

Research on Digital Marketing for NetEase and Tencent Game Companies

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Abstract: The gaming market has seen substantial growth in recent years, with securing a larger market share emerging as a key priority for many gaming companies. Among the various marketing strategies available, digital marketing has become an essential tool for the gaming industry, playing a central role in driving player engagement and retention. This paper examines the theoretical framework of digital marketing within the gaming sector, focusing on its core components—social media marketing, content marketing, influencer marketing, and data-driven advertising—and their influence on player behavior. Through a comparative analysis of the digital marketing strategies employed by Tencent and NetEase, two dominant players in the gaming industry, the study illustrates how these companies utilize digital platforms to enhance player engagement and retention. By synthesizing the best practices from these industry leaders, this paper provides strategic recommendations for gaming companies aiming to optimize their digital marketing efforts and foster long-term player loyalty.

Keywords: Digital marketing, Gaming industry, Comparative analysis.

1. Introduction

The gaming industry has grown exponentially in recent years, driven by advancements in technology and the increasing accessibility of gaming platforms. As of 2021, the global video game market reached \$175 billion in revenue, surpassing both the film and music industries combined [1]. A significant factor contributing to this growth is the strategic use of digital marketing, which has enabled game developers, publishers, and platforms to effectively reach and engage global audiences. Digital marketing strategies in the gaming industry leverage a variety of tools such as social media, content marketing, influencer partnerships, and data-driven advertising.

As the demand for games continues to surge, the number of game companies is entering the market is also on the rise. Gaining a competitive edge in this rapidly evolving and highly competitive industry has become a critical challenge for every gaming company. Currently, the Chinese mobile gaming market is predominantly controlled by two giants: Tencent and NetEase. According to recent report, Tencent generated \$3.2 billion in revenue from its mobile games alone in the first half of 2024 [2]. With a robust portfolio of games valued in the billions of dollars, Tencent continues to assert its dominance in the global mobile gaming market. NetEase, Tencent's primary domestic competitor, is projected to achieved an estimated annual revenue of \$14.43 billion in 2024 [3]. NetEase has further

solidified its market position through significant investments in artificial intelligence and cloud gaming technologies, enhancing user experience and diversifying its product offerings.

This paper employs a comparative analysis to examine the role of digital marketing in the gaming industry, using Tencent and NetEase as case studies. The analysis will begin by reviewing and synthesizing existing theoretical frameworks relevant to digital marketing in the gaming sector. Subsequently, a detailed exploration of the strategic impact of both Tencent and NetEase on the gaming industry will be conducted, focusing on how these companies leverage data-driven marketing strategies to distinguish themselves in the competitive landscape. Following the comparative analysis, the paper will offer strategic recommendations aimed at improving the broader gaming industry's approach to digital marketing.

2. Theoretical Framework of Digital Marketing in Gaming Industry

2.1. Digital Marketing on Gamer Engagement and Retention

Digital marketing is crucial for game companies in terms of promotion and revenue generation. With the swift advancement of internet technologies, it has emerged as a key strategy for these companies to attract users and boost brand visibility. By leveraging precise data analysis, digital marketing enables game developers to effectively reach their target audiences.

Digital marketing has a significant impact on gamer engagement by creating interactive and immersive experiences that keep players invested in the game. Social media marketing, for instance, allows gaming companies to foster real-time communication with players, encouraging them to participate in discussions, provide feedback, and engage with other members of the community. This sense of belonging enhances engagement by making players feel like active participants in the game's ecosystem [4]. Additionally, content marketing strategies such as expansions, updates, and developer blogs help keep players engaged by offering them new content and experiences. The continuous release of new features, characters, and storylines ensures that players have a reason to return to the game and explore what's new, creating a dynamic, ever-evolving gaming experience. Influencer marketing also boosts engagement by providing players with authentic gameplay experiences through live streams, reviews, and tutorials. When influencers showcase a game, they often provide commentary and tips that resonate with their followers, encouraging them to try the game and participate in its community. Influencers' real-time engagement with their audience during streams further enhances this connection, making the game feel more accessible and exciting to players.

