

GAME DEVELOPERS' BUSINESS MODELS – THE KEY ACTIVITIES EXPLORATION*

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Abstract

Following the increasing popularity of business model canvas, we are exploring one of its components, i.e. key activities in order to identify their types and specific activities undertaken within them. As an empirical background a video game industry is used.

The research investigation follows a qualitative approach using semi-structural interviews. The research was carried out on thirteen Polish video game developers. Given that video game developers do differ in terms of adopted monetization models (i.e. premium, freemium, or hybrid) the investigation considers key activities depending on the type of adopted monetization model.

The research results reveal fourteen key activities and more than thirty actions within these key activities. The vast majority of them refer to relational aspects, e.g. customers' retention, customer relationship management, or gaming community management. However, the specific types of both differ regarding the type of the adopted monetization model. For instance, only developers applying premium model show at key activities related to strategic management and human resource management. At the same time, only developers with freemium model identify key activities related to "selective" customer relationships management, while those with hybrid model the most often point out the key activities related to intra-industry networking.

Keywords: key activities, game developers, business modeling, business model canvas, strategic management.

JEL Classification: M21, L21

INTRODUCTION

Among the current research streams in strategic management there is one focusing on business models. The increasing interest in research on business models may be justified in several ways. First, business

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models do significantly affect companies' competitive advantage (Markides, 2015) hence we are still missing from their commonly acknowledged definition, or at least brief conceptualization (Zott et al., 2011). Second, business models are shown as dramatically changing due to the progressive digitalization and interdisciplinarity of current markets (Rayna & Strukova, 2014). Therefore, both our perception of business models as well as their structure must be constantly adjusted to new business reality (Falencikowski, 2013) allowing companies to optimize their business practices (Nogalski, 2011). Third, business models traditionally adopted by companies are ceasing to be adequate especially in the context of knowledge-intensive, innovation-driven, and hyper-competitive markets, thus new business models must be created and implemented (Heitmann & Tidten, 2011). Therefore, it is claimed that business models still remain current research area.

Note however, that both, the literature and managerial practice more and more often adopt the structural approach to business models. One of the most popular concepts considering the business models through their building blocks there is business model canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). Furthermore, among the most important conclusions drawn from an extensive, critical and systematic review of literature on business models (Zott et al., 2011) there is one directly highlighting the significance of firm's activities and actions (seen as a component of business models) for profitability and sustainability of the business modeling. Given the above, this paper explores business models, applies structural view on business modeling, hence focuses on key activities acknowledged as playing "important role in the various conceptualizations of business models that have been proposed so far" (Zott et al., 2011, p. 1019).

The investigation of forms and types of key activities undertaken by companies within their business models was intentionally rooted in video game industry as prior research on business models adopted by video game developers are scarce, fragmentary and limited (Davidovici-Nora, 2014). So far, the research focus has been paid especially to monetization models adopted by developers (e.g. Heitmann & Tidten, 2011; Davidovici-Nora, 2014; Evans, 2016; Hamari et al., 2017; Klimas, 2017a) leaving other aspects of business models behind.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After this introduction, there is a section providing a brief description of theoretical background as the main focus was paid into empirical exploration of key activities

undertaken by video game developers. Third part of the paper outlines the research design. Due to the novelty of research subject the research followed a qualitative approach and used semi-structural interviews as a research method. Fourth section presents the main findings including fourteen key activities and more than thirty actions within these key activities undertaken by video game developers. These results are discussed in the next part of the paper in order to compare them with results specific for considered types of video game developers. Last part of the paper emphasizes main theoretical and practical contributions, comments research limitations and outlines future research directions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In their seminar article Zott, Amit and Massa (2011) claim that business models refer to “strategic issues, such as value creation, competitive advantage, and firm performance” (p. 1026). Nonetheless they do not remain independent from business strategy and tactics as they particularly and literally explain how firms “do business” (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010).

