

# **What is strategic brand management in the gaming industry? A case study of Blizzard Entertainment**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study intends to explore how video games companies work with strategic brand management.

**Methodology:** A qualitative literature review and case study of Blizzard Entertainment using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. The data was collected from Blizzard as well as other secondary sources.

**Findings:** The findings of this paper shows that Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism was applicable to the case of Blizzard Entertainment. It highlighted that the corporate brand does not necessarily need to have a strong personality as long as the gaming brands have strong personalities. Additionally, communities are seemingly an important part of online brands.

**Original/value:** The paper is the first of its kind to study strategic brand management in the gaming industry.

**Keywords:** Strategic Brand Management, Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, Brand, Gaming Industry, Blizzard Entertainment, Online Community, Online Brands, Online Game Brands.

**Paper type:** Research paper.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, the rapid evolution of the internet and the increased digitalization of our world has made it possible for several companies to use the internet to develop their operations. Some of these companies are born online. One sector that has thrived in this transformative landscape is the gaming industry. What was once considered a pastime primarily enjoyed by younger generations has undergone a remarkable development, now encompassing a broader demographic, including adults of all ages. Today, the number of video game players is 2.7 billion (Statista, 2023a), which is almost one third of the world population (Worldometer, 2023). Moreover, the remarkable growth of the gaming industry extends beyond mere participation, with projected revenues set to reach \$334 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2023b). This statistic not only highlights the industry's exponential growth, but also underscores its profound impact on contemporary society. Today there are millions of games to choose between for people interested in gaming. During recent years, brands have become a big player in society (Kapferer, 2012). As a result, there has been an increased interest in how to best manage brands in order to create a "stronger brand". But how this is done differs between different brands and industries. The video game industry has been attracting the interest of scholars in recent years (Zackariasson & Wilson, 2012) but the industry lacks research in this topic which leads to the following question: what is the strategic brand management in the online gaming industry? This paper aims to examine what strategic brand management is, how it is executed, and the rationale behind its specific approach in the gaming industry. In this paper, a case analysis is utilized of Blizzard Entertainment, one of the largest game providers within the gaming industry (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023a). Since

strategic brand management is a broad subject this paper will focus on brand identity by using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism.

## **Literature review**

### *Strategic brand management*

Video game companies are using brand strategies to deliver value through their corporate brand identity (Zackariasson & Wilson, 2012). The meaning of strategic brand management is to "create value with proper brand management" (Kapferer, 2017, p.7). Strategic brand management includes several components such as brand positioning, brand identity and brand communication (Kapferer, 2012).

Brand positioning is the strategic process of defining and establishing a brand's unique place and relevance in the minds of its target audience within a competitive market. It involves crafting a distinct and compelling image for the brand that sets it apart from competitors and communicates its value, purpose, and benefits to consumers (Kapferer, 2017).

Brand identity is the distinct and unique set of characteristics, values, and attributes that define a brand and distinguish it from its competitors. It encompasses visual elements such as logos, typography, colors and design, as well as the brand's personality messaging and positioning in the market. Brand identity serves as the brand's visual and emotional representation, helping consumers recognize and connect with the brand on a deeper level. Brand identity plays a crucial role in brand perception, recognition, and building brand loyalty among customers. A well-defined and consistent brand identity can contribute to a brand's success by conveying its essence and creating a memorable and trustworthy image in the minds of consumers (Kapferer, 2017).

Brand communication refers to the strategic process of conveying a brand's message, values, and personality to its target audience through various marketing and communication channels. Effective brand communication aims to ultimately influence consumer behavior, brand loyalty, and long-term success in the market (Kapferer, 2017)

*The brand identity prism*

The brand identity prism is a conceptual framework consisting of six facets that define a brand's identity. The characteristics of one facet resonate with those of another. The foundation of the identity prism is rooted in a fundamental idea: brands possess the ability to communicate and convey their message. The first facet is the brand's physique, the brand's distinct physical characteristics and attributes. The facet encompasses the brand's spine and the tangible, visual elements of the brand, including its logo, design, and overall visual identity. Defining the brand's physique is the first step of developing a brand.

