

CONNECTING COMPANY AND CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS IN GAME DESIGN: A FOOD SECTOR CASE

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ABSTRACT

Advergaming and gamification represent a promising means of product differentiation for food companies in an oversaturated marketplace, as they enable engaging consumers with brands in a playful and fun way. This need of food companies to find novel gamified ways to lure new customers and involve existing ones has implications for game designers who are considering the revenue generation options of their game. This paper aims to develop ideas and design guidelines for game developers to collaborate commercially with companies interested in using games in brand engagement, with a special focus on the food industry. As a result of combining food company interviews and an online consumer community research, we present seven themes of importance that were found, and provide the overall descriptions of how they affect the design process of the game and how they could be taken into consideration during it.

INTRODUCTION

The biggest challenge food companies are facing in 2017 is how to differentiate their product offering in an oversaturated marketplace, reports FoodDive in its newsletter for food industry professionals (Heneghan, 2017). Advergaming and gamification represent one promising way to achieve such differentiation, as they enable engaging consumers with brands in a playful and fun way (e.g. Çeltek, 2010). This need of food companies to find novel gamified ways to lure new customers and involve existing ones has implications for game designers who are considering the revenue generation options of their game. If food companies realise the benefits of employing gamified marketing content, there is potential that they would adopt it in a strategic perspective, regularly engaging consumers with the brand. In such case, even long term prospects for collaboration between game developers and food companies may exist.

In this paper, we aim to develop ideas and design guidelines for game developers to collaborate commercially with companies interested in using games in brand engagement, with a special focus on the food industry. With this aim, we first discuss extant theory on game design relating to monetisation possibilities and present examples of game-related food marketing campaigns. Secondly, we conduct a comparative analysis on food companies' expectations and

consumer wants on gamified contents with regard to food products and related services. Our analysis is based on qualitative data and it provides insight into how consumer and industry expectations match, and where there is a need for better understanding.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF GAME DESIGN IN FOOD INDUSTRY

As free-to-play (F2P) games in mobile markets have gained much ground, it has become necessary for game developers to consider the possible business models of the game already at an early stage of development in order to compensate for the reduction or disappearance of the upfront sales revenue. Currently, the main monetisation pathways for developers are selling in-game purchases and displaying short video advertisements that players can choose to watch in order to receive resources needed in the game (Hamari et al, 2017).

Indeed, advertising in games and with games has been discussed much in previous literature. Terlutter & Capella (2013) build a comprehensive framework based on previous literature for analysing advertising in digital games, covering in-game advertising, advergaming and advertising in social network games. In their framework, they illustrate the individual factors influencing the psychological responses and behavior outcome in players toward the brand. According to Lewis & Porter (2013), the extent to which consumers consider in-game advertising appropriate or realistic varies between different types of games. In their research comprising 100 undergraduate students, sports and racing/driving games were considered by far the most appropriate for in-game advertising, whereas action/first-person shooter games and strategy/puzzle games were considered particularly badly suited for it. Furthermore, there were significant differences between the sexes in the way they experienced in-game advertising: women were more likely than men to regard it as increasing the realism of the game, whereas men were more likely than women to consider it annoying or obtrusive (Lewis & Porter, 2013). Also, in-game purchases (or in-app purchases in mobile markets) have been studied previously (see Hamari, 2017 for review). Hamari (2017) expanded this field of research by studying in-game purchases from the perspective of how the game was designed to motivate the player to make them.

From the historical perspective, game design in F2P games can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of "Pay-per-Play" (PpP) design for coin-op games of the arcade era of gaming (Deterding, 2016; Rollings and Adams, 2003). In between these periods of PpP and F2P, sales in physical

stores and to a certain degree in digital stores represented the main sources of revenue. The game design of this era could be seen concentrating on generating content that was engaging and fun for the players, so that they were willing to purchase the game from stores (Hamari, 2017). In that time, monetisation relied on getting players to purchase the game, contrary to the more current F2P model where games create opportunities for microtransactions in the form of in-app purchases, downloadable content, and such. The F2P model and microtransactions are not limited only to mobile games. Successful PC games such as World of Tanks and League of Legends are also F2P games that contain microtransactions. Formerly, Diablo 3, a non-F2P PC game, featured an auction house, where players were able to trade items with real-money, and the game's publisher Blizzard would receive a commission on each transaction.