In a more detailed – hence structural – perspective business models provide “description of value offered to firm’s customers, basic firm’s resources, crucial firm’s activities, as well as relationships with business partners which – separately and jointly – favour value creation, ensure firm’s competitiveness and increase competitive advantage” (Nogalski, 2009, p. 45). Given the above conceptualization it is possible to distinguish several aspects worth of consideration while defining company’s business models. Among them there are crucial firm’s activities labelled also as the key activities, e.g. included in business model canvas developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010). As emphasized by the authors, key activities are needed to be done in order to make a business model (as well as its particular building blocks) work efficiently, i.e. any operations, actions, sub-processes, and processes required to create and provide value proposition to customers, make it possible to use particular distribution channels, establish and maintain customer relationships, optimize revenue streams and optimize costs, successfully organize/allocate and exploit key resources, as well as to reach the targeted customer segments (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010)?

Indeed, the key activities are usually listed among the building blocks of the generic business models regardless the applied theoretical or practical perspective:

- Morris, Schindehutte and Allen (2005) point at internal processes and operations;
- Johnson, Christensen and Kagermann (2008) include the key processes and actions;
- Rayna and Striukova (2014) identify core skills and actions among the value-related components of business models' framework seen as "critical elements of business models" (p. 64);
- Davidovici-Nora (2014, p. 84) shows key processes and activities as one of the essential components of business models responsible for value creation;
- Klimas (2017b) identifies key activities as one out of four building blocks of business model significant from relational perspective applied in the current strategic management using the resource-based view on competitive advantage.

Summing up, the key activities may be claimed as in particular importance for creation of profitable business model leading to sustainable competitive advantage. In that perspective key activities deserve managerial attention. It is claimed however, that similarly like critical success factors, sources of competitive advantage, or drivers of competitiveness they are highly industry-related (Gassmann et al., 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research applies a qualitative and explorative approach in order to identify the key activities undertaken by video game developers considered as one out of nine building blocks of business models (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). Furthermore, the focus is paid on specific actions realized under the identified key activities.

Given that business models adopted by video game developers significantly differ due to the different monetization models utilized by them (Davidovici-Nora, 2014) our investigation considers three types of developers. First, video game developers using premium monetization model assuming development and sale of paid games. Second, those utilizing freemium monetization model based on development and delivery of games for free, hence taking financial benefits from in-app

purchases (i.e. micro-payments, micro-transactions) and/or in-app advertisements. Third, developers adopting hybrid monetization model utilizing profits through both of the above revenue streams, namely sale of paid games and in-app transactions/advertisements. One should bear in mind, that consideration of hybrid model of monetization is a novelty in research on video game developers as prior research has considered only premium and freemium ones (e.g. Davidovici-Nora, 2014; Evans, 2016; Hamari et al., 2017).

The research investigation started in May 2016 and finished in January 2017. The data was collected using semi-structural interviews with top-managers and owners of 13 game development studios, including 5 applying premium, 4 applying freemium, and 4 applying hybrid monetization models*.

Regarding the scope of this part of the research project and following the business model canvas standpoint (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) the interviewees were asked about the types of key activities (including operations, actions, tactical and strategic behaviours, sub-processes, and processes) which they must (or should) implement in order to provide value to the targeted customers; to use (distributions, sale) channels, as well as to establish, maintain, and exploit customer relations. Furthermore, in order to grasp a wider perspective on the role of key activities for the adopted business models our respondents were questioned for aims targeted to/reached through the identified key activities.

RESULTS

The conducted interviews have revealed more than thirty specific actions considered by video game developers as needed to be done in order to make a business model profitable. The actions which have emerged during the interviews, based on their meaning, related functional aspects and processes have been grouped** into fourteen key activities – table 1. The identified key activities are claimed to be targeted to several different inter- and intra-organizational aspects.

* The research design is described in greater details in another author's publication titled "Key resources in game developers' business models" – forthcoming in *Journal of Management and Financial Studies* 2018.

** The process of aggregation was carried out by the researcher. In order to ensure the adequacy of aggregation it has been discussed with another researcher experienced in qualitative research as well as with two industry experts.

