Report on Ethical, Privacy and Social Responsibility Issues for a New Multiplayer Game for Children

Purpose

MonGamerz wants to develop a new game for children within age eight to fourteen years. In this business report, privacy, ethical, and social responsibility issues that can arise while developing this game are illustrated. A practical recommendation to tackle these issues is given at the end of the report.

Findings

Privacy problems

Company wants to introduce one to one or group communication. Here hackers or cyber criminals may communicate children via communication channel. These hackers may send some inappropriate data or ask for personal information like bank account details etc which can lead to monetary loss.

Ethical Issues

Company wants to introduce in-app purchase for fast game progress. In this case, children may enter credit/debit card details without informing their parents in excitement to pass various levels in the game. Such practices can be financial loss for parents and develop stealing habits in children. Exposure to violent content via game can develop arrogance among children.

Social Responsibility

Generally, male game character is shown as the hero character which will lead a user towards victory and other female characters are just to do the other minor tasks. This can develop a gender stereotype among kids. Also, showing female character as a sex symbol can have a negative impact on children.

Recommendations

Recommendations to tackle all these issues are as follow:

- Developing features like blocking, unfriend users to stop inappropriate messages during conversations.
- Providing email functionality to email a culprit to the company and have screenshot functionality as a add on as a proof.
- Develop animation illustrating the in-app purchase where major focus would be on a child seeking permission from parents to purchase stuff from game.
- Have clothes for characters in such a way that it will cover all the body parts.
- Set female character as a main character to reduce gender stereotype.

- Violent content can be minimised, or negative marks can be attempt on excessive use of weapons.

Introduction

An online game developer ‘MonGamerz’ known for multi-player games like Fortnite, World of Warcraft has a target audience of adults with age greater than eighteen. The new management in the company has planned to change the target audience of the game such that children with age eight to fourteen. To engage these children and develop a community of pals, management has planned to introduce a brand-new multiplayer game with features like:

- Attractive graphic design for children.
- Introducing regular quests to give power ups and rewards to children.
- Introduce in-app purchases for fast progress in game.
- Online chatting to develop online game community.
- Location tracking to know other friends around the globe.

While developing a game, a company may face or consider lot of issues or aspects like legal, team, ethical, prototyping, laws, copyright, privacy, intellectual property, social responsibility issues, etc. This report illustrates the ethical, privacy & social responsibility issues when dealing with children with recommendations to tackle these issues. Under Privacy issues, online conversation is illustrated in detail. Under ethical issues, hidden in-app purchases is illustrated detail. Similarly, under social responsibility gender stereotype in gaming world and female character portrayal is explained in detail. For all these discussions, recommendation to tackle all these issues are presented in the subsequent section.

Insights and Discussion

The insights and discussion are divided into three categories:

- Privacy problems
- Ethical issues
- Social responsibilities

Privacy Problems

Online chatting

Nowadays, to bring the gaming community together under one virtual roof, online chatting is introduced. Gamers may have to provide personal details such as first name, last name as a user name. Children don’t use their real name as their user name while playing games. They tend to use their age, year of birth, birthdate or location as their user name. With these user names children may have the tendency to connect with other children around the globe to build a network in the game with the help of online chatting or conversation. Cybercriminals can or tend to manipulate such kind of conversations. These people can target children and send some private messages, through which they can ask for personal details. By combining this information from game chats and other information sources, cybercriminals can represent themselves in a user’s name and access existing game account details. Also, some children

may use inappropriate language like bad words while chatting with other users, this may have bad effect on children. In turn children may start using such bad words in real life or in their day to day activities.

Ethical Issues

Hidden Fees

Nowadays lot of games provide basic free features at the initial stage of the game. As a user moves to next level the game asks the user for to watch free videos about a new game in market on YouTube which helps the user to get a new life or virtual money in game. This creates an excitement in users to buy new features for the character like new clothes, look, cap, guns, weapons depending on the game type. Game asks the user to buy these exciting stuffs with the virtual money. Now comes the main twist where game ask to add real money in the user's game account if user doesn't have enough virtual money via debit or credit card. Especially children find these features excited and go into the flow of buying these stuffs. Children tend to use their parent's debit or credit card to buy these stuffs by notifying them or without. Such transactions without notifying their parents is a serious issue. If kids use credit card to these transactions, then it's worst as money can be automatically charged when these stuffs are purchased. Like real money has symbol such as $ etc, similarly virtual money on game can have symbol like diamond, gold etc. These symbols put children at risk as they may end up purchasing stuff unknowingly.

