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DIGITAL MARKETING

MARKETING FOR VIDEO GAMES IN THE DIGITAL ARENA

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Agencies and How They Use Digital Marketing

As technology expands and evolves, so does the needs and wants of individuals. In just our market alone, statistics for games released in 2017 on Steam alone averages to 21 games per day¹. With a high influx of games being released daily, in order to be competitive our studio needs to utilize digital marketing in order for our product(s) to stand out. Our studio has the benefit from learning from the mistakes and successes of those that came before us. There are several marketing firms that cater to the video game industry that have done case studies and offer free available information that a small, indie company like ours can learn from and utilize. It should be noted that most of what these agencies preach can be found through other sources and general marketing principals.

Amp Agency has done several case studies we can learn from. Three in particular are Sony with their product, *MLB: The Show*, Microsoft to retain gamers and 2K Games with *Battleborn*.

Amp Agency's approach to *MLB: The Show*² in 2013 was to have custom baseball cards through the now defunct site, Vine; a website that had users post and share 6 second videos. They took advantage of taking the concept of an old medium, trading cards, and turned them into a moving visual that could be easily shareable. This allowed Sony to show the realistic graphics and to coincide with actual baseball games and to gain free advertisement through influencers. The key thing to learn from this study is to take advantage of current day technology and social media trends, mixing old with the new, and give users the ability to be able to freely share content. Even Sony needed to reach out to media outlets for their product to gain awareness.

Halo Reach was given a companion site and app to increase consumer engagement called *Halo Waypoint*³. *Halo Waypoint* allows players to access content related to the franchise that isn't directly through the console. It allows them to view videos, podcasts, comics, and more. *Waypoint* also gives players the ability to see in-game stats that can give them a better understanding and even a competitive advantage. Users can engage with like-minded players, have blog posts, create events, and have friends interact with them and even challenge one another. While this type marketing has a focus on competitive gaming, an indie company like ourselves can adopt the overall concept. However, it would only be recommended once a product reaches a large enough userbase to justify costs to create such an app and maintain it.

Battleborn's case study⁴ was to help it stand out from the crowd. Taking only the bits that are specific to digital marketing. They focused on social engagement and heavy social media promotion. Anything that was considered "badass" was hash tagged and shared through Twitter or Facebook. Amp Agency wanted to push the fact that gamers could find something that fit them within the game, that they were their own "badass". More of this campaign will be discussed later.

A very successful campaign to take notes from is Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed Origins*. Marketing Supply Co. makes great documentation on why this was successful⁵. While *Assassin's Creed* has a substantial fanbase and standing in the gaming community, there can be diminishing returns and burnout on an IP if too many products are made and not handled with care. Marketing done for *Origins* however, correctly builds hype and awareness before and during release.

Ubisoft uses Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to drive home that this game is coming, it's going to be amazing, and that users can engage with them. They offered those interested to sign up for an email subscription to stay-up-to-date with all information regarding the game. With their email campaigns they made sure to highlight their pre-orderable DLC that added an extra 10+ hours of additional content. Once the base information of the game was revealed, the company went full force on promotion. Trailers, character information, artwork, livestreams, anything relating to the game was posted on each of these channels to the point it was the number one mentioned game by June 2017. Ubisoft also did a cross-promotion with *Final Fantasy XV*.

Mode 7, an indie developer who also has a decade's worth of marketing experience, used their experience to build better games⁶. The most important take away from Mode 7 is that the industry is constantly changing, constantly evolving, and it's going at breakneck pace. Methods preached as the go to should be taken with a grain of salt. The general belief that Mode 7 has is that success takes a long time and that one must be consistent in how they do things. Not what they do. Mode 7 recognizes marketing channels that include Discord and the Steam Community.

We know our company is on the right track when it's recommended that showing your fanbase the development of a game keeps them invested. We're offering them two stories, as Mode 7 puts it, the game's and our studio's. People are naturally curious about others. Indie game developers can take advantage of this by letting our community have those sneak peaks, to listen to the developers talk about their projects. When we're passionate, they're passionate.

Learning from Others

Games like *Battleborn* can have great marketing and still have a short-lived product. Amp Agency focused on the variety of characters and being "badass" when it should have focused on the fact it was a first person MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena). The first of its kind. They acknowledged that there were other MOBAs in existence, which is good, but marketed the game as an FPS (First Person Shooter) MOBA, not good as it's false advertisement. The focus should've been to fans of the genre, like DOTA and League of Legends, rather than to a broader audience. The other issue was that marketing could not tell consumers what it was. It tried to be too many things⁷. *Battleborn* had to compete with Blizzard's open beta of *Overwatch* at the same time it released. Despite the heavy competition, both marketing and the game itself failed to attract and retain gamers.

