

From web stores to intelligent player services

How identity, data, and D2C quietly prepared studios for the next chapter of player engagement



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Harri Vainio is a Strategic Designer with 30 years of experience across industries and projects in service business models, service concepts and visions, and customer experience design. At Reaktor Gaming and Entertainment, Harri helps game publishers and studios improve direct-to-consumer sales and out-of-game player relations.



Harri Vainio

Director of Strategic Design,
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Introduction

Over the past few years, studios have built strong first-party identity systems, direct commerce channels, and data pipelines that span multiple titles. Originally created to avoid platform commissions and secure first-party data ownership, these systems now form the groundwork for a new generation of player-facing services, such as predictive live operations and more intelligent player experiences.

The shift from platform dependence toward first-party ecosystems has created a new level of flexibility. Studios understand their players better, control more of the commercial surface, and gain the agility needed to manage fast-paced, hyper-personalized offers and campaigns.

Studios already rely on AI in development and creative workflows, and expectations around its future use are high. More meaningful opportunities emerge when AI and ML (machine learning) combine forces on top of solid foundations: strong identity systems, unified data pipelines, and management with direct-to-player commerce.

These foundations make it possible for AI+ML to move from experimentation into practical and intelligent player-facing services.


The real benefits of going off-platform

The move off-platform began with a simple motive: publishers wanted freedom. External pressures, such as changing platform policies, regulatory decisions, and the Epic vs. Apple case, created the first cracks in the app store monopoly.


What started as a workaround for commissions quickly became a strategic channel for player engagement. With the Epic vs. Apple ruling, apps can link to the web to purchase in-game items, currency, and battle passes through publishers' own web shops. Today, 57% of gaming leaders sell direct-to-consumer (D2C), and 83% expect to do so within a year. Publishers already doing it report that 5% to 49% of their total revenue comes from these channels¹.

But avoiding platform commission was only the spark. Once publishers controlled the commercial surface, they gained something far more valuable: an unfiltered view of the player relationship. First-party data helps them understand, support, and retain players in ways that the old ecosystem never allowed.

This is where the real momentum behind D2C lies today, not just in bypassing fees, but in shaping the worlds players belong to, not only play in.



57% of gaming leaders already sell direct-to-consumer



83% of gaming leaders will be using D2C a year from now

The D2C maturity scale: Where do you rank?

As publishers shift toward first-party ecosystems, D2C becomes part of a broader journey rather than an end state. Each level of maturity opens new capabilities in identity, data, and service evolution.

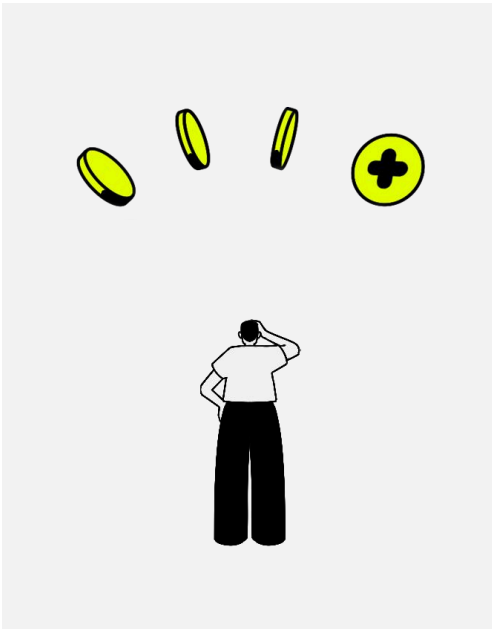
In our maturity ranking, starting with a simple single-page store with bundles, virtual currency packs, and an easy checkout process is often enough to drive initial transactions. But basic webshops have their drawbacks: players must manually enter their in-game ID to receive credits, which increases support requests due to manual errors.

That's why larger publishers are moving to unified player accounts. You can deliver game items through validated channels and explore new ways to improve the player experience. When players can create their accounts, first-party data flows in. Once you own the data, you can analyze it and better target the offering. That's when things get interesting.

Data unlocks services such as hyper-personalized experiences, creator ecosystems, and loyalty programs that progress player identity not just in the game, but across the surrounding ecosystem of services.

At the highest level, the goal is deeper immersion. How can AI orchestrate the player experience, tying gameplay, support, and commerce together into one immersive world? In an economy where everyone is competing for attention, seamlessness is lucrative, and those who master it could gain an edge.

At every level, there are both rewards and risks. This maturity scale helps publishers see where they are today and what's possible next. Where do you rank?



