Marketing as black magic: perspectives from Victorian studios

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INTRODUCTION

Many Australian developers do not see themselves as businesses and consequently focus on the production of their games (Keogh, 2021), rather than business aspects such as marketing. Furthermore, it is known that smaller video game developers, who make up the majority of the Australian industry (Keogh, 2021), often do not understand fundamental marketing processes such as engaging in market research, understanding a target market, or how to deliver value to the target market (Consalvo & Paul, 2017; Zackariasson & Dymek, 2017) unless marketing is an interest of the developer (Kubberød et al. 2019; Khan, 2017). However, many developers focus more on creating their games, not the marketing processes. Research into aspiring, university student game developers found a limited level of marketing knowledge, but an appreciation of its importance and desire to enhance their marketing knowledge and skills (Burgess, 2021). Marketing is much more than simply advertising, and what marketing involves and entails is often misunderstood by video game developers (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2017). Marketing is concerned with creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings and products that produce value for the seller, consumer and society as a whole (Burgess, 2021). As such, marketing should involve extensive market research into consumers and start early in game production to ensure value can be created for players so the developer can capture, and communicate, value in return (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2017). Marketing is a pivotal and core skill in the video game industry and equips developers with the tools they need to stand out among a competitive and crowded market (Kerr, 2017; Zackariasson & Dymek, 2017).

To better understand developer's understanding of marketing, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Victorian studios. All were working to publish video games, derive revenue from their creation and had between one and ten staff members. The Victorian games industry is the most developed in the country and home to over 50% of Australia's developers (IGEA, 2021), so the state represents the most sophisticated understanding of video game business and production. The interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed and analysed using a traditional human interpretative thematic-analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview transcripts were analysed one at a time, however, 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).

All of the developers interviewed agreed that marketing was an important activity and skill if a developer wanted to make a profit or living from their game design. The competitive nature of the industry was noted by developers, for example, one stated 'Because with the amount of games, especially on mobile, that comes out every day, if you don't do any marketing, you're not going to be seen'. However, two of the developers admitted they did not start their marketing early in the development cycle or realise it would be important until much later. In this way, their approach to marketing would be more akin to advertising, rather than identifying and embedding value that would appeal to the target market early on (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2017). Interestingly, both developers noted that they now understood the importance of conducting marketing activities earlier in the development process demonstrating that marketing in the video game industry can be an informal process that involves learning more about their consumer, via feedback, and making mistakes as they experiment with ways of communicating value to their target market.

Interestingly, four developers admitted that they did not always know what marketing activities would work. Nor did they know what marketing activities would work *well*. This included both developers who felt they started their marketing too late, and also two developers who were actively working on marketing activities and had a marketing idea in place. As one developer described it, 'It's also a bit of a black magic, I think for everyone, like even the largest studios that sometimes you just don't really know what's going to work'. Furthermore, only three developers explicitly noted that they studied or examined analytics such as responses to social media content. As such, despite an acknowledgement of the importance of marketing and many developers interviewed making attempts to formulate and execute marketing plans, the evaluation would appear to be ad hoc, which undermines their potential success at communicating value to their target market (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2017).

This research has sought to shed some light on the marketing skills and knowledge of Victorian game developers and has implications for other small Australian and national developers. Despite these developers understanding the importance of marketing, and engaging in the process, the lack of formal understanding and evaluation is likely undermining their results. Additional resources and training for small developers would enhance their marketing knowledge, understanding of its purpose and processes and thus influence their success at communicating value.

BIOS

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, has been published in multiple peer-reviewed journals including the *European Journal of Marketing*, *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture* and the *Creative*

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Dr Alexander Muscat is a game designer and researcher who is a Lecturer in Games and the Game Design Study Component Coordinator at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He has achieved award nominations for his games at prestigious international and local game festivals including A MAZE, Berlin (2019) and Freeplay, Melbourne (2018) and was awarded a competitive industry Assigned Production Investment grant (totaling at $48,000) in 2021 with Screen Victoria for work on a commercially focused experimental game.

Dr Anthony Grace Anthony is a Lecturer in Business, the Assurance of Learning Lead and the Assistant Deputy Head of School (Research) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Anthony has extensive experience designing employability and technology-based curriculums while also producing high-quality research and gaining competitive grants (totaling $207,000 since 2014). His work has been published in various highly ranked journals including the *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Channels* and *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*.

Dr Christian Jones is Professor of Interactive Media and the leader of the Engage Research Lab at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. His research focuses on human–computer interaction, interactive media, and affective computing. He leads multiple large-scale, collaborative projects and his research has been published in over 100 international, peer-reviewed conference and journal articles. His work has also been covered by various journalists in news outlets.

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