

WILDLIGHT
ENTERTAINMENT

Highguard: A Live Service Launch Case Study

From High Hopes to Heated Backlash:
A Deep Dive into the Polarising Launch

Customer Sentiment & Voice

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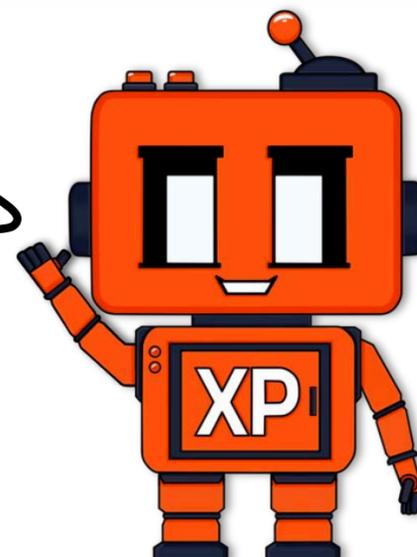
PLAYERXP

PlayerXP is an **award-winning company**, founded in 2015 by gamers Chris and Andy, that connects players with the games industry by **amplifying their voices** through AI-powered reports and engagement metrics.

Using a game-focused Large Language Model with over **1 billion data points**, they provide accurate sentiment analysis for studios and publishers to make informed decisions based on player feedback. Their mission is to bridge the gap between game developers and players by conveying community wants and needs for better **game decisions**.



Hi there, I'm Kevin, your PlayerXP Bot. I've used my advanced AI algorithms to help generate this report. If you need help interpreting the data or spotting key insights, I've got you covered!



UNDERSTANDING PLAYERXP SENTIMENT

How does PlayerXP's sentiment system work?

PlayerXP's Sentiment System is the core of our platform. Our 'Sentiment Diamonds' allow you to gauge the sentiment behind the data viewable on our dashboard. These diamonds come in three colours: red for negative sentiment, orange for neutral sentiment, and green for positive sentiment.

The diamonds on the left demonstrate this, showing negative, neutral and positive sentiment, and display a corresponding value for greater depth. This value indicates how positive or negative sentiment is and on a scale between -99 (extremely negative sentiment) to +99 (extremely positive sentiment), where 0 is completely neutral.

Sentiment Scale



Used to indicate when the average sentiment is **negative**.



Used to indicate when the average sentiment is **neutral**.



Used to indicate when the average sentiment is **positive**.

Toxicity Scale



Used to indicate when the average toxicity is **negative**.



Used to indicate when the average toxicity is **neutral**.



Used to indicate when the average toxicity is **positive**.

KEY INSIGHTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Highguard launched with strong visibility and immediate player interest. Early feedback, however, revealed challenges in gameplay, community trust, market positioning, and launch strategy. This summary highlights the key factors shaping its initial performance and retention dynamics.



Launch Performance & Gameplay Reception

- Highguard launched with strong visibility but a rapid player drop-off.
- Community feedback consistently cited weak core loop satisfaction, clunky feel, performance issues, and limited originality.
- Positive elements such as F2P access and mode variety did not offset negative first impressions.



Community Trust & Post-Launch Sentiment

- Players reported fragmented communication, limited engagement, and slow responsiveness during the critical early window.
- Expectation gaps widened post-launch.
- Confirmed layoffs at Wildlight Entertainment amplified concerns about long-term support and stability.



Struggling to Stand Out in a Saturated Market

- Community discourse positioned the game against entrenched ecosystems such as Apex Legends.
- Feedback consistently highlighted generic design, unclear identity, and insufficient innovation to justify switching costs.

