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Technology and touchdowns: How mobile is changing the game

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By Lahary Ravuri

The delineation between the digital and physical is gradually ebbing. As applications grow more ubiquitous, they alter the ways that we interact with traditional aspects of our life. We see it in the way we shop, the way we read the newspaper, even how we hail a cab. We also see it with the Super Bowl.

It is interesting to me that an event that occurs once a year would have so many mobile apps designed for roughly four hours of television. It makes a lot of sense though, when you think about it, because this year's game is expected to break the viewer record set in 2012 (111.5 million viewers).

Keeping score
Despite the dwindling numbers of traditional television viewership, the National Football League is not hurting. It has maintained steady average growth over the last four years. Networks that run NFL games have seen viewer growth between 2 percent and 7 percent consistently since 2010.

Why is this?

Football, unlike episodic television programming, is a communal event. The joy of the Super Bowl is the joy of gorging on delightfully unhealthy food with friends or strangers and the shared experience of what is guaranteed to be an interesting game.

This year the two teams Seattle Seahawks and the New England Patriots with the best record in their respective conferences will compete. And they have identical records 15 wins, three losses which, combined with the recent Patriots scandal, should draw quite a crowd.

With these viewer estimates in mind, and this dedicated exuberance, the glut of Super Bowl apps makes sense.

The majority of these apps fall predominantly into one of three categories according to primary functionality, though there will, of course, be a bit of function overlap.

Aggregation apps
These information-oriented mobile apps serve to present data and statistics in a cogent and manageable way for fans who want to do their homework. They provide everything from player/team statistics to up to date weather information. They are also connected to social media streams to provide real time added value.

The Official Super Bowl XLIX Game Program mobile app offers access to the 288 page printed program. It includes rosters for both teams, photos, videos, a recap of last year's Super Bowl, animated lineups, current temperature information, an aggregation of Twitter and Instagram Feeds, and what it refers to as "fun activities for the kids, too!"

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The Seahawks and Patriots mobile apps, the official apps of the teams, provide similar access to news, statistics, rosters and team-related media and social media integration.

Engagement apps
These apps offer information on Super Bowl-related events, from local social gatherings and social media/chat features for telecommunicative smack talking, to recipes and resources necessary to ensure that you throw the optimal Super Bowl Party.

NFL Homegating features recipes for interesting snacks and old favorites, party planning tips and an interface to invite existing contacts. This app, as another official NFL property, also features a countdown to the game and an internal merchandise shop.

The in-app merchandise purchases are a popular monetization avenue with Super Bowl apps. Having a passionate and captive audience seems like a recipe for high conversion rates.

THUUZ is a personalized sports entertainment app that provides a metric (0 -100) for how exciting the game is, as well as headlines to help you contextualize the numbers.

THUUZ is interesting in its personalization. Users select favorite teams and set alert parameters and the app then sends push notifications to the user that coincide with their alert parameters. For instance, you can set the app to alert you when a team has scored or is in scoring position.

PlayUp aggregates game-related news and statistics but gets shifted to this category because its primary function is to allow users to "chat, joke and argue with your mates as the action unfolds." While an interesting concept, the app, judging by user reviews, seems to fall short in terms of functionality.

Curation apps
These entertainment-oriented apps either serve as vectors for streaming the game/commercials or simple games.

While this sector is saturated with trivia games about past seasons and current teams, it also features some very impressive applications that work to get the game in front of more people. This grouping is less tied to social media as the content is designed to be more purposeful.

The NBC Sports Live Extra app will allow users to stream the entire pre show, game and halftime show to their mobile devices, and does not require a cable subscription.

NFL Mobile will also allow viewers to watch the game for free if they have service through Verizon Wireless, as the carrier secured exclusive rights to stream the game to mobile devices.

There are also a handful of apps that provide a library of past commercials, but these apps are not affiliated with the game or the NFL, and so do not provide early access to this year's ads.

The trend with these, as with the majority of mobile apps, is providing easier access to information and more engagement options.

The NFL has done a terrific job with its official apps. NFL Mobile has at least 10 million installs and resoundingly positive reviews. It has good usability and a lot of features to keep users interested.

Thin line between victory and defeat
When designing an app, particularly one that interacts with an event, there is virtue in building a product that contributes to enjoyment rather than distracts.

The apps that succeed are ones that effectively present the options of curation, aggregation and engagement, yet each of these has distinct risks.

When you create an engagement app, particularly a new one, there is risk it will go unnoticed or unused.

The challenge is in demonstrating to the user that a particular engagement vector is better than another. Engagement apps create a distinct and unique environment, which can be wonderful or awful.

When you create an aggregation app, you have to build it with a degree of agency.

Without some amount of curatorial control, you can lose control of your brand and your message. The Patriots mobile app is full of tweets about underinflated footballs, for example.

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Who will win?

It will be interesting to see how consumers respond to these apps, if the apps enhance the game experience or if they detract. Some of them have been out for years, carefully patched, maintained, and polished, while others are recent additions to their respective markets.

The NFL Mobile app has between 10 -50 million downloads, whereas the NFL Homegating app only has 10,000 - 50,000.

These two apps, both produced by NFL Enterprises, have completely different intended audiences and will fulfill distinct needs.

Will Homegating generate a more dedicated audience, or will the recipes disappoint?

Can NFL Mobile capture and maintain an audience, despite the streaming function being limited to a single mobile carrier? How will chat apps such as PlayUp compete with a room full of friends and fellow fans?

We will just have to wait and see how it plays out, just like the game itself.

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