

Strategies of Supercell's Success

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Abstract: Supercell, known as video game company, that is the best at making money, had developed a value of over 10 billion dollars by running only 5 games. All of their games earned more than a billion dollars with over one billion downloads in total. There must be a lot worth studying their strategies. This paper is divided into three parts: analyzing the marketing strategies in their games and advertising, their special way of management, and how they have contributed to the company's huge success.

Keywords: Supercell; Game; Popular

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background information

In Finland, a Northern European country, there were more than 3000 people working in the video game industry by 2010. Many popular video games, including Angry Birds, which had gone viral all over the world were developed there. The chief executive officer (CEO) of Supercell, Ilkka Paananen, was one of them. He worked in a company named Digital Chocolate. However, in that company, only the manager would decide on what games to run, and this restricted the employees' creativity. Upset by the manager, Paananen and five other colleagues left the company and started their own business, Supercell ^[1].

It is never easy to start up a video game business. In 2010, there were more than 150 video game companies in Finland, and there were only very few games that were able to succeed. Moreover, making a video game requires a lot of money and work. It seemed to be a great challenge for Supercell to make a good game.

1.2. Government's support

In the beginning, the company had only 6 people working in a 30 square meter room with six chairs and a tea table. However, after Nokia, that was once the pillar of Finland's economy, had begun to decline, the Finnish government set their sight on science and technology innovation. Thus, a lot of video game companies were able to receive more funds and talents in which Supercell was one of them. They attracted several gifted game designers and a great deal of fund from the government, which largely contributed to their future success.

1.3. Path to success

In 2012, after Clash of Clans and Hay Day were released, Supercell gained great popularity around the world, and they soon became well-known. Then in 2014, Boom Beach was released and made a lot of money for them. In 2016, Clash Royale hit the market and became the most downloaded game within three

months. In the same year, Supercell was purchased by Tencent at an astonishing value of 8.6 billion dollars [2]. How can a tiny video game company make such great achievements? There is at least one thing for sure; that is, their games are interesting.

2. Games

2.1. Gunshine

In the early 2010s, when iPads became popular, Supercell found opportunities. They wanted to create a game that can be played on computers, iPads, phones, and on other electronic devices. Hence, here came Gunshine, a role-playing shooting game. However, since it was quite difficult to operate on iPads and phones, it had terrible performance, and soon it stopped running.

2.2. Hay Day

After the failure of Gunshine, Supercell decided to change their strategy. They noticed that people sometimes had nothing to do while queuing or waiting for their buses. With that, they had an idea in which they used people's pieces of time to play their game. From that, came the birth of Hay Day which is a farming game. In the game, the player would play the role of a farmer where he or she would cultivate all kinds of crops and raise animals, such as chickens and pigs. Then, the player would process the raw materials collected into other products. For example, wheat and corn can be planted in the field, and the cows are fed with them. Then, milk is collected from the cows to use them for cheese or butter production. After that, those products would be sold, and the money collected from the sales would be used to expand and decorate the farm.

All these seem quite normal for a farming game, but there is one thing which is quite special: every process requires time, differing from a couple of minutes to several days so this gives the players an option where they do not have to be online all the time. In fact, it is likely that there is nothing to do if a player continues to stay online since every process requires time. When the process is ready, the game sends a notification to the player to remind them. In this way, Hay Day encourages people to spend even more time on it. Therefore, it gained a lot of popularity.

2.3. Clash of Clans

Seeing the success of Hay Day, Supercell decided to continue applying this strategy, and from that, Clash of Clans was born. This was the game that marked the legend of Supercell for it had made 6.5 billion dollars so far and had won several prizes. This game is about battling. In the game, the player would collect gold and elixir, the two basic resources, and use them to build defense facilities as well as to train troops. Then, those troops can be used to attack other player's villages and take hold of their resources. People enjoy battling games because they love the excitement of battling and the feeling of victory, which they may lack in real life. All these encourage people to play the game, but it is not enough. There is an important factor that contributed to Clash of Clans' success.

During the popularity of Facebook, Twitter, and the newly released Instagram, Supercell noticed people's social needs and they had a bold idea where they wanted to combine video games with social contact. Hence, in this game, as its name suggests, there are clans. Everybody can create a clan, and the players have the opportunity to join other clans. Clan members can fight together and chat about the game or whatever they want. Hence, they are able to make friends with people from different parts of the world through the game. In addition, to increase their clan members, many players would ask their friends to play this game together, which greatly increases its visibility. People love this game so much that it is even as popular now as when it was just released.

2.4. Boom Beach

Two years after the birth of Hay Day and Clash of Clans, Boom Beach was created. It was very similar to Clash of Clans; just like another version of it, with different scenes and characters. However, it still earned more than a billion dollars as people really like this kind of games.

2.5. Clash Royale

Since Boom Beach was not performing as well as the former two, Supercell noticed that they had to make some changes while continuing their strategy. Thus, Clash Royale was released. It is a three-minute battle game. Two players would fight against each other using a deck of 8 cards they choose from all their cards collected. With the advantages of short time and strong competitiveness, Clash Royale gained a reputation for Supercell once again, but there were two more important factors.

First, how good a player is playing is evaluated by how many trophies he or she has. When a player achieves a certain number of trophies, he or she enters the next stage of arena with a cooler name and appearance. This provides social currency for players and encourages them to play more games in order to enter a higher stage. If a player wins a match, the player will win trophies whereas if the player loses, the player will lose their trophies. In this way, like gambling, when you win, you want to win more, and when you lose, you want to win it back, thus people play a lot more matches.