The second facet is the brand's personality. Personality means that brands are attributed with human traits, making it easier for consumers to relate to them on a personal level. The tone and style of a brand's advertising originates from its personality. Looking at the perception of the brand, its personality can be described by whether it is perceived as sincere, exciting, competent or rugged.

The third facet is the brand's culture, and it is described by Kapferer as the most important facet of brand identity because it creates an understanding of how brands differ. The culture facet delves into the brand's values, ethical stance, and underlying beliefs, going beyond the scope of its products or services.

The fourth facet is the brand's relationship, and explores the type of relationship the brand fosters with its customers and defines its mode of conduct. Its defined

mode of conduct significantly impacts the way the brand acts, especially with relation to its customers.

The fifth facet is the brand's reflection, relating to the brand as a customer reflection. The customer reflection should reflect the way the customers aspire to be recognized by using the brand.

The sixth facet is the brand's self-image, relating to the customer's internal view. By using a certain brand the customers develop a picture of themselves. A description of how they feel or are by using a certain brand.

The different facets are also designed to help define the sender, with physique and personality, and the person or audience the brand would communicate with, with reflection and self-image. The gap between the sender and the recipient is bridged by relationship and culture. The brand identity prism also incorporates a vertical segmentation. The left side: physique, relationship and reflection- these are the social dimensions that provide the brand with its external representation. The right side: personality, culture and self-image: these are the social dimensions that provide the brand with its internal representation (Kapferer, 2012).

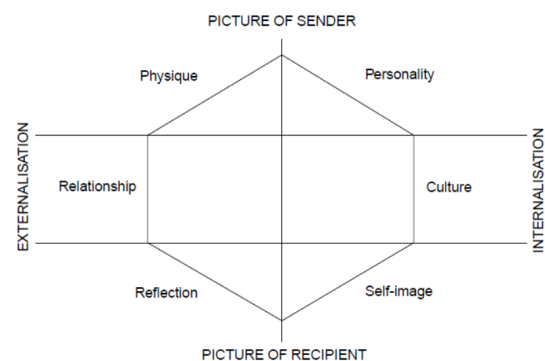


Figure 1 illustrates Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism.

*Online communities*

Online communities in relation to branding are a relatively new phenomenon and the research available is limited. Online communities, also known as virtual, social

or internet communities, can be defined as “a group of people who use a particular internet service or belong to a particular group on the internet” (Cambridge, 2023, n.p.).

When researching the more recent studies of online communities in relation to brand management, two new concepts were found; firm-initiated online brand communities and consumer-initiated online brand communities (Raichur, Sharma & Kalro, 2023). These are related to the proposed typology made by Porter (2004) where he argues that online communities could be divided into two categories; member-initiated communities and organization-sponsored communities. Member-initiated communities are established and managed by their members, while organization-sponsored communities are sponsored by commercial or non-commercial organizations with key stakeholders or beneficiaries. These categories aim to classify virtual communities based on their relationship orientation.

#### *Online video game brand*

A brand that exists only on the internet is referred to as an online brand (Kapferer, 2012). Online brands differ from traditional ones because they are perceived through the stakeholder’s experience of them. Online brands are global because they exist online, their customers are often referred to as users, they are experiential, and are relational to the user (Steenkamp, 2018; Kapferer, 2012). Online brands are experiential because different users have different experiences regardless of what it offers. Online brands are relational because the information available online in combination with the interaction among users emphasizes the communal aspect of using an online brand (Kapferer, 2012).

A video game company is characterized by its distinct nature compared to traditional companies. It can be described as a company that develops software for entertainment purposes (Zackariasson &

Wilson, 2012). Online video game (online game) is a software that is available on a variety of platforms, such as a computer or a game console, where the user (player) interacts with them (Lowood, 2023). Each player has a unique experience with online games. Players also develop their own relationships online in the form of communities, in game communities and video game company initiated communities (MetaEngine, 2023). The brand of an online game can therefore be recognized as an online brand.