Table 1. Forms of activities undertaken under particular key activities

Monetization model	Key activities	Forms of key activities (specific actions)
Freemium	Business relationships management	External communication with publishers
	Customer retention	Optimization and diversification of micro-transactions and in-game advertising (measured by cost per installation (CPI) which ought to be lower than life time value (LTV)) aimed at maximization of Average Revenue Per Daily Active User (ARPDau) or Average Revenue Per User (ARPU)
		Updates of game content (e.g. new achievements/levels/skins/avatars available)
	Game development	Game creation
		Game production
		Game distribution
		Game improvements (including development of updates, elimination of crashes, development of patches and bug fixes, etc.)
		Game retention (maintenance and servicing of servers)
	Project management	Future project planning
		Monitoring of projects under realization
		Budgeting
		Agile and scrum approach improvement (monitoring and adapting to the specifics of the game, new technologies available, etc.)
		Tailoring project management to the needs of targeted customers
	(selective) Customer relationships management	Communication with selected customers (i.e. the most profitable gamers)
		Providing personalized information and statements to selected gamers
		Providing information in advance
		Providing individual support
Hybrid	Business relationships management	External communication with game platforms
		External communication with publishers
		External distributors
		External communication game platforms (i.e. AppStore, Google Play, Steam)
		Ongoing maintenance of relationships with platforms

Hybrid	Community management	Communication with customers
		Participation in events for gamers and players
		Recognition and monitoring of customers' needs
		Gathering and using customers' feedback
		Activity and communication using social media, own platform for gamers, cooperation with gaming influencers (including youtubers, bloggers, videobloggers, reputable in terms of number of followers users of Instagram, Tweeter, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitch, Every Play, etc.)
	Customer relationships management	Communication with customers (including non-gamers like such like parents, grandparents, institutional clients) during game development
		Communication with gamers during game development
		Communication with gamers and institutional clients while game is already on the market
	Customer retention	Activity in social media targeted to gamers as well to general public
		Activity during events for gamers
	Game development	Creativity encouragement
		Game production
		In-house publishing
		Own distribution
	Intra-industry networking	Participation in game developers' fair trades, industry conferences, voluntary speeches and workshops during industry events, running trainings and workshops at Universities for future developers
		Participation in fair trades, industry conferences, and game associations, local and global networking inside the industry
	Marketing and PR	Digital marketing, word of mouth
		Word of mouth, activity in social (and digital) media
	User acquisition	Activity in social media, cooperation with youtubers, bloggers, game journalists and reviewers
		Participation in events for gamers and players (e.g. e-sport championships)
		Ordering of online ads, offline ads, direct mailing
	Project management	Future project planning, monitoring of realized projects
	Quality management	Development of team-working, innovation encouragement
	Social intra-industry networking	Activity at developers' forum, problem solving, idea discussion; participation in game associations and networks
		Activity at developers' forum, problem solving, idea discussion
		Communication other game developers during game development

Monetization model	Key activities	Forms of key activities (specific actions)
Premium	Business relationships management	External communication with platforms
		External communication with hardware manufacturer
	Community management	Ongoing communication with customers
		Activity and communication using social media, own platforms for gamers
		Participation in events for gamers and players
		Maintenance of relationships with hard-core gamers using traditional channels (i.e. sending traditional letters, invitations to the company)
	Game development	Game creation, game production, game distribution, game improvements, internal communication, sound team-working
		Game creation, game production, sound team-working
	Human resource management	Technological, business, and interpersonal trainings (i.e. communication, team-working, cultural differences), talent management
	Project management	Agile and scrum approach improvement (monitoring and adapting to the specifics of particular game, new technologies available also in other creative and knowledge-intensive industries, etc.), tailoring project management to needs of targeted customers
Strategic management	Strategic analysis, inter-industry networking, R&D activities, quality management	

Source: original field study.

First, there are key activities related to intra-industry networking. Those activities cover both organizational and interpersonal relationships established and maintained mainly through – direct and indirect – communication inside video game industry. Surprisingly, game developers see it reasoned to be in close relationships with other game developers, including competitors (i.e. developers targeting the same customer segment). Second, quite significant quantity of the identified key activities relates customers, i.e. gamers and players who differs in terms of the amount of time spent on gaming, engagement into game development, and money spent on games (Perron, 2003). Among the customer-related key activities there are the following ones: user acquisition (realized mainly through digital communication in social media), customer retention (realized in two ways through digital communication in social media and optimization of revenue mechanisms included inside the games), customer relationship management (realized through communication with customers,

or at least with selected – based on the amount of money spent on gaming – customers), community management (realized through communication, adaptation of game development process in order to meet the needs and future expectations not only of customers but also of gamers in general perspective). Third, similar – hence targeted to different entities as well as to different goals – type of key activity identified in the study there is business relationship management realized through intensive communication, providing assistance, knowledge and information exchange with other members of video game industry (e.g. publishers, hardware manufacturers, other game developers). Fourth, there are the key activities directly or indirectly corresponding with game development*. The direct ones refer to some (if not all) stages of game development process, whereas the indirect ones are linked with sound implementation and optimization of project management. Last but not least, during the interviews it was possible to identify some managerial-related activities considered as crucial for business models' profitability. These activities differ in terms of the targeted functional area of developers' business activity, namely marketing (especially digital, unofficial, social), quality (especially aimed at incremental innovations and intra-organizational improvements), staff (especially intensification of technical, business, and interpersonal, skills), and management (especially improvements and development in a long-term and at the global scale).

