CLICKS AREN'T PLAYERS.

Early-alpha marketing lessons
for solo indie developers

The good, the bad, and the expensive lessons
from the first Altered Earth playtest campaigns.

$538.82

in reach boosts

1 reported link click

$24.84

in traffic ads

485 reported link clicks

$25

tester fee

1 verified playtest

These outcomes are different. That is the lesson.

I'm building Altered Earth, a PC co-op sci-fi shooter and survival game, as a solo developer. Steam developer approval is still pending; this alpha is distributed on itch.io. My goal: 50 Windows 11 playtesters by November 7, 2026.

Snapshot through October 11, 2026. Small samples, changing landing pages, and incomplete attribution. This is a field report, not a proven growth formula. Spending details and limitations are on page 2.

01 / THE HONEST SCOREBOARD

What the money actually bought

Choose the outcome before you choose the campaign.

EXPERIMENT	ACTUAL SPEND	OBSERVED RESULT
Two X Quick promote boosts **Reach objective**	$538.82*	1 reported link click. No verified player acquisition result.
X Ads Manager **Website traffic**	$24.84	30,801 impressions; 485 link clicks; 1.57% click-through rate; about $0.05 per click.
Face-to-camera X post **Engagements objective**	$31.05	8,587 engagements; 1,349 video views; 27 link clicks. Followers rose from 6 to 8; attribution unproven.
Craigslist playtest gig **Compensated session**	$25 tester fee	1 verified completed playtest, a recording, written feedback, and a feedback form.

The bad: I bought the wrong outcome

Reach boosts were a poor fit for my immediate need: people playing the alpha. The traffic campaign produced much cheaper clicks, but clicks alone still could not tell me whether the game was getting tested. X defines these campaign objectives differently. [1]

The good: the traffic test became measurable

I split a $300 planned cap across keywords, follower lookalikes, and interests. Keywords barely delivered. That was a delivery finding, not proof that the other audiences brought better players. Downloads and launches were not reliably attributed to each group.

The ugly: large numbers can hide a tiny result

The engagement campaign had a separate $400 planned cap. Its follower total moved by two, and one of those follows appeared before the ad delivered. Dividing $31.05 by two would not establish a cost per acquired follower.

* The supplied notes give a later boost total of $538.82 ($220.34 + $318.48). The pause-time log recorded $535.90 for one click. Figures are snapshots, not a synchronized experiment. Planned caps are not spending. The $25 excludes developer time and any listing costs.

02 / FIX THE PATH TO THE GAME

Three ways I lost interested players

Every extra step asked a stranger to do more work.

1. The community came before the game

About 166 ad clicks produced zero uses of the three tracked Discord invites at the October 9 check. In a signed-out browser, the invite opened a registration form. That was a plausible source of friction; it does not prove why every visitor left.

What I would do: put the playable build and its requirements first. Offer Discord as a place for help and feedback after the download. Test the entire route while signed out.

2. The free build sat behind a key-claim form

I tried a Google Form that emailed an itch.io key. The first version also required Google sign-in. X halted ads linking to the page, and the support guidance in my notes pointed to the gated access flow.

I switched to a public, free itch.io download and aligned the ad, landing page, and listing. The replacement public-alpha ads were approved and delivering by the October 11 check.

What I would do: make the promised offer accessible and describe it consistently. This case does not establish a blanket ban on forms. X's published policy addresses misleading offers, restricted access used to evade review, excessive redirects, and nonfunctional calls to action. [2]

3. The page loaded, but the useful part stayed blank

The page body lived inside a slow Google Apps Script iframe. On October 11 I rebuilt it as native Wix content, placed the download button above the trailer, and added button tracking. The mobile PageSpeed audit returned 89; the earlier version failed to render in the audit.

What I would do: make the promise, requirements, and download button visible immediately. A better lab score confirms a technical improvement; it does not yet prove more people played.

> **THE MINIMUM USEFUL LANDING PAGE**
>
> Say what the game is, what the player can do now, which PC it needs, and how unfinished it is. Give one obvious download action, brief launch instructions, and a clear way to report a problem.

03 / MEASURE THE WHOLE JOURNEY

A download is still not a player

Use each counter to answer a different question.

