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Vince Broady is a legend in the world of online game playing. He set up the GameSpot.com network ten years ago that unites computer games fans worldwide. We caught up with him in London at the launch of their UK site and discovered how the early adopters in the online games industry are setting a blueprint for much wider digital publishing and marketing.

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Speed read

Connected gaming is now gaining critical mass, heading for its tipping point

People behave differently when networked together - the digital networked society is as much about being networked as it is about being digital

Barriers between media access are also changing: the new gaming machines are providing a gateway to DVDs, games, the internet, and - thanks to Skype – even telephony

New publishing models are emerging that harness these networked environments – models that will fundamentally affect what media businesses do and how they deliver

Nurturing communities has emerged as a key strand of network-centric publishing – yet although every publisher wants a vibrant community, few sites are achieving anything more than token successes

New paradigms are emerging for advertisers as well - sites like GameSpot can take the audience's pulse, effectively this becomes the backbone for a digital nervous system that monitors any brand's health

There are major implications for all publishers

Online gaming: laboratory or 'just for geeks'?

Connected gaming in the digital networked society

Computer gaming is going through a sudden change, again. Players are getting connected together and the games machines they use are no longer confined to games, but have evolved into media players that will do everything from play DVDs to make phone calls. The new generation of machines are natives in the broadband world and typify the frontline of the long-awaited technology 'convergence'.

As the world of media gets set for its next big transition, we believe connected gaming offers a unique window into some of what lies in store for all media. This is one form of online social networking - gamers are playing *together* while connected to the internet. Some play with a small group of friends and others inside massive gaming communities. The shift to networked gaming is now undergoing its tipping point. 10% of the original X-Box users were connected, but for the new generation of machines this figure leaps. It's been clear for years that game players are early adopters of new technology, but what is now emerging is an appreciation that their behaviour serves as a valid laboratory for the new publishing models that will spill across the wider web industry. The GameSpot websites are home turf for hundreds of online gaming communities. The sites review the latest games and the players talk about them, play them and share their passions, all in a form of participation architected by GameSpot.

Meet the Gamesmaster

Vince Broady set up GameSpot.com for gaming fans ten years ago. And now he's back to launch it in the UK. A decade on – married and with a family – Broady revels in challenging the stereotype of gamers: "Games have evolved, and so too has the audience. The average age of gamers is now 'late twenties', but they're played by people of all ages, and as the first generation of gamers gets older, we're seeing them take gaming with them." The potential for market growth is clearly good news for the games website industry, but what Broady's team are doing is noteworthy for all publishers.

New models

People behave differently when networked together. The digital networked society is as much about being *networked* as it is about being digital. Broady is already charting new behaviours in the games market: "One big trend we're seeing is that games gain a spectator mode. For example on our Tournament TV service we have experienced gamers competing, and once they enter, their games are watched live in a webcast."

Tournament TV already has tens of thousands of users in the US and the model echoes what we're all familiar with from traditional sports television. Just like TV there are highlights that are then broadcast later in the week. Just like TV there are tribes of fans following particular sports. This is a new genre of TV style programming and in spite of the narrow appeal and the low production values, what's happening here in one tiny market will be a blueprint for many other sectors. Other aspects of their web broadcasting includes live events, interviews and reviews. Although everything GameSpot does is anchored around a specific game, the model transfers neatly across a broad range of consumer entertainment.

So far they have 62,000 paying subscribers (mainly in the US), and the live broadcasts are restricted to those hardcore gamers for reasons linked to the current economics of serving bandwidth hungry content. The collapse in bandwidth pricing means those economics are shifting quickly and although the idea of a live twelve hour live gaming marathon (one of their first broadcasts) may not be everyone's idea of 'appointment to view' web TV, it charts out what is now possible.

Confidence bounces back

In 2005 a buzz returned to Europe's web publishing industry. By the spring of 2006 confidence had reached an all time high, and when I caught up with Vince at the launch of the UK GameSpot site, the enthusiasm was palpable. What separates this from the previous highs in confidence is the clear commercial foundations underlying the web 2.0 media brands. The stats look awesome...

> "On Monday we launched and got one million impressions in the first day, and over a thousand forum posts. In the world of launches that's a bit of a record."

Having weathered the storm when the web publishing industry crashed, Broady has much to smile about now: "In July 2002 GameSpot left the UK penniless and in disgrace as the dotcom implosion pulled every dream that we had. The GameSpot UK site was the most heavily trafficked site at the time and it was a really tough decision".

The collapse of confidence in online advertising revenues forced them to develop a different way of looking at media. He is conscious that "five years of thought went into the new publishing format", but what has emerged is a new publishing genre. The model taps into the enthusiasm and passions of the community and turns this into a commercially viable media publishing business.