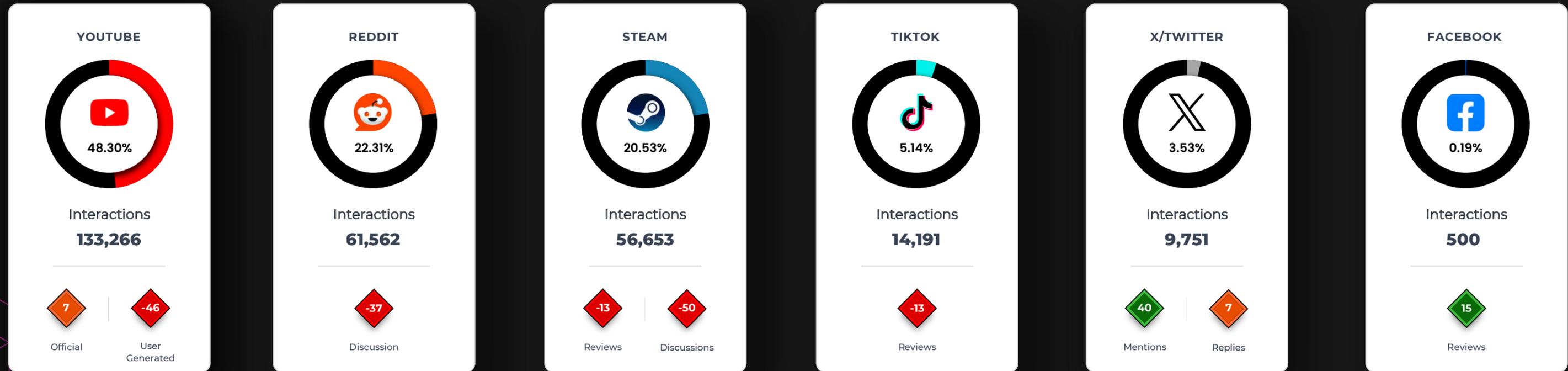


Awareness-Focused Launch Lacks Retention Foundations

- Available signals indicate an imbalance between visibility-oriented beats and community infrastructure.
- The reveal at The Game Awards delivered reach but was not matched by visible large-scale playtesting, structured community lifecycle planning, or sustained creator activation.

DATA SOURCES OVERVIEW

Timefram: January 10th to February 17th, 2026.



Please note: This report was created using both our platform for sources and external sources, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of the data trends across various platforms. Our focus has been on capturing a wide range of interactions, reviews, and discussions to provide valuable insights into user engagement and sentiment. The external sources are used for context as they do not fully reflect the sentiment of the community.

Other Sources

- [GamesRadar+ - Embark Studios clarifies Arc Raiders AI usage.](#)
- [PCGamesN & Yahoo Tech / Reuters-style coverage - Interview with Embark director](#)
- [AI Daily / Tech news piece - ARC Raiders AI debate overview](#)
- [GamesRadar+ \(follow-ups\) - Publisher / industry reaction](#)

KEY INSIGHTS

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

Notable Sentiment Trends over Sources

Steam Review Bombing and Negative Rating

Highguard faced significant backlash on Steam, resulting in countless negative reviews within the first few days, with players citing poor optimisation even on high-end systems, and a confusing early gameplay experience that weakens onboarding. Community feedback also points to unengaging character design and a perception that the game launched before it was ready.

Reddit Community Discussions

Reddit discussions around Highguard skew negative, with players describing the game as lacking a clear identity and critiquing its design direction as derivative of titles such as Fortnite, Valorant, and Apex Legends. Sentiment reflects disappointment with the launch and concern about longevity. The overall tone indicates a divided community with expectations largely unmet.

YouTube Reactions

Discussions on Highguard are largely negative, with players criticising slow, unengaging gameplay, weak performance, and uninspired art direction. Many compare it unfavourably to Overwatch and Concord, reinforcing perceptions of limited originality. Despite the dominant negativity, a smaller group of players defended the game, arguing that the criticism was overstated and expressing cautious optimism about its potential to improve.

Sentiment Summary

Timeframe: January 10th to February 17th. Total volume of player feedback collected.