Retention is a key success factor for any game, and digital marketing plays a central role in keeping players engaged over the long term. Through personalized, data-driven advertising, gaming companies can create targeted campaigns that offer players incentives to return to the game, such as in-game rewards, discounts, or exclusive content. These tailored messages, sent through email campaigns or social media ads, make players feel valued, thereby improving retention rates [5]. Content marketing also contributes to retention by providing players with continuous value through ongoing updates and live services. Games that regularly introduce new content—such as downloadable expansions, special events, or seasonal updates—are more likely to retain players, as they consistently offer fresh experiences. This model of content release, known as the "live service" model, ensures that players remain invested in the game over time, enhancing loyalty and prolonging the game's lifecycle [6]. Finally, social media plays a key role in retention by building player communities. Players who are actively involved in discussions, fan art contests, esports tournaments, and other community-driven events are more likely to feel connected to the game and its community, which in turn improves their likelihood of continuing to play the game long term.

2.2. Key components of digital marketing

The digital marketing landscape in the gaming industry is multifaceted, with several key components working synergistically to promote games, engage players, and build lasting brand loyalty. These components include social media marketing, content marketing, influencer marketing, and data-driven advertising, all of which play an essential role in shaping consumer experiences and driving the success of gaming brands.

Social media has become an indispensable tool in the digital marketing strategy of gaming companies. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok allow game developers and publishers to directly engage with their audience, promote new releases, share updates, and foster community interactions. Social media marketing as a critical method for facilitating two-way communication between brands and consumers, making it a particularly effective tool for creating strong relationships with gamers. In the gaming industry, social media platforms are used to generate excitement around new game releases through trailers, gameplay clips, and behind-the-scenes content [5]. Additionally, these platforms serve as community hubs where players can share their experiences, interact with each other, and provide feedback to developers. User-generated content (UGC), such as player reviews, fan art, and gameplay videos, is particularly valuable because it offers an authentic perspective that other players trust more than traditional advertising [7]. Social media also enables game publishers to promote live events such as esports tournaments, which are streamed on platforms like Twitch and YouTube, further engaging audiences and amplifying the game's reach. By integrating interactive features like live chats, polls, and Q&A sessions, social media marketing fosters deeper player engagement and solidifies community ties.

Content marketing is another vital aspect of digital marketing in the gaming industry. Defined as a strategic approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and engage a target audience, content marketing enables gaming companies to establish themselves as thought leaders in their space [8]. In gaming, content marketing often takes the form of development blogs, lore videos, gameplay tutorials, and expansion previews, which keep players informed and invested in a game's universe. One of the unique advantages of the gaming industry is its ability to create rich, immersive worlds that extend beyond the gameplay itself. Game developers frequently use content marketing to deepen players' emotional connections to the game by offering them insight into the characters, storylines, and worlds in which they play. Content marketing helps build long-term loyalty by offering players more than just a product—it offers an ongoing experience [9]. Video content, particularly through YouTube and Twitch, has become a dominant form of content marketing in the gaming sector. Walkthroughs, live streams, and tutorials provide both entertainment and practical information, helping players to better understand a game's mechanics and engage more deeply with its content. These videos also serve as valuable search engine optimization (SEO) tools, driving organic traffic to a game's website or store page by ranking higher in search results [10].

