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APP INVASION VIDEO GAME PUBLISHERS EXPAND REACH POINTS

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SPECIAL REPORTS

LEVEL UP

How Game Marketers Are Expanding Their Reach Through Digital Platforms
By Justin Amirkhani

BRIEF



SCORE: 14000

LEVEL: 4

When Epic Games' design director Cliff Bleszinski took the stage at this year's the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, he addressed the one thing radically changing the gaming industry: digital. Bleszinski, whose company is responsible for top titles like *Gears of War* and *Unreal Tournament*, highlighted the difference between platforms available now and a mere five years ago – the peak of the console generation – and how it's changing not just the players, but the industry as well.

In 2005, consumers only had access to a handful of costly single-purpose machines that ran expensive games, which could only be obtained through in-store purchases. But if capturing the attention of gamers was difficult during the age of persuasion, in the modern arena of limitless messaging it's nearly impossible. Today, players are armed with a host of internet-ready devices, all with the ability to play low-cost games. Between the iPhone, Facebook, Playstation 3, Nintendo DS and Kinect, there are more opportunities than ever before for consumers to fill their gaming needs.

So video game publishers, eager to capitalize on these new opportunities without sacrificing the model that's kept the industry stable for the past 30 years, are increasingly utilizing digital multi-platform approaches to keep players invested in their properties no matter what screen they're using.

As Craig Relyea, SVP of global marketing at Disney Interactive, which, with *Club Penguin*, has one of the most cohesive transgaming experiences, said, "We're moving toward a more ubiquitous and connected approach to platforms, which mirrors the way people consume their interactive entertainment."

Capcom has been at the forefront of this new tactic with branded releases across a variety of platforms, all pushing a traditional retail launch. In August 2010, the publisher released *Dead Rising 2: Case Zero*, a download-only sample of the full *Dead Rising 2* experience scheduled to hit stores later that September. With its budget price and full-quality production values, *Case Zero* garnered more than half a million downloads before the full game was ever released, acting as one of the biggest promotional tools for the game. This ultimately helped Capcom push in-store

purchases of *Dead Rising 2* to the tune of 2 million units, making it one of the biggest games of 2010.

What separated *Case Zero* from the traditional demo model was that while it offered many elements of the complete experience, it was narratively distinct from the final product. Most video game demos simply package a level or two for the player to sample, but Capcom created unique content that connected to the full game and left players ready to pick up the story again when *Dead Rising 2* finally launched. By giving new players a real taste of the final experience with narrative elements exclusive to the sample, *Case Zero* was accessible to newcomers while offering something unique to lasting fans. It was a simple and effective strategy that was extremely profitable; while most video game demos cost studios a lot of money to produce, *Case Zero* pulled in gross revenue around \$2.5 million.

Capcom isn't the only publisher to achieve success with a multi-tiered release structure. Electronic Arts' mobile division has been offering on-the-go versions of their hit franchises since 2004. With the proliferation of Apple's iOS devices and the popularity of the App Store marketplace, EA Mobile has been producing companion iPhone and iPad games for almost every major retail release.

Last year's release of the company's FIFA World Cup: South Africa app for iPhones and iPod touches joined the company's long list of Electronic Arts' gaming properties that have been turned into popular apps including the *MADDEN NFL* and *The Sims* series.

A recent study by PopCap Games, publisher of successful free online games such as *Bejeweled*, showed that 92% of all smartphone gamers play games on their phones at least once a week, and about half of them play daily. By releasing quality, branded apps, video game publishers like Electronic Arts are seeing the benefits of releasing mobile versions of their games not just as a product, but as a means of advertising. At low price points, consumers get access to casual-friendly versions of blockbuster games like *Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit* and *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* without significant monetary investment. And their mobile play habits have them revisiting these brands on a routine basis, reinforcing their place within the consumer's entertainment patterns.

Facebook has also been a large area of focus for the games industry. Both Electronic Arts and Ubisoft have released several companion games on the social network that allow players to play within their →



Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*

brands for free while earning bonuses for the retail versions of their games. In addition to the viral marketing benefits, these branded Facebook games offer players a way of casually interacting with the game for free while creating added value for the full purchase.

For example, Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* saw a companion Facebook game released prior to the retail launch. *Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy* invited players to enjoy an experience similar to the hit Zynga property *Mafia Wars* while earning additional content for the full version of *Brotherhood*. This method invites players in to a free, casual experience and slowly creates additional value for them by giving them more with their purchase.

What made *Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy* such a success was that Ubisoft realized the bi-directional-partnership of the ecosystem they created. In addition to unlocking content in the retail game, players who enjoy both experiences unlocked more content for the Facebook game. This in turn creates a cycle of play that encourages the consumer to interact with the brand routinely through different portals, creating relevancy through repetition and availability regardless of where the player is interacting with the brand.

Despite being Ubisoft's first initiative in their continuing companion gaming strategy, players flocked to both versions of the game but also spread their involvement with the brand beyond just gameplay. As a testament to the brand-growing potential of their companion gaming strategy, Tony Key SVP of sales and marketing at Ubisoft confessed that, "The *Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy* Facebook game greatly increased the number of fans on the *Assassin's Creed* Facebook fan page, nearly doubling the number of fans."