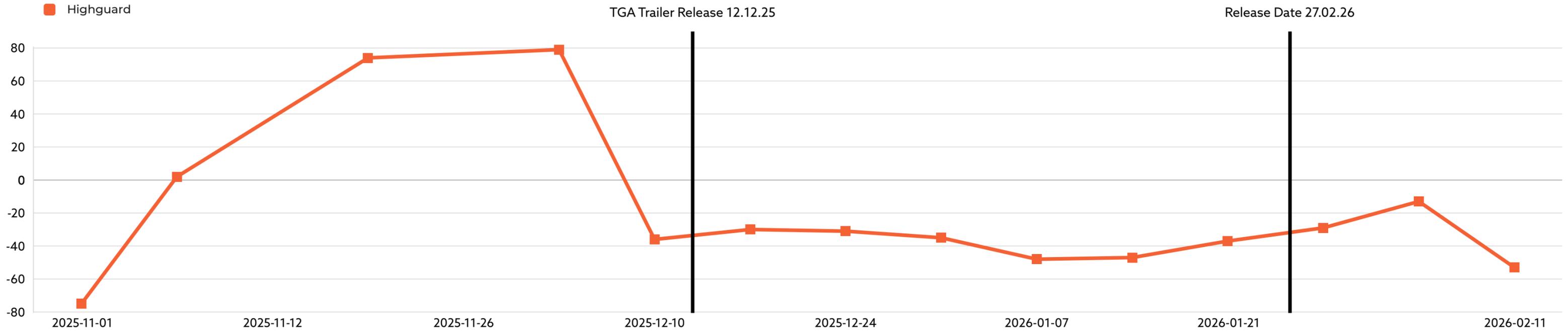
Sources

All | User Reviews | Online Communities | Social

Source	# Interactions	% Interactions	Average Sentiment	# Est Community Members	
YouTube	130,076	47	-46	71,566	→
Reddit	61,562	22	-37	14,749	→
Steam Discussion	28,821	10	-50	5,384	→
Steam	27,832	10	-13	27,832	→
TikTok	14,191	5	-13	8,455	→
Twitter Replies	7,337	3	7	4,780	→
YouTube Official	3,190	1	7	1,858	→
Twitter Mentions	2,414	1	40	1,402	→
Facebook Pages	500	0	15	495	→
Total	275,923	100		135,689	

SENTIMENT VARIATION OVER TIME

Overall Sentiment Change



Highguard's Sentiment Variation Over-Time Chart. Timeframe: November 1st to February 17th 2026. Image/data sourced from our 'Over Time Feature' on the @PlayerXP Platform. .

Initial Announcement (December 12, 2025)

The announcement of Highguard at The Game Awards sparked both excitement and scepticism. While some responses were positive, criticism dominated, with many citing the game's perceived generic design. Leading up to release, the developers released no further communications or marketing, leaving players uncertain about key game features until launch day.

Release (January 26, 2026)

Highguard saw a post-launch surge, peaking at over 100,000 concurrent players. Initial excitement soon gave way to disappointment due to gameplay, optimisation, and enjoyment issues. Player sentiment dropped sharply, creating a divided community: while many expressed frustration, a segment remained optimistic and willing to give the game a chance.

Post-Release (January 27 to February 17, 2026)

Sentiment for Highguard remained mixed in the weeks following release. While some players remained hopeful, criticism persisted, with notable downturns, such as a -56 score on February 16. The dedicated community actively suggested gameplay and quality-of-life improvements, reflecting both frustration and a willingness to see the developers adapt.

SENTIMENT DRIVERS

1. 5v5

The 5v5 mode was well received and widely praised, but overall frustrations with the game limited its positive impact. While the mode stood out as a highlight, many players remained dissatisfied with other aspects of the experience.

2. Raid

The mechanics of Highguard's "Raids" are overall positively received, with players appreciating the strategic depth they add to the game. However, this excitement was tempered by ongoing concerns about game stability and balance, and was insufficient to shift the overall sentiment.

3. Free

Highguard's free-to-play model helped draw in players, offering a risk-free way to try the game. While this initially boosted engagement, many players reported negative experiences that the free model could not offset, contributing to a significant post-launch drop-off and mixed community sentiment.

4. Apex

Community discussions frequently compared Highguard to Apex Legends, praising its fast-paced gameplay and familiar mechanics. However, many also used these comparisons to highlight a perceived lack of polish and quality relative to established titles.

5. Horse

The introduction of mounts drew interest, with some players enjoying the novelty and potential for dynamic combat. However, critiques of their execution tempered enthusiasm, reflecting broader disappointment with how several game features were implemented.

Most Positive

Topic	Count	All Time Sentiment
5v5	7,189	4
Raid	4,869	-17
Free	9,927	-18
Apex	11,285	-30
Horse	7,530	-31

Positive Sentiment Drivers Summary

While the positive sentiment drivers for Highguard highlight aspects that players found enjoyable, they exist alongside significant dissatisfaction. The excitement surrounding these aspects was often overshadowed by frustrations with the game's overall performance and execution. Regardless, there is still a prevailing sentiment amongst groups of players that reflects the community's hope for improvement, even as they grapple with the game's current shortcomings.

SENTIMENT DRIVERS

1. Fail

Discussions around Highguard often centred on its perceived "failure," with many players disappointed by its execution. This sentiment was reinforced by retention issues, as reports indicated over 90% of players did not continue after trying the game.

2. Generic

Many players criticised Highguard for a perceived lack of originality, labelling it generic and uninspired. Comparisons to successful peers in the genre highlighted its lack of a unique identity, with familiar mechanics failing to meet expectations and leaving the community disappointed.

3. Money

Players expressed concerns about the game's monetisation strategies, with many feeling that it was designed primarily to generate revenue rather than to provide a quality gaming experience. This perception of prioritising money over quality led to further disenchantment among players, who felt that the game was not made with their interests in mind.