## **Methodology**

### *Research and design*

In this paper, a qualitative analysis is used. An inductive approach is commonly used to view the relation between theory and research with this type of analysis with an emphasis on the generation of theories. Qualitative analysis is appropriate to use when the goal is to explain connections or seek a deeper understanding of something (Bryman & Bell, 2017), which is what this paper aims to accomplish by analyzing the case of Blizzard Entertainment. If the aim of the paper had been to measure effects and generalize or test existing theories, a quantitative approach would have been a more appropriate choice (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

### *Empirical data collection*

The qualitative analysis is made by collecting secondary data. The secondary data include literature, public statistics and other sources deemed relevant for this paper. The choice to use secondary data is based on the time limitation of this paper and because it can be hard to collect the information needed, both due to the amount of time needed and because it can be costly (Bryman & Bell, 2017). It is important to be aware that using secondary data means that the quality of the material and how it was collected cannot be ensured (Bryman & Bell). This has

therefore been taken into account when gathering information for this paper.

#### *Choice of theoretical framework*

The choice to use Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism is based on that it provides a more detailed view of identity due to the bigger amount of facets compared to other models such as Aacker's brand identity system (Aacker, 2003) and Keller's Brand identity prism (Im, Kim, Jwa & Gim, 2019). Kapferer's prism is also putting more emphasis on the communication perspectives, which is of importance for businesses today (Im et. al., 2019).

### **Case study - Blizzard Entertainment**

Blizzard Entertainment is an American game company founded in 1991 by game designers Allen Adham, Frank Pearce and Mike Morhaime. In 1994 Blizzard released Warcraft, the game that came to be their first big hit. Fourteen years later Blizzard merged with another game company, Activision. Together they formed Activision Blizzard. Later on the company also acquired the company King, known for creating games such as Candy Crush (Activision Blizzard, 2023; Ray, 2023). As of 2023 Activision Blizzard is owned by Microsoft (Spencer, 2023). Blizzard has a mesmerizing logo that resembles that chaos of the weather phenomenon, a snow storm, and incorporates ice-like details (Logos-World, 2023). The Blizzard company colors are mainly blue and dark gray, whilst bright colors are used depending on the video game brand (Logos-World, 2023). Blizzard has an online game portfolio, which consists of six online games; World of Warcraft (WoW), Diablo, Overwatch, StarCraft, Hearthstone, and Heroes of The Storm (HS) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023a). Blizzard uses different revenue models depending on the game, WOW for example is subscription based whereas Hearthstone is free to play and Diablo

(Chen, 2023). Blizzard uses Battle.net for the players to play the games on the platform, and as a promotional channel (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023b). Blizzard has an online store for the players in the USA, the UK and the EU, where they can find collectible dolls, apparel, accessories, books and art inspired from the online game characters (Blizzard Gear, 2023).

Another channel used by Blizzard to promote new content and share news about their online game portfolio is Blizzcon. Blizzcon is an annual convention hosted by Blizzard, for the Blizzard game enthusiasts to connect with each other and receive news, updates, access to exclusive content, interact with the developers and enjoy their favorite games (Wowpedia, 2023b). Similarly, Blizzard is making use of cross-game collaborations through Battle.net and in-game, where the players of WoW can enjoy Hearthstone themed rewards in WoW (Taylor, 2021), or the players of Diablo 3 have the chance to get new cosmetics by playing HS (Cook, 2017). Blizzard made a deal with Google where Google gets the rights to broadcast some of Blizzards esports tournaments, such as Hearthstone, Overwatch and StarCraft, which is a way of promoting their esports tournaments (Batchelor, 2020), a video game played as a competition for people to watch as entertainment (Oxford learner's dictionary, 2023). Selected players are allowed to participate in beta testing of Blizzard's online games (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023c). This means that they get the chance to try the game in the development stage while they provide Blizzard with feedback about the games before the game launch (Oxford learner's dictionary, 2023).

#### *Battle.net*

Battle.net is a platform developed to function as an online shop, as well as a gaming and social networking platform for Blizzard (Wowpedia, 2023a). They use it to sell their games, facilitate customer support, as well as in-game purchases

through the site. It is possible for the player to purchase in-game currencies and purchases, subscriptions for certain game titles and even gift games or cosmetics to their friends on Battle.net (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023b). The player can use Battle.net to connect with other players, send direct messages, make calls, and create groups of friends to play with (Wowpedia, 2023a). Blizzard also uses the platform as a means to promote new games as well as share updates and news to the players (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023b). The overall look of the site resembles that of the Blizzard site with the same colors and layout.

