

Research Project: Intrepid Studios Case Study

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Part I. - Introduction & Overview

In my two previous courses with National University, I focused on Intrepid Studios for my case studies. I chose to continue with this company for my research in this course. Intrepid Studios is an independent or “indie” game developer based in San Diego, California. Their first game, a massively-multiplayer online game (MMO) entitled “Ashes of Creation,” is anticipated to open its first rounds of public testing later this year. During research for assignments in my previous classes creating communication and marketing strategies, I encountered a study on the motivations of consumers to play the MMO “World of Warcraft.” I only found one study on the topic of motivations for purchasing and playing MMOs, and it was specific to “World of Warcraft” players in Spain (Fuster 2012). I’ve decided to research this same problem in the United States, the primary target consumer location for Intrepid Studios, and expand it to the MMO genre as a whole.

The video game industry has seen considerable and continuous growth since its inception with the title “Pong” and the Atari game console gaining explosive popularity in the 1970s (Video Game History 2023). Indie games specifically have become more common in the libraries of players, with an increase from 13 to 17 percent of personal computer and console gamers playing indie titles from 2021 to 2022 (Fleck 2022). Though the opportunity for indie developers has increased, the market is extremely competitive. Steam, the primary platform for both indie and AAA games on personal computers, released a staggering 10,644 games in 2022 alone (Clement 2023). In this landscape, it becomes increasingly important for video game marketers to have a deep understanding of their target consumers and what drives their purchasing decisions. This research will also benefit Intrepid Studios game developers by deepening their

understanding of what players will desire from their experience with “Ashes of Creation.” As the game is intended to be an ongoing, live-service game that will see continual updates and new content, additional insights regarding types of content or interactions desired by players can help the developers shape future content.

The mission of the research was to provide a deeper understanding of consumer motivations for purchasing and continuing to play MMOs. The vision, inspired by Intrepid Studios’s own vision of making games players want to play, was to develop insights that help Intrepid Studios create games that align with gamers’ wants (Meet Intrepid Studios, n.d.). The objectives were to determine three to five primary motivators behind why players choose to purchase and continue to play MMOs and to determine their relative importance to players. The focus group was used for qualitative analysis of why consumers of MMOs choose to purchase and play games of the genre. The survey then determined a ranking of the three to five primary motivations discovered through the focus groups by their relative importance to participants.

Part II - Focus Group

The focus group was conducted as the first step toward developing robust insights that address the research problem. Its objectives were to determine three to five primary motivations behind why consumers choose to purchase and continue to play MMOs. Some strengths of the situation regarding the research are that Intrepid Studios’s leadership team has a genuine interest in their consumer desires and is excited to make use of developed insights and that I have a familiarity with the company and the game genre through previous research and as an MMO player. Weaknesses include a low budget due to Intrepid Studios not yet having a published game generating revenue and a potential for bias both on my part as the researcher and on Intrepid

Studios's part when applying insights. Opportunities included Intrepid Studios's large social media and Reddit following, which generated willing, volunteer participants for the study. The biases mentioned in the weaknesses could also be a threat to the study if they led to compromising the study or the application of its insights.

Procedures

For selecting participants, I first established criteria for demographics participants would need to have. The demographics I decided on were people ages 18-34 who reside in the United States, play at least one MMO, and play video games on a personal computer. I also decided that as my focus is on the United States as a whole, I wanted to ensure participants represented a variety of locations within the country by selecting participants who reside in different U.S. states. The age range is based on the most common age group of MMO players (Ye 2022). The other characteristics were based on Intrepid Studios's target market for "Ashes of Creation."

Selecting a setting that is comfortable for participants can facilitate participants building trust with one another and having open, candid discussions (Daymon 2011). For my MMO-focused research, I decided to host my focus group by using a video chat on Discord, which is an app commonly used by players of MMOs and other online games to communicate with other players. Using a familiar application that already had an association with the topic being discussed was beneficial in creating a comfortable environment and building a sense of connection among the participants.

