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GENERATING VISIBILITY IN THE INDIE GAME MARKET

– The Visual-First Method

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– The Visual-First Method

A need for cheap and fast marketing in the Indie game development community and the accessibility of social media has shaped into a relatively new way of marketing, the Visual-First Method. This thesis explores the effectiveness of this method, as well as the quirks of social media as a marketing platform and its unique algorithms from the point of awareness-building.

The visual-first method is based on the idea that the more frequently a social media user sees a post about a game, the greater the chance for the user to become interested in the game. The continuous posts heighten the viewers' interest until they might someday try the game, which might at the end lead to a sale. As social media demands fast paced action, another element is the use of video formats, showing in ten seconds what the game is about, and communicating clearly what the game offers in a nutshell. The Method is also based on graphics, and advocates beginning the development with the visuals, as social media is inherently a visual medium.

To test the Visual-First Method two different projects from the same company were used as case studies, one was marketed with the company's previous marketing strategy, and the other with the Visual First strategy. During the first two months analytics were gathered from the first project that was following the studio's current marketing plan. The next two months the marketing of the latter project was performed using the Visual-First method. Twenty-five posts were collected from both marketing campaigns each and were compared to one another by means of analyzing the format, subject, and the audience of each post.

The Visual-First method proved to be more successful, due to posting more visually appealing material, as well as targeting the marketing towards the game development community. However, growth was slow, thus the method is meant for a development long marketing, meaning that to see real progress, it should be done for a year or more. Furthermore, the quality of the game defines the success of the awareness-building campaign. If the game is not visually appealing and does not look fun, the game will not gain a following.

KEYWORDS:

Indie games, digital marketing, marketing strategy, video game marketing

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NÄKYVYYDEN GENEROINTI INDIE-PELI MARKKINOILLA

– Visual-First-metodi

Rahallisesti ja ajallisesti halvan markkinoinnin tarve indiepeliyhteisössä sekä sosiaalisen median käyttömahdollisuudet loivat uuden markkinointitavan: Visual-First-metodin.

Visual-First-metodi pohjautuu sosiaalisen median tapaan toistaa sisältöään. Mitä useammin käyttäjä näkee julkaisun tietystä aiheesta, sitä suurempi mahdollisuus postauksella on herättää käyttäjän mielenkiinto. Sosiaalinen media on nopeatemoinen ja armoton ja sallii julkaisulle usein vain sekunnin herättämään mielenkiintoa. Tämän takia metodi ehdottaa videoformaatin käyttöä, jolla pystyy näyttämään kymmenessä sekunnissa pelin pääkohdat selvästi näyttämään, mitä peli tarjoaa pelaajalle. Lisäksi sosiaalinen media on visuaalinen media. Metodia käyttävällä on tapana aloittaa pelinkehitys grafiikkapainotteisesti.

Opinnäytetyö tutkii metodin vaikuttavuutta sekä sosiaalisen median sääntöjä ja algoritmeja näkyvyyden ja markkinoinnin kannalta. Visual-First-metodia tutkimiseksi kehitettiin kahden kuukauden mittaiset tapaustutkimukset käyttäen saman yrityksen kahta eri projektia. Ensimmäiset kaksi kuukautta kerättiin analytiikkaa yrityksen nykyisen marketointisuunnitelman mukaan. Seuraavat kaksi kuukautta marketoitiin yrityksen uutta projektia Visual-First-metodin mukaan aiemman projektin perusteella. Molemmista kerättiin 25 julkaisun analytiikat, joiden avulla verrattiin projektien sosiaalisen median tilejä toisiinsa ja samalla analysoitiin käytettyä formaattia, aihetta, yleisöä sekä levinneisyyttä.

Visual-First-metodi onnistui hyvin. Postaukset ovat vetoavampia sekä yleisö oli huomattavasti vastaanottavaisempi. Kuitenkin kasvu oli hidasta, joten markkinointia kannattaa ylläpitää koko tuotteen kehityksen ajan, usein vuoden ajan tai pidempään. Pelin laadulla on myös suuri merkitys. Jos peli ei näytä hauskalta tai ole visuaalisesti vetoava, peli ei ole tarpeeksi kiinnostava eikä saa kannattajia.

ASIASANAT:

Indie-videopelit, digitaalinen markkinointi, markkinointi strategia, videopeli markkinointi

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GLOSSARY

AAA	Sometimes pronounced triple-A, in the video-game industry it is used to classify games that are produced or distributed by major publishers. Associated aspects are higher development and marketing budget.
Algorithm	On social media channels, an algorithm decides which posts users will see every time they check and update their feeds.
AR	Augmented Reality. Rendering computer-generated content into the real-world environments to build an interactive experience.
Beta	A term used in software development, also known as betaware. Used when a software is completed, but still contains bugs and errors, and may cause crashes. Published betas are used for testing.
Call to Action (CTA)	A marketing term, where the marketer encourages the consumer to do a certain action the marketer wishes them to make, such as visiting a website, or in this thesis, wishlisting the marketed game on Steam.
GIF	Graphic Interchange Format. A bitmap image format suitable for short, 10 second animations and video clips.
Feed	Usually the front page on social media platforms, which provide users with frequently updated content.
Hashtag (#)	A way of categorizing, highlighting, and finding different Tweets, posts, or conversations concerning different topics. Used with the symbol "#". For example, #IndieDev. Originally implemented by Twitter, thus spread to other platforms.
Impression	A metric of how many times a post has the potential to be on another user's feed based on the different algorithms.
mDAU	Average monetizable daily active users on Twitter.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the rise of the video game industry, with the yearly games published on the popular game distributing service Steam breaking 10 000 in 2020 (Clement, 2021b), the competition has grown fiercely. Not only are the games competing against each other, some of which have actual marketing budgets, they also must compete against social media platforms, streaming services, and anything else that takes up the consumer's time and attention. Many independent game development teams do not have the budget or time for a traditional video game marketing strategy, least of all solo developers or newcomers to the industry.

