



Best Practice Guide to Branded Games

In association with Gamify now

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Meet the gamification experts

"We create meaningful digital experiences leveraging our expertise in games development for human-centred serious games, training programs and business apps. Gamification engages customers, educates, motivates and fosters brand loyalty and trust."

A great branded game masters the art of blurring the line between advertisement and entertainment to create a truly engaging brand space, while avoiding frequent challenges in today's marketing like 'banner blindness' or ad antagonism. People love to play. It is in our DNA. Building on the playfulness of people and applying psychological mechanisms, branded games offer an enjoyable user experience for their consumers. Companies of all sizes and from all industries can use them to communicate their brand message to their target audience. In this best practice guide we address the topics of what branded games are, what benefits they have, the psychology of how and why they work, as well as what you have to consider when leveraging their potential as an effective marketing tool.



It's not about reach, it's about reaching your audience

What's the value of a marketing campaign if our audience doesn't even recognise it, or even worse, if it causes irritation and resentment?

The problem is - many marketers justify their actions with often misleading metrics like 'page-impressions' and 'click-through-rates' (CTR) while losing sight of their main goal, which is to engage the consumer with their brand in a meaningful way. People are flooded with information as if presenting the information is an end in itself and not a means to achieve business related outcomes. The consequence - users became desensitised to common advertising approaches, developing 'banner blindness' and are mostly antagonistic towards advertising¹.

Let's look at some stats: 5.3 trillion ads are served each year, 70% of mobile users are blocking ads or planning to do so², 86% of German 14-59 year-olds are so-called 'multi-screen users', who rarely have their attention in one place (most common example of this category are people who use their mobile phone while watching TV)³. Now how do you connect with your audience without doing the 5,3 trillion and first ad? How do you create an ad that your target group engages with by their own choice and even might be willing to pay for instead of spending their money on avoiding it? How do you establish a deep engagement between your customers and your brand that is so captivating that it catches their full attention? Branded games can be an answer to these questions. But let's first clarify what a branded game is.

Playing and advertising at the same time

Branded games are one of the most interactive forms of advertising. They are the 'big brother' of playable ads, having an extensive user experience and longer session times. Entertaining the player has priority, the advertising is a subtle side effect. That is why branded games are not primarily about in-app purchases or in-app adds, as the game already is the ad. Unlike product placement, where the brand is 'sneaked' into an unrelated work (e.g. movie), the branded game usually appears as an integral part of the work. So instead of asking how to place your new BMW model in an Avengers movie, you ask yourself how your BMW game can look like an Avengers movie and have a similar level of entertainment. That's how you engage consumers with your brand while having a format they love and already understand.

A branded game could look very different based on the goals it is supposed to achieve and the product/service it is promoting. Everything is allowed as long as it is fun and engages the user. For instance, a car manufacturer could use a 'Mario Kart'- or 'Forza' like game to advertise for its brand.

Why not do a marketing campaign in which the advertised car model is equipped with a Switch console and a branded Mario Kart game? Happy children, happy parents, good marketing. An airline might create a 'plane simulation' game to increase the number of touch points with its most frequent fliers. Download your game for free and learn how it is to be the captain of your favourite airline. And this isn't just plain theory; existing companies already leverage the potential of games for marketing purposes. Burger King has several games for Xbox on the market. Mondelez International created a casual game where you twist, lick and dunk their famous OREO cookie into a glass of milk. Our game studio 'It Matter Games' developed a branded game for Porsche to support their introductory campaign of the new Cayman GTS model. Every genre and industry can be tackled. In the end, branded games are a subcategory of branded content marketing, which is widely defined as a tool to generate customer loyalty in a subtle kind of way by providing entertainment or creating a benefit. As entertainment is at the core of every game, this definition is very appropriate.