The results of our study show differences among specific forms of key activities and actions realized under them regarding the type of monetization model adopted by video game developer – Figure 1.

First and foremost, considered types of game developers differ in terms of the number of activities acknowledged as the key ones. Developers exploiting premium monetization model pointed out at 6 types of key activities (and 10 specific actions), those with freemium model indicated 5 types of key activities (and 10 specific actions), and those

* Note that game development process covers all activities starting from idea creation while ending with maintenance of game at the market so long as it is profitable. Usually the game development process includes the following stages: game ideation, game production, game promotion, game distribution, game sale, game improvement. It is worth to notice, that more often the above stages are realized in cooperation with external partners. Thus, more often the games are co-developed instead of developed as they include at least one cooperative/coopetitive stage, i.e. game co-ideation (co-creation), game co-production, game co-promotion, game co-distribution, game co-sale, game co-improvement.

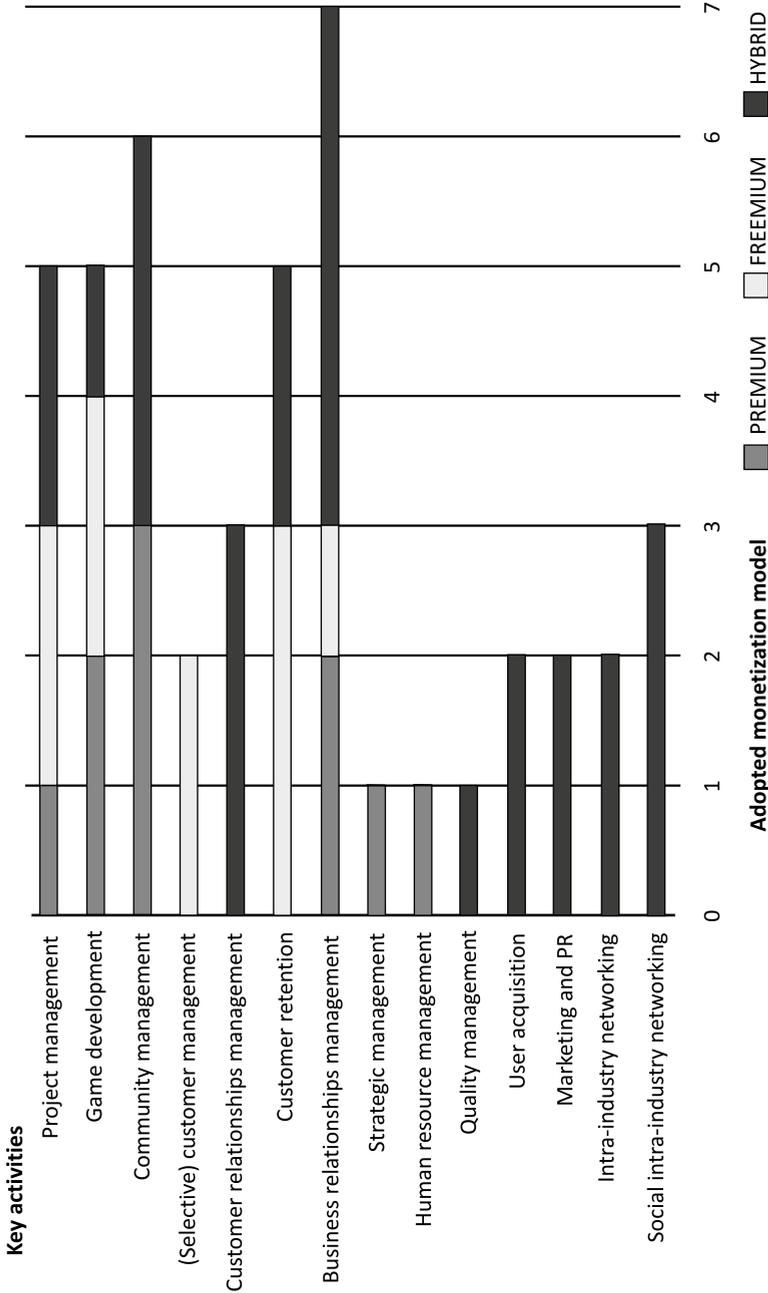


Figure 1. Key activities of video game developers

Source: original field study.