Second, as its name suggests, it is a member of the Clash series, which means it uses the same characters as in Clash of Clans. It is like watching a television series where when you watch the first season and feel good about it, you are more likely to watch it when the second season comes out. Therefore, many Clash of Clans players started to play Clash Royale.

Benefiting from all the elements above, Clash Royale went viral all around the world as soon as it hit the market. It became the most downloaded game, and it won the award of “the most welcomed game for men” just a few months after its release. However, this was just the beginning. Since a lot of players had turned to play Clash Royale, the number of Clash of Clans players decreased dramatically. Moreover, in order to keep players playing Clash Royale, Supercell kept introducing new cards and making the weak cards stronger so that players would keep on collecting and upgrading their cards. They also increased the difficulty in collecting powerful cards in order to encourage players to charge. This had certain effects where many players were upset by that because they had to always work hard to become strong enough. Hence, many of them stopped playing it. This was when the Clash series met a huge crisis, but Supercell was still Supercell where they always have ideas while facing all kinds of problems. What they did to win players back will be discussed later.

2.6. Brawl Star

As Supercell’s fifth and latest mobile game, Brawl Star continued to be a three-minute battle game. Based on the popularity of multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games, such as Arena of Valor and League of Legends, Supercell decided to go with the trend and develop their own MOBA game. Thus, Brawl Star was born. However, lacking new ideas, it was not as popular as the former ones.

3. Advertising

3.1. Paid media

At the very beginning, the company considered the awareness of their games as great importance so they spent most of their money on paid media where they put up advertisements on television and newspapers to promote their games. This achieved certain effects where a lot of people got to know about Hay Day, Clash of Clans, and Boom Beach, thus these games gained contagiousness.

3.2. Owned media

Two years after the birth of Hay Day and Clash of Clans, Boom Beach was created. It was very similar to Clash of Clans; just like another version of it, with different scenes and characters. However, it still earned more than a billion dollars as people really like this kind of games.

The Clash series animation was a great success so Supercell continued to produce animation out of Brawl Star characters when it came out. However, who was going to watch a bunch of unknown characters? Thus, in order to increase fame, Supercell invited many celebrities to dress up as Brawl Star characters and interact with other characters. Soon after, these videos and the Brawl Star animation went viral on the internet leading to the quick increase of the number of Brawl Star players.

3.3. Electronic sport

Since both, Clash Royale and Brawl Star, were strategy games that involve a lot of competitiveness, many players got bored when they thought they were good enough or had difficulty finding a good strategy to win. Therefore, the Clash Royale League was held as it was crucial to allow those players to realize the variety of tactics and how well they can do so. In 2018, the first Clash Royale League attracted many players and received 1.3 million hours' watch in total on Youtube and Twitch. Soon after its release, Brawl Star held a professional league in which it also received lots of attention.

4. Corporate culture

4.1. Infinite game

As Supercell's CEO, Ilkka Paananen, said in an interview, they are not only making games that would be played by many people, but also games that would be played for a long time and would never be forgotten. Based on this idea, Supercell pays great attention to the qualities of its games. They shed not only uninteresting games, but also interesting games that are unable to last for a long time. This is probably the reason why they had only released 5 games within 10 years. In addition, every time they shed one game, they would hold a sharing session to celebrate it and discuss why the game did not work. In this way, Supercell develops high-quality and long-lasting games where they make a lot of money with only very few games.

4.2. Management

With no more than 200 employees, how did Supercell managed to create such high-quality games? Their special way of management must be one of the main factors. First, they have high threshold when hiring people. Before deciding whether to employ someone, they would evaluate if that person could increase the average level of the staffs. "Working with outstanding people makes everything better," one of Supercell's employee said, "They make you feel enthusiastic yet relaxed. They can greatly stimulate our passion for game making." "Hire people in a quality-oriented way is very important," according to Supercell's CEO, Ilkka Paananen, "Every day, the staffs can see their colleagues being passionate in what they are doing, and this emotion is infectious. This depends on a motivated environment – everyone can be inspired and encouraged by others."

Secondly, in order to make better games, Supercell divides its members into several groups where each group only has very few people. Usually, for many firms, they believe that the larger the teams are, the more efficient they would be. However, for Supercell, they believe the opposite. Smaller teams reduce unnecessary complexity and make it easier to adjust the direction. "In some cases, large groups cause many difficulties, and decreasing the group's scale can make things back on track," according to Ilkka Paananen. In most cases, before establishing a team, Supercell would pick two to four people that produce excellent

work as the core of the team. As Ilkka Paananen said, “Compared with having tens of people, considering about only two people would be much easier. They do not only finish their own work, but they provide different perspectives and improve each other as well. Sometimes we call this a ‘magical match.’ With a firm core team, it is always easy to add new members and expand the team.”

Last but not the least, instead of control, Supercell manages their teams by trust. In fact, Ilkka Paananen is considered as the CEO with the weakest influence because almost all decisions are made by the teams instead of their senior leaders. For example, when Boom Beach was developed, 90% of the people thought it would not work during the senior meeting. However, considering that the corporate culture is more important than short run results, they still chose to run this game which proved to be a success. In this company, members can completely trust each other and do what they really want.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the works created by Supercell and its management, their success is not a coincidence. Each of their games had very subtle marketing strategies and that is why they were able to attract consumers while many other companies could not. They have a very comprehensive understanding of the market and of themselves. Therefore, they were able to create games that satisfied people’s demand. Even in the face of problems or crises, they would analyze them calmly and put forward the best solutions. That is why they succeed.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict on interest.

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