Apart from being fun, using games as a marketing tool allows the measurement of every single interaction the player makes in-game and hence enables trackable insights on consumer behaviour and ROI. Other than data driven digital marketing approaches, which suffer greatly from different forms of fraud (e.g. CPM-, CPC-, or CPI-fraud which account for several billions of loss for marketers⁴), gaming data is very difficult to manipulate. It's clearly more challenging to create a bot that imitates human playing behaviour than one that places simple clicks.

Now, having a rough idea about what branded games and their benefits are, let's have a look at why they work.

It's a numbers game. It's psychology.

First and foremost, people love to play. Games were by far the most popular Apple Store Category in 2018, accounting for almost 25% of all available apps in the store (second are business apps with 9.8%⁵) and generating almost half of the app store revenues⁶ (data from 2017). In Germany, 42% of the population are playing computer and video games⁷. In the USA it's nearly two-thirds of the population⁸ (64%). Thus, with a great game, it is possible to reach customers at scale. For example, we were able to reach over 1 million downloads for the branded game we designed for Volkswagen (VW) and over 120 million downloads with our mobile game Angry Birds Epic.



But why is it that games are so popular, aren't just kids playing? Well, the average age of gamers is 36 and the gender distribution is almost equal (47% are female⁷). Hence, it's easy to fit your target group when using branded games, as the population of gamers is big and represented in most customer segments. The reason for this big popularity of games is deeply rooted in our psychology. We played long before the rise of digital games and playing always appeared to be one of the main activities to learn and establish social ties. In other words, we are biologically hardwired to play.

A good branded game leverages this predisposition by providing a fun gaming activity and simultaneously engaging the user with the brand. The difference to banner ads is that users choose to engage with the advertisement themselves, because it's entertaining. This autonomy is important, as it is one of our central human needs and triggers well-being and customer loyalty when fulfilled through a service or product (my own research: reach out to receive my thesis on this topic). In general, we tend to like things we choose to do ourselves more than things someone forces on us.



Several psychological mechanisms like classical conditioning and the mere exposure effect contribute to the effectiveness of branded games. Classical conditioning refers to a learning procedure, where a person starts to associate two stimuli with one another (e.g. a song + Christmas), so that both stimuli start resulting in the same reaction (e.g. Christmas mood) even if presented independently from one another (e.g. the song brings you into Christmas mood even if it's not Christmas time). This is one of the main underlying mechanisms of good advertising.

Thinking about Coca Cola, what pictures and emotions, come to your mind? If you are conditioned the same way as most people are, you think about Christmas, although there is nothing inherently Christmassy about a Coke. However, as mentioned above, nowadays it becomes more difficult to establish such a strong emotional link with your brand through a TV spot, as people are flooded with ads and hence became desensitised to them. Branded games on the other hand are not as wide spread, and even if they were, the person playing has made the decision themselves and obviously won't ignore the game while playing it. And according to classical conditioning, the emotions that are triggered by the game will be associated with your brand. These emotions can be very diverse, but mostly positive if the game is well designed. Excitement, fun and satisfaction are typical game inherent reactions your target group can start associating with your brand. The more often the game is played, the stronger this association.

The second psychological mechanism, the mere exposure effect, describes the phenomenon that people develop a preference to things because they are familiar with

them. One of the best-known demonstrations of this effect is a social-psychological study from the 90s, which showed that the more often we see a person, the more attractive we think the person is⁹. It's the same mechanism with brands. The more people are confronted with a brand in an unforced setting, the more they like it. Thus, a brand name, which seemed to be awkward in the beginning, might become more appealing or the user might develop a more positive attitude towards the brand over time.



Both mechanisms, classical conditioning and the mere exposure effect, work best if the marketing activity is delivered as often and as long as possible, while being non-intrusive and self-appointed. This is why these mechanisms are so effective in games, as mobile games score highest among all app categories when it comes to the amount of time to actively use the app and second highest on the number of sessions per user¹⁰ (right after social apps). The user is exposed to the brand in great frequency and most importantly by his own choice. Additionally, the intensity of the interaction is higher than with normal ads, as several senses are activated at the same time. When I play a game, I see it, hear it and touch it (or at least the gaming device). I am not just the observer anymore I am the focal point of the story. See the difference of how people talk about a video clip they saw ('the main character did something') and a game they played ('I did it'). Games leverage this high engagement of the user to present their brand message in a context where the user is open to receive it. That's why well-designed branded games work; because behavioural sciences work.