Due to the need of cheap and fast marketing in the indie game development community, a new awareness-building strategy started to evolve, the Visual-First method, also known as Visuals-First. Accounts sharing their projects and development on social media started to gain traction, gaining their own followings, and resulting to critically acclaimed and well sold titles, such as *Ooblets*, *The First Tree*, and *Slime Rancher*, all with close to no marketing budget nor a publisher to back them up during development.

Using social media for marketing and promotion purposes is not a new concept. Companies and even small businesses have their own Facebook accounts and share news of their company happenings through Twitter. Social media platforms have tools and resource sites to help businesses as well as have certain spots reserved for paid promotional ads they slide into the feed. AAA studios also use social media as a promotional tool, for example Santa Monica Studios used Facebook Messenger to promote the 2018 title *God of War*, by building a text-based prequel, *God of War: A call of from winds*, playable on the social media platform (Santa Monica Studio, 2018). The Visual-First method, however, is different by the special use of social media, which makes the development more transparent. Likewise, it differs from the norm by building a community as early as the development, where the developer and the audience are inherently equal and sharing authentic interactions.

Like the name suggests, one of the key elements of the Visual-First marketing strategy is the emphasis on graphics and visual aesthetics. This method suggests firstly designing the games aesthetics and secondly showcasing these visuals, and how the game would look like repetitively on social media platforms to gain visibility during the whole development process.

This thesis studies the effects of the Visual-First method by comparing the social media marketing of two different projects by the same company. The platform used for this study is Twitter, as it is the most used platform for this kind of marketing, as well as the company prefers Twitter as their marketing platform.

Like all technical development, the game industry, as well as social media platforms, change almost daily. New software updates bring new features and changes to development, documentation, and distribution, making the practices from only a few years back outdated. This thesis will discuss social media and the game industry in relation to what it is during the first half of 2021.

In the next section this thesis introduces social media and its platforms from the marketing viewpoint, as well as awareness-building. The third section discusses the Visual-First method through different iterations it can be implemented into a marketing plan. In the fourth section this thesis describes the case study made to study this method. While is the fifth section the data gained from the case study is analysed. In the sixth section this thesis concludes with the findings of the case study and basing it on the gathered theory.

2 THEORY

The video game industry is growing at a fast pace, with a 159.3 billion dollars' worth of revenue in 2020, a year-on-year increase of 9 percent (Newzoo, 2020). Furthermore, in the year 2020, the yearly amount of new game releases on the online game distributing service Steam increased by 20 percent from the year before (Clement, 2021b). Grand View Research (2020) estimates the gaming industry reaching 290.2 billion dollars' revenue by the end of 2027, with the Covid-19 pandemic contributing to the growth with a surge in users and the number of hours spent playing during quarantine.

Figures from J. Clement (2021a) state that 38% of gamers are in the 18-34 age range with 26% belonging to the 34-54 age group. Children under 18 take up only 21% of the gaming population. Cross referencing these figures with H. Tankovska's (2021c) figures, which show that while most of Twitter's userbase is 35-49 of age, with 28.4%, people aged 25-34 take up 26,6% of Twitter's userbase. In addition, Facebook's user statistics reflect these numbers, as the biggest demographic group on Facebook are aged between 25 and 34 (Tankovska, 2021b). This information gives us an age group of 25-34 who are the biggest gamers and active twitter users. Considering this information, it is thus safe to say that social media has a great possibility of effectively reaching targeted consumer groups, making it a valuable marketing platform.

2.1 Marketing and awareness

Marketing is about creating value for the product. The American Marketing Association's (2017) definition for marketing is "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large". In the video game industry, it is about communicating the value of the experience that the game can evoke either by alluring with entertaining or emotional values.

Word of mouth and peer recommendation are the most influential ways of marketing (Dymek and Zackariasson, 2017). People are most affected by the friends close to them. Social media endorses this as well, as sharing an interest by the press of a button rouses others to the same interest. The multibillion video game developer and publisher company Valve also uses the same tactics to market other games in their distribution

platform Steam. When a user plays a game, a pop-up appears on their friends' screens, showing that a friend plays the game and likes it if they play it several times.

Using social media influencers for marketing purposes has become a standard through sponsorships and partnerships. In addition to this, studios have sent copies of their games to gaming youtubers and streamers, who gain massive amounts of views by recording and posting gaming videos on Youtube or streaming them on streaming platforms such as Twitch. Not only is this an effective way to showcase a product to a large audience, but the followers are also more inclined play the game themselves, as the streamer or gaming Youtuber shows their enjoyment and praise for the game. An example of this is Fischbach (2016), also known on Youtube as Markiplier, was sent an early version of the game *Hello Neighbor* by the development team Dynamic Pixels. The video went viral and gained nearly 7 million views and 147 thousand likes, which contributed to the game selling 500 thousand copies.