Violent content

Violent games are emerging out to be popular in the gaming world. So, company prefer to have violent content in the game as the company has profit in doing so. It's a strategy a company may use to increase the sale of the game resulting in monetary benefit to the company, but this violent content may have a negative impact on the users especially children. Spending lot of time playing such violent games can develop aggression in these children. Moreover, when the opponent is a character controlled by other human being then the gamers may feel that they are part of the action. Such interaction may reduce the reduce the empathy and socialising behaviour among users against the other players and real life. Furthermore, it can have negative impact on child's behaviour in society as well as psychology. A child may get violent if his needs are not completed by parents or other person in general.

Social Responsibility

Gender Stereotype

Games have both male as well as female characters. Generally, when a user plays game for the first time a male character is set as the primary character of the game. Also, male characters are considered as the active whereas female characters are considered as passive. To be more specific it is assumed that a male character is the one who will lead the user to victory and female character will help these male characters in this victory (an assumption that since it's a female character so it's meant for support).This kind of portrait in the game in front of users especially children can generate a gender stereotype amongst them. Children can start assuming that females around them are for doing all the support work. This is a bad mental impact on them. Developing such stereo types at an early age is not good. Boys may hesitate to

socialise with girls and may prefer to play games, perform various activities with other boys instead of girls or vice versa. Moreover, dominance quality can be developed in boys towards girls due to such exposure such that asking girls to do some work.

Female character portrayal

Another problem in games is that female characters are considered as sex objects. These female characters show body parts that are not meant to be shown in the game. Such depictions have negative impacts on children. Such appeals are made to attract male users. To be specific, it may have negative impact on thinking and way of looking at a female for male kids.

Recommendation

In this section I have offered following recommendations for the insights and discussion in an attempt to improve Mongamerz new multiplayer game designed for children. Recommendations are as follow:

Handling privacy problems

- We can handle these online chatting problems by providing ‘report a user’ feature. With this feature a user can report a user by emailing us with details such as full in game name with correct spelling of the culprit and the reason of report. If the user is unable to write the name due to special symbols, language barriers then we should provide the facility of taking a screenshot in form of a button. This screenshot can be a proof for us or used for our validation purposes. If a user is willing to take screenshots, then we must provide attachment facility to our email feature. Taking screenshot will enhance transparency among us and the user as if a user ask the reason of a report then we can show this screenshot to the reported user.
- One more feature we can provide is to facilitate user with a way to unfriend a user if they find any bad behaviour or block the user. We can do this provide by giving a unfriend button or option in the menu when a user is in the culprits account. We must record this activity in our database as we can keep a record of reported or blocked user for our future reference. Moreover, we must set a threshold number in the database for such reported users so that if this number is reached then we can take a more severe action against the user.

Handling ethical issues

- We can clearly mention the equivalent of our virtual money with the local currency in the country. For example, x virtual currency is equivalent to y AUD. This act will bring the transparency between us and the users as it will provide the price indications to the users.
- We can create an animation depicting the in-app purchase process to children. Firstly, advertising the stuff, we will give when a user buys it with real money. Then we will educate children with credit/debit card and its use. Then we can show a child interacting with his parents asking about in-app purchases for our game and asking for credit/debit card to purchase the stuff. This animation will advertise our game and may reduce the

percentage of children doing in-app purchases without informing their parents.
- We cannot remove the violent content completely as our game type comes under violent category, but we can minimise the violent content in the game, A strategy which will benefit us in terms of sale and children in terms of a chance to develop minimum violence. When a player is dead then we should disappear the dead user in fractions of seconds. Also, to make the game more interesting, we can give negative points to the user if he fires his opponent even if the opponent is dead.

Handling social responsibility issues

- We can handle these gender stereotype issues by setting a female character as a default character of our game. Whatever facilities we are providing to a male character, we must provide same facilities to the female characters. Also, we can also ask our game developer team to develop some stages that must be completed by a female character. We can set these stages as a hurdle to move to the next stages in the game. These moves will help us in reducing the gender stereotype among children.
- We can provide a feature ‘training session’ for users so that user can get used to with the characters.
- As per the current location of user we can give option of selecting traditional clothes as per the male or female character selected and an option to choose the traditional weapons that is used by male or female in the current location or were using before. This will reduce the gender stereotype and develop the cultural identity or get to know a new culture. For example, we can provide ‘boomerang’ as a weapon in Australia.
- We can ask our game developers to design clothes for male as well as female characters in such a way that it should cover all the body parts of the body so that it does not set a wrong example for children.

Conclusion

Based on the insights and findings we can conclude that:

1. Gender stereotype and female character as a sex symbol is a serious issue which must not be ignored.
2. Hidden fees in form of in-app purchase are good for children as they can achieve their desired level in the game, but it can be a monetary loss for parents and may develop stealing habits in children.
3. Having violent content in the game can develop arrogance amongst children but it’s the best way to sale a game so it cannot be removed but can be minimised.
4. Having conversation with other people is a good way of socialising and developing a network but if a person comes in contact with bad person can be a difficult situation to handle.