4. Studio

Wildlight Entertainment, the studio behind Highguard, faced scrutiny and criticism from the community as players expressed frustration with its decisions and management, particularly amid layoffs and perceived missteps in game development.

5. Market

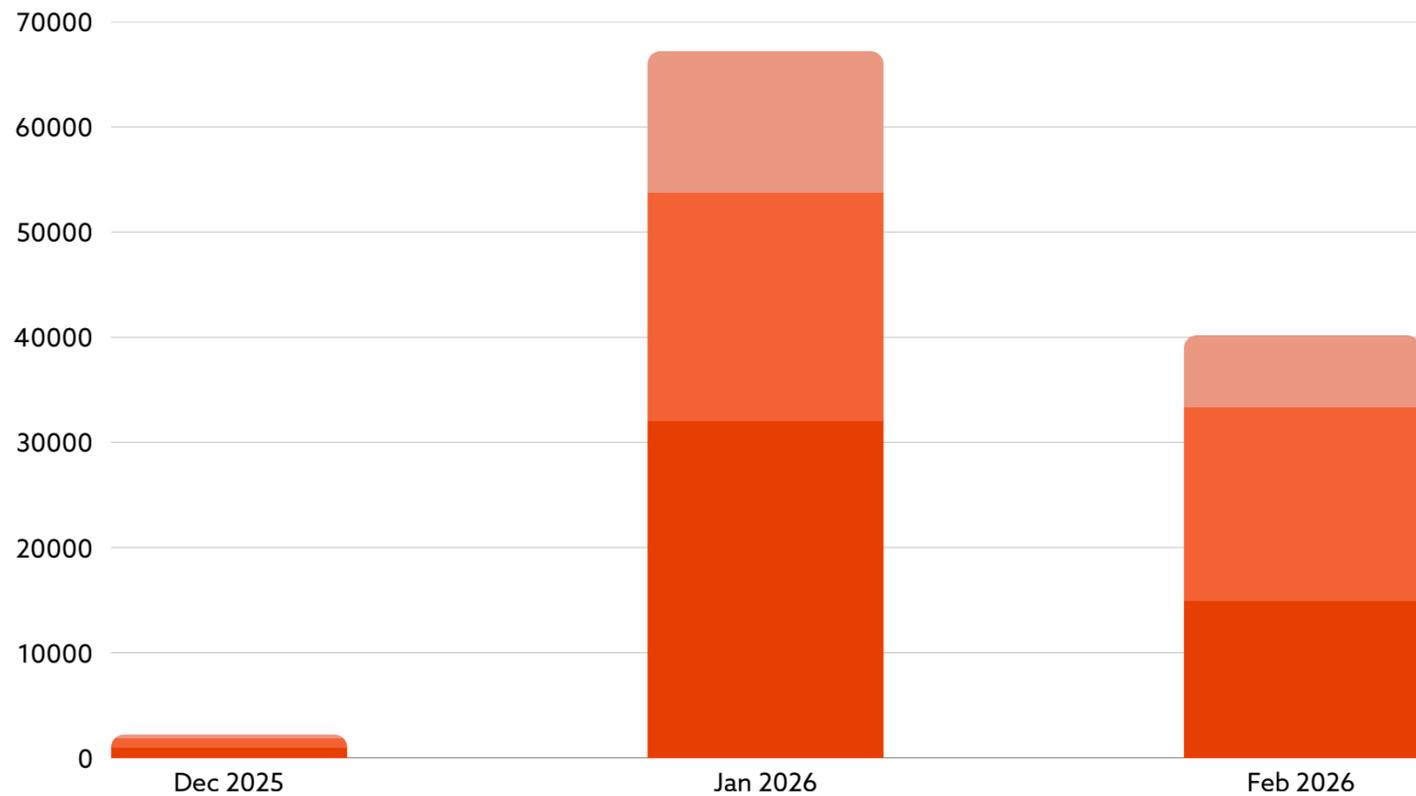
Players noted that the gaming ecosystem was saturated with similar titles, leading to a lack of interest in yet another hero shooter. This market saturation, combined with the game's perceived lack of innovation, contributed to a sense of apathy towards its release.

Most Negative

Topic	Count	All Time Sentiment
Fail	5,874	-90
Generic	4,626	-79
Money	6,976	-79
Studio	4,777	-75
Market	5,057	-72

Negative Sentiment Drivers Summary

The negative sentiment drivers for Highguard reflect a community grappling with disappointment and frustration. The game's perceived failure, generic design, monetisation strategies, studio management, and market saturation all contributed to its overall negative reception, highlighting the challenges Highguard faced in a competitive gaming landscape.