At the outset, we conducted a brief overview of the types of marketing collaborations that had been carried out by the food and gaming industries. Through online data search, we found examples of games and food product marketing in in-game product/brand placement (e.g. Zool and Chupa Chups), in-game product placement with in-game effect (e.g. Uncharted 3 [multiplayer], Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker), external brand tie-in with in-game effect or special access to content (e.g. Call of Duty, Gears of War, Destiny), accessibility to product through game (e.g. Everquest II in collaboration with Pizza Hut), and advergames (e.g. KFC Snack in the Face, BK Sneak King). Many of the cases could be seen as food companies experimenting with collaborating with gaming brands in single marketing campaigns. The primary examples that were found of the use of games in food marketing on a more strategic level were related to the collaboration of soda and energy drink brands, such as Mountain Dew, Red Bull and Monster Energy, with action game franchises such as Call of Duty. Thus, there is an undeniable chance for further development.

METHODS

The data on companies' views were gathered by interviewing marketing managers of five of the largest food companies in Finland. The interviews followed a semi-structured format and concentrated thematically on games and gamification in the marketing context. In total, we had 12 questions in four themes: the state of gamification in marketing (3), the goal and target groups of gamified/digital marketing (5), collaboration and co-creation with other companies (2), and a miscellaneous theme for international campaigns and collection of user data (2). Each of the interviews lasted approximately an hour.

The first two themes formed the core of the interviews. The state of gamification theme was set to unravel what the companies in general know and think about gamification in marketing, what their vision for it is, and what kind of experiences they have about it and other "novel" means of marketing (e.g. social media, games and other digital channels). In the second theme, we probed for their opinions about the goals set for the gamified marketing efforts, especially in a digital context and to which product and target

groups they saw it as a relevant tool. Within this theme, gamification in the marketing context was also discussed on a more general level in order to find what kind of potential goals and roles the marketing managers saw for it.

The consumer data were generated in a netnographic consumer community during four months in autumn 2016. Netnography refers to ethnographic research conducted in online environments, thus relying on typical features of participants observation (Kozinets 2015). For instance, as suggested in ethnographic game studies the researchers were active and sentient participants in the social interaction (Brown 2015). During the online community, informants completed two kinds of tasks; 1) they kept private diaries (including written descriptions and self-produced pictures and films) on their mundane snacking practices, and 2) they performed 33 social assignments that covered various areas of snack consumption, digital game-playing and social media usage. In this paper, the analysis focuses in three of the social assignments participants conducted within this online community. In these three assignments, the informants discussed gamified campaigns, advertising appearing in digital games, applications and in channels of social media, and ideas for gamified usage of mobile phones in grocery stores. This yielded 175 pages of data.

The netnographic research was divided into three smaller online communities in order to ensure the formation of group cohesion. In each of the groups, there were 20 to 35 participants. The research question drove the recruitment of the participants from an existing consumer panel of 15 000 Finnish consumers (provided by a market research company). In total, there were differences in how, what type and how often they played digital games. Similarly, the manners and preferences of food consumption varied across the sample. Furthermore, the social demographics of the sample varied, for example including consumers from 18 to over 65 years old, having varied occupations, living all over Finland and having different kinds of households.

These two data sets were first analysed separately searching for key themes in each. The second round of analysis consisted of making comparisons between companies and consumers views in order to find out differences and similarities in between them. In the following, we discuss the main findings of both views.

