Research Analysis

EverWing

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0.0   Preface

Before ideation for a new *EverWing* feature begin, an analysis of the game is necessary. A thorough understanding of the current state of game play and user experience will inform design choices so that they can be integrated seamlessly into the existing game systems, attracting new users while at the same time invigorating the established audience. At minimum, research should include:

1. EverWing's key features (i.e., the metaphorical pillars that define EverWing as a game).
2. A complete overview of EverWing's sub-features, such that all bases are covered.
3. Reviews and user metrics since EverWing's release, to inform design choices which will supplement the user experience.
4. Facebook's *Instant Games* as a market for publishing (as compared to the App Store and Google's Play Store).

1.0   What is EverWing?

1.1   The Basics

Below is a quick overview of some of the basics of the game.

Name: EverWing

Publisher: Blackstorm Labs

Genre: Bullet Hell

Platform: Facebook *Instant Games* (Android/iOS/PC)

Intrinsic Goals: improve Guardians and Sidekicks, high-score, gold-acquisition

Extrinsic Goals: high-score, bragging rights, completionism, socialising

Keywords: Boss Raids, Bullet Hell, Co-operative, Social, Competitive, One-touch Controls

1.2   Gameplay

EverWing follows a similar formula to most *bullet hell* games but remains unique in comparison.

To play EverWing, the player pilots a Guardian, dragging their finger/cursor horizontally across the screen to manoeuvre themselves through an airborne level, as their character (and its pets) fires projectiles automatically in the forward direction.

Monsters spawn rapidly in rows of 5, moving downwards as the player moves up. These monsters take damage when hit by a projectile; similarly, the player can collide with the monsters, causing the player to lose instantly.

The following items may drop when a monster is defeated:

- Coins: general currency (upgrades) and score
- Trophies: purchase ultra-rare dragons
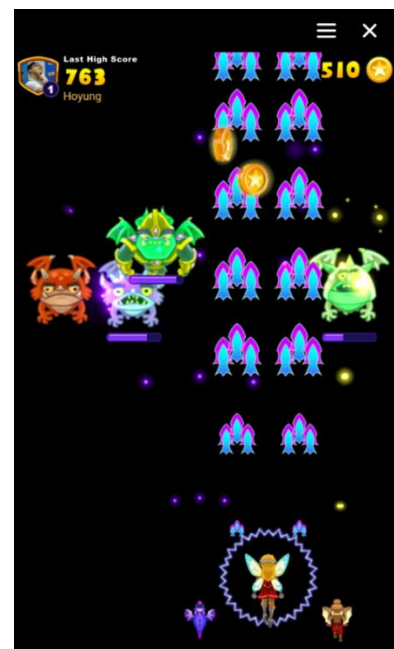- Power-ups: damage+, invincibility, magnet, etc

Figure 1: EverWing Gameplay

The Sidekick system allows players to equip dragons that assist in battle – dealing damage and sometimes able to apply special effects such as charm and slow as well. They follow the player closely, providing extra firepower.

If players survive long enough to reach the end of the stage, they will be forced to confront a boss. The boss will often present a unique unfamiliar attack pattern while remaining stationary. Once defeated, they drop a bounty of coins and trophies as a reward, and the player is then able to progress to the next stage.

Figure 2: Boss Battles – initiation > battle > reward

The player has only one life, a feature that is perhaps a unique to EverWing that isn't often found in *bullet hell* games: when taking any form of damage, the player loses immediately. Threats include: enemy projectiles, falling meteors, and physical contact with enemies.

When defeated, players receive a score equivalent to their accumulated gold for just that instance. This score carries forward to a leaderboard that is shared with friends.