Due to there being little to no data on Highguard prior to its initial announcement and no marketing afterwards, the month of November has been excluded, and there's much less available data in the month of December.

Top 3 Discussed Categories

GAMEPLAY

48,010 Interactions in Period

Most Discussed Topics:

Map Gameplay Shooter

-36

Sentiment

DEVELOPER

41,088 Interactions in Period

Most Discussed Topics:

Developers Devs Team

-64

Sentiment

ONLINE SYSTEMS

20,513 Interactions in Period

Most Discussed Topics:

Matches Team Map

-52

Sentiment



MOST DISCUSSED CATEGORIES



Gameplay

The sentiment surrounding gameplay is predominantly negative, with players expressing frustration over various aspects of the game mechanics. Many comments highlight issues with the gameplay loop, stating that it feels disjointed and lacks engagement. The general consensus is that, while there are interesting ideas, the execution leaves much to be desired, leading to disappointment among players.



Developer

Discussion surrounding the developers was highly negative, centring on perceived mismanagement and poor marketing. Many players felt expectations set at The Game Awards were not met, and criticised the team's perceived arrogance and lack of responsiveness to feedback. This category generated the strongest negative sentiment, reflecting growing frustration and disconnect between players and the studio.



Online Systems

Sentiment around online systems, particularly matchmaking and server performance, was largely negative. Players cited poor matchmaking quality, repeated matchups, and server stability issues that undermined the overall experience. Feedback consistently emphasised the need for improvements in matchmaking and reliability as critical to long-term player satisfaction.

PART 1

GAMEPLAY CATEGORY

48,009

INTERACTIONS
Over Period

33,696

EST. COMMUNITY SIZE
Over Period

-36

SENTIMENT
Over Period

Most Positive

Topic	Count	All Time Sentiment
Unique	2,115	-1
5v5	4,045	-6
Moments	2,575	-11
Gunplay	3,860	-11
Mount	2,228	-14

Most Negative

Topic	Count	All Time Sentiment
Ai	2,760	-60
Design	3,416	-53
Devs	3,909	-53
Player	4,002	-53
Launch	2,428	-52

Gameplay Mechanics and Flow:

Many players criticised the gameplay mechanics as feeling clunky and unrefined, specifically noting that the resource-gathering phase feels tedious and detracts from the action, leading to a lack of engagement during matches.

Performance Issues:

A recurring complaint is the game's performance, with players reporting low frame rates and optimisation issues, leading many to feel the game is not enjoyable, especially in competitive settings.

Character Design and Uniqueness:

The character design has also come under fire, with players describing the characters as "textbook" and lacking depth, with many players looking for more originality and novelty in character design.

PART 1

DEVELOPER CATEGORY

41,088

INTERACTIONS
Over Period

26,579

EST. COMMUNITY SIZE
Over Period

-64

SENTIMENT
Over Period

Most Positive

Topic	Count	All Time Sentiment
5v5	1,824	-21
Loot	1,710	-44
Base	2,595	-45
Support	2,615	-47
3v3	2,730	-48

Most Negative

Topic	Count	All Time Sentiment
Blame	2,181	-94
Fail	2,380	-91
Money	2,549	-83
Companies	1,512	-82
Game's	2,641	-82

Community Engagement and Feedback:

While some players acknowledged the developers' attempts to engage with the community, many felt that these efforts were insufficient. However, this was often overshadowed by the overall sentiment of disappointment with the game's launch and performance. Players expressed a desire for more structured community-building efforts and for more opportunities and content that would help gamers establish a connection with Highguard.

