

# Exploring Game Design Students Understanding of Marketing

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2019 there were approximately 5000 students studying game-related courses at TAFEs or universities within Australia. However, there were just 1000 positions available in video game production (Swanston 2019). Due to a lack of government subsidies and the continuing impacts from the Global Financial Crisis which resulted in major, international studios pulling out of Australia (Swanston 2019), the industry is small compared to those overseas. These students thus face a precarious and competitive job market in Australia when they graduate, and those who stay in Australia will likely form their own, indie studio or possibly work as sole traders. In either case, they would be entering a market with relatively low barriers to publication. For example, there are over 50,000 video games available on Steam, the most popular digital distribution platform for PC games, and 8,000-10,000 are added each year (Bailey 2021). Therefore, this means that aspiring designers would be faced with the need to breakthrough, differentiate themselves, and demonstrate they present a superior product (Conway & Hemphill 2019). Due to the costs and resources required for game development, many developers utilise crowdsourcing (Namousi & Kohl, 2016), which also requires differentiation to be successful. As such, knowledge of marketing would appear to be an important business and employability skill for aspiring video game designers and developers given the competition that characterises their industry. This research thus aimed to understand the current marketing skills and knowledge of video game design students and thus what they would likely graduate with. While prior research has investigated the effects of marketing activities on video games products and consumers (Healey & Moe 2016; Steiner, Wiegand, Eggert, & Backhaus 2016; Butcher, Tang, & Phau 2017; Weijo, Bean, & Rintamäki 2017), the marketing knowledge that video game developers and future developers possess remains unexplored.

Game design students enrolled in second and third-year courses at a Queensland university were recruited for semi-structured interviews. The research received ethics and student survey approval and the recruitment and interviews were conducted by an academic who did not teach any of the students. The research was exploratory in nature and adopted a qualitative approach using thematic analysis, which is appropriate when the context surrounding the research topic is important (Braun & Clarke 2006). The interviews used the semi-structured approach, which resulted in similarity across answers and thus achieved theoretical saturation. The use of semi-structured interviews

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allowed for follow-up questions, probing, clarification, and gaining rich insights (van de Weerd et al. 2016). The interviews were transcribed using an artificial intelligence powered software, Otter, and then checked and edited by the interviewer to ensure accuracy. The interview transcripts were analysed one at a time. The process was iterative and continuous, and transcripts were returned to and re-examined to refine codes and groupings as the analysis progressed (Åkerlind 2012). Peer debriefing was used to validate the thematic analysis (Creswell & Miller 2000).

Of the eight students interviewed, two were female and six were male. Two were under the age of twenty, three were in their twenties, two were in their thirties and one was in their forties. Each interviewee was asked to describe what marketing was and involved in their own words. It is worth briefly considering the American Marketing Association's (AMA) often cited and widely accepted definition of marketing briefly here: 'marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large' (American Marketing Association 2017). In general, the interviewees described marketing as creating awareness, promoting, and informing customers about products, generating sales, and creating advertisements. This is a very sales-orientated description that does not align with the AMA's definition and would appear very limited. For example, building relationships and creating value, loyalty, and brands among other aspects of marketing were not noted. Some interviewees were cognisant of this, as four noted that describing marketing was difficult and they were not confident in their answers. All interviewees noted that more marketing knowledge in their studies would be beneficial, and all but one wanted to improve their own marketing skills and knowledge.

As a result of this research, it is suggested that marketing knowledge be explicitly included in the curriculum of Game Design degrees to address students' marketing knowledge gaps. This could be achieved with guest lectures by Marketing discipline academics and industry professionals and using team teaching with academics from Game Design and Marketing. Marketing courses could also be suggested as electives for students to take. This research suggests video game design students possess a limited understanding of marketing, although they are interested in and see the utility of enhancing their knowledge. Considering the industry conditions, they would be entering into on graduation, enhancing their marketing knowledge and thus employability skills would seem to be of strategic importance.

## **BIO**

Dr Jacqueline Burgess is a Lecturer in International Business and the Program Coordinator of the Bachelor of Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. Her research focuses on the brand management of narrative brands and has been published in multiple peer-reviewed journals including the *European Journal of Marketing*, the *International Journal on Media Management*, the *Journal of Media Business Studies*, *Games and Culture* and *Game Studies*.

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