In order to get a more complete picture of the Blizzard brand, the following part of this study will focus on the online game brands within the Blizzard portfolio.

#### *Game 1: World of Warcraft*

WoW is an online multiplayer role-playing fantasy game released in 2004. WoW requires a starting fee to access the game as well as a monthly subscription (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023p). WoW transports players to the world of Azeroth, where they get to undertake quests, participate in battles, and connect with a large online player community. Featuring a deep storyline, a variety of races and classes, WoW is a beloved and long-lasting gaming title. The game has several versions and when the player has reached the maximum level the new expansions are needed to keep developing the player character, which comes with an extra fee (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023p; Pallardy, 2023). The number of average daily players in WoW is approximately 1.2 million (MMO Populations, 2023).

Blizzard uses in-app advertising to bring awareness of WoW (Advant Technology, 2023). A lot of commercial videos have been made for WoW and in many of them, celebrities are used to promote the game. The celebrities usually talk about their WoW character in these videos (Wowpedia, 2023). During 2022 Blizzard

started a marketing campaign on X (formerly known as Twitter). The users received a picture of their character as well as key gaming statistics that they could share on X. The campaign was a big hit and the hashtag #WarcraftStory was trending as number one globally (Dunne, 2023; Dunne & Lukas, 2022).

Blizzard has also promoted WoW. In 2016 WoW launched the movie “Warcraft”, a fantasy film based on the game (Wowpedia, 2023e). The game has also been a part of collaborations. One of Blizzard’s other games, Hearthstone has roots in the WoW universe and the game also uses the characters presented in WoW (Hearthstone Wiki, 2023b). WoW also does in-game events for its players to make them more engaged (Wowhead, 2023; Wowpedia, 2023d).

#### *Game 2: Diablo*

Diablo is an action role-playing video game series, released first time in 1996 (Green, 2023) with around 450 thousand daily players (ActivePlayer, 2023a). The game is known for its dark and gothic-themed fantasy world, and strong emphasis on dungeon crawling and loot collection (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023s). It combines elements of action, exploration, and character progression, making it a classic in the action role-playing genre. The player can choose between 6 different classes of heroes. Diablo emphasizes both single-player and multiplayer experiences, with a shared world where players can encounter one another. The latest version, Diablo IV, has become the fastest-selling game in the history of the corporate brand, and it comes at three different price levels; standard, digital deluxe or ultimate edition. The player also has the option of additional in-game purchases (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023s).

In order to promote Diablo, Blizzard has engaged in several collaborative promotion activities. Earlier this year Blizzard partnered with the popular fast

food chain KFC and offered gamers early access to the Diablo IV beta version. To gain access to the beta, customers had to purchase a specific sandwich through the KFC website or mobile app (Way of Intercepting Minds, 2023). Blizzard also used its other games to promote Diablo through them, where the player can purchase cosmetics based on the characters of Diablo in games like Hearthstone (Delgado, 2023). They also promote Diablo with other game brands such as Call of Duty owned by Activision (Warren, 2023).

Blizzard has also engaged in creating traditional advertisements for Diablo IV. This year they released a short film, produced by Chloé Zhao, an Oscar winning director, which has been broadcasted on traditional linear television channels, in the US for example. The film portrays village people surrounded by evil and they in desperation plead to the audience for deliverance from this ominous evil and for swift action (Kemp, 2023). The short film has also been published on premium digital platforms, streaming services and social media in more than 20 diverse regions encompassing North America, the Middle East, Asia Pacific, Africa and Europe (Kemp, 2023).

Blizzard also uses social media platforms for other promotional activities. An example is the debated collaboration with celebrity Megan Fox. In a video on the official Diablo account on X the American actress invited fans to share videos and use the hashtag #DiabloDeaths for a chance to have their character's eulogy read aloud by the celebrity (GameBaba Universe, 2023).

#### *Game 3: Overwatch*

Overwatch is an online first-person shooter action game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023k). It is possible to play in teams of five against a team of five players in real-time. The game was introduced in 2016 (IGN, 2015) and was replaced by the Overwatch 2 version in 2022 (Dexerto,

2022). The player can choose between 14 characters and the game is free to play (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023k). Even though the game is free to play the player has the option of purchasing cosmetics for the characters alongside other in-game features (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023k).