Operational maturity of intelligent commerce and player relationships

Game

Core gameplay experience that attracts and retains players through content and updates

In-app Sales

Monetization through app store transactions and item purchases

Web Store

Direct-to-player sales channels that expand reach and reduce platform dependency

ID & Data

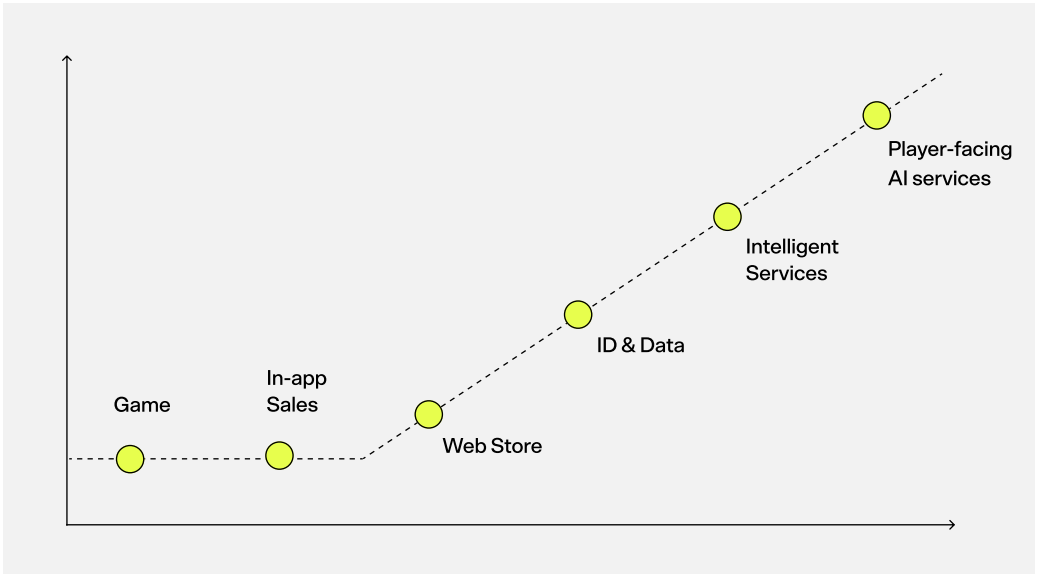
Unified player accounts and first-party data connecting gameplay, commerce, and communications

Intelligent Services

Loyalty programs, creator ecosystems, and AI-assisted operations that activate first-party data

Player-facing AI services

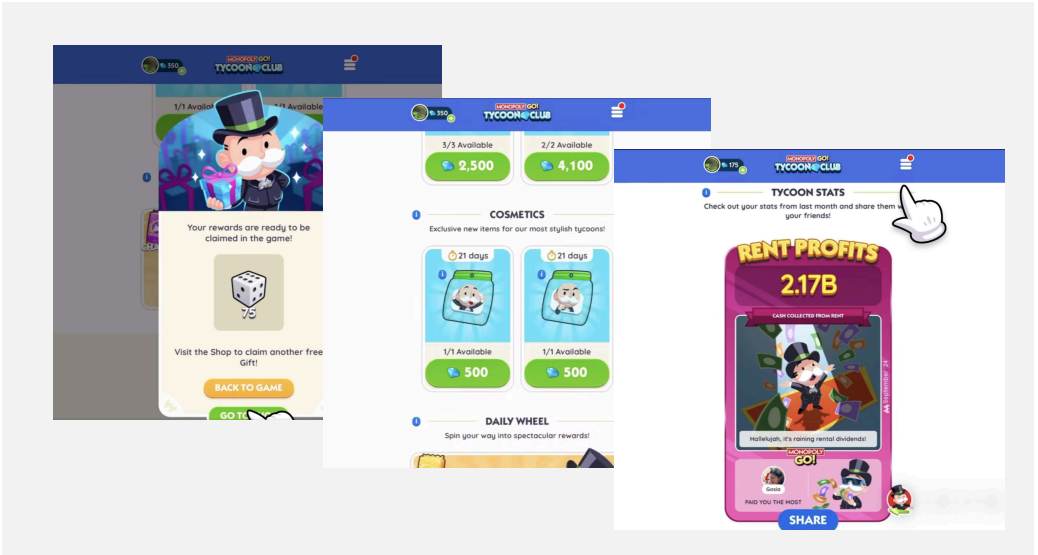
AI-driven services that adapt to player intentions and context across gameplay, commerce, and support



How data opens doorways to intelligent player relationships

Once D2C channels and identity systems are in place, data becomes the real differentiator. First-party insights enable everything from smarter segmentation to richer communities, deeper loyalty mechanics, and eventually the intelligent services that build long-term relationships with players.