Shut up and take my money.

Are branded games the magical cure to all marketers' problems? They surely are a great complementation to usual marketing methods, nevertheless, they also contain characteristics you should be aware of in order to leverage their full potential. As opposed to typical online marketing tools, which can be implemented almost immediately, branded games take time to be developed and implemented. You first

must invest before you start harvesting. If you want short-term impact then branded games might not be relevant for you at this point.

However, if you plan and aim for a long-term effect of your advertising, games fit very well. This is the similarity games share with long-term TV advertising, although the process of creating a game might turn out to be slightly more complex. Game development needs lots of iteration, as it's hard to estimate what is going to make the game fun in the end.

Does that mean that only corporates can afford to use branded games as a marketing tool? Not at all. Depending on the complexity of the game, the price ranges can vary greatly. Obviously, as a start-up you won't spend half of the money you raised in your financing round on a AAA style game (highly sophisticated games like GTA).

However, you can also use mini-games, which can be developed for a reasonable price and still have a great fun factor. There is no fixed rule of how sophisticated your game must be in order to be successful. Just think of the game 'Snake', in which the player simply manoeuvres a line which grows in length by collecting items. Simple, but addictive. In the end, the choice of the format depends on your goals, the strategy/vision you want to deliver, the product/service you want to advertise, your target group and of course your budget. You should be very clear on these aspects, as they will determine the direction of the whole project. For instance, the more you define what you want your brand to be - your vision, the easier it will be for the game developers to carry the tone and style over. The clearer you define and know your target audience, the more effectively your vision can be transported to them.

When I first saw the advertisements for the series 'Walking Dead', I was wondering why the creators mostly chose women as the protagonists of the clips, as I assumed a male audience to be the main target group of a post-apocalyptic zombie drama. Well, turns out that the series was the No. 1 show amongst women at that time. And as people tend to like and identify with people who are similar to them, the ad leveraged its full potential by engaging the right audience. Knowing who is going to interact with your content is crucial for designing it successfully.

As a general rule of best practice, all aspects that you consider within your company communication, should be considered when developing a branded game, as it is also a channel of interaction with your audience. To give you an idea on how a branded game might look like depending on some of these parameters, let's examine two branded game projects from our studios 'It Matters Games' and 'REDOX'.



For the first project (above), the client Playmobil set the goal of a long-term interaction with its target group (children), while advertising its Playmobil Dino toys. The outcome was a sophisticated racing adventure in cartoon style for mobile. In several levels, the player collects coins, avoids obstacles and saves the dinosaurs from the evil poachers. Hence, it engages the user in the long-run and gives the brand the opportunity of several touch points in a certain time period.

On the other hand, the second project with Red Bull pursued the goals of creating awareness for one of their campaigns. The outcome was a casual game in the style of 'Guitar Hero' for the browser. Various quizzes and challenges were applied, and the best scoring user could win a meeting with the famous rapper CRO. Although rather simple, the game was great fun and fully achieved its goal to engage its users within the event context it was embedded into.

Both games were completely free and didn't include in-app purchases, advertisement or links to other websites/social networks. The best practice that Playmobil and Red Bull followed in this case was to put customer value first and their potential business objectives second. Often advertising is a form of 'tax' users pay to be able to use a product. Many companies like Facebook, Spotify or YouTube allow the free use of their service and in return provide unwanted advertisement. There is a value creation, but often there are also 'strings attached'.

Games come with the advantage, that entertainment (= value creation) and advertisement (= the strings) are the same thing.

