Games People Play

Category: *Electronic Games*

Methods: *Focus Groups, Depth Interviews, Projective Techniques, Motivational Research*

Summary

At the dawn of the digital age, a major international manufacturer of electronic systems and components assigned a team of engineers to develop digital games for the new electronic devices then emerging. The engineers viewed this as an opportunity to convert checkers, chess, and similar board games into electronic versions. Consumer research revealed a far vaster realm of opportunity, a fantasy world beyond the imaginations of the engineers.

Strategic Issues

Major technological breakthroughs in integrated circuits, microprocessors, and other electronic components made possible a whole array of new products and new possibilities. Our client, a Fortune 500 company, organized a number of engineering teams to address different product categories of perceived opportunity. One engineering team was assigned "games" and the task of developing games for digital devices and media. The engineering team's initial focus was on converting various board games into digital or electronic versions, and the engineers wanted some guidance, based on consumer research, about how best to design electronic versions of these board games.

Decision Analyst immediately suspected that the engineers might be too rigid or too structured in their thinking, and recommended that qualitative research (focus groups and depth interviews) be the primary research method. Qualitative techniques would allow consumer motivations related to games to be explored in depth, and the engineers could view the interviews and perhaps expand their conception of what might be possible. The engineers liked the idea of escaping their cubicles to watch consumers through a one-way mirror, and the project was approved.

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Research Objectives

Naturally, the overriding stated objective of the research was to help the engineers convert board games into electronic versions, based on consumer feedback. We were able to persuade the engineering team to allow us to set a research objective of exploring consumer attitudes toward games in general—and delving into consumer motivations related to games. The engineers felt the motivational explorations would be a waste of time, but nevertheless agreed to give us that freedom.

Research Design and Methods

A combination of qualitative methods was employed—focus groups and depth interviews. A series of in-person focus groups were conducted in the United States, spread across several major cities. Several focus groups among men, divided into similar age groups, were conducted. Several focus groups were conducted among women, following the same sampling pattern. In addition, a number of depth interviews were conducted in each market. We wanted to observe the interplay and interactions among respondents as they discussed games (hence, the groups), but we also wanted to hear what individuals would say and do in the absence of peer influence or pressure (hence, the depth interviews).

The discussion or interview guides were set up to begin very broadly and vaguely on the subject of playing games and sports, so that respondents did not know the purpose of the discussions or understand our motives—to minimize any potential bias from our questioning. As the sessions evolved, we explored childhood memories of playing games, explored adults playing games with other adults, and explored adults playing games with children. We asked questions about the joys of games and the disappointments. We used projective techniques, such as role playing and story telling, to help uncover deeper emotions and feelings. We probed into the psychology of game playing and the factors involved. Towards the end of the sessions, we focused on board games and their conversion to electronic media (the primary objective).

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These sessions turned out to be remarkable in terms of participant involvement and interest—and in the depth and expanse of revelations. It seemed that everyone had very deep and strong feelings about games and game playing. The longer respondents talked, the deeper and more intense the sessions became. The results were not what the engineers expected.

Results

We learned that human beings are extremely competitive creatures, but these competitive urges are suppressed at every turn. In the home, in school, in church, and at work, open competition among individuals is actively discouraged in the interests of social harmony and cooperation. In playing games, these deep-seated competitive drives are unleashed and set free. It's thrilling to compete openly to win— where winning is a socially acceptable outcome.

We also learned that consumers were not much interested in playing board games, or solving puzzles, or playing chess on computers or electronic media. What the participants really wanted to do was sit in the cockpit and fly the airplane, sit in the driver's seat and race the car, drive the tank and shoot its gun, and carry the rifle and grenades into the thick of battle. The respondents wanted simulated action and conflict, and wanted to be participants in the competitive action and excitement. We were thrilled with these qualitative discoveries. They heralded the birth of a new industry. The rest is history.

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