Meet the gamesmaster's family

GameSpot UK is the latest launch from CNET Networks, the veteran digital pure-play business that charted the rise, fall and rise again of the dotcom world. The CNet networks entertainment family includes three key sites: GameSpot, mp3.COM and TV.com. The publishing model for GameSpot reflects a wider understanding of Web 2.0 approaches that the group is readily championing. They have a proven track record in creating content and communities around entertainment media, then connecting passionate users to products, and then marketers to that community. Their models apply just as much breadth and versatility to the services their commercial clients can expect, and the analysis and performance of the collective behaviour of their community of users is giving brands unparalleled insight into the use of their products.

Smart devices, not dumb terminals

Barriers between media access points are also changing. The X-Box bridges the gap between media, providing a gateway to DVDs, games, the internet or other media in the home. Add in Skype and the games machines become telephones, chose the right websites and they're televisions too. Games machines are in the driving seat on the road to the technology convergence we're all heading for, but remain mysteriously off the radar for many executives because of their narrow appeal. What's clear is how those visions of the single device and the smart home are almost within our grasp. Games manufacturers are already weaving

How the site works

GameSpot is all about the game. "We host everything that the game publisher creates and put it up for free," explains Broady, not losing the irony that their entire business is a free advertising platform for their main clients.

"We then create additional content with our editorial experts. In the UK we now have an additional team creating additional content and all of this serves to let audiences come in and engage more and post more material."

This aspect of the user-generated content is proving to be the key to their publishing success. "Instead of having a one-to-many attitude we decided to change to become the enablers of conversations." The CNET shorthand for this is about architecting the conversations their users can have. Architecting conversations is something we're bound to hear more of this year.

mainstream music tracks into the gameplay, advertisers are taking billboards in the virtual streets, and there are even moves to standardise the nature of in-game advertising in a bid to make it more readily tradable. For the music industry, the next step will be linking into video music that will be built into the games themselves. At that point the barriers between devices and media formats will have truly melted away. Broady is clear that once the technology is in place, consumer behaviour will shift quickly and marketers will have a new toolkit: "It will change the way marketers think about their consumers. We won't think about males who are 18-34, we'll think about a world of individuals. This will change the way marketing works".

Nurturing community

Much is being made of the importance of online communities. Everyone wants to have one, yet few sites are achieving anything more than token successes. Broady's site clocked up a staggering one thousand posts from its users on the day of the UK launch, and GameSpot's attitude to nurturing community reveals lessons other publishers would be advised to learn from: "We're really after the avid contributors", explains Broady, "These are people who know about stuff and want to share that knowledge with others. When they contribute, we translate their knowledge and involvement into something everyone can access, and then we use our publishing framework to share that with the rest of the community". The key ingredients are the level of connection you have with your audience.

> "Instead of having a one-to-many attitude we decided to change to become the enablers of conversations"

From the amount talked and written about user generated content, it remains surprisingly elusive in most web businesses. MySpace and Craig's List are only two aspects of what 'user generated' is all about. For GameSpot "the value of user generated content is in its quality and not its volume" explains Broady. "We have a high quality threshold. Only experienced GameSpot users can write reviews. The reviews have to be 1000 words and include summaries and our rating system. This means that the reviews that are generated are really valuable. These pages communicate to people whether the game is good and what experienced players think". That's a long way from personal home pages and travel photographs, but reflects the breadth of models possible in the user-generated arena. It's also proved to be the key in retaining the focus in GameSpot's market. Their tools allow games players to create 'Unions' – communities within the GameSpot community, and users have free reign to create as they please.

New paradigms for advertisers

Tap into a community and you'll find more than just user-generated content. There's as rich an experience for marketers as there is for the gamers. Sites like GameSpot can tell how many people looked at the content of a specific page (like the review of a game). They can tell how many pages were accessed, and how those customers responded to competitive activity from other brands. Harnessed effectively this becomes the backbone for a digital nervous system that monitors the brand's health. For advertisers it's gold dust. Never before has it been so easy to gain insight into how audiences are really behaving.

Broady is clear that this is a critical part of their revenue model and a hot button for clients: "This data gives incredible insight into how audiences behave, and what is going to sell in the shops". That gives a rare window into what marketers can expect in the future, and sites that develop the analytics tools that GameSpot has, can now be harnessed as a barometer for the wider market. From sales to promotional strategies, this is exactly what marketers are craving. In the early days of web publishing, brands like e-pinions that drew together product reviews of anything and everything looked set up be the pulse of consumers. Many of CNET networks sites deliver this, but by tapping into the audience behaviour data, a rich new vein of insight is reached. Smart marketers will use this to reappraise the whole customer's journey. And when they do, the effects on the offline brands are dramatic.

> "This data gives incredible insight into how audiences behave, and what is going to sell in the shops"

They can support the sales process in many new ways, all of which go way beyond the role of content posted on an advertiser's own website. In the future of digital marketing, web advertising and corporate brochure-ware are just a small part of the story.

Vince Broady

Vince Broady looks after CNET Networks' Entertainment portfolio of brands – GameSpot, MP3.com, TV.com and Metacritic.com. These sites give access to content and resources about games, music, movies and television, and have a series of engaging and innovative community features that let people with the same passions and interests meet up and share their opinions.

