

GDC Europe: Playdom's Meretzky On Making Social Games More Viral

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Steve Meretzky, VP Game Design at Playdom, spoke at GDC Europe this Tuesday on the key elements required in creating a successful social game. The talk focused on how to achieve virality and cash flow in a rapidly emerging market.

Meretzky, a veteran of the adventure game scene and senior figurehead of the casual games market, noted how there had been an "incredible leap forward in the scope and ease of playing games online" with friends.

Where before on services like Xbox Live it had taken him 1-2 years to build a friends list of 20 people, he now had a group of 400 friends to interact with only shortly after joining Facebook.

He explained that the key issue of virality, or how to get your game to reach the widest possible audience, can be achieved using several popular mechanics. Game requests, active "wall-posts" and passive notifications are the favored methods where players are prodded to beat each other's scores, join each other's mobs or exchange gifts.

However, Meretzky pointed out that it's not as easy as simply applying these mechanics: "Virality is made more complex by nearly everything falling outside of the terms of service," making it necessary for a user to be in constant contact with the social networks.

Recently other methods have emerged to further the viral nature of social games. *Farmville*, Zynga's hugely popular new Facebook game, uses a combined gifted invite method in its "lost cow" mechanic. When a cow wanders on to your virtual farm you aren't allowed to keep it yourself, but can send it to a friend to get them started. This type of invite has a much higher acceptance rate than the standard message invite.

Another new mechanic brought in by Big Fish Games in their social game *Restaurant Empire* is the "be my employee" system, where you can task your friends with jobs in your restaurant. This system has two ways of hooking players: either your friends want to return the favor by employing you, or they want to seek revenge if you have given them a demeaning task. How do they get this revenge? By employing you in their restaurant to perform the same (or even a worse) job.

Now That You Have A Player Base...

Once the social game has gathered players the developer must have in place a way to make money from them. As most social games follow the free-to-play model monetization of players tends to happen from the purchase of some kind of virtual currency, such as favor points in Playdom's *Mobsters* game. Meretzky was quick to point out though that, "monetization follows engagement." In order for the player to start spending money in the game they must be very engaged and invested in it.

Meretzky detailed some of the way to get players to re-engage with a game, including login rewards, collecting stores of money that will not increase over a set amount, harvesting, and notifications of friends beating your high score.

He said of the high score mechanism that when you see a friend has passed you on a leader board, "the natural inclination is to jump right in and pass them right back", clearly a very strong re-engagement technique.

A Need For More Innovation, Less Imitation

Speaking on the social games industry as a whole Meretzky marked that due to the short turnaround of development and very visible end product, "there's so much rapid imitation" — if something works or looks like it's going to work, it's easy to take that idea and use or improve on it. He also said, "What's really interesting here is that the staples of games — fantasy or sci-fi [for instance] — in other areas haven't been successful here."

Asked whether he thought the large volume of notifications and invitations sent by social games could be seen as spam, and would 'poison the well' of future players, Meretzky replied, "With all these 'virals' it's a delicate balancing act...one person's 'a chance to boast' is another person's 'another pesky pop-up.'"

He also mentioned that this issue was intrinsic to the collaboration between business and design in a developer, where the business department may be pushing for more virality and the designer feels this could compromise the quality of the game.

Meretzky added that he would "like to see a lot more innovation and a lot less imitation."