

Offer Development of Electronic Products Generated by Information Technology and Consumers' Requirements

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Information innovations are increasingly present in the consumer's life, both in terms of technology products and in terms of applications, shaping contemporary society. Social gaming applications are played by more and more people every day. This is a new domain, whose main characteristic is that players play an online game on a social media platform. Although the main social gaming companies have had an impressive evolution in just a few years, the purchase of these kind of products is just starting to develop in Romania. In order to better understand the implication of social gaming product purchase it is important to shape the consumer buying behaviour. Therefore, a more thorough understanding of the consumers' lifestyle and attitudes with respect to social gaming products is an imperative for developers. The research is based on a survey, ran through an on-line questionnaire with intent to describe the attitude and preferences of the Romanian gamer towards social gaming products. According to the research results, the vast majority of respondents access the internet daily and have an account on a social platform. Also, more than 1 third of them have paid for social gaming products. Still, the concept of social gaming products is new on the Romanian market. Nonetheless, interesting conclusions have been drawn regarding the lifestyle, interests and preferences of the Romanian consumers on the social gaming market. Consumers with medium and higher revenues are more likely to purchase social gaming products. Young people of feminine sex are more likely to purchase such products. As for the game type preferred, most of the players chose role playing games and find design as the most important aspect of a game. The research builds a view of the development of a new, dynamic, field, and the requirements of the Romanian consumer of typical products.

Current socio-economic circumstances make technology and information more readily available than previously possible and, in these circumstances, new, innovative business ideas have been developed.

The specific requirements of an innovative economic field as well as competition growth have led to a necessity of better understanding and meeting consumer needs, and highly important in this enterprise is discovering consumers' attitude and lifestyle.

One of those that studied the relationship between lifestyle patterns and marketing was *William Lazer*. He defined lifestyle patterns as the "unique

ingredients or qualities which describe the style of some culture or group, and distinguish it from others” (Lazer, 1963:130).

Social online games are a new concept and they have been defined in various ways by researchers in this field. Roberts, Arth and Bush (as cited in Miller, 2014) defined them as “a recreational activity characterized by organized play, competition, two or more players (or player versus a device), criteria for determining the winner, and agreed-upon rules that is played using digital technology. These games are distinct from gambling games, and do not have any financial or monetary payout.”

The first business models in this domain have been started no longer than a few years ago, on Facebook as the main social platform and have grown to millions of users worldwide.

Considering that the current number of Facebook users has exceeded 1.3 billion in the 3rd quarter of 2014 (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>) as well as the fact that more and more social network games are implemented as browser games, and on mobile devices, the evolution of this type of applications will probably have a considerable social and economic impact in the future.

The current research aims to offer an image of the global social online gaming market as well as the characteristics of the Romanian market, as a result of a study conducted through an online questionnaire, defining the variables that describe the Romanian gamer’s behavior.

The evolution of social online gaming

Social games have been played by humans for millennia, and are believed, by some researchers, to have played “*an important role in shaping the human mind and human culture, by expanding and preserving adaptive cultural patterns, furthering symbolic thinking and expanding and preserving the expressiveness of symbolic media*” (Murray, 2006:185).

The key motivation for playing social games in general is ‘fun’, this is one of the reasons for which social online games are considered part of the entertainment industry.

As presented in the previous definition, social online games can be roughly described as games played on the internet, through a social platform, promoting social interaction; they are mostly free and don’t offer a withdrawal option for the winnings gathered.

The development of computer games traces its early start to the 1970’s (Bryce & Rutter, 2003), the size and popularity of the games industry growing continuously ever since. The social online games industry alone is expected to reach \$7 billion in revenue and 34% of the total internet population is expected to be playing social games by the end of 2015, meaning an estimated 1.55 billion people (Miller, 2014). However, in contrast to the high socio-economic impact of this domain, the understanding of social gaming and consumer behavior in social gaming is still relatively limited.

Social online games have been developed in a wide variety of themes and are usually characterized by a simple gameplay and the ability to play them in short sessions, without losing previous achievements (Kirman & Lawson, 2009). Some of the most popular types of social online games are: role playing games (Mobstaers, Dungeons and dragons: tiny adventures), puzzle games (Candy Crush, Bejeweled 2), word games (Scrabble, Word Challenge), virtual community games (Pet Society, Lil Green Patch), casino games (House of Fun, Slotomania) etc.

