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Angry Birds as a social network market

Tama Leaver

The hugely successful mobile game *Angry Birds*, and subsequent franchise built around it by Finnish company Rovio, is synonymous with the new and growing market of app-based games played on smartphones and tablets. These are often referred to as ‘casual games’, highlighting their design which rewards short bursts of play, usually on mobile media devices, rather than the sustained attention and dedicated hardware required for larger PC or console games. Significantly, there is enormous competition within the mobile games industry, while the usually very low cost (free or just one or two dollars) makes a huge range of choices available to the average consumer. In 2013 when Apple celebrated the 50 billionth app download from the App Store, their charts revealed that at that time *Angry Birds* was the most downloaded paid iPhone app of all time, with three other *Angry Birds* variants making the top twenty-five list, and all four of these *Angry Birds* games also featuring in the top twenty-five paid downloads for the iPad as well (Viticci 2013). By May 2015 there were approximately 1.68 million apps in Apple’s App Store, with over 366,000 of those being games (‘Count of Active Applications in the App Store’ 2015). Choice between these games is usually framed by just one standardized interface, such as the Google Play store for Android-powered devices or the Apple App store for iOS devices. Within this plethora of options, I will argue that in addition to being well-designed

and enjoyable to play, successful mobile games are explicitly and strategically positioned within a social network market.

The concept of social network markets reframes the creative industries (CIs) not so much as the generators of intellectual property outputs, but as complex markets in which the circulation and value of media is as much about taste, recommendations and other networked social affordances (Potts et al. 2008). For mobile games, one of the most effective methods of reaching potential players is therefore through the social attention and activity of other players. Rovio have very deliberate and widespread engagement with players across a range of social media platforms, promoting competitive play via Twitter and Facebook, highlighting user engagement such as showcasing *Angry Birds* themed cakes, and generally promoting fan engagement on many levels, encouraging the 'spreadability' of *Angry Birds* among social networks (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). Moreover, Rovio have taken an approach to piracy and copyright in certain countries, such as China, which is less about litigation and more about encouraging the dissemination of *Angry Birds* globally.

This chapter opens by situating Rovio as consciously positioning *Angry Birds* within a social network market, aiming to increase the spreadability of their games and distinctive iconography. The chapter will then explore the way the narrative openness of the games encourage the development of paratexts, of related narrative spaces that players and fans can explore and build upon. Following this, the way Rovio engages with fans and players in a co-creative manner is explored, highlighting the centrality of fan activity in directing the development of the *Angry Birds* franchise. Finally, the chapter will draw these threads together, arguing that the frequent updating of apps, unlike larger games, allows Rovio to change and respond more swiftly, not only responding to audiences and players, but also deploying each and every *Angry Birds* app as a social network amplifier, acting in a similar manner to many content platforms.

Social network markets

In their analysis of the operation of the CIs, Potts, Cunningham, Hartley and Ormerod (2008) argue that rather than conceptualizing the CIs as an industrial system – that is, focused on creators and producers – they are more meaningfully understood in terms of markets. Given that cultural products, including media and software, are largely consumed on the basis of taste and recommendation, Potts et al. argue that the CIs are, in fact, constituted by the operation of social network markets in which 'consumption is essentially

constituted by complex social networks' since the CIs 'rely, to a greater extent than other socio-economic activity, on word of mouth, taste' (Potts et al. 2008, 169). In this context the success or failure of cultural products, including apps, regardless of how well they are made, is dependent on the successful harnessing and perpetuating of attention.

Social network markets are not limited to online interaction; however, these are a substantial element of social networking today, with the reach and impact of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and the recommendation and commentary sections of the app stores themselves all powerful spaces for the flow of recommendations. Banks (2012), writing specifically about mobile games, argues that social network markets are core to the way that apps are found, enjoyed and valued:

The social network market dynamics characterizing how an app rises to a prominent position on Apple's store sales chart suggests a new search strategy that cannot be quite encompassed by standard marketing classifications of demographic categories and associated social classifications of taste. The network, the social relations, is the source of value, perhaps even more so than the products. (2012, 165)

It follows from this argument, then, that in the context of apps, success within a social network market, especially given the crowded app arena, relies on gaining and maintaining the attention, interest and affection of current and potential players. As argued below, Rovio have established themselves as both successful game designers and, crucially, experts at building and maintaining interest in their games, and their broader franchise, within the social network marketplace.