Influencer marketing has transformed digital marketing in the gaming industry. Influencers—particularly those on platforms like Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok—have built large, engaged audiences that trust their recommendations and opinions. These influencers often serve as brand ambassadors, playing and promoting games in real time to their followers, thereby providing an authentic, relatable perspective that traditional advertising lacks. Influencer marketing works effectively because influencers act as intermediaries between the brand and the consumer, offering personalized endorsements that resonate more deeply with audiences. In gaming, this is particularly important as influencers often demonstrate gameplay, offer tips, and provide feedback on new features, encouraging their followers to try the game themselves [11]. Gamers are more likely to trust influencers than corporate advertisements, especially when influencers actively engage with their audience during gameplay streams or reviews [12]. By fostering partnerships with influencers,

gaming companies can boost visibility, drive game downloads, and improve player engagement. Influencer marketing also serves as a way to extend the lifecycle of a game, as influencers can keep a game relevant long after its initial release by generating ongoing content and interactions with their followers.

Data-driven advertising is another critical component of digital marketing in the gaming industry. Using advanced analytics and data collection methods, gaming companies can create highly targeted marketing campaigns based on players' behaviors, preferences, and spending patterns. Personalized advertising, particularly on platforms like Facebook, Google, and YouTube, allows companies to reach specific demographics with customized messages, resulting in higher conversion rates and more effective marketing campaigns [13]. Programmatic advertising, which uses automated systems to buy and sell digital ad space in real time, has become increasingly popular in the gaming sector. This approach allows companies to optimize their ad spend by ensuring that their advertisements reach the right audience at the right time, ultimately increasing the return on investment (ROI) for digital marketing efforts [14]. Through data-driven insights, companies can continually refine their marketing strategies to better meet the needs of their audience.

3. Tencent's Digital Marketing Strategy in Gaming

3.1. Social Media Marketing

Tencent, through its ownership of key platforms like WeChat and QQ, has established a powerful social media marketing strategy that integrates seamlessly with its gaming operations. WeChat, with over 1.2 billion monthly active users, is central to Tencent's marketing activities. The platform enables Tencent to deliver highly personalized game content and advertisements through its WeChat Moments, a feature similar to Facebook's News Feed. Social media provides brands with an avenue for real-time, two-way communication with consumers, which Tencent has leveraged to keep its user base engaged [5]. WeChat also allows Tencent to integrate mini-programs within the app, where users can download and play games directly, further blurring the lines between social media engagement and gaming experiences. By fostering an ecosystem where players can socialize, discover, and play games all within one platform, Tencent has created a seamless user experience that enhances engagement and facilitates cross-promotion of its gaming products. QQ, Tencent's other major social media platform, plays a more community-driven role in its social media strategy. QQ groups serve as spaces for user-generated content (UGC), discussions about game strategies, and sharing game-related media. UGC significantly enhances user engagement by allowing players to participate in content creation, thereby increasing their emotional investment in a game [7].

3.2. Content Marketing

Tencent's content marketing strategy focuses on offering consistent, high-quality updates that enhance the gaming experience and foster long-term player engagement. The company's blockbuster titles, such as Honor of Kings and PUBG Mobile, regularly introduce new content such as skins, characters, and events, which are often accompanied by immersive trailers, developer insights, and story expansions. These efforts provide ongoing value to players, aligning with a statement emphasizing content marketing's ability to drive long-term loyalty by offering more than just a product [9]. Moreover, Tencent's use of video content is extensive, particularly on platforms like Bilibili, Douyin, and YouTube. Through these channels, Tencent shares gameplay tutorials, developer diaries, and esports highlights, all of which deepen player engagement by keeping the community informed and entertained. This approach ties into the observation that video content optimized for search engine visibility can significantly increase a game's discoverability and player acquisition [10].

3.3. Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing is a core component of Tencent's digital strategy, especially in the esports domain. Tencent's flagship games, such as League of Legends and Honor of Kings, are central to the global esports ecosystem, and the company works closely with popular streamers and esports influencers to promote these titles. Influencer marketing works because influencers create a sense of trust and authenticity that traditional advertising cannot replicate, making their endorsements more effective at driving player engagement [11]. Tencent's partnerships with influencers extend beyond simple product endorsements. The company actively involves influencers in game development, allowing them to provide feedback and co-create content. For instance, Tencent often invites top streamers to test new game features or participate in esports tournaments, which boosts the game's visibility and credibility within the gaming community. These partnerships create a virtuous cycle of engagement, where influencers not only promote the game but also help shape its development, further strengthening the connection between players and the game.