STEP	EVIDENCE FROM THIS TEST / WHAT IT MEANS
Ad click	485 lifetime traffic-campaign link clicks. This includes earlier Discord and key-page destinations.
Site session	Wix showed roughly 80 sessions from x.com against roughly 500 reported X clicks. The windows and destinations differ.
Download-button click	Tracking added October 11. A button event proves a click, even if the ad platform labels it "Download."
Reported download	itch.io showed 66 downloads and 38 page views in its 30-day snapshot. These are not unique players.
Game launch	Telemetry showed 3 PCs on October 8 and 2 on October 9, with possible overlap: roughly 3-5 PCs across those days.
Session outcome	30 match starts and 1 recorded finish. Missing end events and short test runs must be investigated before calculating completion.

Do not turn these rows into a conversion-rate chart. They are different counters, time windows, destinations, and possibly different people. X also explains that a click is logged before a page necessarily finishes loading. [3]

Set up the evidence before buying more traffic

Record campaign/source, build version, first launch, session start, objective reached, session end, and crash reports. Separate your own testing and repeat sessions. Explain telemetry to testers and collect only what helps diagnose the playtest.

Keep source tags through the website journey. If attribution stops at the store, mark later launches as unknown; a campaign tag on a link does not automatically identify the downloaded game's player.

> **THE METRIC TO GROW TOWARD**
>
> **Cost per verified tester = attributable recruitment spend / unique verified testers.**
> Define "verified" first: a real session plus usable evidence or feedback. If the source or denominator is unknown, report that instead of inventing a cost.

04 / WHAT WORKED SO FAR

The most useful $25 I spent

A recorded session gave me something I could act on.

I posted a Craigslist gig in Austin computer gigs: $25 for a tester who completed the map and submitted a YouTube playthrough, with a maximum of ten testers. On day one, one tester completed the task.

> **WHAT ARRIVED WITH THAT SESSION**
>
> A gameplay recording, detailed Discord feedback, and a completed feedback form. The tester also offered audio/music help and said they would recruit friends. Those last two were offers, not completed outcomes.

That was the clearest verified result in these early tests. It does not establish a repeatable $25 acquisition cost or show that Craigslist will outperform ads at scale. A compensated playtest buys research; it does not by itself demonstrate unpaid demand or retention.

How I would structure the next small batch

Recruit for fit. State the operating system, hardware needs, download size, available play modes, and any required services. If co-op is the question, arrange a time and a partner.

Pay for a bounded attempt. Set a session length and a simple task. Agree that a reproducible crash or blocker counts as useful work, so a broken build does not prevent the tester from qualifying.

Capture the experience. Ask for a recording or observed session, the build version, basic PC specs, and where the tester became confused. An unlisted video is enough for private review.

Keep feedback independent. Compensate the agreed work regardless of whether the feedback is positive. Request permission separately before publishing a clip or testimonial.

Review before expanding. Start with a few sessions you can actually watch. Fix a repeated blocker, then recruit a fresh tester to see whether it is gone.

> **FOUR QUESTIONS AFTER THE SESSION**
>
> What did you think the goal was? Where did you get stuck? What moment was fun enough to repeat? What would stop you from playing again?

05 / LET THE PLAYTEST SHAPE THE MARKETING

Show the fun. Fix the first session.

The next campaign should reflect what players actually did.

EARLY SIGNAL	NEXT EXPERIMENT
Players enjoyed scooters and crashing into breakable buildings and poles.	Lead a short gameplay clip with that interaction. Treat it as a creative hypothesis until new players respond.
Players skipped the tutorial and reported unclear objectives.	Test a persistent objective line and brief hints during play. Watch a fresh tester before explaining anything.
Feedback mentioned vehicle handling, stiff gunplay, camera clipping, and stutters.	Fix the friction that repeatedly interrupts the first session. Record the build so later feedback can be compared.
One tester thought the scope was too broad.	Try a smaller core-loop prototype. Use the session to test whether the main activity is enjoyable and understandable.

Separate a product problem from a recruitment problem

If people arrive but cannot launch, investigate installation. If they launch but cannot find the objective, investigate onboarding. If they reach the objective and ask for another round, you have a more useful reason to recruit more people.