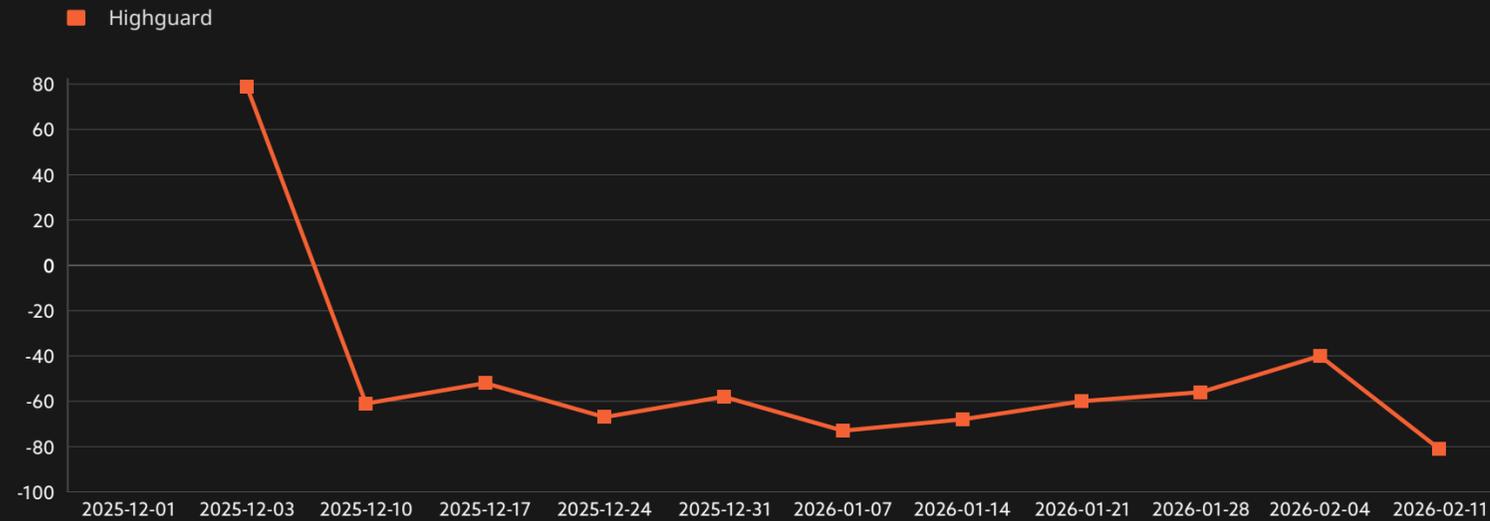
Conclusion:

Inconsistent communication, reactive PR, and limited community engagement eroded trust in Wildlight Entertainment. Early layoffs and defensive statements amplified frustration and uncertainty, leaving players doubtful about long-term support. While some remain cautiously optimistic about the remaining team, overall sentiment emphasises a strong demand for accountability and structured community engagement.

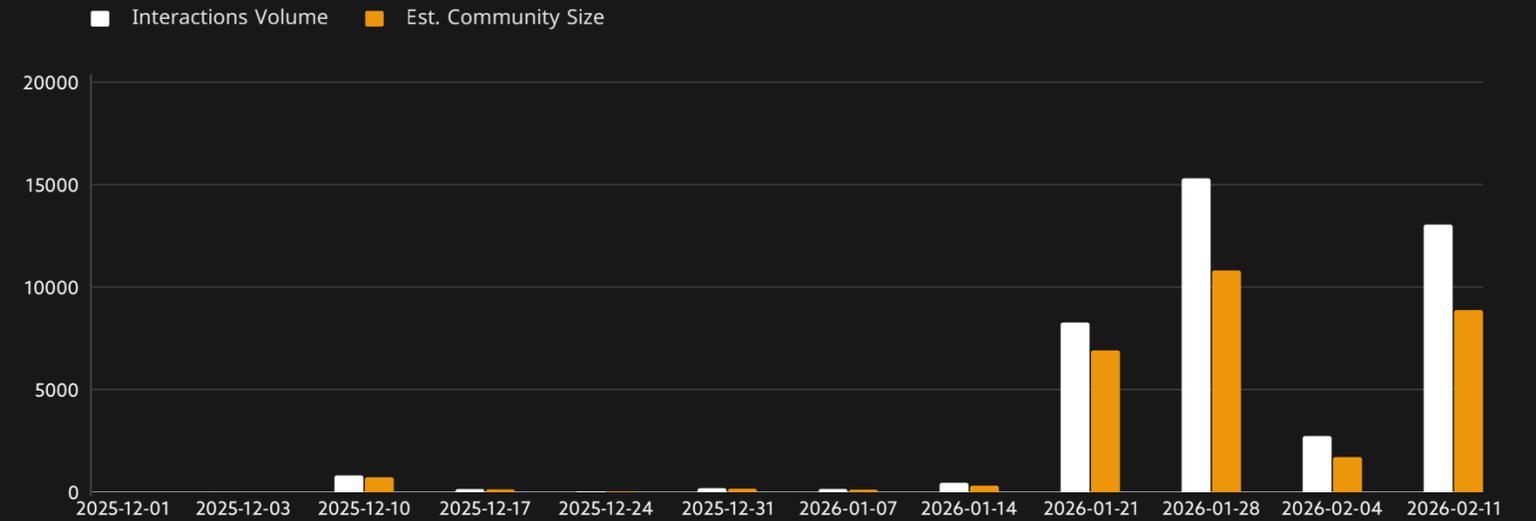
PART 2

DEVELOPER CATEGORY

Sentiment Change



Interactions



Lack of Effective Communication:

A recurring theme in player feedback is the developers' failure to maintain consistent communication with the community. Many players expressed frustration at the lack of updates and engagement from the developers after the game's launch, leaving them feeling neglected and uninformed, which has contributed to a negative perception of the game.