3.4. Data-Driven Advertising

Tencent's ecosystem, which includes WeChat, QQ, and its gaming platforms, allows it to collect a vast amount of user data, which it uses to create highly targeted, data-driven advertising campaigns. Data-driven marketing enables companies to deliver personalized ads that cater to specific user preferences, leading to higher conversion rates [6]. Tencent's programmatic advertising system uses real-time data to ensure that ads for its games are shown to the right players at the right time, optimizing ad spend and improving ROI. For example, Tencent can target players who have previously played similar games or have shown interest in particular gaming genres, delivering ads that are more likely to resonate with them. This personalized approach increases the likelihood of engagement, as players are more receptive to ads that align with their preferences and past behavior. Through continuous data analytics, Tencent refines its marketing efforts to ensure maximum effectiveness, making data-driven advertising a key pillar of its digital strategy.

4. NetEase's Digital Marketing Strategy in Gaming

4.1. Social Media Marketing

Compared with Tencent, NetEase relies more heavily on external platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili. On Weibo, NetEase promotes its games through frequent updates, community interaction, and influencer collaborations. The platform serves as a key medium for engaging with a wide audience, especially younger players, through interactive content such as polls, fan art contests, and discussion threads. Social media enables real-time communication, fostering greater brand loyalty and engagement [4]—NetEase's use of Weibo exemplifies this approach. Douyin and Bilibili, both video-centric platforms, allow NetEase to share game trailers, behind-the-scenes content, and live streams that engage viewers visually and emotionally. For instance, NetEase's blockbuster game Onmyoji maintains an active presence on Bilibili, where it shares character lore videos and hosts live discussions with developers. By doing so, NetEase taps into the growing trend of video-based content consumption, aligning with observation that valuable, shareable content is key to building strong connections with consumers [8].

4.2. Content Marketing

NetEase excels in content marketing, particularly through its focus on narrative-driven games like Onmyoji and Identity V, as well. These games are known for their deep lore and expansive worlds,

which NetEase actively promotes through various forms of content, including blogs, character backstories, and developer Q&A sessions. By offering players a richer understanding of the game world, NetEase keeps them emotionally invested and engaged over the long term. NetEase's content marketing is not limited to text-based material; the company uses video platforms such as Bilibili and YouTube to share gameplay footage, live streams, and cinematic trailers. For example, Onmyoji frequently releases videos that explore the game's mythology and introduce new characters, enhancing the game's narrative depth. By continuously providing engaging content, NetEase aligns with the idea that content marketing should create value beyond the product itself, keeping players immersed in the game's universe [8].

4.3. Influencer Marketing

NetEase has also adopted a robust influencer marketing strategy, collaborating with influencers on platforms like Douyin, Huya, and Bilibili to reach specific target audiences. Influencers often live-stream gameplay, share insights, and participate in game-related events, which helps NetEase build credibility and visibility for its games. Players are more likely to trust influencers than corporate advertisements, particularly in the gaming industry, where authenticity and community are highly valued [12]. NetEase's strategy often involves micro-influencers, who may not have the largest followings but are deeply trusted within specific gaming niches. This approach allows NetEase to connect with highly engaged audiences who are more likely to act on the influencers' recommendations. For example, NetEase has successfully partnered with streamers who specialize in anime-style games to promote Onmyoji, ensuring that the game reaches the right audience through relatable and authentic voices.

