

Marketers have to play more videogames to make better brand experiences

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In case you don't follow gaming, the first Fortnite Worldcup came to a glorious end a couple of months ago and the numbers alone were staggering: 40 million qualifiers, 20,000+ fans in attendance, 100 finalists and total prize money of \$30 million. And with gaming becoming a central part of our collective identities, from the brands we interact with to our social lives, it might be time for marketers to start paying attention.

Full disclosure: I'm no stranger to gaming. Even so, I'm convinced that gaming could hold the key to fixing attendance issues plaguing the worlds of real-life retail and experiential marketing. Games have seemingly perfected the engagement puzzle. Meanwhile, real-world brand experiences have been suffering under the same endemic symptoms driven by a lack of excitement and an experience formula that doesn't provide enough distinction from digital brand channels.

With my controller in hand and hours of relentless gaming, I stepped into the players' POV and took a closer look at successful in-game mechanics and tactics that could help brand experiences drive endless engagement and ongoing revenue.

Tell unexpected, non-linear story narratives

Non-linear gameplay, also known as "Sandbox" or "open-world play," permits gamers the absolute freedom to explore and finish a game on their own terms and style. This game mode is not a one-way-to-play type approach. Instead, endless side quests and subplots open up hours of open exploration even after beating the game.

In a real-world, experiential scenario, non-linear gameplay could be seen as the anti-Ikea strategy. Instead of controlling the customer's journey, brands can implement experience modes that offer up various explorative paths through their retail and pop-up experiences. These could vary from fast-track purchase and pick-up options to highly educational and explorative modes. Over time, customers start forming preferences and choose their very personal modes based on their ever-changing retail needs and expectations. A most recent example is Nike's +app which switches to "store mode" once customers set foot into their retail outlets. This store mode puts control of the shopping experience back into the customer's hands by featuring various options, from "shop the look" to "scan and try" to "instant check-out."

Present a new experience for every visit

In the past, entire game environments and characters have been manually generated solely by game designers' imaginations. Nowadays, set mathematical algorithms assist in building infinite amounts of content while adding real-time randomness for less predictable and endless gameplay. Procedural Generation (PG), as this is commonly called, has been leveraged to randomize games, maps, levels and characters that are unique on each playthrough. In some game titles, AI is added to provide real-time intelligence to games by monitoring how gamers behave in a game and adjusting their opponents' behavior, all while also curating the competitive level, gameplay and story. The combination of PG plus AI keeps players continuously engaged and is why people still play games months and even years after their release.

Real-life experiences often turn mundane and predictable quickly, struggling to lure customers back into the same experience or store environment. But Procedural Generation plus AI opens up a wide range of new exciting cosmetic and experiential possibilities. It could enable in-store lighting, sound and digital canvases to instantaneously change the look and feel of parts or entire store environments. With every return visit, the in-store AI could gather more insights, constantly evaluating customers' familiarity with the brand, service and product, tailoring their in-store service and staff engagement. The more customers visit a location, the more their experiences will level up. For a health and fitness brand, leveling up may mean increasing the skill level of exercises, weight and repetition, while product and service brands could gradually unlock more advanced and premium in-store offerings.

Reward frequent engagement

Loot boxes are part of a larger virtual economy that monetizes in-game experiences and generates ongoing revenue. Over the last few years, revenue models pivoted from steeper one-time purchases of franchise titles to virtually free games with ongoing subscription and in-game microtransaction models. Loot boxes are unlocked by players progressing in the game or through purchase, offering constant and newly generated content items ranging from customizable character skins (cosmetic upgrades) to rare game-changing equipment. The majority of loot items empower players to build out their status and advance faster within the game and often real-world funds are exchanged to purchase loot boxes.

Looking at retail and experiential marketing, revenue is mainly evaluated by transaction data stemming from product sell-through. Yet, there is a great opportunity to charge for experiences and add-on services. For instance, Livraria Lello in Portugal the self-claimed most beautiful bookstore in the world charges 5 Euro for entry which can be redeemed against any in-store purchase. Going to an REI store is free but using the in-store climbing experience comes at a charge. Within a store environment, customers could earn credits that are redeemed for customization moments or go ahead and unlock service and product tiers that normally wouldn't be accessible.

Let's play

The truth behind all those colorful pixels and fun characters hides a brilliantly orchestrated and always adapting marketing machine. Top-tier game franchises have a full grasp on how to navigate and scale endless content and engagement resulting in global fandom while pocketing billions of dollars through pre- and post-game transactions.

While there are obvious limitations to the physical world, experiential marketing is poised to learn from the tactics of games. Experiential environments can show a new prolific level of adaptability and grow to become more unexpected. Brand revenue models could fundamentally shift from single transactions to clusters of micro-transactions so long as they always act in good faith when deploying revenue tactics that borderline on gambling mechanics.

Regardless, it's only a matter of time before the ideas driving gaming make their way into other sectors. Unless marketers want to get left behind while others are leveling up, it's time to get to work.

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