Blizzard makes use of shows game clips on Youtube as promotional material and hosts online panels with developers in order to allow players to interact with Blizzard (Cunningham, 2023; Blizzard Entertainment, 2023k). They also used traditional and online media that included billboard advertisements (ATL-Legend, 2023), social media posts and advertisements (Wakisaka, 2017), and platforms like Spotify (HoneySabers, 2023). Overwatch has had many collaborations with other popular brands in the form of in-game cosmetics, such as for example One Punch Man, a popular Japanese animation show (Holt, 2023). The game is played by 400 thousand players daily (ActivePlayer, 2023c). Blizzard organizes an annual international tournament, Overwatch League, composed by 19 city-based teams for the best players in the world (Overwatch League, 2023).

#### *Game 4: StarCraft*

StarCraft is a real-time online strategy game developed by Blizzard in 1998 (StarCraftwiki, 2023). The theme of StarCraft is set in space and the player can choose between three races, to create an army in order to overtake their opponent (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023o). StarCraft is free to play, but there are two different package tiers that players can choose to buy which include cosmetics for the races and the equipment in game as well as the option of unlocking in-game functions without gaining levels by playing (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023o).

Blizzard used traditional media to promote StarCraft, mainly in computer game magazines (VG Print Ads, 2014). They also did collaborations with board game brands and StarCraft was available as a

board game for the whole family to enjoy (Teach\_SC2, 2023). During the StarCraft launch Blizzard ran several tv ads (GamersPrey, 2015). Blizzard uses social media channels for promotion (Overwatch 2, 2023).

StarCraft has approximately 35 thousand daily players (THP, 2022). The community is strong even though the number of active daily players is considerably lower compared to the other games. A great example is the love for the games in South Korea (O'Kefee, 2018). StarCraft games gained the respect of the South Korean players because of how well made the game is, instead of how well the marketing strategy is. Blizzard hosts 2 international tournaments, ESL Pro Tour StarCraft II and DreamHack SC2 Masters (Blizzard Entertainment, 2020). The people of South Korea love watching players play StarCraft which led the tournaments to become an integral part of the gaming culture in South Korea (O'Kefee, 2018).

#### *Game 5: Hearthstone*

Hearthstone is an online collectible card game released in 2013. It is a multiplayer game known for its accessible gameplay and Warcraft-inspired universe. The game centers on card-based mechanics, where players construct decks comprising cards representing various characters, spells, and abilities from the Warcraft universe. The game is free to play but offers in-game purchases of new cards for improvement of the players card collection (Hearthstone Wiki, 2023a).

Blizzard uses traditional as well as online advertising for the promotion of Hearthstone. Printed advertisements for Hearthstone could be found on billboards as well as in a unique form of street art, giant murals showcasing various characters from the game in cities all around the world (Sawovsky, 2015). The promotional strategy includes a lot of tv commercials (Xperio28, 2022) as well as esports (iSpot.tv, 2023).

Hearthstone has approximately 350 thousand daily players (ActivePlayer, 2023b). Blizzard arranges esports tournaments several times each year to promote the game, where the players have a chance at winning money, as well as the annual world championship (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023j). Hearthstone also has a content creator program for those interested in creating content for the game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023i). They have several content creators on Youtube such as Brian Kibler with almost 400 thousand subscribers and SolaryHS on Twitch, a streaming platform (Youtube, 2023b; Twitch, 2023).

#### *Game 6: Heroes of The Storm*

HS is an online multiplayer battle arena game released in 2015. In the game, each player assumes the role of a Hero, the character of the game, with distinct abilities, who collaborates with its team members to defeat the opponent team. The characters are based on other Blizzard games. The game is free to play but offers in-game purchases of for example cosmetic items (Heroes of the storm Wiki, 2023). HS has approximately 100 thousand players daily (Player-Counter, 2023).

In HS, occasional in-game events are arranged featuring unique themes, associated rewards and purchases. Blizzard arranges several community contests where they encourage players to create fan art, videos, and other content related to Blizzard's different games (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023h). Blizzard uses traditional media advertising, tv commercials (GamersPrey, 2015) and online advertising, such as Facebook advertisements to promote the game (Galrath91, 2016).