Spreadability

While the widespread circulation of content on social media is often referred to as going viral, in *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) refute this metaphor of contagion, arguing instead that encouraging the sharing of media is facilitated by respecting the agency of individuals and giving them good reasons to share. The most important element is offering people the chance to meaningfully participate in both the framing and shaping of media. In terms of mobile games, the level of playability is already there, but play is not just limited to the game itself. Rather, this also entails playing with the characters, stories and mechanics of the games themselves. Viewing *Angry Birds* as a franchise first and foremost, Bergstrom (2014, 332) concurs,

arguing that ‘Tapping into memes, trends, news topics and current pop culture phenomena – all the other things relevant to the community in addition to the game – is what makes a brand relevant in the eyes of the audience.’ Rovio’s strategy with *Angry Birds* has been to engage with the community on a number of levels, including engagement on various social networking sites (SNSs) as well as building and encouraging a range of ways that fans of the game, and the brand, can engage and participate.

While *Angry Birds* began as a stand-alone solo-player game, the simple act of having high scores and a stars rating system was sufficient for players to talk about their successes on social media, and to challenge their friends to beat their scores. Rovio’s official Twitter and Facebook accounts quickly picked up on this phenomenon and began posting daily high scores and challenges for specific levels, encouraging social interaction beyond the confines of the game. At the same time the company developed *Angry Birds Friends* which was initially released exclusively as a Facebook game and later released as a mobile app. *Angry Birds Friends* allows players to compete both globally and, most importantly, against their own Facebook friends, vying for the highest scores, encouraging competitive play and, crucially, harnessing the social networks players already have on Facebook.

Rovio’s use of social media is far from limited to discussing and encouraging competitive game play. As of May 2015, the official *Angry Birds* Twitter account has over 636,000 followers while the *Angry Birds* Facebook page has over 25 million likes. Beyond the obvious promotion of new *Angry Birds* games, levels and so forth, Rovio’s use of social media very purposefully showcases and encourages fan engagement and participation. The Facebook page, for example, is filled with galleries of fan creativity including *Angry Birds* fan art, sculptures, craft, cakes and so forth. Indeed, a YouTube video shared on Rovio’s social media presences of the creation and enjoyment of a playable *Angry Birds* cake (Cooper 2011), complete with catapult and collapsing cake structures, was so popular that it alone attracted more 13 million views and more than 10,000 comments. Similarly, when one dedicated fan wrote to Rovio asking for their help with a wedding proposal, the company created a bespoke level within the game with the text ‘Marry Me Mel’ prominently displayed; a YouTube video of the *Angry Birds*-powered proposal was a hit on social media, gaining media attention and being widely viewed (Stark 2013). On the microblogging platform Tumblr, too, remixed images of *Angry Birds* characters appear as *The Avengers* or *The Terminator* or Shakespeare (an Angry Bard) or even as the *Angry Bird*’s in-game nemeses, the *Bad Piggies*, reworked as Che Guevara, and hundreds of other variants.

The openness and adaptability of the *Angry Birds* characters and the seeming endorsement of Rovio in periodically highlighting some of these remixes and mash-ups serves to encourage further affection for and attention to *Angry Birds*.

Following Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013), opening, encouraging and amplifying these examples of fan interaction and creativity is a core factor in making *Angry Birds* players and fans feel valued and encouraging them to further play with and endorse *Angry Birds*, building Rovio's success within a social network market.

The recognition and affection for the iconic *Angry Birds* and *Bad Piggies* have been leveraged by Rovio to diversify the *Angry Birds* games to include twelve different official *Angry Birds* apps. Beyond the games, the impact of *Angry Birds* as a brand has been significant, leading to a wide range of licensed merchandising and branded products. Everything from official *Angry Birds* plush toys, hoodies and pyjamas through to *Angry Birds*-branded Easter eggs, children's vitamins and playing cards have both drawn upon and expanded the spread of *Angry Birds*. Indeed, by 2011 merchandising already accounted for 30 per cent of Rovio's income, with that percentage rising to 50 in the following years (Tung 2012). Notably, Rovio are far from alone in relying on a compelling but open game narrative to leverage player affection for merchandise and related products. Halfbrick, the Australian company behind *Fruit Ninja*, have similarly made significant amounts selling and licensing plush toys, T-shirts, posters, mugs and a range of other paraphernalia showcasing the iconic *Fruit Ninja* images and characters (Cunningham 2012).