2.1.1 Virality

Going viral refers to a piece of media that is rapidly shared and becoming popular by spreading throughout social media platforms (Broxton, Internian, Vaver, and Wattenhofer, 2010). Virality of a post depends on the content, rather than on the person posting or the social media network around the poster (Guerini, Strapparava, and Özbal, 2011). The effects of this can be seen in the trend of copies with slight alterations of viral posts spreading sometimes more effectively, than the original post itself, from one platform to another, for example TikTok's posts' spread into Instagram. The chance of a post going viral decreases as the time after posting increases (Khan and Vong, 2014). If a post published months ago did not go viral, it probably will not go viral at all. Virality is something that happens quickly, as users prefer fresh content, as well as the social media algorithms prioritising newer content to the old. This phenomenon can also be seen in the rapid evolution in the meme culture.

The effect virality can have on a game's success is massive. An example of what virality's might in the industry is the 2018 game *Among Us*. After being published, the game received little mainstream attention. However, the game became popular worldwide by becoming viral through a Twitch stream, causing other players to discover the fun of the game, thus inspiring memes and becoming a worldwide phenomenon, and finally gaining 176 thousand active players during its peak in October 2020 (Steamcharts, 2021).

2.2 Social media platforms

Social media has become an integral part of today's society, with the average daily internet usage worldwide amounting to 145 minutes per person per day in 2020, a three-minute increase from 2019 (Tankovska, 2021a). Simon Kemp (2020) also states that in the beginning of 2020, 3.8 billion people worldwide used social media, with an increase of 9% of social media users since 2019. He also mentions that the average user has 8.6 accounts on different networking sites, some of the most popular being Facebook with approximately 2740 million active users, Youtube with approx. 2291 million, Whatsapp with approx. 2000 million, Instagram with approx. 1221 million, and Weixin with approx. 1213 million. Other important platforms are also in the top ten, Twitter and Reddit, however only at approx. 353 million and 430 million, respectively (Tankovska, 2021d). These all have their own algorithm, which dictates, what kind of content a platform offers its users. This, as well as the format of the media, affect the main uses of the audiences for each platform. These elements are important concerning marketing and awareness-building and will be referred throughout the thesis.

Some of these networking platforms are not suited for video game marketing, for example Whatsapp, which allows users to share messages and files privately to another user. The only marketing element is Whatsapp Business, released in 2018, which is meant for companies to communicate with customers privately one-on-one to help with customer service. Another platform not suited for western social media marketing is Weixin, also known as WeChat, which is mainly used in China. Instagram can be a powerful marketing platform. However, as Warren (2021) explains, the algorithm of Instagram is built to support personal relationships. This means that the algorithm favours personal relationships and interests, basing the feed on who the users follow and the posts they like, usually resulting in favouring influencers and friends. Furthermore, the algorithm notoriously favours daily posting, which might not fit in a studio's tight development schedule.

2.2.1   Steam

Due to its popularity and leading role as a video game distribution service, with 62.6 million active daily users in 2020 on Steam (Steam, 2021a), it has become the new standard to publish your game initially into the platform. Henceforth, Steam has become important as every gamer sees the storefront every time the app is opened. Furthermore, publishing deals by other Steam-like video game distribution services, such as Epic, are not common.

Wishlists are a feature on Steam that allows a player to save games from the store for future purchases. Wishlists have a few useful feats. Firstly, the wishlist informs the future customer when the game is released. Furthermore, wishlisted games are more visible for the customer in their personalised storefront views on Steam, which reminds the player of a past interest. Steam (2021b) states that wishlists indicate the interest from users towards the game in result to the preceding awareness-building. When a new game is released into steam, it is added to a pool of new games released in the same time frame. Games in this pool with the least views are shown in the "new on Steam Queue". However, a game with good enough sales may be shown in more popular lists, such as "new and trending" and "top sellers". Wishlists are also used as an analytics tool, as you can see the data updates day by day and sorted by country.

2.2.2   Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging social media platform with an average monetizable daily active user count (mDAU) of 192 million by the end of 2020 (Twitter, 2021).

The Twitter feed has a "In Case You Missed It" function, where they suggest and show tweets the algorithm thinks the user wants to see. This function is important to understand, as it allows a post to spread even when the user is not on Twitter during the time of posting. Twitter has also added a function called Twitter Topics. Twitter suggests different topics, and when a user follows a topic, related posts and ads will appear in their feed (Sehl, 2020). Categorizing your posts and using hashtags (#) becomes integral to ensure a game gets as much awareness as possible.

When choosing the tweets to show on the Top Tweets tab, Twitter considers how recently the tweet has been posted, how engaging it is through likes, comments, and

reposts, and keywords. Twitter users can distinguish, which people are targeted by the marketing campaign and which not, by using keywords. Choosing added and excluded keywords means if a user tweets or engages with a tweet containing these keywords, Twitter adds them to the eligible targets for the campaign, or people, who are excluded from it, respectively (Twitter, 2021). Twitter also warns that when excluding audiences from the marketing campaign can be useful, overuse can impact the potential reach of the campaign. In addition, Twitter uses the format of the tweets to determine if it suggest it to users or not. The algorithm checks what type of media the user has engaged with the most, thus providing the user with more posts of the same format.

The greatest spreaders are still the users themselves and the network of followers and friends they have built. However, the number of followers does not necessarily mean larger influence. It is noted that the quality of followers who interact and engage are more influential in the long run (Anger and Kittl, 2011). Furthermore, active followers lead to a higher impression amount, meaning more people will see the post. This also makes Twitter one of the main platforms for this method of marketing, as the game development community is mostly active on Twitter and Reddit.

