

*“...a stain-
squirting
robot in
a Stockholm
shopping
center...”*

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Game Your Campaign

New research from Google shows how the dynamics of social gaming can help marketers level up their digital campaigns. Google's User Experience researchers Carolyn Wei and David Huffaker explain how.

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Once upon a time, video games were for kids. In their earliest days, they occupied seaside arcades, basements, and bedrooms – the natural habitats of teenagers. But as the audience grew up, the games, too, became more sophisticated, gradually spreading from bedroom to family room, drawing in an older generation. And yet, for the most part, these gaming adults were the same kids that had grown up in the 8-bit era – they were an interesting niche, but a relatively small one. Then Facebook happened.

The phenomenal success of so-called 'social gaming' has turned middle-aged women into the gaming world's fastest-growing market. These days, a 'gamer' could be a kid in their bedroom, but it could equally be their mom on her way home from work. In this sweet spot of the web, people discovering gaming for the first time are becoming highly engaged players who coalesce around a shared goal. But what can brands and marketers

learn from this powerful, sociable behavior and the complex game dynamics that drive it?

On social networking sites, games serve the same purpose they do at, say, a birthday party or family gathering – they're something to do with other people, an excuse to connect and have fun. Our research set out to understand those interactions in social games, surveying 438 gamers from the US, UK, and Australia as well as conducting video interviews with 14 US gamers.

As you might expect, communicating with friends and family is a major motivation for game play, with friends acting as a quality control for new experiences based on trust and shared taste. We found that 64 percent of gamers surveyed play via a social network site at least three times a week, and one quarter play several times a day. Nearly 29 percent stated that they played with close friends, compared to only 16.7 percent who play with strangers – a ringing endorsement for sociability. ➔



The *Halo* franchise motivated this kind of out-of-game immersion, with users creating a dedicated wiki, Halo Nation, as well as posting hundreds of ‘machinima’ videos (short films created from in-game assets) on YouTube. *Halo 2* was also promoted with the viral campaign ‘I Love Bees,’ which started with a URL planted in a trailer and set a series of real-world missions for fans. Created by 42 Entertainment, the game saw players across the US collaborate to solve problems, being rewarded with an installment of a radio-style drama that wove a backstory to the world of *Halo 2*. One player said at the time that the game was so gratifying, and designed with such cliffhangers, that he had lost sight of the fact that it was a marketing campaign.

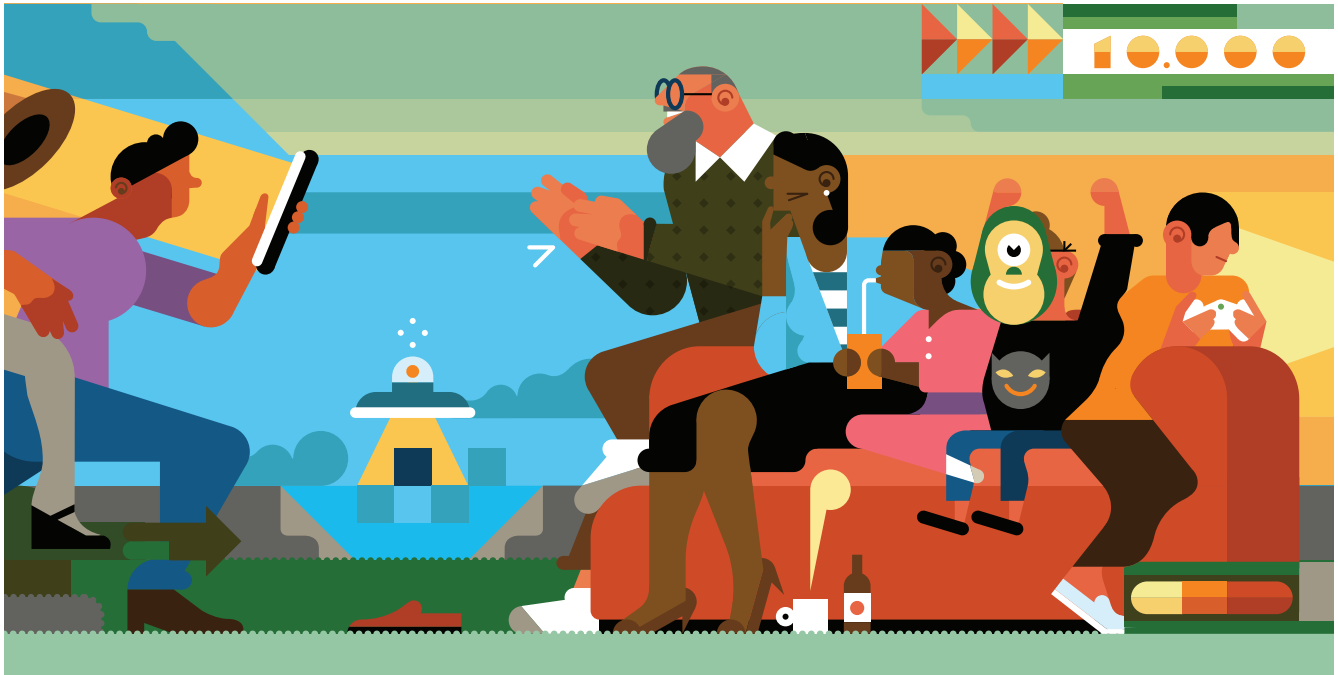
New York retailer Daffy’s developed a bold collaboration for their 2010 ‘Underground Puzzle’ campaign. Created by the agency Johannes Leonardo, 40 sections of one large image were scattered on posters across the city. Players posted photos of the pieces to Twitter, tagged ‘#undergroundpuzzle,’ and two weeks later the full image was revealed along with details of price reductions.