According to FastSpring, publishers now generate between 5% and 49% of total revenue through direct-to-consumer (D2C) channels, showing the strong potential of a webshop strategy. But the value of going direct doesn't stop there. Once publishers establish these channels, the focus shifts from selling items to creating rich player experiences. First-party data from direct sales gives them sharper customer insights, deeper brand loyalty mechanics, and paves the way for more intelligent services. Here's how leading publishers are putting that data to work:



01 Connected fandoms

No longer are loyalty schemes merely about stacking up points. To engage players on a deeper level, publishers are building belonging. Many now take cues from football clubs like [Liverpool FC](#)² and retail giants like [adidas](#), who use digital fandoms to keep fans emotionally connected. Think account-wide identity rewards, loyalty clubs that unlock social status, and creator programs that cultivate community.

Who's doing it?

MONOPOLY GO!'s Tycoon Club says it rewards players with loyalty points for web-exclusive purchases, signaling social status within the game³. They can use these points to buy cosmetics and bundles that only members can flaunt, encouraging off-platform spending. Each purchase progresses the player's account, keeping them emotionally engaged.

Supercell offers account-level rewards that span multiple game titles. Players can earn ID Rewards Points in one game and redeem them for rewards in any other Supercell game⁴. Buying ID Rewards from the Supercell webshop gives fans better value (+10% currency on the web), while cross-game points and bonuses turn each purchase into long-term progression for the player account.

Supercell goes one step further by nurturing its creator community. On a dedicated webpage for creators, Supercell explains how eligible content creators with a following on TikTok, YouTube, or Twitch can work their way up its tiered partner program⁵. As they create content about Supercell's games, they unlock exclusive perks. Top creators can even earn money through creator codes when a follower makes a purchase.

Why it's interesting

Publishers are shifting from a game-centric to a player-centric mindset to win brand loyalty and emotional engagement. Whether it's an in-app interaction or a webshop purchase, players should feel they are progressing their identity, not just their gameplay.

Reaktor it.

Ask us about loyalty programs and platforms that let players shop, connect, and create content across games, devices, and communities.

02 Hyper- personalized gaming

D2C channels are changing how publishers engage with players. With first-party data, they can deliver tailored experiences, targeted in-game offers, personalised messages, and behavior-based reactivation campaigns. Large publishers with many games can use publisher-level IDs and contextual insights to cross-promote titles that match each player's interests.

Who's doing it?

Gameloft is redefining player engagement through first-party data and AI. By blending player accounts with behavioral algorithms, Gameloft for Brands segments audiences and delivers messages that genuinely connect. "Thanks to AI and specific algorithms from NumberEight, we can deduce behaviors – are they a shopper, an athlete, a traveler? – and combine that with contextual data. This makes contextual targeting even more precise"⁶, says Hugues Ossart, Global Marketing Director at Gameloft for Brands.

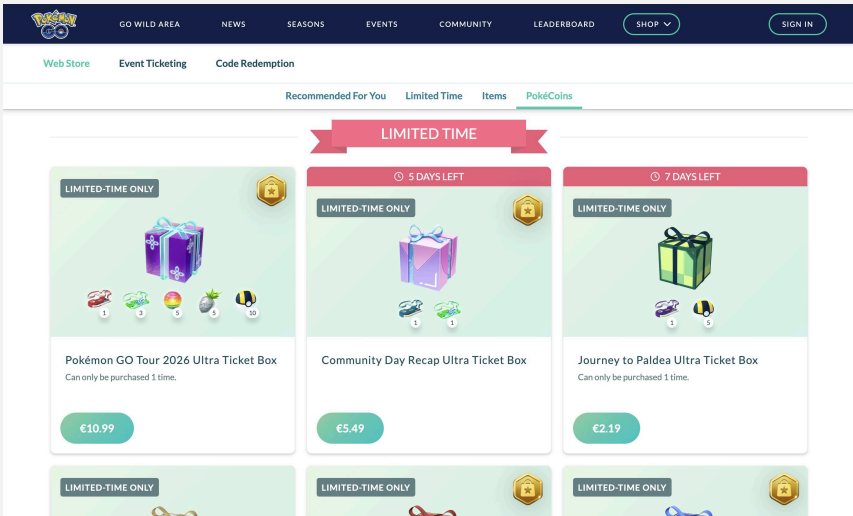
Niantic connects its webshop directly with in-game activity in Pokémon GO. When visiting the Pokémon GO webshop, you can see how web offers sync with live-ops events, like 'buy PokéCoins on the webshop before Community Day', and mix personalized bundles⁷ with community messages. This sparks more meaningful connections that tell players, "We know you're part of this community, there's always something for you."