with hybrid – the most complex – model of monetization identified 12 types of key activities (and 25 specific actions). The results are reasoned as video game developers utilizing the most complex type of monetization model, requiring simultaneous operations at freemium and premium game market segments, link much more activities with profitability of their business model than those companies operating only on one game segment.

Given the acknowledged differences among game developers regarding the monetization model (Davidovici-Nora, 2014) the identified key activities have been considered in the division into three possible monetization models. Indeed, our results reveal several differences. First, game developers exploiting premium (the oldest one) monetization model link key activities especially with community management (30%), business relationship management (20%), and game development (20%) – Figure 2.

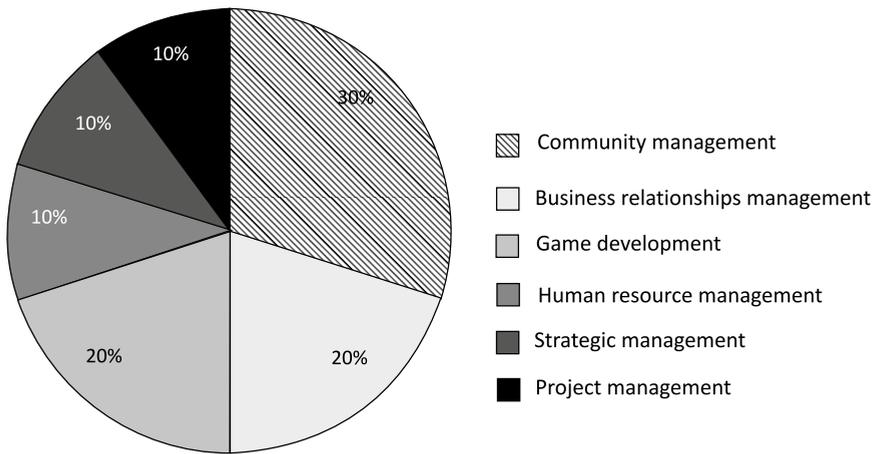


Figure 2. Key activities perceived by game developers adopting premium monetization model

Source: original field study.

Second, game developers providing games for free, hence generating profits on in-game ads and micro-transactions most often identify the following activities as the key ones: customer retention (30%), game development (20%), project management (20%), and “selective” customer management (20%) – Figure 3.

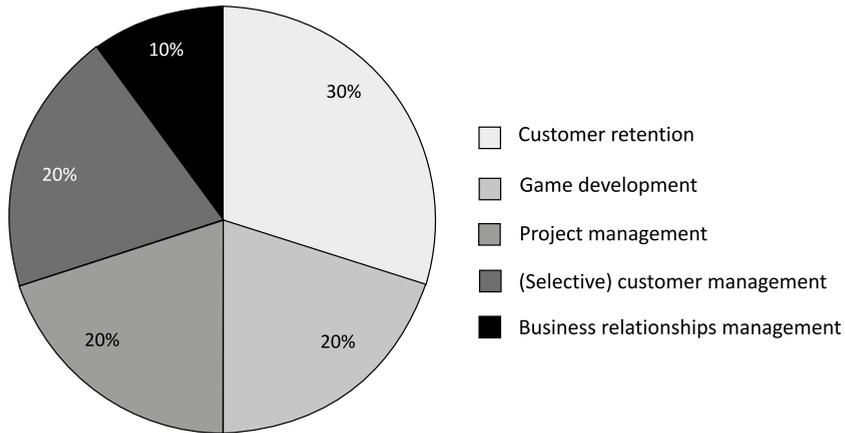


Figure 3. Key activities perceived by game developers adopting freemium monetization model

Source: original field study.

Third, game developers interested in exploitation of benefits from both monetization models simultaneously seem to be the most relational oriented as the vast majority of the activities shown as the key ones focus on establishment, management and maintenance of external relationships – Figure 4.