“We know from classic campaigns that complexity is no barrier to success. Goal-based social games are extremely compelling for players, who can work collaboratively to solve a problem and complete a mission.”

The challenge for digital marketers is to identify and employ social tools that are relevant, and to exploit consumers’ interest in a meaningful and engaging way. Poorly implemented ‘gamification’ can undermine the credibility of a brand or project. The game might offer points and then badges, but to what end? Conversely, social entrepreneurial site Kickstarter, which has crowdsourced more than \$130m in creative project funding, provides a model for using collaborative technologies to mobilize people around one concerted effort.

We know, then, that consumers like to express and share their values and interests publicly; the ubiquity of brands’ Facebook Pages demonstrates this. We also know that even massively popular games are not fulfilling players’ appetites for engagement and social features. That creates an exciting and powerful opportunity to create branded games or simply inject social gaming elements into digital campaigns. Add the possibilities created by mobile – location, movement, third-party apps – and the opportunity is vast.

And there is plenty of innovation. Marketing for the movie *The Hunger Games* was social media heavy ➡



(including Twitter and Facebook accounts for specific characters, as well as a YouTube channel), but it also featured a social game on Facebook. The whole campaign was built around fan-based communication, creating games and opportunities for interaction around existing fan communities.

PlayStation clearly knew its audience when it promoted *Twisted Metal*, inviting players to shoot a military-grade gun at a real-world truck via Facebook and Twitter. The shoot-up was live-streamed for two days in February – and burnt through 100,000 bullets.

Ariel used a similar – if less lethal – social installation last September with the ‘Fashion Shoot’ Facebook app, inviting players to control a stain-squirting robot installed in a Stockholm shopping center. And another real-time game, Frijj’s *You LOL You Lose*, pitched Facebook friends against each other via video, challenging them to keep a straight face while watching some of YouTube’s finest weirdness.

All these games cleverly combine novelty with the prestige of discovery, encouraging players to share with their network, while exploring the

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possibilities of web-based technology. But there is far more potential in social games and the power of the web to connect and inspire people.

Celebrated game designer Jane McGonigal evangelizes about the transformative power of gaming, a behavior that she says can help solve real-world problems. The skillset built up by dedicated gamers, she says, includes the trust and cooperation of collaborating with others, and shows that the structure of games motivates people to be productive and to achieve their goals. McGonigal’s own games include *Evoke*, developed with the World Bank Institute, which introduced players to major world problems such as water security and poverty, and encourages them to collaborate on solutions.

A stain-squirting robot is a long way from an initiative to tackle water security, but by understanding the key features of sociability in games, marketers are finding themselves able to communicate with a growing audience in totally new ways. We have a mass technology of collaboration and connection at our fingertips – all we need to do is level-up to the challenge 🎮