One of the more recent historical marketing failures in gaming history would be that of *No Man's Sky*. It was like they took a page out of Peter Molyneux's book⁸, a man notorious for over hyping games and failing to deliver on promised features, and took a magnifying glass and said, "Yeah, this is fine." While *No Man's Sky* was cleared of false advertisement charges by the UK's Advertising Standards Authority⁹ consumer trust eroded after its commercial success at launch. There are many videos that go into Sean Murray's promises and how he lied to players¹⁰.

So what's worked? Looking at *Angry Birds*, an indie mobile game that is just as well known as *Pokemon*, we can learn from what made them successful. Aside from the game being freemium, Rovio push content marketing for *Angry Birds*¹¹. They were consistent in updating

utilizing a 1-7-30-4-2-1 schedule. The schedule breaks down to Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Quarterly, Bi-Annual, and Annual. However, this is overly ambitious and should be done once the company can afford to be this consistent. It does, however, make for a great goal to aim for. This includes blog and Tweets, newsletters, podcasts, webinars, conventions, and more.

User Generated Content, or UGC, is vital to the success of a company to retain engagement and interest. *Angry Birds* made use of this with their post by having their community submit ideas, create contests and events, and even charitable causes¹². Consumers are not fools and are generally wary of marketers to begin with. Too often, the promises of a product do not match reality, much like *No Man's Sky*. With UGC, consumers can participate with the company to see the worth of the product.

Our Double-Edged Sword

Indie video game companies are a double-edged sword. We have freedom AAA companies either don't have or neglect to take advantage of, but we can be quickly drowned out by the competition. Marketing will always be evolving with technology and it's up to us to utilize that technology to our advantage.

The biggest lesson to instill is to never promise what we can't deliver. Don't over hype the product. If the product can't be hyped as is, then our studio needs to reevaluate the product. We need to be realistic in what we can deliver to our community. The studio doesn't need to aim for perfection and in fact that would be a dangerous and costly endeavor.

Make sure the community and potential players understand what the game is and what they can expect. Get the community involved with promotion with UGC. Have contests that provide in-game content such as codes for items. Ask the community what they like, what they would enjoy seeing more of. Art contests can be a fun way to engage the community.

Understand our fanbase and the channels they use. Where can we find them? How can we interact with them? In our case, Discord has been pivotal in engaging with our userbase. Our Patreon community grows with each passing month. Expanding to Reddit and if possible, Steam to grow our community outreach. In keeping things realistic, making blog posts daily may be a bit of a stretch, but having it 4 days out of the week containing content and progress is acceptable for our level.

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- ² Amp Agency. (n.d.). *Winning Opening Day and Beyond*. Retrieved from Amp Agency: <https://www.ampagency.com/sony-playstation-mlb-theshow-gaming-case-study>
- ³ Amp Agency. (n.d.). *Turning Gamers into Loyal Soldiers*. Retrieved from Amp Agency: <https://www.ampagency.com/halo-waypoint-gears-of-war-gaming-case-study>
- ⁴ Amp Agency. (n.d.). *The Freak In All of Us*. Retrieved from Amp Agency: <https://www.ampagency.com/2k-games-battleborn-case-study>
- ⁵ Marketing Supply Co. Team. (2018, March 24). *VIDEO GAME DIGITAL MARKETING WE LOVE: ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS*. Retrieved from Marketing Supply Co.: <https://www.marketingsupply.co/video-game-digital-marketing-we-love-assassins-creed-origins/>
- ⁶ Kilduff-Taylor, P. (2018, August 23). *The 10 Secrets to Indie Game Success (and Why They Do Not Exist)*. Retrieved from Mode 7: <https://blog.mode7games.com/the-10-secrets-to-indie-game-success-and-why-they-do-not-exist-8d5acdff703d>
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- ⁹ Summers, N. (2016, November 30). *'No Man's Sky' cleared in false advertising investigation*. Retrieved from Engadget: <https://www.engadget.com/2016/11/30/no-mans-sky-steam-asa-investigation/>
- ¹⁰ [NeilBeale]. (2016, August 23). *One Man's Lie (Sean Murray Lie Compilation)*. Retrieved from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJ-tgaE37UE>
- [SoloJones]. (2016, August 16). *The No Man's Sky Hype Train - Missing Features Compilation*. Retrieved from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kuz3WETd4ug>
- ¹¹ Felicia. (2017, June 26). *Mobile App Success Story: How Angry Birds Did It*. Retrieved from AppSamurai: <https://appsamurai.com/mobile-app-success-story-how-angry-birds-did-it/>
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- ¹² Tyler Robinson Foundation. (n.d.). *Angry Birds + TRF*. Retrieved from Tyler Robinson Foundation: <https://www.trf.org/angrybirds/>
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