

The Game(s) of Netflix: Exploring the Entertainment Functions of Digital Games as part of the Company's Content Strategy

Salvador Gómez-García

Complutense University of Madrid
Avda. de Séneca, 2 Ciudad Universitaria
28040 Madrid, Spain
salvgome@ucm.es

Teresa de la Hera

Erasmus University Rotterdam
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Department of Media and Communication
Burg. Oudlaan 50, Rotterdam
delahera@eshcc.eur.nl

Mireya Vicent-Ibañez

Complutense University of Madrid
Avda. Complutense s/n
Ciudad Universitaria
28040 - Madrid
mireyavi@ucm.es

Nuria Navarro-Sierra

King Juan Carlos University
Fuenlabrada Campus
Camino del Molino, 5
28942 - Fuenlabrada
nuria.navarro.sierra@urjc.es

Keywords

Netflix, Media Convergence, Digital Games, Entertainment functions, mixed-methods approach.

ABSTRACT

Netflix's decision to include games in its subscription in November 2021 reflects the company's ambition to become a dominant player in the entertainment industry. This strategy is in line with Netflix's statement in 2018, where they claimed, "We compete with (and lose to) Fortnite more than HBO" (Netflix, 2019). Netflix's strategy is framed within a new phase of media convergence. This new phase is characterised by content convergence, which is the fusion of sectors and contents as a response to the highly competitive context of the entertainment industry, in which companies compete to get users' attention (Wu, 2017). By offering a wider variety of

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

content, including video games, Netflix aims to consolidate its position in the market and provide a complete entertainment experience for its users. This endeavour represents Netflix's disruption of the status quo from a content perspective (Gómez & Muñoz Larroa, 2023). This study takes the growing convergence of ludonarrative and audiovisual content as its starting point and focuses on Netflix's recent strategy to embrace this trend. The platform's relationship with the world of video games has been extensive. It has manifested in various ways, ranging from audiovisual adaptations of games like *The Witcher* (CD Project Red, 2007), *Castlevania* (Konami, 2003), and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), to foster the creation of video games based on their original productions such as *Narcos: Rise of the Cartels* (Curve Digital, 2019), released alongside the show's second season. Additionally, Netflix has ventured into interactive audiovisual experiences with productions like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018) and the documentary series *Wild vs. You* (Grylls, Buchta, & Shoopman, 2019)

This study aims to provide insights into how the inclusion of games aligns with Netflix's overall content strategy and how this strategy is positioned within the entertainment ecosystem. To achieve this goal, we propose to critically analyze how Netflix games contribute to fulfill different entertainment functions: compensations, gratifications (compliance of needs) and self-realization (Vorderer, 2001: 257); and how these complement the functions fulfilled by Netflix's overall audiovisual catalogue. Furthermore, the study also highlights the gaps that can still be filled by the content-on-demand platform. To achieve this goal, we provide an answer to the following research question (RQ): How does Netflix' game catalogue fulfill different entertainment functions and how do these games align with and complement the company's entertainment goals? To answer this question, we use a mixed-methods approach. First, we conduct a data-driven analysis of the 48 games released by Netflix through December 31, 2022. We gathered several data (such as game genre, release date, download range, recommended age, links to audiovisual content and ratings) using SensorTower, an app-monitoring tool. In the second step we performed a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of all games through analytical play (Mäyrä, 2008), meaning that researchers played the games in the sample by critically examining their game experiences. This process involves utilitarian play (Mäyrä, 2008), which implies relating the game to the wider context in which it was published. This serves us to think critically about the role of games in relation to Netflix's broader entertainment strategy. As sensitizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006) for the data analysis phase, we used the functions of entertainment described by Vorderer (2001).

Our research allows the identification of different types of strategies directed to fulfill Netflix's objectives through digital games. The main one, for now, involves a focus on basic interactive entertainment content that enhances the subjective perception of subscription value. However, glimpses of transmedia, branded, and third-party licensing strategies are also emerging. The emerging status of these different approaches does not allow for a definitive conclusion that this increase in value has occurred at this time. However, it is likely to attract casual players and fans of specific IPs. Based on the currently available data, games constitute a sort of Netflix micro-strategy within a broader plan whose main objective is to entertain and retain users. This entertainment, following Vorderer's proposal, can be categorized into three main functions: compensations, gratifications, and self-realization.

Games around compensation refer to the aspect of entertainment that helps individuals escape from their daily routine or relieve boredom. In the context of Netflix games, compensation can be observed through the immersive and interactive experiences they offer, allowing users to engage with new worlds and characters. By offering a wide

range of game genres and narratives, Netflix aims to offset the limitations of traditional audiovisual content and provide users with a more interactive form of entertainment.

Gratifications include the satisfaction of psychological needs that individuals seek through their entertainment experiences. Netflix games fulfil these needs by providing challenges, rewards, and a sense of accomplishment. By integrating gameplay elements such as achievements, progress tracking, and social interactions, Netflix aims to satisfy users' desire for mastery, competition, social connection, and self-expression.

Self-realization pertains to the aspect of entertainment that allows individuals to explore and express their identity, values, and aspirations. Netflix games can facilitate self-realization by providing players with opportunities to make choices, shape narratives, and customize their gaming experiences. Through character creation, narrative branching, and decision-making mechanics, Netflix games enable users to engage in interactive storytelling and personalize their entertainment experiences according to their preferences.

However, this shift in how mobile content is offered (free from in-app purchases, microtransactions, or advertising) compared to major content distribution platforms (such as the Apple Store and Google Play) may signify future changes in the configuration of mobile gaming entertainment. Furthermore, the study also highlights the gaps that can still be filled by the content-on-demand platform. We discuss these results by reflecting on how these games align and complement Netflix's broader entertainment strategy and what their role is in the company's positioning and competitiveness within the entertainment industry. The findings also shed light on the strategic purpose and content relation of the games published by Netflix.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- CD Project Red (2007). *The Witcher*. [Digital game]
- Curve Digital (2019). *Narcos: Rise of the Cartels*. [Digital game]
- Gómez, R., & Muñoz Larroa, A. (2023). Netflix in Mexico: An Example of the Tech Giant's Transnational Business Strategies. *Television & New Media*, 24(1), 88-105.
- Grylls, B., Buchta, R. & Shoopman, D. (2019). *Wild vs. You*. [Netflix series]
- Guerrilla Games (2017). *Horizon Zero Dawn*. [Digital game]
- Konammi (2003). *Castelvania*. [Digital game]
- Mäyrä, F. (2008). *An introduction to Digital Game Studies*. Routledge.
- Mehta, P. & Pandya, S. (2020). A review on sentiment analysis methodologies, practices and applications. *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, 9(2), 601-609.
- Netflix (January 17, 2019). Final Q4 2018 Shareholder Letter. Retrieved by <https://bit.ly/3pPbsE8>
- Slade, D. (2018). *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* [Netflix series]

Vorderer, P. (2001). It's all entertainment—sure. But what exactly is entertainment? Communication research, media psychology, and the explanation of entertainment experiences. *Poetics*, 29(4-5), 247-261.

Wu, T. (2017). *The attention merchants: The epic scramble to get inside our heads*. Vintage.