2K Games, publishers of the 2K Sports franchise and hit games such as *Bioshock* and *Duke Nukem*, follows a similar philosophy – using iOS and Facebook applications as a means to extend brands, but only if they're a good fit. According to Sarah Anderson, SVP of marketing at 2K, blanket strategies are not as important as good content.

"We look for compelling ways to extend our franchises and will pursue development for iOS and other platforms when it makes sense for our business and brands," said Anderson. "Above all, we have to make great games that consumers want to spend time playing." →



Activision's *Call of Duty: Black Ops*

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It's not just the hardcore gamers that are being targeted with these new multi-platform approaches; with its free-to-play browser game being supported by Nintendo Wii and DS titles, Disney Interactive has created an ecosystem for their younger *Club Penguin* player that goes beyond the limits of a single, dedicated portal.

However, Activision has realized this and by creating quality properties and refusing to dilute the experience with Facebook and iOS games, they've been able to keep gamers hungry for their properties year after year; there has been a best-selling *Call of Duty* game released every holiday season for the last five years.

While these strategies have proven effective for many, appointment gaming is still the mainstay of the industry, and there are still large video game publishers that resist using digitally downloaded software as a means to reconnect with their customer throughout the day. Some companies, like Activision, believe that diluting brands with App Store versions of their properties ultimately makes the time consumers spend with their brands less valuable. And it's hard to argue with their reticence to switch their game plan: the fact that there has been a best-selling *Call of Duty* game released every holiday season for the last five years shows they've proven they can keep gamers hungry for their properties.

Last November at the Reuters Global Media Summit, Activision CEO Bobby Kotick stated, "We don't view the App Store as a really big opportunity for dedicated games." Still, the company's chief franchise, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, which sold more than 5.6 million units in its first day, does have a companion app-based game for the iPhone – *Call of Duty: World at War: Zombies*.

There's no right answer to a game producer's approach to digital. If, in the case of Activision, it ain't broke, it's hard to argue the decision to stay the course. The potential benefits to adding a new layer to an overall gaming experience, however, are compelling.

By creating content that is meant to ultimately draw users into a console experience, game publishers have the opportunity to turn what was once simply a marketing expense into a potential source of revenue. And if free versions of online games are the gateway to a more realized experience, then quick-hit, bite-sized games have the potential to prompt a new group of people to self-ascribe themselves as gamers. And then hopefully buy a console. But if not, at least they've made a few new friends along the way. ■



From top: Capcom's *Dead Rising 2*; Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy*

EXPANDED UNIVERSE

As app-based games invade the market, publishers are seizing the opportunity to turn their console classics into downloadable experiences for the iPhone and the iPad. Shanna Green highlights some of the hits that have fared well in the Apple marketplace.

FIFA 11

Publisher: EA SPORTS

Original Game Platform: PlayStation, Wii, Windows, Xbox

Price: \$2.99 iPhone; \$9.99 iPad

App Extras: Borrowing from the console version's Be-A-Pro mode, users can develop their own players and track their soccer careers as they move up the goal posts from domestic to pro games, with details stopping just short of allowing your character to marry a Spice Girl.



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Assassin's Creed: Altair's Chronicles

Publisher: Ubisoft

Original Game Platform: PlayStation, Windows, Xbox

Price: \$0.99 iPhone; \$6.99 iPad

App Extras: Sharper graphics mean the game (and Altair) has gotten prettier since the DS version, while mini games add layers to the already expansive narrative. Throw in a storyline about a crusade for a mysterious Chalice, and we're in. If he starts fighting Nazis with his dad though, we're telling Mr. Lucas.



Rock Band

Publisher: MTV Games/Electronic Arts

Original Game Platform: PlayStation, Wii, Xbox

Price: \$4.99 iPhone; 9.99 iPad

App Extras: If you're not in the same room as the rest of your band mates, you can also form a band via the Facebook Connect option, which lets you play your part out of sync and nudge your friend when it's their turn to rock.



Star Wars: The Force Unleashed

Publisher: LucasArts/THQ Wireless
Original Game Platform: PlayStation, Wii, Xbox

Price: \$0.99

App Extras: Obi-Wan isn't the only one with Jedi mind tricks as players use their fingertips to control the force. Unlock the survival mode to take on a room full of stormtroopers, but be careful, this is part of the prequel universe, so there's no Chewie to back you up.



Metal Gear Solid Touch

Publisher: Konami
Original Game Platform: PlayStation

Price: \$7.99

App Extras: A pinch zoom feature offers more precise rifle shots, just in case Snake's headband slips too far down, which will come in handy for building up points to purchase the *Metal Gear* wallpapers available exclusively through the mobile version's Drebin's Shop.



Call of Duty: World at War: Zombies

Publisher: Activision
Original Game Platform: PlayStation, Wii, Windows, Xbox

Price: \$4.99

App Extras: Not content to keep your zombie kills to yourself? With the multi-player connection, soldiers can use the app to brag about their stats to fellow recruits and even schedule private shoot 'em up matches for date nights.



Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars

Publisher: Rockstar Games
Original Game Platform: PlayStation

Price: \$9.99

App Extras: Once you've jacked your ride of choice, you can create your own *Grand Theft Auto* playlist through your iTunes and sync the car stereo to your personalized tunes. May we suggest some Van Halen for your virtual mayhem?