2.2.3   Reddit

Reddit is a community-based social media channel. It is a good tool for small and upcoming game developers, as posting on appropriate game development channels evoke discussions with small upcoming studios, solo developers, and hobbyists, giving valuable feedback. This audience, as well as Twitter's game development community, accommodates people, who Dymek and Zackariasson (2017) call innovators. These are the people who are interested both in new technology in the industry as well as how they are developed. These are the people who pride on being the first ones to try a new game as it launches. When Twitter houses innovators, who are a part of the mainstream industry, Reddit's innovators are the underground developers. They are in the same place as all other newcomer developers, so they support accordingly.

However, reddit's self-promotional rules make promoting with this specific channel different. Self-promotion and posting links to a site you own is classified as spam, and numerous instances of this is not allowed. According to Reddit rules a user needs to contribute to sharing ideas and conversation. The amount of self-promotion should be less than 10%, otherwise the account will be classified as spam (Reddit, 2020). This

means to be able to be successful on reddit, time needs to be spent generating other posts that comply to Reddit's contribution standards.

2.2.4 Facebook

The Facebook algorithm values the user's personal connections and interests. This means that the content posted by friends and followed pages are prioritized (Facebook, 2021), which puts an emphasis on gaining followers for the game's page more important than likes.

Cooper (2021) states "when it comes to earning more organic reach, the Facebook algorithm will reward you for posting content that people engage with." To accomplish standing out with your posts from all the other followed pages' posts, Facebook calculates the user's likelihood to like, comment, and share the post, when deciding which to show first. Facebook also makes guesses on how informative and interesting the post is, and adds those scores into the overall Relevancy Score, which dictates which posts and stories to show (Facebook, 2021).

Facebook has marketing systems integrated to help businesses, such as built-in post engagement and audience data trackers. They also have plug-in software to support smaller businesses, for example Facebook Pixel, which tracks audience activity on the business' Facebook and webpage.

2.2.5 Youtube

Youtube is not necessarily a platform that forms part of the Visual-First method, as it is more commonly thought of as a community building tool. However, it has proven to have worked well for some development teams. For example, Flow Studio, who in two and a half years managed to gain approximately 234 thousand subscribers and launched a successful crowdfunding campaign with approximately 900 backers, funding the project with 58,000 Australian dollars (Len's Island - Build, Fight, Farm and Explore, 2021). They did this by posting videos showcasing their gameplay and development and discussing their decisions for different choices. Their game, *Len's Island*, has not been released yet at this time, Spring of 2021, thus there are no marketing numbers to analyse. However,

due to the nature of crowdfunding, the game already has 900 preorders, boosting the game's market value on Steam when it is released.

Youtube has recommended sections, where they suggest videos for the user to watch next. The algorithm checks first and foremost the users' search and watch history, as well as subscriptions, and generates the suggestions from the gathered info. The algorithm also evaluates each video by checking if the video was watched until the end, deeming it interesting and enjoyable enough (Youtube, 2021). This means that a viewer only needs to watch one video by a creator to completion for Youtube to recommend other videos from the same creator, as well as suggesting other possible DevLogs that might interest the viewer. Due to the emphasis on watching videos to completion, shorter videos with good editing are advised. However, videos, that show for example three months of progress as a compilation are popular, even though they may be longer videos. Flow Studio published a video where they compiled two years of development video snippets into a ten-minute retrospective, which has gained approximately 780 thousand views within one year of publishing (Flow Studio, 2020).

3 THE VISUAL-FIRST MARKETING STRATEGY

3.1 The Cycle

When deciding on what kind of game to develop, it is important to pay attention to recent patterns and behaviours in the video game industry. A game following recent trends has a higher chance of becoming popular than either a genre revival from years ago, or something completely new the audience cannot yet relate to it. In addition, when discussing the relatability of a game, Popovich (2019) states that a game should always have a purpose. when a game has something to say, it shows in how the game plays. Thus, when the social media user stumbles upon the marketing material of the game, it has a better chance of making the user get a reaction. "Otherwise, you're just another game" (Popovich, 2019).

The idea behind the Visuals-First method is to approach the graphics and aesthetics of the game first, as those are the most marketable aspects of the game. Furthermore, social media platforms are built upon our visual perspective. In his talk, Slav (2020) described starting the development of their latest project with their artist posting quick concept art pieces on Twitter, which they used to gauge what the audience was into through likes, reposts, and comments. From there they started designing what different assets could look like, as well as continuing to follow likes and reposts that lead the way to a design that was unique and proven to be popular. The development for the title *Ooblets* also started from a single post of a 3D diorama in the style that later became the art style of the game. The diorama gained more popularity than any of their other projects, so the team shifted to working on *Ooblets* (Priestman, 2017).

Steam (2021c) suggests putting up a Steam page as soon as possible, to have somewhere for people to go in the call to action. Furthermore, it is advised to make a trailer and a website that will be updated during development whenever a new version or a popular post is done. Robinson-Yu (2020) stated that he found the analytics of his posts fruitful, as he was able to determine, which elements in his game caught the audience's eye best. Thus, he was able to build an eye-catching trailer by showing the best and most interesting footage.

Considering posting to Twitter, Slav (2020) mentioned using the Visual-First method during concepting and posting almost every day. Further down the line posting every day

comes in the way of actual development. Wehle (2019) suggests posting consistently once a week until the game launches, from which to switch to a post-launch schedule. The time of publishing should be the most active time of the whole marketing campaign. During the social media blitz every platform that has been used for marketing should be updated with posts of the release of the game, as well as press kits should be sent to different videogame newsletter sites. The aim is to maximise the sales for the game to get into the front page on Steam.