One way in which Rovio shows more foresight than many of their competitors, at least in terms of competing in a social network market, is in their approach to intellectual property. Montgomery and Potts (2008) have argued that taking a weaker approach to intellectual property in China, allowing knock-offs and not attempting to strictly enforce trademarks, can cement the role of a game in social network market terms, repositioning official merchandise and paid versions of the app as desirable, elite goods, compared to the knock-offs. Peter Vesterbacka, Rovio's chief marketing officer, also affectionately dubbed their 'Mighty Eagle', has commented 'that China was already happening in a big way for us . . . When you see all these knockoffs, you know that there is a lot of demand' (Reuters 2012). Rather than litigate, Rovio let these unlicensed products build awareness and demand for the game and the brand, strategically increasing the spread of the game. Notably, in early 2015 Rovio announced that *Angry Birds* games had been downloaded in China more than half a billion times. While no figures were released regarding the amount of these downloads that were paid, it was highly significant that the release of these figures was paired with the news that Rovio were planning to open nine *Angry Birds* theme parks across China (Elise 2015). When even the most expensive iPad version of the *Angry Birds* games costs around \$3, the fact that a relatively cheap theme park ticket would easily cost ten times that amount demonstrate Rovio clearly diversifying their monetization strategy to the extent that their major returns from *Angry Birds* may not be from the games themselves at all, but rather from the wide range of licensed goods, games and experiences.

Paratexts

Lee (2014) emphasizes the fact that as many casual mobile games are typically played in 5–10 minute bursts, the more complex narratives of larger games necessarily give way to simpler, quickly comprehensible stories for mobile games. Given the huge range of game apps, the challenge then is not just to make a simpler narrative, but to craft one which is just as compelling as console game, yet introduces this game story or world far more swiftly. While ostensibly quite simple – the Bad Piggies have stolen the Birds' eggs and they are angry and out for revenge – this immediately relatable good versus evil tale is immediately clear, told not only by the initial comic-book-like cut scenes, but emphasized in all the game elements from audio design to the construction of each bird and piggy character.

While the narrative design of casual mobile games can be compared unfavourably with more immersive console and PC-based games, Keogh (2014) argues instead that games such as *Angry Birds* are best understood as demanding co-attentiveness, a situation where the game narrative and mechanics are purposefully situated in tandem with the material world, and where the action of pulling back the slingshot to propel the bird across the screen deliberately highlights the physicality of the play. Thus, casual mobile games demand attention both to the game, and the everyday material context in which the game is being played. Hjorth and Richardson (2009) similarly emphasize that mobile devices travel with players, often providing a sense of safety and familiarity in different physical spaces, providing what they describe as a 'home-in-the-hand' (see also Willson 2015). Given this co-attentiveness and shifting everyday contexts, I contend that it is also the case that the narratives of the game and broader material setting may playfully merge at times; playing *Angry Birds* while in a waiting room before a medical appointment might provoke thoughts of defeating doctors or an illness rather than the pigs, or playing on a bus before an exam might lead a student to imagine they are knocking down the examination hall. The simplicity, relatability and shifting contexts of play make the game narrative particularly open for players to imaginatively inhabit.

In Gray's (2010) work examining linear film and television narratives, he examines the paratexts, the element such as toys and trailers and posters and tie-in comic books, which dialogue with the core film or television text. Rather than being superfluous, he argues that 'paratexts are not simply additions, spinoffs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them... a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text' (Gray 2010, 6). To some extent, then, the wide range of *Angry Birds* merchandising, especially elements such as the toys and tie-in books, operate as paratexts, encouraging

the type of imaginative engagement that builds on the game narrative. Gray also notes the paratextual importance of play; for many children who grew up with *Star Wars*, for example, the toys acted as paratexts which allowed the narrative to be extended and perpetuated in the long break between films. As the narrative structure of *Angry Birds* is comparatively simple, one of its great strengths is that the narrative is easily adapted, remixed or inhabited by others. Unlike the division between core text (the film) and paratexts (trailers, toys and so on), the narrative of a casual mobile game is equally open to imaginative engagement. Internet memes, remix cartoons, political satires on YouTube or even children battling with *Angry Birds* toys in the playground are all utilizing and building their own stories on the *Angry Birds* foundation. Without an overly complex core story to compete with, these narratives can expand and be explored playfully, increasing affective attachment to the *Angry Birds* franchise. Without seeking to engage with the game studies debate as to whether interaction or narrative is the core element of a game, I nevertheless contend that the elegant simplicity of the *Angry Birds* narrative is deliberately open, inviting players to reimagine and repurpose it, to play in the game, and play with the story, in a manner resonant with Gray's notion of paratextual play.

