Developing an App or a Game? Take a (Retro) Lesson From ‘PAC-MAN.’

Yes, believe it: Retro games are making a big comeback.

The Commodore 64 gamer computer, a smash in the 1980s, will soon be providing players with a second round, via the upcoming release of the $70 C64 Mini – a system complete with 64 games, a joystick and easy connectivity to a TV or other peripherals. Nintendo, meanwhile – which is at the heart of this resurgence – is selling out retailers’ stock with its SNES Classic.

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Not only are these old titles nostalgic, but their simpler game-play requirements, and innocent themes and graphics, are resurrecting the good ol’ days of gaming, when elegance and predictability predated the frenetic pace of today’s high-tech apps and hyper-realistic games.

The implication here – also evidenced by the return of vinyl records and high-quality turntables – is of a kind of back-to-basics approach and even an emotional pining for the technology of yesteryear.

The message for entrepreneurs? Those looking to build or expand their software products and businesses might want to take note.

The retro boom and today’s apps aren’t so far apart

A marvel of the modern mobile age is rapid, handheld

multitasking. But so many small tasks swarming around people can be overwhelming. They can feel they've fallen "behind" — unless they're rewarded there, in the moment, by being able to check a task off their list.

Retro games bake this process into their approach. As the world becomes more complicated, small, satisfactory moments become a welcome reprieve, and retro games' straightforward game mechanics and easy-to-complete functions are fundamental to that satisfaction.

Remember? When you play, using the old-style approach, you jump into a block with a question mark on it and get a mushroom, accompanied by a pleasant and memorable sound effect. Drop down a hole, and you access a subterranean level.

Even the "practice makes perfect" mantra seems more integral to retro games. Although any game, however complex, can be mastered through practice, it's cathartic to hone your skills at the simple yet compelling tasks of old video games. Take Victor Sandberg, for example.

In 2013, according to The Verge, Sandberg, a marathon gamer, put in more than 56 hours to beat a 30-year-old high-score record in the 1980 arcade game *Missile Command.* This created a legacy of return that enabled him to further interact with that game.

What's of note here is that, whether you're talking computer games or task managers, modern software can mimic retro games by giving people a quick way to complete something and feel accomplished. Certainly, some of today's apps already have that simplicity and "practice makes perfect" quality; players can swipe left on a task to make that task disappear .

The point is that entrepreneurs, too, can get in on this trend, and capitalize on the same qualities that make retro games so beloved. Here are the steps they should follow.

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1. Keep it simple.

Whether it’s a game or a social media application, complicated software can deter users. Even those who tough it out to learn the software’s functionality slog forward without that magic ingredient of satisfaction; frustration isn’t fun for anyone.

A good way to keep your app simple is to avoid scope creep – a problem that results when a project evolves beyond its initial concept, with destabilizing results. The military seems particularly vulnerable to this problem, illustrated, for example, when $6 billion was wasted on a failed radio project, as described by Ars Technica.

Scope creep, then, can actually derail your app or other project, bogging it down in unmanageable complexity so that the the app’s original mission or vision gets lost.

Instead, keep your project on the right track by always focusing on user happiness. Ensuring that your game or application stays in tune with its users by conducting frequent user tests is key. Such tests assess a user’s level of satisfaction or frustration and produce insights that can guide project decisions.

In short, you get to work on perfecting what you already have rather than letting a project merely drift toward new features.

2. Make it engaging.

Simplicity isn’t everything, though. Users also demand engagement. Beauty, taste, a sense of whimsy and a mechanism for reward all go a long way toward helping you promote user engagement.

Starbucks gets this engagement right in the look and feel of its app. The app's color and font match the brand's, and the app also provides a slick user experience. By the end of 2015, in fact, *Business Insider* reported, the Starbucks app was responsible for 21 percent of ithe company's U.S. transactions.

Along with aesthetics and function, an app's gamification features foster engagement. While this term often gets associated with badges or points, it's more about breaking down tasks into small moments of satisfaction — both auditory andrvisual. Such moments build a user's affinity for the software and drive adoption, which is how some of the most famous retro games became so successful in the first place..

Remember *PAC-MAN* and that unforgettable sound effect when it ate a ghost?

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3. Never stop striving.

Even after you've created a simple and engaging app, never let past success stall progression or lead you to assume that what's worked before will continue to engage users again.

Although this point might seem to contradict the notion of keeping things simple, it's not. Evolution doesn't equate with complexity; and achieving elegant and growth-oriented simplicity requires commitment. You must remove the dross and clutter to present a pure and clean user experience that "just works." Along with scope creep, this notion is essential to app development.

Example? When L'Oréal launched its successful Makeup Genius in 2014, it provided face-mapping technology that turned the smartphone into a mirror and allowed users to try out its

products in a virtual setting. Having already logged 20 million claimed users – including millions in China – the company didn't have to release this app. But it did so because it wanted to provide a simple, efficient experience for customers – particularly younger ones – that could be utilized outside of its technological wheelhouse.

Such a creative, forward-thinking move is likely to boost the company's sales, growing a brand that is already an industry giant. It also serves as a blueprint for entrepreneurs wanting to examine their own market space, to find new opportunities for customer engagement.

In sum, this retro game fad doesn't mean that entrepreneurs should be thinking retroactively or that simplicity equates with ease. Even David Crane, whose simple but compelling game, *Pitfall,* spent 64 weeks at No. 1 on the video games bestsellers list, had to overcome technical challenges along the way. While old may be new again, entrepreneurs need to realize that they should learn more from the experience than the product.

Considering that today's consumers are being bombarded by 24-hour sound bites, software updates, text messages and many other data inputs, it's possible that they sometimes seek solace. Maybe they can find it with Mario and Luigi, or maybe with one of your own elegant, responsive apps designed to make people's lives better.

The effort to simplify apps, delight users and push forward can be its own reward, and you may be surprised by how rewarding, in terms of adoption and revenue, this approach can be.

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