There are several methods of recruiting focus group participants, including nomination by a key person or people, inviting an existing group to participate, randomly selecting from within

a large group, making selections based on a title or position, and advertising for volunteer participants (Guidelines, 2005). In my hypothetical research scenario, I'm working closely with Intrepid Studios through the research process. I felt seeking volunteer participants would be the most beneficial for this research. The company has a relatively large following on its social media channels and the "Ashes of Creation" Reddit page. Sharing posts for focus group recruitment on these pages would bring in participants who not only meet the previously detailed demographics but also have some level of interest in Intrepid Studios's upcoming game.

The eight focus group participants were selected from those who communicated their interest from the "Ashes of Creation" social media pages and Reddit. Those who were selected were then emailed to identify time slots that would work for all participants. Once this was completed and a date and time were selected, participants were then emailed a discord server invitation along with an overview of what to expect as well as rules and expectations for conduct during the focus group. On the day of the focus group, the participants all joined a video chat hosted on the Discord server, which was recorded from my computer as an MP4 video file for later review. I moderated the focus group by voicing the questions and prompts for discussion.

To void the previously mentioned potential researcher bias impacting the study I needed to ensure I would remain open-minded and wouldn't allow my own experiences and opinions to interfere with the group. As an MMO player myself, I knew I would have strong ideas regarding the topics, which I took the time to anticipate ahead of conducting the group to have an awareness of my potential biases. This helped me to set them aside and keep a more objective role as a moderator (Daymon 2011). Being able to draw on my own experiences did help with communicating with the participants and thinking of follow-up questions.

The first section of questions and prompts was introductory, intended to help build rapport and trust between participants to facilitate candid discussion throughout the focus group. These included questions regarding their name, where they're from, what MMOs they've played, and why they decided to participate in the study. The next section proceeded to exploratory questions to derive insights into the research problem. These included questions about what makes a good MMO, what content within MMOs is their favorite, what content do they get the most excited about, and what is their favorite MMO. These questions were often met with follow-up questions to facilitate deeper discussion inspired by a participant's response. The last section was for closing questions, including asking if there was anything else they'd like to add and about their experience with the focus group (Guidelines 2005).

Analysis & Findings

Most participants agreed that the social aspect of the genre is the biggest draw, and being able to have a community within a game that is conducive to enjoyment and feelings of belonging was the most important. The second motivator was a feeling of identity with the player's character, discussed in the previous study as "dissociation." This motivation was described by participants as the ability to feel a sense of immersion that allows them to temporarily escape day-to-day stressors. The third was games that provide a sense of achievement. Participants enjoy challenging content that provides awards that can be seen by other players, including items of clothing or armor, mounts, a visible title, etc. The final motivator was exploration. Participants like MMOs with extensive world-building with areas and ideas to explore through game content.

Part III - Survey

The survey used the focus group results to develop further insights into the research problem. Combining research methods provides insights that a researcher would be unable to achieve with either method on its own (Kaden 2012). The objective of the survey was to rank the four previously described motivations in order of relative importance to the participants. Each participant provided their own ranking. The collaborative ranking was analyzed for the final results and findings.

Situation Analysis

A strength of the research is that having the focus group results provides strong insights for an informed basis for the survey. While having data to build the survey from is a strength, the data having only come from a single focus group is a weak point due to its small sample size. This limits the understanding of the study's reliability as there was no opportunity to see repetition of the produced results (Howell 2005). Conducting multiple focus groups ahead of the survey could have provided more reliability and could likely have had a large effect on the survey questions and results. An opportunity related to the survey was that the recruitment for the previous focus group provided a large number of eligible volunteers who were not selected for the focus group and qualified and willing to participate in the survey. A threat to the research was my expectations for the outcomes as the researcher, based on the results of the previous study it was inspired by. This expectation could have resulted in compromising my interpretation of the data by looking only for patterns that support my expectation and/or ignoring or denying those that don't (Daymon 2011).