Continuous post-launch upkeep with patches, updates, and additional content are just as important as prelaunch awareness building. When releasing a new update, the game gains players, who want to check out the new updates. This contributes to Steam's method of marketing through Friends Lists. These two elements generate a system, where a living game, a game with a pulse made of updates and content, keeps the player base coming in waves. This results into passive peer recommendation, where the player's friends see that they are playing said game, continually reminding of the game's existence, which might eventually lead to intrigue and possibly a sale.

3.2 The content

Facebook IQ (2017) states, that people spend about 1.7 seconds on a single post on mobile. Due to this, the marketing only has a few seconds to be interesting enough to be memorable. Posts need to communicate ideas quickly and clearly, otherwise people will simply skip the post for the next one on the feed. Nick Popovich (2019) suggests presenting the core game loop in a single GIF, answering the question, "Can you make people understand the game or even teach someone to play the game with a GIF?" It is important to present the core game loop and the must-see features of the game. Being aware of what each post is trying to communicate to the audience is important, as the idea is to try and make the person looking at the post to respond to it. As Popovich (2019) states, "you are giving context, you're answering questions people have in their heads. And that leads to either wanting to know more, or a sale."

However, Twitter GIFs are automatically turned into a video format when posted, as they are smaller than GIFs in terms of memory. Due to the low resolution of GIFs, when posting on Twitter, it is advisable rather to post in video format, but still structure the video as if there was the time limit of a GIF. On other platforms GIFs are still advisable, due to it being a format that is easy to share.

3.3 The Method

The goal of the Visual-First marketing strategy, like any other, is to gain enough traction and interest in a potential customer towards a game that will possibly lead to a sale. It starts with the needs and wants of the specific audience, to which the marketing must find how best to communicate why the customer should be interested in the product (Dymek and Zackariasson, 2017). AAA titles and even some Indie studios have the budget to achieve this, making them a hefty competition.

AAA studios have the funds for effective widespread marketing. They have the connections to conferences and events where they can showcase their products. They also have a following who catch on to all news about new releases, which they announce years before the scheduled release date to build media exposure and awareness in hopes of more preorders (Brightman, 2014). They follow their own marketing plans, which may consist of demos, showcases, and big budget marketing videos. The Visual-First is for studios and solo developers with low or no marketing budget, no previous popular works, or a following. However, even some AAA titles have started using social media for more personal marketing, although they are considered as small showcases and demos to build hype. An example of this is CD Project Red's (2020) *Night City Wire,* an episodic showcase series and an introduction to elements of the mechanics and worldbuilding of the title *Cyberpunk 2077*, released at the end of 2020. The series consists of five 25-minute episodes, released during the six months before the release of the game.

The Visual-First method's most prominent elements are the transparency of development communicated through social media, development-round marketing, and no definitive marketing budget. With relevant issues in the mainstream game development industry being that the games are unfinished and rushed due to marketing prioritizing money over quality as well as the unethical crunch culture, players are calling out for more transparency (Handrahan, 2020). People fear buying a game as it launches, and the games have to prove themselves with greater criteria to gain the appropriate number of sales. In the Visual-First method, transparency and development-round marketing play into each other, as posting work-in-progress and developmental content keep up the marketing as well as letting the audience have a more personal look into the developer's work. The small studios and solo developers have different expectations than AAA companies, where being too personal might seem unprofessional.

4 CASE STUDY

I prepared a Visual-First marketing campaign with Punnu Games for their new demo *Arrival of Punnu*. A four-month test period was constructed out of a six-month development plan. For the first two months information was gathered of Punnu's marketing campaign for their first project, *Fantastic Energy*. During the last two months the Visual-First method was performed for Punnu's second project, *Arrival of Punnu*, which was on its first months of development.

Twitter was chosen as the social media platform for the control-case study, as it is Punnu's preferred platform, and they have already marketed on the platform for a few years. Analytics were gathered of Punnu Games' Twitter posts over the period of two months, starting from the beginning of January 2021 and ending at the end of February 2021. To maintain the post authenticity, the marketing was done by Punnu's social media manager, without interference of the marketer during the Visual-First case study marketing campaign, and vice versa. This resulted in twenty-five posts during the two-month period. Afterwards a separate Twitter account was created for *Arrival of Punnu*.

During the next two months after the control, March 2021 to the end of April 2021, twenty-five posts were made and posted according to the Visual-First method, mirroring the control study. Due to time constraints, *Arrival of Punnu* did not go through a concept art marketing period, contrary to the suggestions of the Visual-First method, as *Arrival of Punnu* was already a way into the development to make this unconventional. The project being a side-scrolling puzzle platformer, with this demo being a more graphical representation, the subjects of the posts were more asset and graphics based, instead of showcasing the mechanics visually. To generate interesting posts, interesting scenes were assembled that would catch the viewer's eye out of the assets, in idea of trying to showcase the best and most polished features and aspects. All in all, the environments, characters, and scenes were marketed, thus the emphasis was also in the quality of the assets and graphics.

Concerning followers, *Fantastic Energy* accumulated approximately 90 followers during its marketing run, growth during their two-month study periods was evaluated, rather than size.