Negative Impact of Marketing Decisions:

The marketing strategy employed by the developers, particularly the decision to showcase the game at The Game Awards, has been heavily criticised. Players felt that this decision backfired, leading to heightened expectations that were not met. The lack of a solid marketing campaign following the reveal left players feeling abandoned and confused about the game's direction.



Desire for Accountability:

There is a strong call from the community for the developers to take accountability for the game's shortcomings. Many players believe that the developers should acknowledge the issues and work towards rectifying them. This lack of accountability has further alienated players, leading to a sense of distrust towards the developers.

DEVELOPER REACTIONS AND THEIR **IMPACT**

Perceived Disconnect from Player Feedback:

Many players expressed that the developers seemed out of touch with the community's needs and desires. Feedback indicated that the developers operated in a "toxic positivity" bubble, where criticism was not welcomed, leading players to feel their concerns were dismissed, leading to a growing resentment towards the developers

Calls for Accountability and Change:

There is a strong community demand that the developers take accountability for the game's shortcomings. Players are urging the developers to listen to feedback and make necessary changes.

Hope for Remaining Staff:

Despite the negative sentiment, some players expressed hope for the remaining core group of developers who intend to support the game, with various comments reflecting a desire for the game to succeed and see improvements.

Impact of Developer Responses on Community Trust:

The developers' reactions to criticism have significantly impacted community trust. Many players feel that the developers blame external factors, such as content creators and the gaming community, for the game's failure rather than taking responsibility for their decisions. This perception of blame-shifting has further alienated players, leading to a decline in support for the game.

Public Comments from the Team

"The trailer at The Game Awards was meant to be an announcement trailer. The plan was to announce, go dark, and then the next thing that we want players to see is the game,"
"If the reception had been totally different, it would have been the same plan. The key is, you've got to play the game."

[- Jason McCord, Design & Creative Director](#)

"Look, I wish Highguard had been received better. I wish the feedback had been better," "Part of that's on us, right? We didn't put our heads in the sand. We, as a team, saw the feedback. We're gamers ourselves. We're online ourselves reading the feedback."

[- Dusty Welch, CEO & Founder](#)

"Geoff came in and wanted to do something special and put us in the TGAs. We were gonna do a shadowdrop, you know, since day one, almost since forming this company; we did it with Apex and it worked well."

[- Chad Grenier, Founder](#)

"This has mainstream hit written all over it."
"If there's one project nobody in the industry is worried will fail, it's yours."

I'm not saying our failure is purely the fault of gamer culture and that the game would have thrived without the negative discourse, but it absolutely played a role. All products are at the whims of the consumers, and the consumers put absurd amounts of effort into slandering Highguard. And it worked

[- Josh Sobel, Developer \(from a deleted X/Twitter Post\)](#)

WHY WAS HIGHGUARD UNSUCCESSFUL?

Findings indicate a structural mismatch between Highguard's launch strategy, product positioning, and live service requirements. The outcome is best explained as a compound failure across awareness, readiness, and retention infrastructure.

1. Balancing Awareness and Community Investment

Available data presents Highguard as an awareness-first launch without any infrastructure for player retention. The release strategy heavily relied upon a high-visibility reveal at The Game Awards for its marketing, as Highguard did not engage in any other industry standard pre-release practices. Publicly available industry benchmarks suggest premium event trailers can cost up to \$400,000 for a 1-minute trailer or up to \$1,000,000 for a 3-minute trailer.

Whether or not that level of spend applied here, across pre-launch materials and community timelines reviewed, there is no evidence of a structured public beta, large-scale playtest, or sustained creator seeding program. Similarly, no consistent cadence of community-facing communications such as roadmap commitments, regular developer updates, or scaled player support preparation was observed prior to launch. The data support a strategy optimised for initial reach rather than early retention.

2. Bridging the Gap: Aligning Ambition with Operational Execution

Available signals suggest disproportionate investment in awareness-generating moments relative to long-term community retention capability. In retention-driven service models, underinvestment in player-facing infrastructure results in more unpredictable, volatile game launches. The observed sequence of events is consistent with a model where growth assumptions were front-loaded while relationship-building systems were deferred.



