenue before the hard launch, which can create a significant cost for the studio.

However, it's not advisable to launch a game with **KPIs that are too weak**. The first users acquired during the hard launch are often the most profitable. **If the game isn't polished enough or the monetization isn't ready, it will result in significant missed opportunities.**

In this case, it's **better to extend the soft launch** by a few weeks or months, depending on the studio's financial capacity, to fine-tune the game.

✦ Kill the game

Game development often incurs significant costs. During the soft launch, however, little to no revenue is generated, causing costs to pile up. The longer this phase lasts, the deeper the financial gap before the hard launch.

If, after several iterations, the game is far from meeting its KPI targets and estimated revenues remain low despite all efforts, **it's better to kill the game than to persist in its development.** Continuing would only increase financial losses and waste resources on a game that shows no potential, making it counterproductive.

This is a tough decision because a lot of energy, time, and passion have gone into the project. However, it's often more effective to **move on to a new project and learn from these failures, which are common in the mobile gaming industry.**

What our customers say

Addict Mobile has been a key partner in our self-publishing strategy. They helped us build a UA approach perfectly suited to our studio's objectives and deadlines.
Their creative ideas were excellent, and they remained open to ours, making the process truly collaborative.
Addict Mobile took charge of the day-to-day management of the campaigns and provided detailed reports, making UA management smooth and straightforward for our studio.

Timothy Bellaiche – Co-founder
@First Pick Studios

Thanks to Addict Mobile's innovative approach and proprietary creative technology, we were able to discover new avenues for our market launch with Match3D. Their unique strategies led us directly to untapped user acquisition opportunities, and capitalizing on these unique opportunities was essential in our acquisition journey.

Eric Chan – Data Analyst @MobilityWare
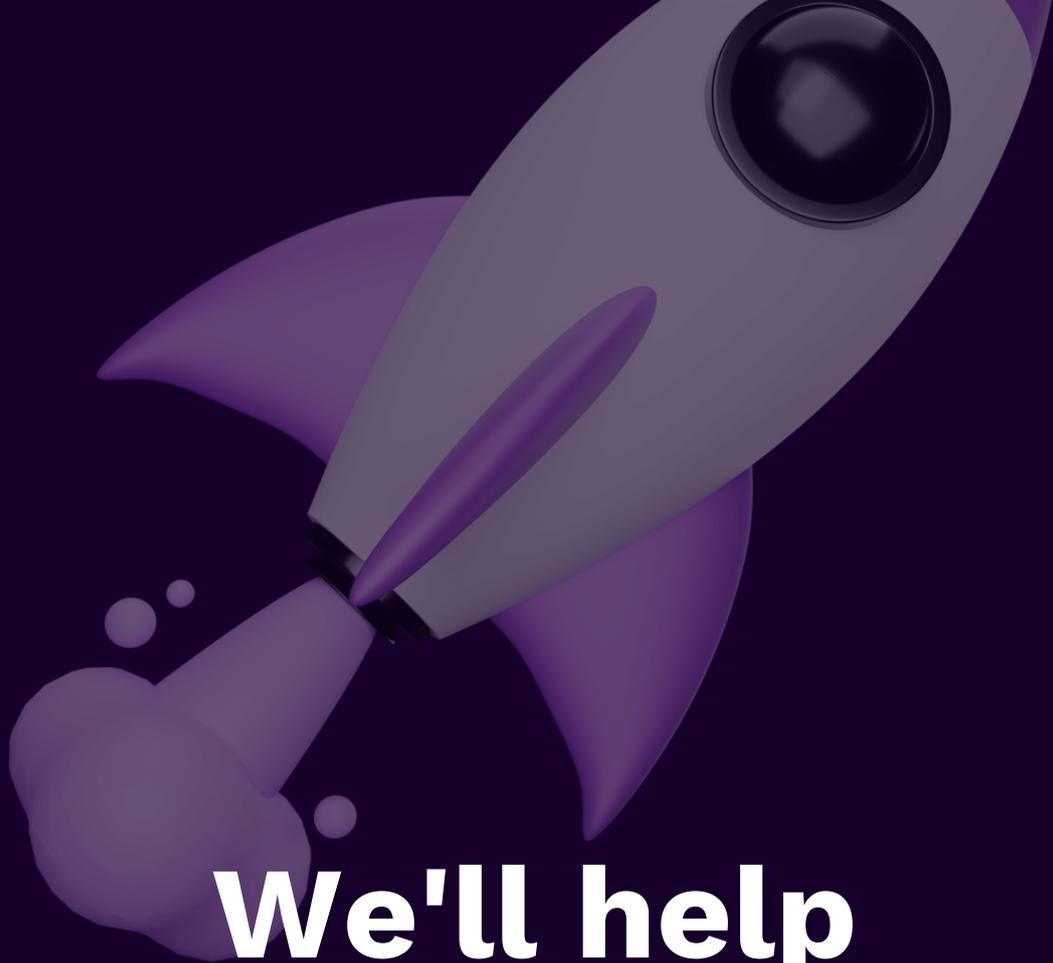
We'll help you with your soft launch!

Contact us!

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