Reaktor it.

[Ask us](#) about tools and pipelines that connect gameplay, commerce, and player behavior for hyper-personalized gaming.

Why it's interesting

With richer access to data and behavioural insights, publishers can speak directly to the player. In practice, this level of insight supports smarter reactivation strategies and stronger player relationships. If a high-value player drops off, you can win them back with hyper-personalized messages, reminding them why they loved the game, and incentivizing them with a player-specific offer. When interactions like this link to in-game behavior, players stop being user IDs and become individuals. It's a shift that can make players feel more seen, transforming purchases and logins into stronger connections with the brand.



03 Immersive experiences

There are only so many hours in a day, and everyone's fighting for your attention. Entertainment giants like Netflix win by eliminating friction: autoplaying the next episode keeps viewers hooked. As Netflix's CEO, Reed Hastings, once said, "Netflix actually competes with sleep – and we're winning."

Games can adopt this thinking. Game-branded webshops that mirror the game's look and feel make the jump from app to web stores effortless, keeping players immersed longer. When issues arise, in-game AI support tools can solve them quickly so players stay in the experience.

Who's doing it?

Just take a look at the Supercell's store landing page and you'll see how it runs a central store hub with separate branded storefronts for Clash of Clans, Clash Royale, Brawl Stars, and more⁸. Matching the webshop to the in-game user interface reduces friction and context switching, so players don't feel like they're buying on an unfamiliar site.

Game-branded storefronts also build trust. When the webshop looks and reads exactly like the game, players trust that the buying journey will be seamless, minimizing drop-off at purchase.

Reaktor it.

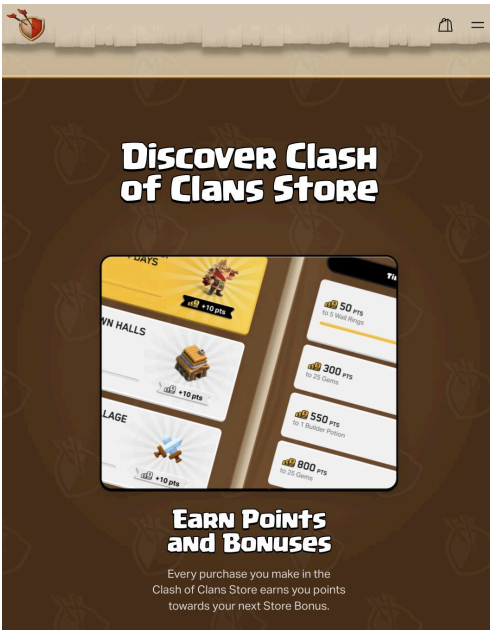
Ask us about AI-assisted player support, or a game-branded webshop that work with your game's logic, bundles, and visuals.

Rovio, publisher of Angry Birds, keeps players immersed through in-game chat and AI-powered support. AI can be expensive to use in large volumes, so it's important to create the right workflows to direct simple and complex issues to the right tools. According to Helpshift, Rovio uses AI to surface relevant answers from FAQs, ensuring simple issues are resolved through self-service while more complex ones are routed elsewhere. More than 93%⁹ of all player issues across Rovio's 23 games are now handled in-game, reducing context switching and keeping players immersed.

Why it's interesting

We live in a competitive attention economy, where seamless experiences can be lucrative. Five out of six Supercell games have all surpassed \$1 billion in revenue⁹. Its webshop strategy is a pillar of that success.

By connecting gameplay, commerce, and support, publishers can achieve something rare: uninterrupted immersion. Keeping players immersed with game-branded webshops reduces bounce rates and abandoned carts. Meanwhile, AI-assisted support can protect the emotional bond with the player and ensure every interaction feels smooth, responsive, and part of the same world. These elements work to promote uninterrupted play.



"More than 93% of all player issues across Rovio's 23 games are now handled in-game, reducing context switching and keeping players immersed."

04 Publisher as protector

Trust is hard to build and easy to lose, especially in gaming. Anti-cheat tools like aimbot detectors are essential in competitive gaming to keep play fair. When publishers launch D2C webshops, they also become retailers, responsible for preventing fraud, hacking, and transaction issues.

While it's easy to create a webshop, it's much harder to earn player trust. A key part of that trust comes from data. Once publishers operate their own webshops and account systems, they gain visibility into transaction patterns, account behavior, and anomalies that remain invisible in platform-only setups.

As publishers mature their data pipelines, protection can shift from reactive moderation to proactive detection, identifying suspicious behavior before it escalates into player-facing problems.

Who's doing it?