Exemplifying the paratextual potential of *Angry Birds*, in 2011 Russian designer Egor Zhgun created an animated parody of *Angry Birds* commenting on the Arab Spring uprisings called *Three Big Pigs* (Zhgun 2011). Zhgun harnessed the good versus evil plot of the games, and distinctive character design, recasting political dictators in the role of the bad piggies. The multiple scenes in the animation each commented on a different Middle Eastern country that experienced political upheaval and change during the Arab Spring. Zhgun's animation struck a chord with audiences, and the YouTube version of the animation was viewed more than 2.5 million times. Emphasizing the global circulation of *Angry Birds* as paratexts, Zuckerman (2011) commented that: 'There's something very 2011 about a Russian video using a soundtrack from American cartoons and characters from a Finnish mobile phone game (based on an English fairytale) to satirize North African politics.'

User co-creativity

In the past decade, the involvement of users and players in the development of games has increased, from the initial development of user-generated content about and within game to scenarios where game companies court the involvement and opinion of the most dedicated fans (Banks 2013). Increasingly, co-creative involvement is seen as integral to social network markets, ensuring that the social word of mouth precedes the release of a game, priming potential

players (Banks and Humphreys 2008; Banks and Potts 2010). While user co-creation can be incredibly valuable, so too can it be incredibly destructive. Deep user co-creation in the design of a game following a social network market approach can increase engagement, attention and distribution, but if co-creative users feel that their opinions, critiques and recommendations are not taken seriously, their word of mouth can prove fatal to a game (Banks and Potts 2010). To date, Rovio have not embarked on a co-creative strategy in the same fashion; however, their deep engagement with fans on social media has led to somewhat different but still important form of co-creativity.

As mentioned above, different remixes and mash-ups of the *Angry Birds* characters with a range of popular culture franchises have circulated on the popular microblogging platform Tumblr. In 2011, one of the most popular remixes, combining the *Angry Birds* and *Star Wars* characters, called *Angry Rebels*, was widely shared both on Tumblr and a range of other social media sites ('Angry Birds And Star Wars' 2011). Rovio, being highly active on social media platforms, were no doubt aware of the popularity of this and other remixes and took note. So much so, that a year after the *Angry Rebels* remixes first became popular, Rovio released their official *Angry Birds Star Wars* app. I should note, I am not suggesting something underhand here, but rather highlighting the attentiveness with which Rovio listen to the social network signals, noting the popularity of the *Star Wars*-themed remixes, and strategically building on this interest by collaborating with LucasFilm to produce the first of two official *Angry Birds Star Wars* games. Whether framed as market research or deep listening on social media, the attentiveness to the fans of *Angry Birds*, I argue, is itself a fruitful form of user co-creation, where the strongest signals from fans encourage the development priorities and direction that Rovio take the *Angry Birds* suite of games.

The signals and interest from users and fans not only direct the development of Rovio's games, but also the ways in which they are framed. As Tumblr had been one of the main platforms on which the *Angry Rebels* images were popular, it made sense that Rovio use that platform to launch *Angry Birds Star Wars*. As Bergstrom (2014, 331) notes:

In 2012, Tumblr was gaining traction among young adults at the same time as the 'Angry Birds Star Wars' marketing campaign was kicking off. Based on research into how consumers use Tumblr, a strategy was set to concentrate on the biggest trend on Tumblr at the time: GIF animations. Thus, 'Angry Birds Star Wars' was announced to fans through a GIF animation followed by press outreach – the strategy being to talk directly to consumers on a platform which already had attracted the right target audience, and through a piece of content that tapped into an ongoing trend.

