

Harnessing behavioural psychology to enhance user experience

 By Jason Ried

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Over the past several years, behavioural psychology has attracted a great deal of interest outside of academic circles. With one of its main sub-fields, behavioural economics, now influencing the strategies of major corporations around the world, it is no surprise that more people are paying close attention to its proponents. Indeed, books such as Dan Ariely's *Predictably Irrational* have spawned revamps to entire business operations, altered retail models and reshaped financial strategies.



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In the fast-evolving world of online games, digital products and app development, behavioural psychology and its various offshoots are having a similarly transformative effect. For those who understand the concept and learn how to apply its many insights to development in the digital realm, behavioural psychology can radically improve the user experience and in turn drive user engagement to new heights.

Put simply, behavioural psychology posits that all behaviours are acquired through conditioning, and conditioning occurs through daily interactions with our environment. An important and highly influential sub-field, behavioural economics, examines psychological insights into human behaviour to explain economic decision-making and predict economic patterns.

Unbeknown to most people, major brands and businesses have been applying these insights for many years to influence consumer behaviour and establish favourable spending patterns.

Positive influence, positive returns

In South Africa, insurance giant Discovery Health partnered with Dan Ariely himself to develop an insurance plan that prods its members to engage in healthy behaviour (such as exercise, healthy eating, etc). The end goal was to create a 'voluntary pre-commitment programme', whereby Discovery Vitality members could put their 25% discount on groceries 'on the line' by agreeing to increase their purchases of healthy food by 5 percentage points above their household baseline. Ariely, who is the James B. Duke Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University in the U.S., documented the results on [his website](#):

“We found that 36% of members who were given this option agreed to participate, and these members maintained a 3.5% increase, on average, in healthy grocery items purchased in each of the six months. These findings suggest that a portion of consumers seize the opportunity to create restrictive choice environments for themselves in order to purchase healthier items, even at some risk of financial loss.”

In other words, by creating the right conditions – and setting up a certain ‘environment’, so to speak – Discovery was able to positively influence the behaviours of its members.

For brands, the end goal is naturally to link positive changes in behaviour with an increase in brand loyalty, and ultimately, profitability.

Making space for creative freedom

In the digital realm, and more specifically, within online games and app development, we are beginning to see the effective application of behavioural insights to design better and more compelling user experiences. As developers, we have tended to assume that people are inherently rational, and that they will react according to our (deeply ingrained) assumptions. These assumptions have led to the release of many flawed products, games, and applications that have failed to engage and enchant the end user – often at great expense to the developer, business or brand behind it.

By applying scientifically proven insights into human behaviour to product design, however, developers can drastically reduce the chances of missing the mark. Armed with the knowledge and insights that researchers such as Ariely and other leading thinkers are yielding, we can begin to rely less on assumption in product design, and more on a sound, scientific approach.

Critically, this allows brands and developers to create and design interactions that (almost) guarantee certain reactions. In the process, liberated from the burden of wondering whether the interactions and triggers will ultimately work, developers are duly empowered to be more bold and creative with how they present the interactions and craft key elements. This scenario generally leads to more compelling and creative product design, and to a far more engaging and rewarding experience for the end user and/or consumer.

Be relentless

Admittedly, applying the insights gleaned from behavioural psychology and its sub-fields is both art and science. As developers and designers, it has taken us many years to understand exactly how these insights can shape and improve product design – and to master the art of weaving these insights into the user experience within online games and applications. For us, the key to success has been to constantly challenge our own assumptions – and to question relentlessly the underlying logic that has shaped product, app and game design in the past.

It is important to remember that as products and experiences within the digital sphere evolve and transform, so too are the users and consumers of these products. This evolution demands the constant study of human behaviour, and the effective

and rigorous application of the resulting insights into design and development. In our view, such insights are already creating a clear distinction between digital experiences that compel users and engage them for sustained periods, and those that repel them.

ABOUT JASON RIED

Jason Ried is the founder and MD of Fuzzy Logic. Jason's vision for Fuzzy Logic is to create world-class games and apps while growing the games industry in South Africa which has a wealth of untapped potential and talent. To date, Jason has led Fuzzy Logic in releasing chart-topping products, winning an international award and starting work on a big budget, highly ambitious game for an international game and toy company.

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