Screenshot from the game Highguard. Image sourced from the official presskit from © Wildlight Entertainment

3. Amplified Negative Sentiment in Developer Communications

Multiple industry outlets confirmed rapid layoffs at Wildlight Entertainment shortly after launch, with the studio stating that most of the team had been let go. At the same time, a smaller group remained to support Highguard.

Community sentiment tracking across creator and discussion platforms shows that public narratives around layoffs and responsibility attribution amplified negative perception during the critical early retention window. The timing and tone of communications appear to have contributed to declining player confidence rather than stabilising it. Even where nuance existed, the perceived posture was defensive rather than accountable.

WHY WAS HIGHGUARD UNSUCCESSFUL?



Screenshot from the game Highguard. Image sourced from the official presskit from © Wildlight Entertainment



Screenshot from the game Highguard. Image sourced from the official presskit from © Wildlight Entertainment

4. Product readiness did not match positioning

Positioning analysis (PR coverage, reviews, players' reactions) shows the title entered an already mature hero shooter market with entrenched player investment in long-standing ecosystems. The available gameplay coverage and creator reviews consistently highlight that Highguard possesses a number of familiar core systems without much innovation, making it hard for players to justify switching over to Highguard.

This aligns with early engagement patterns documented across creator impressions and community discussions: high awareness, followed by a rapid drop-off due to perceived lack of differentiation and depth of progression.

Community feedback at launch focused on Highguard's limited differentiation, balance issues, progression problems, and insufficient onboarding clarity. In such a crowded genre, Highguard failed to communicate or consistently deliver a compelling reason for players to switch.

5. Lack of a Unified Community Building Strategy

Analysis of official communications and community discussions indicates limited evidence of a defined pre-launch to post-launch community lifecycle. Highguard had no structured pre-launch onboarding funnel, limited creator partnerships, a reactive rather than proactive approach to community communication, and insufficient visible scaling of support channels.

For a free-to-play service model, these absences strongly correlate with rapid player falloff. The data suggests community operations were not resourced or empowered proportionally to the intended audience scale. In PlayerXP terms, the game launched without a retention-first operating model.

FINAL INSIGHTS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01. Gameplay Perception

Gameplay perception drives retention, with stability and polish as the primary expectations of players. Early reactions to Highguard show that mechanical feel and performance shaped first impressions and accelerated player falloff.

02. Saturated Markets

Differentiation is required to justify switching in saturated markets. Within a competitive ecosystem led by affirmed IPs, a familiar design without clear innovation weakened Highguard's perceived value.

03. Retention Mechanism

Communication responsiveness is a core retention mechanism. Limited acknowledgement of player feedback contributed to expectation gaps and declining confidence in long-term support.

04. Negative Narratives

Operational developments directly influence sentiment formation. Layoffs at Wildlight Entertainment during the launch window intensified uncertainty and reinforced negative narratives.

05. Community Infrastructure

Awareness without community infrastructure creates unstable adoption. Visibility generated an influx of players, but players consistently cited the need for clear communication, engagement, and trust-building beyond PR exposure.

06. Communication Patterns

Developer messaging shapes discourse stability. Post-launch communication patterns shifted the discussion from product experience toward community dynamics, amplifying polarisation rather than restoring confidence.

FINAL CONCLUSION ON HIGHGUARD

The Highguard launch faced challenges due to high awareness but limited product differentiation and community readiness. Outcomes from sentiment tracking and player discussions indicated a focus on reach over retention, entering a competitive market without a clear value proposition. Following the release, Wildlight Entertainment laid off most of the development team, raising player concerns about support continuity and worsening negative sentiment in community discussions.



SOCIALS



Wildlight Entertainment is a new, fully-funded entertainment studio comprised of talented creators from some of the biggest IPs in gaming, including Apex Legends, Call of Duty, and Titanfall. We are driven by our **deep passion** for making AAA games that leave a lasting impact on the world, and we match that drive with a commitment to quality in every aspect of our work. We foster a **positive, supportive work environment** built on mutual trust and open communication, where everyone has a voice, and everyone is treated with respect. With a bias for action and a belief in each other, we're betting on ourselves to deliver truly unforgettable gaming experiences.

HIGHGUARD

SOCIALS



Highguard is a **PvP raid shooter** where players will ride, fight, and raid as **Wardens, arcane gunslingers** sent to fight for control of a mythical continent. **Team up**, secure your base, then ride out across vast uncharted lands to loot, harvest resources, and upgrade your arsenal as you face off against a rival Warden crew looking to claim your territory as their own. Battle for possession of **the legendary Shieldbreaker** in the open field; fight to carry it to the enemy base to bring down their shields, then raid to destroy their base before they can destroy yours.



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