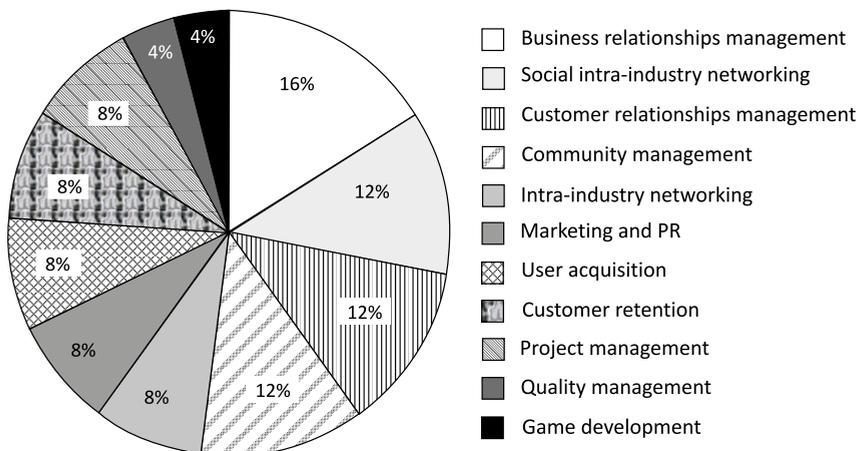


Figure 4. Key activities perceived by game developers adopting hybrid monetization model

Source: original field study.

In particular, the key activities target three types of recipients: non-developers operating inside video game industry including publishers, game platforms, or distributors (business relationship management – 16%); other game developers (social intra-industry networking – 12% and formalized intra-industry networking – 8%), and gamers (customer relationship management – 12% and community management – 12%).

DISCUSSION

Our study reveals the key activities undertaken by game developers seen as one out of nine building blocks of their business models, hence regarding the type of monetization model adopted. Even though there is no prior research focusing on the explored specific component of business models, there are some empirical results from studies more or less related to critical success factors, triggers of competitiveness or antecedents of competitive advantage of video game developers. Given the prior empirical insights, it is claimed that the obtained findings should be seen as supportive, deepening and widening the previous ones.

Given the applied theoretical background our research supports conceptualization of key activities developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010). In particular, our findings refer to all out of key activities considered by the above authors, namely: production (i.e. game creation, game design, quality management, communication with publishers, distributors, and platforms), problem solving (i.e. game co-design, gathering and utilization of feedback from gamers, human resource management aimed at technical and business trainings), and platform/network (i.e. creation and maintenance of own platforms for gamers such like GOG.com created by Cd Project or Createria created by Incuvo).

Similarly, considering more practical – hence based on the same theoretical background – perspective our results provide additional evidence. First, the report on video game value chains provided by Accenture in 2015 (*The Pulse of Gaming...*, 2015) identified some new capabilities needed in video game industry in order to optimize the level of value exploitation form gaming value chain. Some of the identified capabilities coincide with the key activities identified in

our study, namely brand management (here related with community management, marketing and PR aimed at improvement of brand(-s) promotion), customer relationship management (here community management, customers' retention, customer relationship management, including selective customer relationship management), and product development (here mainly game development and project management). We see this consistency of the above results as a proof of game developers' awareness about the areas of business activity influencing the current and future market success. Second, we support prior managerial and entrepreneurial claims (*Key Activities Block...*, 2015) about the currently desired key activities exploited within innovative and profitable business models, i.e. quality checks and control, product development, communication (including this inside video game industry as well as ongoing dialog with wide range of customers), events (including participation in industry fair trades and gaming events for gamers), handling customers' problems and problem solving.

Rayna and Striukova (2014) show that core competencies and skills as well as key resources exploited under business models of video game developers have changed in recent years. In particular, they identified a decrease of in-house capabilities (mainly the technical ones). These also remain in lines without findings. First, key activities are shown as different regarding the adopted model of monetization. Furthermore, the newest monetization model – the hybrid one – is shown as the most desiring in terms of key activities realized under the business model (in total 12 different activities identified as the key ones). Second, the vast majority of the identified key activities are related to external partners and relationships maintained with them in a long term. Furthermore, as shown by Heitmann and Tidten (2011) the new business models profitable within global video game industry significantly take benefits from relationships with customers, including wide range of gamers. Indeed, our study shows that the vast majority of key activities identified as a building block of business model relate to customers, e.g. community management, customer retention, user acquisition, or intensive marketing through direct and indirect communication with gamers, non-gamers and wide gaming community.