Procedures

Selecting survey participants involved the same criteria used for the focus group participants. The demographics were people ages 18-34 who reside in the United States, play at least one MMO, and play video games on a personal computer. The age range is based on the most common age group of MMO players (Ye 2022). The other demographics were aligned with Intrepid Studios target market for “Ashes of Creation.” To prevent the sample from being too concentrated in one area, each third of participants represented the West Coast, East Coast and Central areas of the United States, respectively. No single U.S. state accounted for more than 10 percent of participants. This was an important measure to ensure the data collected was representative of the target sample (Daymon 2011).

When conducting the previous focus group recruitment, I advertised the study on the Intrepid Studios social media channels and Reddit page. As this resulted in a large number of volunteers who were already screened for the previously described criteria, and only eight were selected for the focus group, I was able to pull from the remaining eligible volunteers for the survey. 100 participants were selected from this pool of volunteers. They were contacted by phone to notify them of their selection and confirm their interest in and willingness to participate. If a participant was unable to be reached or did not wish to participate, a new volunteer was selected to contact until 100 participants were confirmed. Once confirmed, participants were emailed a link to the survey, which was hosted on SurveyMonkey. The email also included instructions and a timeframe in which to complete the survey.

The survey included two methods of ranking the four motivations and two additional questions. The first ranking method was for each participant to rank the four motivations by their relative importance, assigning them an order from one to four. The second was to rank each of

the four motivations individually on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (highly important). The survey included one open-ended question to ask if the participant had other motivations for purchasing and continuing to play MMOs that were of equal or greater importance to the four motivations included in the survey that had not been mentioned. The final question was if any of the motivations in the survey were not important to the participant. This question was multiple choice with the option to select multiple results. Their answers were recorded by SurveyMonkey and available for analysis once submitted by the participant.

As described in the situation analysis, I recognized the danger of my expectation that the results would likely align with those of the Fuster study. I maintained an awareness of the potential for bias to consciously ensure I was approaching the data from an objective point of view. When the patterns I saw were consistent with my expectations, I spent additional time analyzing to evaluate if those patterns were logical and to look for other patterns I may have missed due to a subconscious bias (Daymon 2011). For my analysis, I looked for patterns both in the order of the relative motivation ranking and in the individual rank score of each motivation. I placed strong significance on the individual trait ranking when the ranking was consistently 7 or above or 3 or below. To evaluate potential unanswered questions or further research needed, I analyzed the responses from participants to the question regarding motivations that were not included in the study to identify if there were any patterns among the participant responses.

Findings

The collaborative results showed that the relative importance of each of the four motivations from most to least importance were as follows: Immersion, Social, Achievement, and Exploration. While ranking the immersion motivation above the social motivation was

consistent in the relative ranking question, the individual trait ranking showed that participants placed a near-equal value on the two motivations, with both showing an average ranking of nine out of ten. Achievement was ranked between 6 and 8 by most participants, with an average trait ranking of 7. Exploration was consistently ranked between five and seven by most participants with an average ranking of 6. Most participants did not list additional motivations and no patterns were identified between those who did. No participants identified any of the four motivations as not important.

Part IV - Conclusion

While the survey results were similar to the Fuster study, the ranking of the determined motivations was significantly different. In the original study, the relative order of importance from greatest to least was exploration, dissociation (similar to immersion), achievement, and socialization (Fuster 2012). Possible factors for this I considered for potential exploration are the difference in culture based on the geographical region as well as the time period, the impacts of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic, and the culture within the World of Warcraft community in comparison to that of MMO players as a whole. While the findings were interesting and provided insight that would be useful for any company producing MMOs, they would have been more reliable if I had been able to conduct multiple focus groups and get similar results. Having this data would have increased the validity of the study as it would have enhanced the study's ability to accomplish its intended goals (Howell 2005).

In addition to providing avenues for further potential research for the gaming industry, the study accomplished its goal of providing insights benefitting Intrepid Studios. The insights developed from this study enable Intrepid Studios to prioritize creating and marketing content

that encourages social interaction between players and immersion through connecting with the player character. They also understand the value in communicating the types of challenging content and rewards in the game as well as their world-building that provides interesting exploration for players. Having this information will allow Intrepid Studios marketers to better connect with their target market for successful campaigns, as well as provide direction for game content developers in what types of content MMO players value.

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