Be sure to keep it this way, as being 'greedy' and implementing intrusive in-app ads or any other form of burden to your users won't do you any good in the long-run. This doesn't mean, that you can't use any additional marketing tools within the game at all. In fact, games are amongst the media with the highest rate of ad acceptance. The point is, that if you use ads, you have to make sure that they don't negatively affect the overall user experience.

Often additional tools are also not necessary, as pointed out with the examples of Playmobil and Red Bull. If the game is well designed, the users will come and stay. The more fun and rewarding the game is, the longer your users will keep playing it. This means more interaction with your brand and hence an increased brand awareness which will lead to higher customer loyalty. You usually don't need a 'tax' for the user to make the branded game pay off. In the end, the brand is the game and the game is an easily accessible brand experience. Try out one or two of the branded game examples mentioned in this best practice guide and experience yourself how entertaining and engaging advertisement can be.

Gamify now: Branded games toolkit

1 Define specific goals and narrow down your target audience. Do you want to increase brand awareness, reach a new target audience or create an additional revenue stream? Who are your players and what content is attracting them? Answering these questions is the crucial first step towards a great branded game.

2 Content first. Don't overstress your audience with your brand. Be ironic about it, play with it – dare to make something bold. Making the branded game fun for your target audience is always the priority. Business outcomes will follow, as the players will associate a great game with a great brand.

3 Be open to expand your Corporate Design to accommodate the specifics of interactive media and games. You want the game to represent your company's CD as much as possible, but also include aspects which aren't 100% CD conform to make the game fun.

4 A branded game doesn't necessarily have to evolve around the products and services of the brand (e.g. driving game for a car manufacturer). Games have the potential to go even further and convey the values of a company (e.g. illustrating BMW's slogan "Designed For Driving Pleasure" by a "Pimp My Ride" style game, where the player engineers the best possible driving experience).

5 Consider the quality benchmarks for your game genre. If your branded game wants to compete with "real" games, it has to be as good as "real" games. Be sure you know the video games market and the entertainment world very well or work with an experienced partner to create a game people want play.

6 Seek feedback from your players and act on it. Games require constant iteration to become fun to play. Ask your players and implement their feedback as quickly as possible to improve the game, keep your players engaged and make them love your brand.

7 Reward your players. What benefit do your players have when playing your game? Why do they want to play it and not Candy Crush? When using Amazon prime you get a fast delivery service PLUS a streaming service. Offer exclusive access and insights for your players, make them feel valued and special or simply create a personal experience and story they really want to share.

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About Gamify now

As an expert in gamification and serious games, Gamify now has been a highly specialized and experienced provider of branded content for years. We create interactive experiences for brands that generate long-term engagement with the content of the business. Whether as a game, app, VR application or learning platform, we develop tailor-made branded content solutions for customers such as TEVA, Porsche, Deutsche Bank, Red Bull or the Bavarian State Ministry of Economic Affairs.

For more information please visit <http://www.gamify-now.de>

About The Author

Maxim Karl is General Manager at Gamify now, the gamification unit of Europe's biggest game developer family remote control productions (rcp). At Gamify now, he is responsible for business development, the strategic development of the company and the creation of gamification concepts for existing and new customers. Holding degrees in psychology from the LMU in Munich as well as technology management from the Center for Digital Technology and Management (CDMT), Maxim has been passionate about gamification and UX during his studies. For car manufacturer Audi, he worked on a gamification project with the goal to gamify their employee surveys and he conducted psychological research about cultural differences in User Experience and their effects on business outcomes. His work experience is similarly as broad as his academic background, including fields like psychotherapy, product management and venture capital. When he's not gamifying the world, you can find Maxim backpacking around the globe or DJing in Munich's electro clubs. In this Best Practice Guide, he combines his psychological knowledge with his gamification expertise to illustrate how you can leverage technology to drive business outcomes. To get in touch personally, contact him at mkarl@gamify-now.de.



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