	World of Warcraft	Hearthstone	Diablo	Overwatch	Heroes of the Storm	StarCraft
Total number of players	130m	100m	48m	25m	5.1m	5.1m
Daily number of players	1.2m	350k	450k	400k	100k	35k
Computer	x	x	x	x	x	x
Other device		x	x			
Traditional media promo	x	x	x			x
Online media promo	x	x	x	x	x	x
Brand collaborations			x	x		
Cross game promo	x	x	x	x	x	x
Battle.net promo	x	x	x	x	x	x
Theme	fantasy	fantasy cards	fantasy	action	fantasy	space
Free to play		x		x	x	x
Subscription	x					
Additional purchase options		x	x	x	x	x
Number of players per team	team + single	single	team + single	team	team	team

Figure 2 shows an overview of the Blizzard case study.

## Analysis

In this part the case study is analyzed with the Brand Identity Prism.

### *Physique*

All of Blizzard's games have their own distinct recognizable features, elements and characters. The design of the game and the characters are distinct in a way that makes them recognizable without the Blizzard logo. Blizzard is making sure that all games are connected to the Blizzard brand by making the Blizzard logo visible everywhere in all of the games. Another way Blizzard connects all brands is by using Battle.net which looks the same regardless of the game. The site of Battle.net has features similar to the site of Blizzard. The logo incorporates details connected to the natural phenomenon blizzard.

### *Personality*

The personality of Blizzard is complex. Each game has its own personality and the multiple personalities of the games shine through the personality of Blizzard. Most of the games have some common and or recurring concepts such as heroism and camaraderie. However, it is clear that the personality can not completely be

described by these words. It is evident from the game promotion that Blizzard adjusts the material, approach and tone of voice depending on the game theme. For example in Diablo's promotion they depend heavily on celebrity collaborations to personify the game alongside theatrical short movie clips and online media clips. In Hearthstone they focused mainly on online advertising, and adjusted the clips to the game, use of inside gamer jokes, as well as the country where they were shown.

### *Culture*

The goal of Blizzard is to make games for everyone which is evident in the game availability on different platforms. Inclusion of different platforms enables the players to have access to real-time customer support. Allowing people to play on different platforms indicates that Blizzard does not favor any platform. It communicates that the players are free to use whichever platform they prefer. Blizzard promotes community engagement through in-game events, contests, and esports tournaments, which showcases inclusiveness and foster a sense of belonging.

### *Relationship*

Blizzard nurtures relationships with its players by offering in-game events, content updates, and platforms like Battle.net for community interaction. They engage with players through social media, contests, and collaboration with celebrities and brands, to build a strong relationship with its players. Blizzard tries to make their players feel heard and make them feel their opinion matters by offering beta testing and asking for their input. In the same time Blizzard's promotion of the games, creates an excitement for the player to take action and not only play the game but be part of the story.

### *Reflection*

Blizzard uses the games to make the players perceive themselves differently depending on the game. By having ideas about how their players want to be perceived, for example as cool players, they enable this reflection on different players. When looking at the communication Blizzard has an idea of how the audience perceives them and it can be assumed that they are perceived as a cool and relatable brand. It is clear that Blizzard uses different advertising depending on the game in order to target different players. Blizzard initiated communities and tournaments enabled Blizzard to include their players as well as give them a chance to picture themselves as part of their aspiring group. Blizzard's games appeal to diverse demographics, but a common pattern is the appeal to individuals seeking in-depth gameplay, community interaction, and rich narratives. A player of WoW, for instance, might envision themselves as an explorer, a strategist, or the team leader. The brand reflects these aspirations. The cost of the different games is another way Blizzard mirrors its players. The costs could be more or less appealing to different customers. When it comes to free games, there is less pressure to live up to social standards. This presents different mirroring of its players.