There are some key differences to consider when comparing *Fantastic Energy*'s and *Arrival of Punnu*'s marketing strategies. The two projects have had a different amount of development time. *Fantastic Energy* has already been in development for over a year and with a published beta. *Arrival of Punnu*, however, was on its first months of development and working on its first proof of concept demo. Mostly this affected the quality and amount of the game and assets to showcase. These are two different games with different looks, as well. Furthermore, *Fantastic Energy* is an AR mobile game, while *Arrival of Punnu* is a more story driven 3D side-scroll platforming. There is a significant difference in the themes and formats of the games. This alone might affect the analytics, as the aesthetics of a game affect how the audience will act towards the posts. Unfortunately, when examining activity, Twitter only has a set data range when reviewing some aspects, for example the growth in followers. Punnu themselves did not document this data either. Therefore, some important data could not be calculated.

Another difference is the use a different set of hashtags. This affected the reach to the different audiences with the awareness-building methods, as well as the key qualities of these audiences, for example engagement customs and interest for the media. Punnu used hashtags that are connected to the statement the project wants to say, such as #SaveThePlanet and #EnergyEfficiency, aimed towards people who are passionate about ecological solutions and the environment, in addition to some basic game development hashtags. However, *Arrival of Punnu* tried to attract solely people, who are interested in game development and Indie games, with #IndieDev and #gamedevelopment among others. When posting concept art, reaching artists and people interested in aesthetics with #conceptArt and #graphics was attempted. In addition, there are game development community hashtags, such as #screenshotsaturday and #devhour, meant for community events, conversation, and networking. Lastly, an unused hashtag #AoP was chosen that was added on every post to be able to study the possible impressions at the end of the run. Figure 1 shows an example of a Visuals-First marketing tweet for *Arrival of Punnu*.

Figure 1. example screenshot of *Arrival of Punnu's* post.

The formats used differ between the two accounts. Following the Visual-First method, *Arrival of Punnu* posted content from the game in video format, excluding the few posts displaying concept art. Fantastic Energy does the complete opposite, with mostly pictures and a few videos showing the gameplay of the game. Likewise, the resolutions of the media should be considered, as the platform's preview picture has a set aspect ratio. This can be seen in figure 2, as well as in other *Fantastic Energy*'s posts, as it cuts out a large amount of the picture. A user would have to open the full tweet to see the whole photo. Nevertheless, the standard resolutions used in video formats complement Twitter's preview resolution. Keeping this in mind is important, as understanding what the post is about with only a glance matters when dealing in the fast pace of the social media platforms.

The content of the posts also matters, as *Arrival of Punnu* showed mostly gameplay, which is usual for the Visual-First method. *Fantastic Energy*, however, progressed with their own marketing method, such as with their #MeetTheMonstersMonday, where they showcased their characters in turn. Table 1 summarizes the differences between the Fantastic Energy and Arrival of Punnu posts.

Figure 2. example screenshot of *Fantastic Energy's* post

Table 1. Comparison between Fantastic Energy and Arrival of Punnu Twitter posts

Fantastic energy	Arrival of Punnu
Mobile AR	puzzle-platformer
Pictures as main format	Video as main format
Horizontal picture	Vertical video
#SaveThePlanet #EnergyEfficiency #GameDevelopment	#IndieDev #GameDev #gamedevelopment
Mostly showcasing character models and advertising blogposts.	Showcasing gameplay and graphics.

5 ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDY

Fantastic Energy's posts consist of weekly #MeetTheMonsterMonday posts, where they show an edited screenshot of a character, or posts where they advertise their weekly blog with pictures of work in process models. They also have a few community posts, such as a picture of a dog, an animated coffee cup and an invitation to their beta testing. Of the 25 posts posted on Twitter during the two-month run, three of them were videos showcasing different parts of the gameplay. On the contrary, *Arrival of Punnu* has only two posts out of 25 that are not in video or GIF formats, both being concept art pieces. *Arrival of Punnu's* videos mostly showcase the scenery and the player interacting with objects in the environment. In addition, a few posts include the non-playable characters the player meets in the game. Figure 3 shows engagement, meaning the total sum of likes, reposts, and comments for each post.
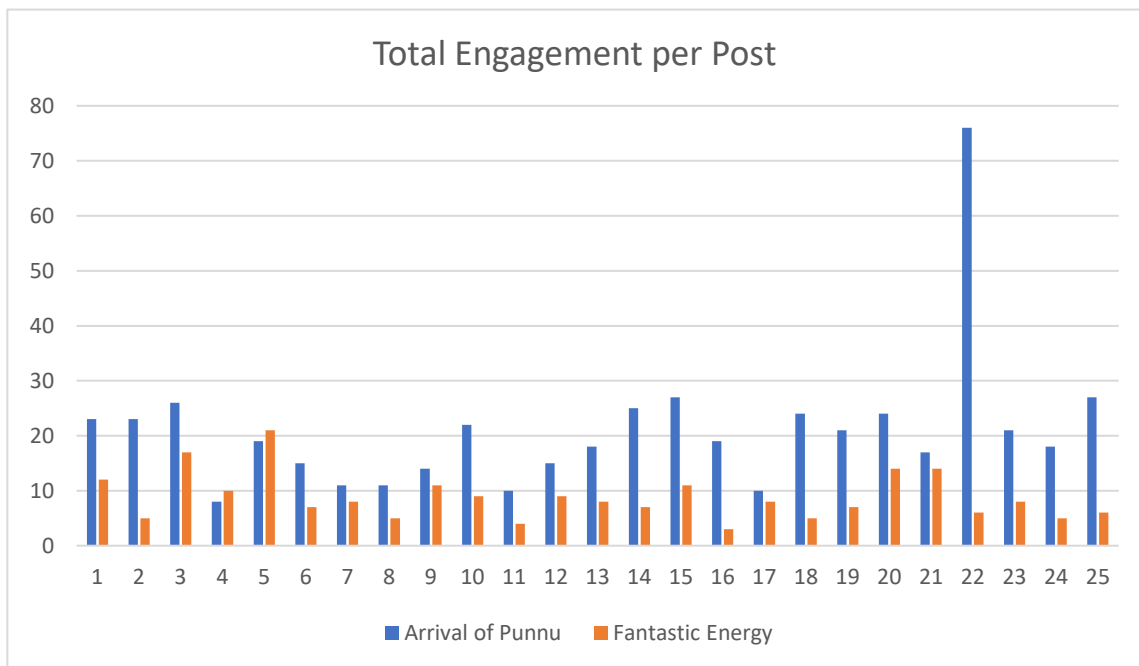

Figure 3. total engagement per post.