The telemetry contained 4 crash reports across 37 launches, about 10.8 reports per 100 launches. Reports were sent on the next launch, and the sample was small. That is a reason to investigate stability, not an estimate that 10.8% of players crashed.

Keep one small loop running

> **OBSERVE > FIX > RETEST > SHARE**
>
> Watch a fresh player. Choose one repeated blocker. Make a specific fix. Retest it with someone new. Then share a short development post that shows the player problem and the improvement.

Only the first two testers informed this feedback snapshot. Their reactions are useful clues, not a verdict on the whole audience. The next recordings should challenge the assumptions as well as confirm them.

06 / A PRACTICAL RESET

Before you spend the next dollar

A checklist for an early alpha that needs real playtesters.

Define the test

- ☐ **Choose one outcome.** Write down what counts as a verified playtest, which build is being tested, and the question you need answered.
- ☐ **Set a small loss limit.** Choose actual campaign/ad-group caps and a review time. Our $350 billing threshold triggered card charges; it was not a spending cap.

Walk the route yourself

- ☐ **Use a signed-out browser.** Follow the exact ad link through the landing page, download, extraction, launch, and first objective on a supported PC.
- ☐ **Match the promise everywhere.** Use the same alpha status, price, platform requirements, multiplayer prerequisites, and available content in the ad and both destination pages.
- ☐ **Remove avoidable waiting.** Put the download action above heavy media. Keep community joins and optional feedback forms from blocking access to a public build.

Make the next decision measurable

- ☐ **Check the events.** Confirm button clicks, launches, session outcomes, and errors arrive. Label internal tests and reconcile reporting dates and time zones.
- ☐ **Change one major thing at a time.** Start with one audience and one clear promise, or make a small comparison with the same destination. Keep a dated change log.
- ☐ **Review downstream evidence.** Compare spend with verified sessions and useful feedback. Keep paid research, organic players, and unassigned sources separate.
- ☐ **Verify controls after saving.** Reload and confirm that budgets, dates, ads, and pause states persisted. In this test, some X pause toggles did not stick.

> **A SIMPLE STOP / FIX / REPEAT RULE**
>
> Stop spending when the destination or tracking is broken. Fix the largest observed obstacle. Repeat a small test once a fresh person can reach the game and you can verify what happened.

07 / PUT IT TO WORK

Copy the structure, not the numbers

Two starting points you can adapt to your own game.

A public-alpha invitation

EXAMPLE FOR ALTERED EARTH

I'm building Altered Earth, a co-op sci-fi shooter and survival game. The free public alpha needs Windows 11 PC playtesters. Expect bugs, missing content, and rough edges; multiplayer requires Steam. Try the build and tell me where you got stuck and what you wanted to do again.

Get the public alpha on itch.io

A small paid-playtest brief

ADAPT THIS BEFORE POSTING

Looking for [number] testers for [game/build] on [supported hardware]. Pay: [amount] for an agreed [duration] session, a recording, and brief feedback. Try [one task]. If a crash or blocker prevents progress, document it; that still counts as useful work. Please include [basic PC specs/build version]. Honest criticism is welcome. Confirm the task and payment terms before starting.

What I would carry into the next test

I would make the build easy to reach, watch a few people play, fix the first obstacle they share, and then run another small recruitment test. The useful result is a clearer game and evidence that real people reached it.

SOURCE & METHOD NOTES

Case evidence: the developer-supplied Grok summary and Altered Earth marketing log, including X Ads, Wix, itch.io, Discord invite counts, PostHog, and the first tester reports. Snapshot through October 11, 2026; telemetry cited here covers October 8-9. Times in the narrative are Central; source dashboards used different reporting windows. These figures have not been independently audited.

Steam had not yet approved the creator as a developer at this snapshot. The public alpha was distributed through itch.io; Steam was listed as a multiplayer requirement. Ad approvals in this guide refer to X. The website repair's effect on verified player acquisition was not yet established. Next steps and reusable copy are proposals.

[1] X Help Center: X Ads campaigns 101

[2] X Help Center: Deceptive & Fraudulent Content

[3] X Help Center: Optimizing for website traffic campaigns

Policy and measurement references checked October 11, 2026. Platform interfaces and policies can change. Read the current guidance before launching a new campaign.