FINDINGS

As we set out to assess food companies' views and marketing practices that may have an effect on gamified campaigns, the first matter to surface was brand compatibility. The companies expressed that any gamified marketing campaign would have to be in line with the major brand outlines of the company. For example, in the case of marketing taking place in collaboration with an existing game franchise, this would imply that its target groups and mindsets should be in accordance with those of the company. Brand compatibility is also of importance in the sense that the gamified campaign, possibly comprising e.g. graphical changes to the product, should not obscure the familiarity of the promoted brand or

product in order to ensure that existing consumers will continue to be able to recognise the product on store shelves.

Similarly, consumers emphasised that in-game advertisements, advergaming and other forms of gamified marketing should be in line with the brand of the company in question. In this case, consumers took positive look on such campaigns, seeing even that acquiring information of the brand in question via marketing could be useful when making consumption choices. However, there are limitations in acceptance of commercial messages as one of our informants highlights, besides compatibility also the amount of marketing matters: *“If there are too many ads, players will choose another game to play, and if the content of the ads mismatches with the game’s content, parents are going to prohibit their kids from playing it”* (female, 36–45 y). Indeed, it seems that the commercial material within games needs to be included into the game thoughtfully, and if watching advertisements takes too much time from playing, there is danger that player will not play the game again: *“I don’t mind if there are advertisements when they are included in the game in a subtle fashion. For example, in sports games, you can see advertisements in the same way as when standing in a real sports field. I find such advertisements annoying that interrupt playing for a too long time.”* (male 36–45 y). Even though commercial elements need to be compatible with the brand in question and included smoothly within the actual game, also the transparency of the commercialisation of games seemed to be a demand.

Second, food companies commonly emphasised a focus on positive values. As consumers may be rather critical towards brand messages, the gamified solutions could focus on the public good, sponsored by brands. Thus, all the food companies suggested that their gamified campaigns should be educational and promote physical exercise and a healthy lifestyle. A gamified campaign should not convey a message that companies promote passiveness and encourage people to lie down on a couch in front of their television sets with a mobile phone in their hand. The views of consumers aligned with those of the companies. In fact, consumers were rather innovative and willing to come up with new ideas, for example, for mobile applications that would support consuming healthy, local, domestic and organic food as well as those preventing food becoming waste. *“Such an app could be nice that could scan the barcode of a product and you’d get detailed information about it, including its origins. You could also choose what ingredients and countries-of-origin you’d like to avoid. This would make it easy to see whether a product belongs to your shopping basket or not.”* (female 26–35 y). Similarly, ideas inspired by Pokémon Go supporting exercising emerged. It was also noted that gamified campaigns themselves should not produce excess waste, for instance in terms of encouraging consumers to consume more than they need.

The third area that was regarded as important was the gamified marketing needs to be in compliance with the specified target group, as positioning and targeting the

selected segment act as a basis of most marketing actions nowadays. However, the segmentation is not necessarily based on stable categorisations, such as age. Instead, what consumers are interested in, like health-oriented lifestyle, may define a target group. Consumers seemed to agree with companies that any gamified marketing should be specifically targeted towards their consumption preferences, and any mistargeted promotion is a source of irritation. Sometimes, consumers had so particular consumption habits that even they did not truly believe in the chances of receiving perfectly matching gamified solutions: *“I could consider an application that would recommend various recipes that are tailored specifically for my personal limitations and ethical choices. However, as I’m rather demanding in this respect, I don’t think the marketing people would like it :D”* (female 36–45 y). Consumers wished often that they could decide themselves, for instance, what sort of commercials to watch while playing or using applications. *“Games and applications that forcefeed advertisements could be developed so that it would be possible to choose areas of interest in the options. Based on them, you would receive advertisements only about topics that interest you. This way, they might not irritate so much.”* (male 36–45 y). This appears particularly in line with companies’ views how segmentation is no longer conducted according to certain stable consumer profiles, but consumers’ interests (and thereby segment) may shift over time. However, when it comes to children’s consumption and playing, also stable segmentation criteria, such as family life cycle applies. For instance, applications for making shopping for groceries with the kids easier and more fun were desired, as well as tight restrictions for in-game advertising within children’s games.