Fantastic Energy's average is 5.8 likes per post, while repost average is 3.2. Their most popular post of the bunch is a concept piece of a few designs for a monster character, where they ask the community to choose their favourites, with 14 likes, two reposts, and five comments. Some of their monster designs also did well with eleven likes and six reposts, as well as the videos of their gameplay, with highest being eleven likes and six reposts. An average of all engagement is 4.5 per post.

Arrival of Punnu's averaged to 14.6 likes per post, over 100 percent increase of *Fantastic Energy's*. Reposts averaged out to 5.9 per post. Overall engagement per post was 9.2, contesting *Fantastic Energy*'s 4.5 by twofold. *Arrival of Punnu*'s best performing posts were those with another animated character on-screen, as well as an animated closeup of the main character. The least popular video was viewed 27 times, in contrast to the average 41 views, excluding the most viewed video, which increased the average by 42 views per post.

Fantastic Energy gained six followers during the case study, while *Arrival of Punnu's* account gained 25 followers in its first two months of the campaign. However, all analytics fluctuated by a few figures, as users can cancel reposts and likes, as well as unfollow the account whenever without effort and without notifying the account in question.

5.1 Audience

Even with the hashtags concerning saving the planet (#SaveThePlanet) and ecological solutions (#EnergyEfficiency), most of *Fantastic Energy*'s likes came from people interested or belonging to the video game industry and the video game start-up scene. The same also applies to *Arrival of Punnu* as they were the targeted audience. In addition to this, most reposts came from bots and users who repost posts with the #gamedev or #indiedev hashtags. This contributed somewhat to the amount of engagement, as the reposted posts by these accounts gained a few more likes than non-reposted. Other prominent audience categories were audio and visual artists.

A reason for the disengagement in the #SaveThePlanet and #Energyefficiency hashtags could be rooted in the social media behaviour differences within the two groups. Another significant aspect is that while there are environmentalists interested in video games, exclusively all people following video game hashtags are avid players.

5.2 Post Analysis

Fantastic Energy's best performing post (Figure 4) shows the best elements of the game, which is the variety and charm of their band of monsters. This is shown in the engagement and the comments on the post, which all were opinions on the best-looking design. However, the post suffers from the same flaw concerning the aspect ratio. The bottom design does not show properly, leaving two designs hidden, as well as the gap between the message and the hashtags deforms the whole posts.

As an aside, even though the posts concerning different monster designs, introduced through the #MeetTheMonstersMonday hashtag, there are some monster posts that gained only a few likes and reposts. Combined with the aspect ratio flaw, it can be believed that the unanimated 3D render with muted colors disinterests people.

Figure 4. Screenshot of best performing post by *Fantastic Energy*.

Fantastic Energy's worst post (Figure 5) contain images of the UI, with four likes and reposts together. This post suffers deeply from the aspect ratio flaw as well, as it only shows a third of the whole post, cutting out the most important and interesting parts. In addition to having a harmonious and boring color palette, the post does not try to explain itself, leaving the audience clueless to what they are seeing. A post like this could be made better by showing, how specific UI choices affect the gameplay, such as building something with the gathered resources. This post also amplifies an unbalance in *Fantastic Energy's* social media marketing. The product is a mobile game played with the phone vertically in hand. Even though social media feeds are built in relation to this, the individual posts are not.

Figure 5. Screenshot of worst performing post by *Fantastic Energy.*

In *Arrival of Punnu*'s worst performing post (Figure 6) has the main character running through the forest towards their home. The post gained less than half the amount of the average and half of the views. It can be assumed the post was too long before showing the main point of the post, the house. The forest environment is not interesting enough for the audience to engage, as well as the forest being in every other post. However, a post specifically made to showcase the forest in the background fared better with six likes and five reposts better that this post.
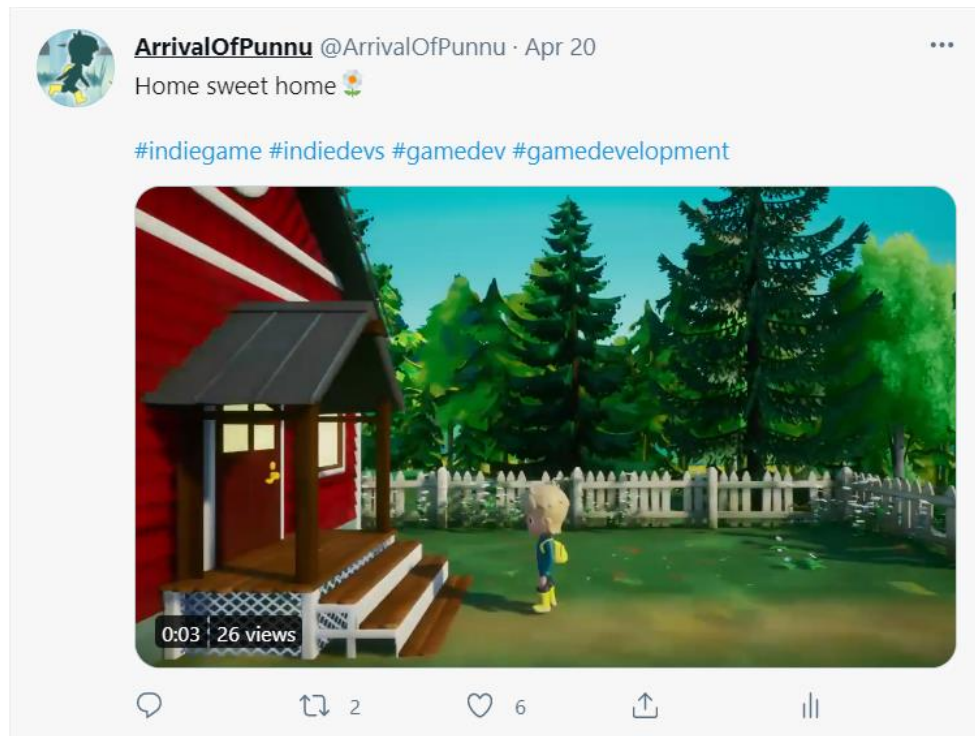