### *Self-image*

Blizzard allows the players to select their preferred character from a wide selection and customize them to align with their special preferences. Allowing customers to be able to see themselves as the main character of the game. For example, in WoW the player can see themselves as an explorer and in Diablo they can see themselves as a powerful demon-hunter. Their desired self-image can be fulfilled by using Blizzard's games. When a player completes a task within the game, or the game itself, the player can view themselves as more skillful and could feel accomplished. In case the player is good at participating in tournaments the sense of pride and accomplishment can be amplified even more since they have a chance of winning money. By Blizzard allowing players to participate in the beta-testing of the game, the players get the chance to feel important and creative by contributing to the development of Blizzard games. Blizzard's use of celebrities is a way to enhance the positive feelings they get when playing Blizzard's games. The broad variety of game themes Blizzard offers can appeal to a large variety of role-playing fantasies. In Overwatch the player fulfills their fantasy of being a skillful futuristic soldier and in StarCraft the player fulfills the fantasy of being the commander officer of a space army. The wide variety of Blizzard led communities on Battle.net, their social media, the organization of Blizzcon as well as the in-game components, such as the game clans, or character races the player can play with, can make them feel like they are part of something bigger than them, they are part of a community.

	World of Warcraft	Hearthstone	Diablo	Overwatch	Heroes of the Storm	StarCraft
Physique	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard
Personality	Game	Game	Game	Game	Game	Game
Culture	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard
Relationship	Blizzard	Blizzard	Blizzard	Blizzard	Blizzard	Blizzard
Reflection	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard	Game+Blizzard
Self-image	Game	Game	Game	Game	Game	Game

Figure 3 shows an overview of the brand identity of Blizzard.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### *Physique*

The level of quality that goes into the development of the online game, shows that Blizzard wants to keep a high level of quality overall in the game and its mechanics. Blizzard succeeded in making the game characters distinct and easily recognizable. They became such a strong part of the game brand that they could stand alone in advertisements without requiring the connection to the logo of the game. The distinctiveness made the logo secondary. Even though the connection between the games and its characters appears to be strong, we think this connection might not necessarily be strong enough to link it back to the Blizzard brand. According to us however, the use of Battle.net appears to have a strong connection to the Blizzard brand due to the need of accessing the site in order to play any of the games.

### *Personality*

The game brands have a strong personality and it appears to be hard for Blizzard to reflect them all. This could be attributed to the fact that Blizzard is an online gaming company and the gaming industry. It appears to be more important for game brands to have a strong personality, rather than the corporate brand. From an objective standpoint the experience the player has with the game affects the views of the video game company, which often appear to be more important than the corporate brand. If Blizzard decided to

create a very strong personality for the corporate brand, this personality could possibly disrupt the relationship between the online game personalities and that of the corporate brand. This approach could also jeopardize their ability to launch new games in the future that do not match the corporate personality. This could be a reason why Blizzard has focused most of their efforts on creating strong identities of its game brands.

### *Culture*

It is evident that Blizzard has a strong corporate culture. The fact that Blizzard lets the players choose the platform of their preference, results in them reaching a greater number of players. This makes the environment of Blizzard more inclusive, which could lead to a stronger sense of belonging among its players. The way Blizzard promotes community engagement aligns with the inclusive corporate culture without implying that the players need to have much prior knowledge or experience to be a part of it. This implies that the games are not exclusively for expert or elite players, rather anyone who wishes to enjoy one of Blizzard's games. One thing that can be interpreted by this is that they are trying to include a broader player base. By working on this inclusiveness and increasing the amount of players could indicate that this could influence the society view of players in a positive way. This is something that could be a contributing factor for the gaming world losing its "nerd" stamp. Further on, this could lead to gaming being more socially accepted and more people being interested

in playing video games resulting in more potential players for Blizzard.

#### *Relationship*

Blizzard's players seem to appreciate that Blizzard constantly expands their games and adds new content. This becomes evident by the fact that Blizzard's players have been playing their games for decades. Blizzard's constant expansions could be one reason why they are able to keep their customers for a long time by keeping them engaged.

The many communities and events led by Blizzard makes it easy to assume that there are some strong, positive, feelings about the games, which enables Blizzard to create and maintain a direct relationship with their players. This is done with Battle.net where they provide the option of for example giving feedback and reporting issues. It is possible to assume that this goes in line with improving brand loyalty. Improved brand loyalty could be used as a competitive advantage.