Due to the diversity of social online game types as well the particularities regarding the product's distribution channels (online - through a site, online through a social network such as Facebook, cross – platform: Facebook - mobile etc.), one may notice a general ambiguity in literature when it comes to a clear classification of social online games. Nonetheless, the International Social Gaming Association recently separated social online games in 3 main classes: Social Networking Games, Massive Multiplayer Online Games and casino style games without any payout (Miller, 2014).

While Massive Multiplayer Online Games have been played since the 1980's, with games like World of Warcraft, City of Heroes, Second Life having great success, social networking games and social casino games represent a new market, that has had a great economic and social impact in a relatively short time.

As for the social network applications, these too trace their 'history' no further than 5 years ago, in 2009, when Zynga released Farmville, one of the most well known social gaming applications (www.zynga.com).

Another application that has had great socio-economic impact is Candy Crush Saga, which according to online statistics site, www.statista.com, has reached over 11 million daily active users.

An even newer type of social online game is the social casino game: Playtika, launching the first free to play casino application, Slotomania, in 2010, currently played by millions worldwide. (www.playtika.com)

The popularity of these games rapidly increased, in 2012, more than half (53%) of Facebook users reported having played a social game (Miller, 2014). Hence, the natural question is: what makes social network games and social casino games so popular?!

Firstly, they are free. Unlike the older MMOGs, that were more costly to produce and, in general, consumers needed to purchase them in order to play, social online games are simpler applications, more attractive in terms of production costs, and the gamer can play them free. Nonetheless, these applications provide the option for consumers to purchase virtual items and thus create profit for the developer.

Also, another difference between the older type of online games, MMOGs, and the new social network games is that the second ones promote the idea of community, as they are based on social networks and promote players' communication on their fan pages or in Facebook groups, most applications having multiple fan groups, where people exchange, ideas, information.

The success of these applications is also strongly linked to the development of mobile devices: smartphones, tablets. These made games much more

available than before; games now can be played anytime, anywhere, as a result, hundreds of gaming applications can be found in app stores.

It has always been in human nature to use social games for entertainment. Playing games has evolved along with informatics, social and cultural changes and will continue to change with the advancement of digital and new technology. Recent technology and internet access have made entertainment activities, such as social online gaming, more easily accessible and have turned them into highly profitable enterprises, at the same time rising competition and the need for entrepreneurs to gain a better understanding of consumer behavior.

Social online gaming in Romania – current market traits

The evolution of online gaming in general is linked the degree to which internet is accessible to a country's population. (Miller, 2014) According to the leading organization in research and regulations for global internet traffic, Internet Society (<http://www.internetsociety.org/map/global-internet-report/>), while in 2012, only 34.4% of Romanians had internet access, currently 49.8% of the population uses the internet and the trend will continue to be ascending during the following years.

Also, recent research conducted by leading online marketing consulting agency on Europe-MiddleEast-Asia, Gemius (http://files.gemius.pl/Reports/2014/gemiusKnowledge_South-EastEurope), shows an improvement of internet access for the Romanian consumer: mobile traffic, as an easier way to access internet, is continuously increasing in Romania from 3% in January 2013 to 7% in March 2014.

As for the socio-demographic profiles, the same research (http://files.gemius.pl/Reports/2014/gemiusKnowledge_South-EastEurope) shows that 54% of internet users are women, aged 45-54, their main search interest on the internet is taking care of health and 46% are men, aged 25-34, whose main interests on the internet are gambling and erotics.

The top sites accessed by Romanians in 2013 are Google (7.5 million, reaching 86% of internet users), Facebook (7.02 million users, 80% of the total internet users) and Yahoo (6.4 million users, meaning 73% of the total internet users) (http://files.gemius.pl/Reports/2014/gemiusKnowledge_South-EastEurope)

The improvement of general access and use of internet as well as the accelerated growth of Facebook popularity in Romania may lead to an increase in consumer numbers for social online products, thus a better understanding of this emerging market is necessary.

In general, as described by InternetSociety.org's, *Global Internet Report* (<http://www.internetsociety.org/map/global-internet-report/>), more and more people join the internet daily, increasing the already existent online global market.

However, these consumers present heterogeneous traits influenced by each country's cultural variables, hence raising the need for game developers to further study and adapt to the behavior and characteristics of the new

consumers. Currently the general consumer profile for social online games is woman, over 40 years, from USA. (Miller, 2014)

As for the Romanian consumer, the current research aims to identify some of his characteristics. The analysis has been conducted using an online survey platform and has been carried out over a 1 month period, during which 60 people have replied to the survey.

The sample has been determined through a simple random sampling method, including individuals of different age, with various social and economic background. The survey was built on 10 questions, from general to specific questions, ending with demographic inquiries.