4.4. Data-Driven Advertising

NetEase also uses data-driven advertising to tailor its marketing campaigns to specific player segments. By analyzing player behavior, preferences, and in-game activity, NetEase creates personalized advertising campaigns that offer players targeted incentives, such as special in-game rewards, discounts, or exclusive content. Programmatic advertising allows NetEase to automate this process, ensuring that ads are delivered to the right audiences at the optimal times, similar to Tencent's approach. In addition, NetEase uses retargeting strategies to re-engage lapsed players by offering them incentives to return to the game. For example, players who haven't logged into Identity V for an extended period might receive an ad offering special rewards for returning. This approach ties into a statement that personalized and timely advertisements are more likely to generate conversions and improve player retention [14].

5. Comparative Analysis of Tencent and NetEase's Digital Marketing Approaches

5.1. Comparative analysis of social media marketing

Both Tencent and NetEase recognize the importance of social media in driving player engagement, but their approaches differ significantly. Tencent's reliance on its in-house platforms like WeChat and QQ allows it to control every aspect of the user experience, from social interaction to game promotion. This integration provides Tencent with a closed-loop system where it can deliver highly personalized content to users based on their preferences and interactions within its ecosystem. NetEase, on the other hand, takes advantage of third-party platforms to engage a more diverse and younger audience. While this means less control over the user experience compared to Tencent, it allows NetEase to reach new and broader demographics through platforms like Weibo and Douyin, which are particularly popular with younger players. NetEase's approach also reflects a greater

reliance on video content as a primary medium for engagement, capitalizing on the growing trend of short-form and interactive video content in gaming.

5.2. Comparative analysis of content marketing

While both companies rely heavily on content marketing, their approaches differ in focus and execution. Tencent's strategy is more event-driven, focusing on keeping players engaged with frequent content updates, new features, and promotional collaborations. This allows Tencent to capitalize on short-term engagement spikes, particularly around new releases and in-game events. Compared with Tencent, NetEase takes a more long-term approach to content marketing by focusing on narrative depth and player immersion. NetEase's games often have a slower content release cycle, but the content itself is rich and designed to deepen the player's emotional connection to the game. While Tencent's content marketing is built around generating excitement and maintaining continuous engagement, NetEase focuses on fostering a deeper, more meaningful relationship between the player and the game's narrative.

5.3. Comparative analysis of influencer marketing

Both Tencent and NetEase understand the power of influencers in driving engagement and game promotion, but their strategies differ in scale and focus. Tencent tends to collaborate with high-profile influencers, especially in the esports arena, which helps the company reach a broad audience and generate significant visibility for its games. These influencers often have a wide-reaching impact, particularly during live esports events or competitive gaming streams. In contrast, NetEase focuses on micro-influencers who may not have as large a reach but who cater to more specific gaming communities. This approach aligns with NetEase's broader focus on building strong, niche communities around its games, particularly those with narrative depth or specialized art styles. While Tencent's influencer strategy is designed for mass appeal, NetEase's approach is more about fostering long-term loyalty within smaller, more dedicated player communities.

5.4. Comparative analysis of data-driven advertising

Tencent and NetEase both use data-driven advertising to enhance their digital marketing efforts, but their approaches reflect different priorities. Tencent's focus is on maximizing the acquisition of new players through personalized, real-time ads delivered across its ecosystem. Its programmatic advertising system ensures that players are targeted with highly relevant ads, increasing engagement and conversion rates. NetEase, on the other hand, focuses more on player retention through personalized retargeting campaigns that incentivize lapsed players to return to the game. This reflects NetEase's broader emphasis on long-term engagement and building loyalty within its player base. While Tencent uses data-driven advertising to grow its user base, NetEase uses it to sustain and nurture its existing players.

6. Strategic Recommendations for Digital Marketing in the Gaming Industry

Based on the analysis of Tencent and NetEase in leveraging digital marketing strategies, other companies in the gaming industry can draw valuable lessons to enhance their own marketing efforts. The following recommendations outline best practices across key digital marketing components such as social media engagement, content marketing, influencer collaboration, and data-driven advertising.