Previously Vince managed mySimon, CNET's comparison shopping service and before that was vice president of product development and general manager for the consumer group of ZDNet. Before launching GameSpot in 1995 (later acquired by ZDNet), Vince was executive editor at IDG's Multimedia World magazine.

Implications: our take

The web has been threatening media substitution for more than a decade, yet throughout the nineties there was little evidence that it was happening. Yet, like so many of the changes that come in the digital networked society, they take longer to happen, but when they arrive prove to be much greater than most predict. GameSpot's model represents the future of consumer media in its sector. Print titles have dominated this market for twenty years, yet in no way can print magazine compete with this offering. Their formats are tired, their production lead times archaic, their coverage is restricted by pagination, and their accessibility cumbersomely tied to the old distribution models; even as news media they're now surpassed by web competitors.

> *GameSpot's model represents the future of consumer media in its sector. Print titles have dominated this market for twenty years, yet in no way can print magazine compete with this offering*

And all this before the real power of digital networked media is unleashed. Interactivity puts people at the heart of the entertainment experience, community tools connect likeminded folk from across the street just as readily as they do across the planet, video and audio can be woven into the content, and there's a permanence that ensures tomorrow's edition builds on the strength of what ran before rather than starting with the white sheet of paper. In every way the strengths of the web competitors reflect just how far media has leapt, and just how vast the challenge has become for magazines.

Clearly the games market is starting to feel the pressure. In spite of the growing potential audiences, print circulations are flagging and we believe will now head into steep decline. Smart advertisers are already following their customers, and smart media brands like GameSpot are giving them unparalleled insights into the way their customers behave.

> *"This will be like blogging 'on steroids' and hardly any media groups – offline or online – are ready for it"*

GameSpot is championing a new type of community involvement, and there's yet another level to what's in store. Because gamers have basic video production tools in their hands, there's a natural progression to video based participation. When it comes, this will be like blogging 'on steroids' and hardly any media groups – offline *or* online – are ready for it.

If the model of architecting conversations is part of the new role for media, then what of its implications? Editorial teams need to be re-skilled to become enablers of conversation, web publishers need to be focussing as much on the user generated materials as on their own creations, commercial teams need to explore how user generated activity can be monetised.

Actions

Plug in your X-Box and get playing

Log on to GameSpot and find out what people are saying about your favorite game

Consider what the publishing paradigm means for the wider games industry

Consider how you could harness 'user-generated' content in your business

Try out video community content and examine where it could fit in your business

Ask advertisers about the market data they currently receive

Ask your team about the community sites they visit

And start contributing to a community yourself

Related trends we're tracking

The cultural shift to online social networks and user-generated content

The 'Web 2.0' publishing models – growing out of the digital networked society

A sudden acceleration in the growth of in-game consumer advertising

Resources & Links

GameSpot.co.uk – Log on, sign up, try it out

X-Box and PlayStation – for the full-on gaming experience

Online Social Networking – our briefing paper for publishers

About Digital Thought Leaders series

In times of huge economic and social change, knowledge becomes a critical success factor. We created the Digital Thought Leaders interviews to bring you closer to people and brands shaping the digital networked economy. They are based on private interviews or lectures we've participated in, and are published monthly. We also publish similar insight papers to accompany our own talks and training workshops to unlock the potential of your team.

About the author

Danny Meadows-Klue has been a commentator on the digital networked industries since 1995. He managed the UK's first online newspaper and has helped run web businesses ranging from mass market portals and consumer magazines, to online stores, search and email services. Among his industry roles he is the co-founder and former chairman of the UK and European Internet and Interactive Advertising Bureau, and has been lecturing on digital marketing for more than a decade. He set up Digital Strategy Consulting in 2000 to help firms accelerate their own digital networked media strategies.

Training and Development from Digital Strategy

If your firm wants to harness the power of web analytics then why not talk to the team here at Digital? Our network of senior associates can deliver the hands-on expertise you need to move your web strategy to embrace the Web 2.0 models of publishing. These can unlock your audience's desire to create, and build traffic and revenues that will be sustainable in the new internet economy.

We can help your management team improve their insights, and look for the audience involvement that's right for your brand. This not only unlocks more of the value from the digital channel investments you've already made, but protects your product offering as competition intensifies. Our services range from masterclass briefings for boardroom colleagues to hands-on workshops for publishing and marketing executives. They are currently available in Europe and North America.

Our company support programmes includes

- Coaching and mentoring for senior management
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DIGITAL STRATEGY CONSULTING

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Digital Strategy Consulting Limited
Tel   +44 (0)20 7244 9661
Fax   +44 (0)20 7168 2659
Email   TheTeam@DigitalStrategyConsulting.com
Company   4342606
The Digital Hub, 34 Kenway Road, Kensington, London SW5 0RR, UK