#### *Reflection*

Blizzard's diverse game portfolio appeals to the different player expectations. The games are very different from each other which could be one reason why Blizzard uses different stereotypes to appeal to, for example someone who sees themselves as a wizard. Having one stereotype would probably not include all of the players leading to less successful rates of salience through their communication efforts rates of salience through their communication efforts. Each game offers unique experiences and challenges, enabling players to identify with various roles, attributes, and skills. Blizzard not only achieves this through the game design, it is also complemented through the promotional efforts and revenue models for each game which attract different audiences. It is possible to assume that Blizzard consciously implemented different revenue models depending on which players the goal was of attracting.

#### *Self image*

Blizzard has several ways of contributing to the various self-image aspirations of the players. One way Blizzard achieves this is through the quality of the game, alongside the character customization options and the various Blizzard initiated communities. The players can perceive themselves as being part of a "cool" community by playing Blizzard's games, alongside a plethora of fun events organized to connect players. Players of Blizzard games can fulfill their desires of being a good player, when completing different tasks in the different games. If Blizzard would go one step further, and allow for more customization in the games than today, they could create an even stronger aspirational image the players strive to achieve.

In summary, the aim of our study was to look at the strategic brand management in the gaming industry with the use of Blizzard as a case study. Our findings show that Blizzard's brand identity is dynamic and inclusive allowing its players to connect and express themselves within Blizzard's games. The focus Blizzard places in fostering and managing relationships with the players contributes in maintaining strong relationships with them. Blizzard's commitment to customization, building communities, diverse and immersive game experiences, contributes in the fulfillment of the player aspirations about themselves and their entertainment.

### **Theoretical and Managerial Implications**

Examining the case study of Blizzard through the Brand identity Prism suggests that the model is applicable to Blizzard. This implies that the framework could be used on other video game brands and potentially even broader online brands as well. However, in the relationship facet we found that community played a big role in

establishing a relationship between the customers and the brand. This is something that could be taken into consideration when applying this framework on a game brand. We noticed that it works for online game brands, in this case Blizzard, which insinuates that it could work similarly for online brands as well. In the case of Blizzard, when we have a corporate brand and several strong gaming brands, certain facets of the prism become less relevant. For example we found that the personality was weaker because of the strong personality of the game brands.

For online brands it is apparent that there is a need for them to stand out from the others which can be done with their physique. The physique is important for online brands, since there are not many characteristics that can define them compared to brands with physical products. Their physique is composed of elements such as the logo of the brand as well as the design of the in-game characters and the overall environment of the game. Overall the third party platforms used to run the game can contribute to the brand physique. Due to the similarities between gaming brands and online brands we draw the conclusion that this can be applicable to online brands in general.

Another thing that became evident in this paper is that it appears to be important for game brands to have a strong personality. It was also implied that if the corporate brand has a strong personality it can be complicated to develop new games that do not fit with that personality. This implies that the focal point of the corporate brand should be to make sure that the game brand has a strong personality.

An implication for successful brand management within the gaming industry is the importance of communities. Developing communities led by the brand appears to be of importance since it is hard to maintain a relationship with the users due to the nature of the online brand. In

the absence of communities it is hard to create, sustain and manage relationships with the users. There are several advantages for companies to provide a platform for its customers. It can improve the culture because the customers are free to do what they want, they can easily get in contact with the corporate brand and the corporate brand has a chance of getting information about its users. For managers it is important to notice that depending on the industry of the brand, the community can be on different levels of importance.

We noticed that the continuous development of new content is a way of keeping the players engaged. By continuously improving the popular games it is possible to keep the current players playing the games for a longer time as well as opening up the possibility of attracting new players. The implication of this is the importance of continuous development and improvement of your product.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

This paper is the first of its kind and it therefore comes with some limitations. Due to the lack of time only one video game company and its series of games were investigated. The research was based on available data from Blizzard and third parties. As a result, the outcome of this study becomes less reliable and more difficult to generalize since the unique circumstances of one company probably will not be representative of the industry as a whole. Relying on a single company also resulted in limited data availability, which hindered the depth of the analysis and the ability to draw meaningful conclusions.

Future research would benefit from studies of more than one company in the gaming industry. collaborating with video game companies would also provide future researchers with better insights about corporate brand management of video game companies. It would also be interesting to compare the strategic brand

management in the gaming industry to other online industries to see if they differ or if there are similarities. Another interesting thing would be to do what we did in this paper but with a different method since this would most likely end with a different result. For example by including surveys from the customers to get their point of view.

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