Fourth, based on the views of food company representatives, physical presence has played an important role in their marketing efforts. In the food industry, it is still commonplace to emphasise physical presence in different venues, such as fairs and gyms, where the companies usually conduct consumer tastings of new products. Even though tastings per se did not come up in consumer data, there were different ideas through which companies could enhance their presence through gamification, especially in grocery stores. For instance *“I could use the mobile phone to receive information about offers and food tips of that particular store, in which I currently am. For instance, store-specific offers and advertisements could run on the screen while I’m doing my shopping.”*, describes one of our informants (male 36–45 y). Similarly, advergaming could be applied to lure consumers to visit particular venues when food companies are physically present.

Fifth, the interview respondents underlined the importance of product accessibility. This implies that their products should preferably be available in all imaginable places where consumers could desire their product. The company respondents saw potential in games supporting the accessibility of their products. Also, consumers considered the accessibility of food products important. In addition, it seems that it is not enough that certain products and brands exist in several shopping locations, but consumers need to

find them there. Many consumers presented ideas for different kinds of grocery store navigators or maps: “Such an application could be fun, that it’d have a map of the store and it’d instantly guide you to the product you’re looking for.” (female 18–25 y). Thus, the accessibility and finding the needed product appeared a commonplace problem that would call for a gamified solution both in familiar and unfamiliar shopping places.

Sixth, food companies saw the improved personalisation of the marketing message at specific target groups as a necessary development in food product marketing. This would preferably imply that consumers are able to define themselves what kind of messages they would be willing to receive. This kind of development would be needed in order to make the communication more relevant to the consumers, and avoid them from blocking or simply ignoring the communication in its entirety. Indeed, in order to make, for example, the shopping experience smoother, consumers were willing to share information about their shopping history, consumption preferences, locations and diets. For instance, consumers hoped to receive recipes of their favorite food products or products on sale while passing them by in grocery stores. Consumers also had some personalised wishes for applications, such as those that would inform them about how crowded stores are, when novelties arrive, prices of all the products, which is the shortest queue for cash register, and which products are available: “An application that would tell you e.g. in which stores certain products can be found. [...] Even if it wasn’t possible to get a real-time status about the availability, it would be great to see whether a certain product is a part of the store’s product assortment, when it was available for the last time, or when it’s coming back to stock.” (female 36–45 y). Consumers had noticed existing gamified targeted marketing communication, e.g. how searching something in Google generates specified offerings, how games include (ir)relevant product placement or other commercial elements, and how grocery stores had sent them e-coupons for products on sale. However, their reactions varied. In some occasions, these gamified contents were welcomed, whereas other times they might just cause irritation, especially when targeting or timing fails: “It doesn’t irritate as long as I’m still interested in it, but after I’ve already made the purchase, you wouldn’t bear to watch related advertising any more. You feel like screaming to Facebook, dunce, that’s water under the bridge.” (female 56–65 y).

Seventh, food industry representatives indicated that gamified campaigns could open possibilities for the retrieval of user behaviour data that could be utilised to segment specific kinds of consumer groups by combining information about the users’ gaming habits and other online behaviour. This could make it possible to retarget marketing to different consumers. Through the collection of longitudinal user data, it could even be possible to deploy self-learning market segmentation, which would support the optimisation of marketing actions. Many times, consumers saw self-learning systems on their usual consumption patterns as aiding their daily routines: “It would like that the phone could provide me the kind of offers that interest me. It would have to be

based on profiling, because I don’t want to be offered, say, baking products, as I never bake. The phone could offer new products that are compatible with my profile, e.g. a new protein bar that has been launched, or a low-carb quark.” (male 36–54 y). Even though consumers were surprisingly willing to share information about themselves for commercial purposes, it was pondered and resisted: “Even if it would activate me to buy, I don’t know if I want to be known so much about (purchase data + location data etc.). It could give reason for a negative reaction.” (male 36–45 y).