6.1. Leverage Social Media for Real-Time Engagement and Community Building

Social media marketing is crucial for fostering real-time interaction with gamers and building strong communities around a game. Gaming companies should prioritize two-way communication with their audience, utilizing platforms like Twitter, Discord, and TikTok to engage in meaningful conversations, promote game updates, and respond to player feedback. Drawing from Tencent's success with WeChat, companies should consider integrating social media functionalities directly into their gaming platforms, allowing players to seamlessly switch between gameplay and social interaction. User-generated content (UGC) is another powerful tool—by encouraging players to share fan art, gameplay videos, and stories, gaming companies can build vibrant communities that promote organic engagement and loyalty.

6.2. Adopt a Balanced Content Marketing Strategy

To maintain long-term player engagement, companies should adopt a content marketing strategy that balances short-term excitement with long-term immersion. Tencent's frequent event-driven updates and NetEase's narrative-driven content offer two complementary models that gaming companies can blend. Event-driven content—such as seasonal updates, in-game events, and collaborations—can generate excitement and attract new players, while narrative depth fosters emotional investment and keeps players engaged over time. Companies should also invest in high-quality video content, including trailers, gameplay tutorials, and behind-the-scenes insights, to strengthen their brand's visibility and player retention. Additionally, gaming companies can enhance their SEO efforts by optimizing video content for platforms like YouTube and Twitch, ensuring their games rank higher in search results and attract more organic traffic [10]. The success of content marketing lies in providing continuous value through regular updates that enhance the gaming experience and build a long-term relationship with players.

6.3. Collaborate with Both Macro and Micro-Influencers

Influencer marketing is a powerful tool for expanding a game's reach and fostering engagement. However, companies should adopt a dual approach to influencer partnerships by collaborating with both macro-influencers—who can deliver mass appeal—and micro-influencers, who can connect deeply with niche communities. Following Tencent's model, partnerships with prominent streamers and esports personalities can generate broad visibility, particularly for competitive games. However, micro-influencers offer a valuable avenue for targeting specific player segments, as seen in NetEase's strategy of collaborating with influencers focused on specific genres or artistic styles. For smaller gaming companies with limited budgets, micro-influencers may offer a more affordable and effective solution, as they often have highly engaged and loyal followings that trust their recommendations. This approach allows for more authentic content creation, resonating deeply with audiences who value personal and genuine endorsements over corporate advertisements [11].

6.4. Utilize Data-Driven Advertising for Personalization and Retargeting

The use of data-driven advertising is essential for optimizing marketing efforts and maximizing ROI. By analyzing player behavior and preferences, gaming companies can create highly personalized campaigns that target specific demographics with tailored messages. Programmatic advertising, as employed by Tencent, allows for real-time ad placements that increase conversion rates by ensuring ads reach the right players at the right time. Companies should also invest in retargeting strategies to re-engage lapsed players, offering personalized incentives such as exclusive rewards or discounts to entice them back into the game. Through continuous data analysis, companies can refine their

advertising strategies and focus on retention as well as acquisition. Retargeting campaigns are particularly effective in maintaining engagement with players who may have lost interest, ensuring a longer lifecycle for games and improved player loyalty.

7. Conclusion

Digital marketing has proven to be an indispensable tool for driving engagement and retention in the gaming industry. Through the analysis of Tencent and NetEase's strategies, it is evident that social media, content, influencer marketing, and data-driven advertising each play a critical role in shaping the player experience and maintaining long-term loyalty. Tencent's integrated approach, which seamlessly blends gaming with social media platforms like WeChat, demonstrates the power of real-time, personalized engagement. Meanwhile, NetEase's focus on narrative depth and micro-influencer collaborations highlights the effectiveness of fostering deeper emotional connections with players. By adopting a balanced approach that combines short-term excitement with long-term immersion, gaming companies can enhance their marketing effectiveness. The strategic recommendations presented in this paper offer a pathway for companies to optimize their digital marketing efforts, ultimately building sustained player engagement and fostering brand loyalty in an increasingly competitive industry.

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