Moreover, for the first time the official *Angry Birds Star Wars* web presence did two key things: it asked visitors to choose whether they were on the side of the Rebels (the birds) or the Empire (the piggies), implicitly situating players within the narrative of the game before it had even launched; and the site explicitly solicited and prominently showcased *Angry Birds Star Wars* fan art. Thus, by listening closely to user signals and activity, launching *Angry Birds Star Wars* where fans had already shown a strong interest in the development of the game, and designing their Tumblr presence to encourage fans to interact with the narrative world in a range of ways, Rovio both situated fans as co-creators on some level, and in doing so enhanced the circulation of their new game within the dynamics of a social network market.

Rovio's approach of taking engagement with their users via social media very seriously, by enhancing community dynamics implicitly endorsing a wide range of fan engagement and remix activities, may be a less formally integrated model of co-creative activity but it is also a less risky one. If, for example, fans were contributing designs for new levels, or a level-designing tool was formally integrated in an *Angry Birds* game, then Rovio may find themselves competing with their users in the development of new level releases, leading to complicated questions around exploitative online labour relations and intellectual property rights. Instead, listening to users and fans in their own spaces, taking those signals seriously, and meeting fans in those spaces as new games are released demonstrates at least a limited sense of user co-creativity which is entirely compatible with strategically amplifying new *Angry Birds* games across existing and emerging online social networks.

Conclusion: Apps as platforms and social network markets

Following Tarleton Gillespie's (2010) warning that the term 'platform' deliberately and politically occludes as much as it reveals about a software system, it is similarly the case that the term 'app' ostensibly evokes a single piece of software running on a mobile device, be that a game or something else, and yet like platforms, apps are far from straight forward. Indeed, the frequent updating of apps means that they are never finished products, but rather software systems in a state of continual change. For Rovio, these constant updates have been a boon; as each new *Angry Birds* game introduces new features, new integration with social network platforms, new optional powers available via in-app purchases, or other new elements, these can be retrospectively added to the existing apps. New options first rolled

out in *Angry Birds Star Wars* can soon be added into the original *Angry Birds* app in the next regular update. The design of the app stores largely occludes the actual content of updates until they are downloaded, allowing Rovio great freedom in reworking and expanding each and every game they offer.

In May 2013 Rovio launched the Rovio Stars (Rovio 2013) program which sees Rovio effectively act as an editor and publisher of games developed by others. Rovio's strongest selling point is their existing penetration into the social network market that is the app marketplace. Promoting the Rovio Stars games within the very popular and frequently played *Angry Birds* suite of games gives participants in this program prominent access to millions of casual mobile game players in a manner not easily achieved otherwise. Rovio have also launched their own cartoon series featuring more developed versions of the *Angry Birds* characters. These cartoons are both licensed to other content providers, hosted on outside platforms such as YouTube, and most significantly are available in media channels embedded within the *Angry Birds* apps. Indeed the popularity of these channels has led to Rovio hosting film trailers and other third-party content that can be viewed within *the Angry Birds* apps.

By the end of 2014, *Angry Birds* had been downloaded 2.5 billion times, and there are twelve different *Angry Birds* games on offer, from the original app through to *Angry Birds Stella* specifically aimed at female players, and licensed versions such as *Angry Birds Star Wars* and *Angry Birds Transformers* (Rovio 2014). Constant updates ensure that the popular features rolled out in any one of these games are integrated where feasible into all the other *Angry Birds* games. The success of the *Angry Birds* brand has allowed Rovio to expand their apps in a way that situates them both as a games publisher and as a video content producer. Rovio's skilful attention to and use of online social networks has continued to bolster the *Angry Birds* brand. Arguably, this success has limited Rovio in certain ways as Rovio's attempts to popularize their own non-*Angry Birds*-branded games have met with very limited success. For better or worse, Rovio and *Angry Birds* are, for most players and fans, synonymous.

Angry Birds rose to prominence when there was considerably less competition in the app stores, yet Rovio has strategically built their position showing a sharp awareness of social network dynamics, doing all they can to encourage the spreadability of their games and fan-created material. Rovio have taken an approach to copyright that encourages brand awareness and long-term gain, have developed game narratives that encourage the stories to be paratextually inhabited, and have also deployed a limited form of user co-creation premised on deep listening to fan activity on social networks. The nature of apps as frequently updated, the development of Rovio as a

publisher for other games, as well as the integration of video channels and other content services within the *Angry Birds* apps, demonstrates that Rovio is not just successful at being aware of social network market dynamics, but also in harnessing those dynamics *within* their suite of mobile casual games.

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