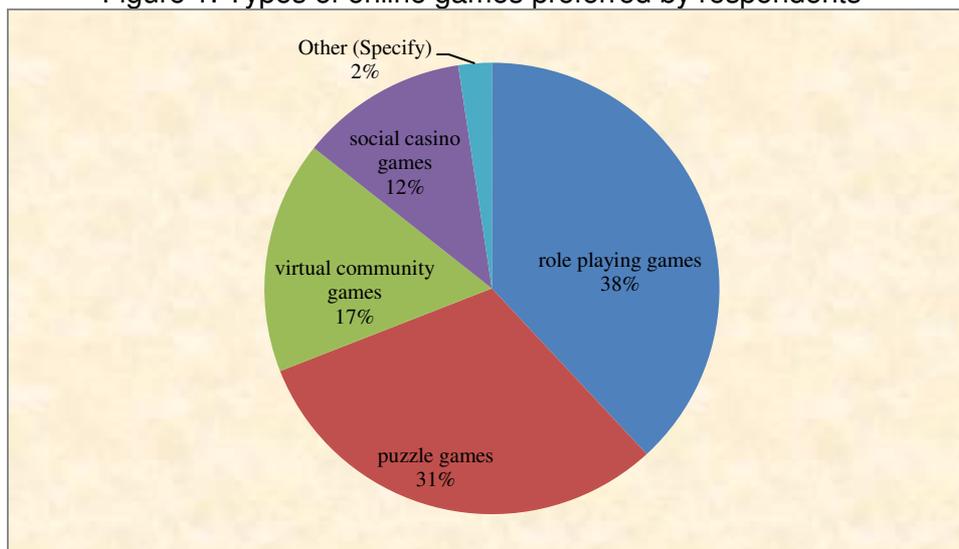
Though determining how representative the sample is might prove difficult, the findings outline some interesting aspects that can be used as a reference point for future research.

The questionnaire responses have been automatically managed through the esurveyspro.com platform, after participants received the link via email or through a social platform.

The first question was a filter question: how often do respondents use the internet and 98.3% of those questioned replied they use it daily. As for the main purpose they use the internet for, 43.3% replied they use it to inform themselves, and 36.7% to socialize. Also, 98.3% of those questioned replied that they have an account on a social network.

When it comes to games, almost half (41.7%) of those questioned replied they do not play computer games, 21.7% play online games on social networks and another 21.7% play online games outside of social networks. Regarding frequency, the most respondents (22%) replied that they use social networks to play games only occasionally. As for the types of games preferred, 30.8% of respondents chose role playing games, followed by puzzle type games (25%) and only 9.6% percent preferred social casino games.

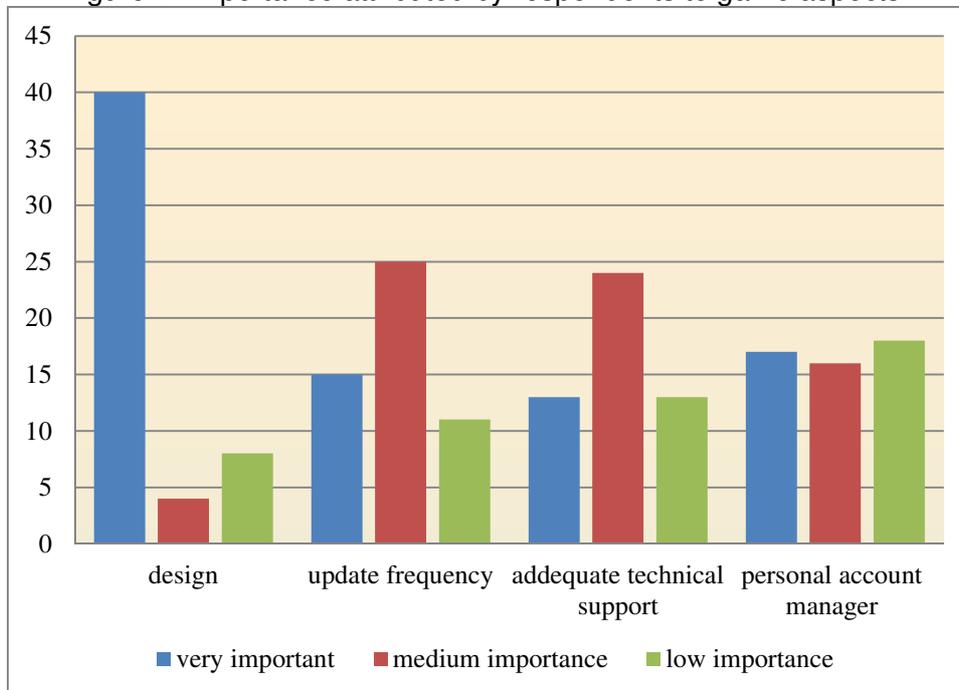
Figure 1. Types of online games preferred by respondents



When choosing a game, the aspects most important for gamers were game design (76% considered it highly important), followed by regular updates and improvements (49% considered it of medium importance) and adequate

technical support (48% considered it of medium importance), while receiving personal treatment was considered least important (35% of players considered it unimportant).