CONCLUSIONS

To the authors' best knowledge, the main theoretical contributions resulting from this study are at least twofold. First, it was possible to identify both key activities and specific actions undertaken within them seen by video game developers as significant in the context of their business models. Second, this study adopts differentiation of game developers in terms of the adopted monetization models and gives evidence for differences regarding key activities as well as actions undertaken within them. One should bear in mind that as prior research has adopted dichotomy (premium or freemium monetization model) this study provides the very first empirical findings related to those developers which simultaneously take benefits from premium and freemium monetization models. Therefore, it is claimed this study directly corresponds, expands and deepens prior findings being restricted to developers utilizing premium and freemium revenue models only (e.g. Rayna & Striukova, 2014). Furthermore, as in prior literature there is no research on key activities of game developers run from business models' perspective it is argued that the obtained findings develop knowledge in this field.

This study seems to be valuable for practitioners as it directly points out key activities being seen by video game developers as significant in business models profitable today. Depending the type of monetization model, this research shows activities and specific actions worth of considering in everyday and longitudinal business practice. For instance, our study shows that customer retention is seen as a key activity by the greatest number of game developers adopting freemium monetization model, whereas it is not considered as the key one by those with premium monetization model. Similarly, community management seen as the key activity by the greatest number of game developers adopting premium monetization model (30%) is considered as a key one by any developers with freemium monetization model. We claim it is significant difference as it shows specific activities worth of engagement and investment in order to make business models – based on specific monetization model – profitable in a long term.

The author acknowledge that this study suffers from some limitations. First, as it is an explorative research following qualitative approach and using only 13 semi-structured interviews as an empirical data set

it is hard to make any generalizations or draw universal conclusions. Nonetheless, as prior knowledge about video game developers' strategic management remains limited we see our results as providing the very first insights into key activities undertaken by them as well as significant differences among them depending on the adopted monetization model.

Given the above we see it reasoned to carry out some further research efforts. First, in order to provide the total picture of business models adopted by video game developers we suggest to run further qualitative research focused on the remaining building blocks. For instance, as the distribution model in video game industry has change lately hence very significantly (Berman-Grutzky & Cederholm, 2010) it would be valuable to consider "channels" in details. Second, as business models, as well as their adequacy and profitability are industry-related (Gassmann et al., 2014) while this study is restricted to Polish game developers it is reasoned to replicate investigation in other countries. Such replication seems to be needed not only to test our findings and make cross-national comparisons, but also to reveal possible national differences among game developers (such differences are acknowledged regarding gamers and players – Perron, 2003) or draw more general, intra-industry conclusions about business models adopted inside this the fastest growing industry worldwide.

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MODELE BIZNESOWE TWÓRCÓW GIER – KLUCZOWE AKTYWNOŚCI

Artykuł lokuje się w obszarze zarządzania strategicznego i wpisuje się w nurt badań nad modelami biznesu. Analizie poddano jeden z dziewięciu komponentów *business model canvas*, tj. kluczowe aktywności.

Empirycznym tłem zrealizowanych badań jest polska branża gier komputerowych i wideo, natomiast przedmiotem eksploracji są rodzaje oraz szczegółowe formy kluczowych aktywności podejmowanych przez twórców gier, a także cele, którym owe aktywności są podporządkowane. Zgodnie z przyjętymi celami badawczymi proces rozpoznania naukowego przeprowadzono w duchu podejścia jakościowego, wykorzystując technikę wywiadu semistrukturyzowanego.

Wyniki badań wskazują 14 kluczowych aktywności twórców gier, które dotyczą głównie aspektów relacyjnych (w tym retencja klientów, zarządzanie relacjami z klientami, zarządzanie społecznością graczy, biznesowy i społeczny networking wewnątrzbranżowy), aczkolwiek są zróżnicowane pod względem przyjętego modelu monetyzacji (premium, freemium lub hybrydowy).

Słowa kluczowe: kluczowe aktywności, twórcy gier, modelowanie biznesowe, *business model canvas*, zarządzanie strategiczne.