When downloading Fortnite, you'll see how Epic Games requires every Fortnite player to install Easy Anti-Cheat before playing the game. "We prevent game-breaking exploits, make game code harder for cheat creators to analyze... and utilize statistical analysis and machine learning algorithms to identify suspicious activity", says Epic in a 2025 anti-cheat update¹⁰. This protects matchmaking and deters cheaters. Epic also enlists its community to report bad actors and follows up with lawsuits to reinforce its zero-tolerance.

Reaktor it.

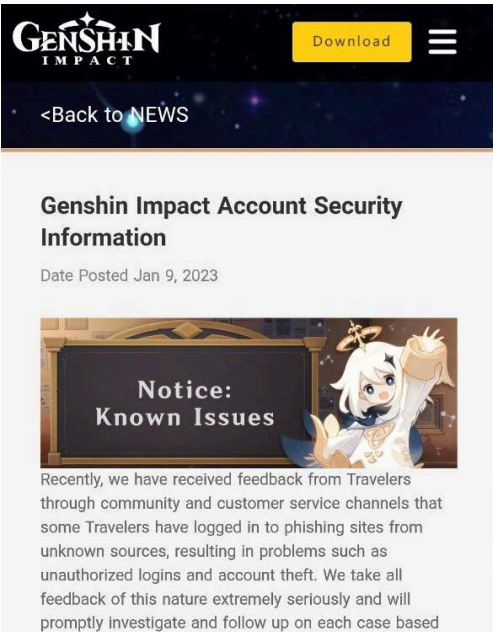
[Ask us](#) about fraud and anti-cheat tooling or parental control and ecosystem safety services.

Genshin Impact developer HoHoUniverse protects player accounts through verification systems and clear communication. It warns players about phishing and third-party ‘top-up’ scams through regular updates on the Genshin Impact website, while maintaining an official website where players can purchase game items.

Supercell actively guards against fake stores¹¹ and account theft. In a ‘stay safe update’ about spotting fake supercell store websites, it warns players against scams and offers ways to recover targeted accounts. It also protects Supercell IDs with verification codes, and rewards repeat purchases through the official store with loyalty Bonus Tracks and Stamp Cards (pulling fans away from too-good-to-be-true offers).

Why it’s interesting

Publishers must act as protectors of their communities. Nurturing trust means taking action to protect the player, gameplay, and the purchase journey. Clear communication, anti-cheat systems, secure webshops, and loyalty programs all contribute to fairer and safer player experiences. When done right, these protective strategies can strengthen the bond between players and the brand.



AI as the next frontier

While the shift to D2C began as a financial move, its longer-term impact has been the access it provides to first-party player data.

AI is already present across game development and creative production. What's changing now is its arrival in intelligent player-facing services. Early forms of AI-assisted support, personalization, segmentation, and live-ops optimization are already visible in the market, and studios are beginning to explore how these systems might work across multiple titles and touchpoints.

In our experience, the most meaningful opportunities appear when AI and ML (machine learning) sit on top of strong, structured data. This is why first-party identity systems, unified data pipelines, and direct-to-player commerce matter. They provide the context AI needs to respond meaningfully to players and situations.

Emerging technical standards in retail, such as the Agentic Commerce Protocol (ACP) and the Model Context Protocol (MCP), show how AI agents can read structured data, check stock, and complete secure transactions. Once gaming ecosystems adopt similar structures, AI will be able to support specific player intentions: recommending items that fit each player's journey, helping assemble teams, or smoothing the transition between gameplay and support.

In an economy where everyone is fighting for attention, seamlessness can be lucrative. Publishers investing in strong data infrastructure and owned ecosystems are better positioned for what comes next.

In the next chapter of gaming services, direct access won't just mean direct revenue, but more intelligent, more connected, and more immersive worlds.



"The most meaningful opportunities appear when AI and ML sit on top of strong, structured data. This is why first-party identity systems, unified data pipelines, and direct-to-player commerce matter. They provide the context AI needs to respond meaningfully to players and situations. "

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About Reaktor

Growing a good game into a successful one takes more than exceptional game design. Players expect a seamless experience from start to finish – whether it's logging in, saving progress, making purchases, or chatting with friends. Every interaction matters.

Reaktor helps gaming companies level up with scalable, cutting-edge technology, player-centered UI/UX design, and strong community and brand-building expertise. Our senior experts have worked with gaming companies for years and know what it takes to impress your players with exceptionally well-executed solutions.

Teaming up with Reaktor allows both the game studio and the gaming community to focus on the one thing that matters the most – the game itself.

Reaktor. Go beyond the game.

Discover more: reaktor.com/gaming