Figure 6. Screenshot of worst performing post by *Arrival of Punnu*.

One of *Arrival of Punnu's* posts (figure 7) was significantly more successful, surpassing the others with three times as many likes as the second most successful post. The post gained 53 likes, 20 reposts, a few comments, and over 350 views in the first 24 hours, 30 of the likes in the first two hours. The post contained a short video of the player character standing on a rock in a lake, with a non-playable character, a Saimaa Ringed Seal, struggling to get out of a net.

Most of the engagement came from the game development and Indie game communities, with a few people working in environmental or biological line of business, according to their Twitter accounts. My conjecture being that the animal the character is based on is known worldwide, in addition to the scene presented relating to nature preservation and the well-being of wildlife. The non-playable character was the key to the posts success. The comments confirm this, as most of the comments were about how cute and "chonky" the character is.

Figure 7. Screenshot of best performing post by *Arrival of Punnu.*

6 CONCLUSION

The objective of this thesis was to research the effects of the Visual-First strategy. As a new kind of marketing strategy born during the 2010s, in addition to not being used by the mainstream media, rather than the most underground levels of the independent game development community, it is not yet highly researched. This thesis serves as an introduction to the method, as well as giving advice and suggestions on the matter, as the results of the case study reflected the usefulness of this method positively.

The Visual-First Method is rooted in starting development with an emphasis on aesthetics, thus it is tied with the development strategies as well. On social media, the method is easy to execute and cheap in both time and money. While for graphics-heavy games the method is intuitive, the Visual-First marketing might be harder to implement for some projects or studios. As eye-catching visuals are a necessity to catch the viewer's eye, heavy mechanics-based games can be hard to showcase. The usefulness of the method is dependent on what the studio feels is most important, should they use their time building unique and fun mechanics, or start development with building the aesthetics.

The method is also very experimental. Different ways of interpreting the method are seen, and with so many platforms and formats to choose from, it gives numerous windows to try out the most successful advertising strategy. Furthermore, with so many platforms and Twitter's format suggestions, it is ideal to start the awareness building with as much variety as possible, to determine what catches on.

The analytics can also be used as guidelines to what the players want. The analytics gained during the marketing campaign is valuable information and is recommended for that alone. As an example of the analytics a project can gain, it was discovered that the French have an interest in Arrival of Punnu. This might be either a coincidence caused by the time of posting or Twitter's algorithm, or possibly a defined audience for the game the company should look more into. Videos on Twitter show the number of times the video has been viewed, which can be used as an additional analytic. However, the videos play automatically, thus the data should be considered with a margin of error.

The two-month run was too short of a time to see the real impact of this marketing strategy. The strategy should be executed regularly over many months or even years. It

is advisable to keep this up during the whole development time, even though the game would be marketed with traditional means.

When considering the content and format of the posts, moving pictures do make a difference, more than screenshots, as GIFs and videos were over two times more shared than average. However, some types of concept art, with an emphasis on artistry and aesthetic are likewise successful. The most popular posts were of nonplayable characters and interactions with them. Posts where the player character interacts with the world came in second.

The hashtags used matter as well, as it dictates which audiences the marketing is aimed at. The game development community seems to be active on twitter and engages more than other audiences targeted with this case study. There is also the possibility of posting on more platforms to grow the audience. Both likes and reposts can be seen on the feed. However, reposts have more of an impact and live longer. Additionally, most of the reposts were bots, who like and repost from #gamedev and #indiedev. In the beginning of the awareness-building campaign, this occurrence increases the impression count. However, as the audience of personal accounts grow, these bot accounts matter little.

In the end, if the game is not interesting or fun, it will not gain a following with this method. As Popovich (2019) states, "You need a great game for the contents of this [method] to matter".

Areas for further research include the differences between the different video game distributing services, such as Epic and GOG. The video game distributing service is a recent business, and new competitors to Steam are rising in popularity. The differences in their customs and whether they have a chance to overcome Steam's steep competition is integral for the future of no-budget Indie Game marketing and distribution. In addition, an important study about the ever-changing future of social media platforms as well as meme culture is integral following the rise of short video platforms such as the late Vine and its successor TikTok, as well as the recent "Stories" function that has been implemented into nearly every popular platform.

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