DISCUSSION

Our goal was to understand how brand marketers from a specific domain (food industry) perceive games and gamified applications with regard to their products and brand, and, on the other hand, what kind of attitudes consumers have towards them. This was carried out in order to

- A. gain insight into the opinions of marketing managers of food companies on games and brand marketing,
- B. gain insight into consumer opinions on games and the marketing of food products,
- C. find connections and differences between the preferences of these groups, and
- D. connect these to the monetisation planning in game design for the mobile market.

As a result, we present design guidelines for how game design could facilitate game developers to form mutual value-creating customer relationships with food companies, e.g. in order to offer brand awareness for them through games. We focus especially on how game design could help building customer relationships and brand awareness in (adver)games and game-like concepts in mobile markets. The following table 1. presents the seven themes that companies and consumers had in common, and how they could be taken into consideration during the design process of the game.

Table 1: Opinions of companies and consumers linked with game design process options

Theme	Companies	Consumers	Design considerations
Brand compatibility	Congruity between game IP and food brand, requiring also graphical confirmity	Mismatch between game and ad, or too many ads drives away	Advertising as part of the game and visual design
Focus on positive values	Connection with educational values and promotion of exercises and health	Emphasize personal values such as ethical and healthy choices	Genre and values presented
Compliance with target group	Especially with lifestyle and consumption preferences of the client	Prefer actions that conform with their lifestyle and consumption preferences	Game analytics combined with personal preferences
Physical presence	Emphasis on product tastings	Interested on tips and information related to the location where they are	Co-operation with advertiser partner, and usage of analytics
Product accessibility	Broad (physical) availability	Interested on finding the product(s)	Co-operation with advertiser partner.
Improved personalisation of marketing message	related to compliance with target group	Positive view on the advertisements based on analytics, but annoyed when they are outdated	Improved analytics
Retrieval of users behavioural data	Interests are in lifestyle and consumption preferences in longer timespan	Willing to give information, but also resists exploitative use	Option to opt-out or opt-in

Two of the first themes, “Brand compatibility” and “Focus on positive values” affect the whole design process from start to end. These themes need to be taken into consideration when designing the game’s graphical look and the kinds of moods and values it conveys to the players. Also, the game’s genre and mechanics might contract with these themes. For example, if the game mechanics emphasize combat and fighting, it’s hard to avoid the notion of violence, which is not usually connected to these themes. These design decisions need to be discussed with the partner that is using the end product in its marketing efforts.

Four of the themes were closely connected in terms of their relationship to designer activities. “Compliance with target group”, “Physical presence”, “Product accessibility” and “Improved personalisation of marketing message” all affect the design of the service or a game, especially regarding what kind of a data should be collected and analysed, and how the game should utilize the data. Beside the data analytics, these themes also require close collaboration with the company that is using the game or service as their marketing tool.

Our final theme is labeled as “Retrieval of users’ behavioural data”. In our study, consumers in general wanted to have more personal service or marketing, but they also wanted to protect themselves. To ensure that consumers can protect themselves from predatory practices, they should have ways to either opt-in to personalised service or to opt-out from it when they so wish. This could be seen as contradictory to the previous themes, but the third option, no choice given, could mean that some customers will not to use the application at all. It is worthwhile to notice that even the users opting-out are contributing to the data pool during their stay, whereas non-users naturally are not.

Based on our research, there are clearly great possibilities for mutually beneficial commercial collaboration between game developers and the food industry. Our results give direction for game developers to be able to present a greater value proposition in the eyes of potential food company customers. Further studies are needed of the implementation of the design considerations described with regard to the food industry in particular.

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