Figure 2. Importance attributed by respondents to game aspects



To the following question: if respondents have ever paid for a game or items within a game, slightly over half (58.6%) replied no, while 41.4% replied yes. The majority of respondents (93.2%) were 20-34 years old, of female sex in proportion of 61.7% and 93% of them have monthly income over the average Romanian monthly income.

The fact that most respondents use the internet daily, a high majority of these with the purpose of socializing, through Facebook, as one of the main ways, highlights what the *Gemius* (http://files.gemius.pl/Reports/2014/gemiusKnowledge_South-EastEurope) study also showed, namely that the popularity of the social network is high within the Romanian market. Although only a third of those questioned play social online games, the viral character of these games could lead to an increase in number of Romanian players in the future.

Furthermore, given that almost half the respondents have paid for gaming products, shows that the Romanian online market could have potential for social game developers. At the moment most respondents preferred role playing games, or puzzle games, while casino games, have been considered less popular.

The fact that unlike the United States, in Romania, gambling does not have a history as a social activity and is sometimes perceived by society in a negative way, could explain the low preference of Romanian social gamers towards this type of applications. This could also give an idea towards why Romanian consumers do not see having an account manager as a highly important aspect

within a social application, as this service could be considered similar to the concierge services offered by a Las Vegas casino, which most Romanians are not familiar with.

As in the case of the typical worldwide social online games consumer, most of the respondents were women, however, unlike the typical profile, the Romanian player is younger, between 20-34 years old.

Another interesting particularity is that most of those questioned answered that they play online games only occasionally, thus emphasizing the need for developers to gain a better understanding of their behavior in order to retain players within the application as long as possible.

The impact of social online gaming on the consumer

Researchers have classified social gamers in several categories, among which the most important ones are the hardcore player and the casual player. Whereas the first one, the hardcore player is deeply involved in the gaming process, the casual one is less involved in the game and plays in shorter, less frequent play sessions. Despite the fact that hardcore players are significantly fewer than the casual ones, they are the focus of marketing studies, as, through their intensive play, they can give relevant feedback on game aspects and possible areas of improvement (Kirman & Lawson, 2009).

Most of the social online games, especially social casino games, advertise awesome wins, through colorful animations, while in app currency is presented using real currency symbols.

Also, achievements within the game are promoted on the player's newsfeed for all his friends to see, some games compare a player's achievements to those of his friends and create hierarchies.

Even though the player is aware that he can not turn any of his winnings into real money, the drive is the same as in the case of real-life winnings. Furthermore, the need of esteem, as Maslow (1987) defined it in his pyramid of needs can be even easier satisfied in the virtual reality. While in real life it might take some time for all acquaintances a person has to find out if that person won the lottery, for example, on Facebook, all friends find out almost immediately through a simple post on the newsfeed, providing the lucky gamer with instant gratification.

Given these circumstances, some players risk becoming addicted to such applications, losing control over time and money spent. Another concern is the access of under aged to such games and the impact this would have on them. Nonetheless, research on this subject has already started, countries like Australia and USA taking a proactive approach (Miller, 2014).

As seen through the present analysis, though a game consumer's profile might be more or less different, as influenced by the cultural traits of the country he comes from, he might be more casual or more hardcore in his gaming activity, the basic needs of esteem, of social recognition, as defined by Maslow (1987), are felt by all people no matter the nationality or frequency of playing.

Facebook itself, as the largest social network worldwide, brings together people of multiple nationalities, creating an impressive online market for the

multitude of applications to fight for, the game that manages to satisfy consumer needs best, winning the biggest share.

While social online gaming is still considered a new domain, worldwide, as well as in Romania, and many variables still need to be clarified, current premises show a positive evolution for it and the social and economic implications will probably lead to a necessity for further examination of the ethical and legal aspects regulating trade with such IT products to ensure optimum satisfaction of consumer needs and sustainable development of affairs in this field.

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