Figure 3: End game screen

When starting new runs, players are given the option to instant-clear the level up until the highest-stage boss they have historically achieved that week. The player character immediately charges into battle, automatically clearing large amounts of monsters and acquiring power-ups along the way. The player also receives an adequate amount of score given the progress necessary to reach that stage.
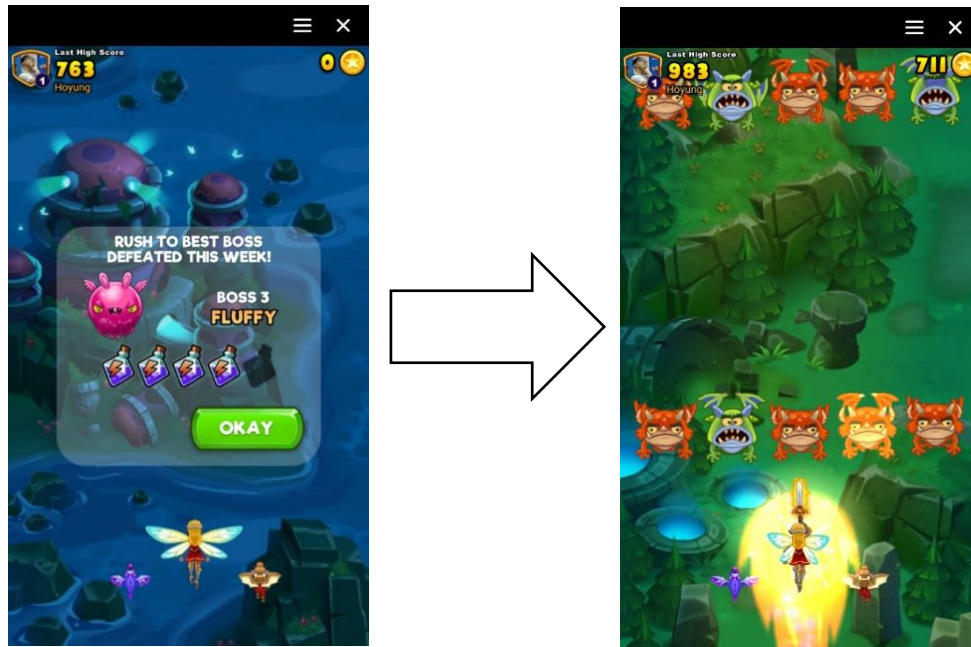

Figure 4: "Rush to Best Boss Defeated This Week!"

The score a player is compensated for auto-clearing levels is less than what they might achieve from taking the time to clear each stage normally, so while the instant-clear feature may be desired by users who are looking to progress quickly, those who are wanting to achieve a new personal record might benefit more from clearing each stage manually.

The simplicity of the core systems allows the user to easily achieve basic understanding necessary to play the game. Additional game modes will be deconstructed later in the analysis.

1.3   The HUB World

EverWing's menu items are stylised as a HUB World: the world itself is represented as a castle in the sky, and each menu item is positioned just outside of the portion of the castle or its grounds that it grants the player access to.

Here is a brief overview of the HUB:

- Characters: discover new Guardians and make them stronger
- Sidekicks: dragon pets that players can equip and upgrade
- Boss Raids: battle ultra-bosses with others
- Leaderboard: compare high scores with friends
- Quests: send spare units off on missions
- Shop: gems and egg-bundles

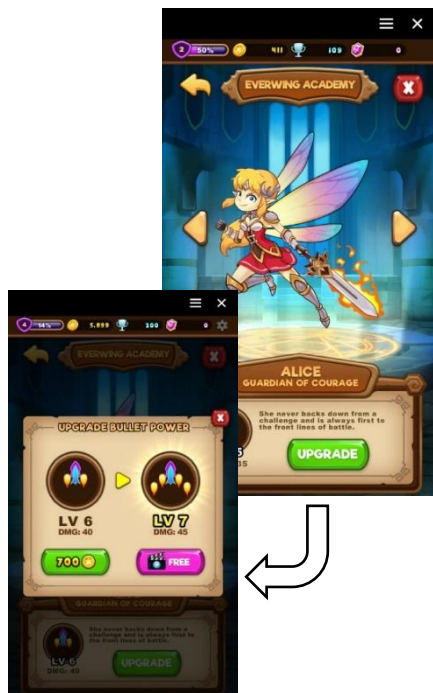*Figure 5: The HUB World*

Characters – Everwing Academy

The *Characters* option gives players access to new Guardians. Each Guardian has their own unique trait that sets them apart from the others. For example, Fiona gives twice as much experience points to pets when completing a run or quest, whilst Lyra can command all five elements giving her more offensive capabilities.

In addition, players can improve the damage output of Guardians by a level, either by spending gold or watching an ad, which grants an extra 5 points of damage.

Summary:

Players will often return to this option if they want to see improvement on their performance in-game. There does not seem to be any way to purchase new heroes/better upgrades using IAPs. This may certainly be intentional, to avoid being identified as *Pay 2 Win* (p2w).

Figure 6: Upgrading characters to deal more damage

Sidekicks – Dragon Roost

The *Sidekicks* option allows player to manage their roster of dragons. Here, players can choose to:

- equip dragons (up to 2)
- upgrade dragons (using other dragons as material)
- or sell dragons for gold

Dragons also come in various grades:

- Common
- Rare
- Epic
- Legendary
- Mythic

They can be acquired through various means:

- Spending coins or trophies
- Receiving rewards from chests or from boss raids
- Challenging players to play EverWing
- Investing real money via IAPs (such as bundles)
- Watching advertisements

Figure 7: Sidekicks tab

Sidekicks can also be evolved to become stronger. Tier 1 dragons can only reach a maximum level of 10. Once achieved, another dragon of equal level, species, and tier can be combined (known as evolution) to create a Tier 2 dragon. This can be done again at level 20, for the highest tier dragon possible: Tier 3.

In addition, dragons of the same zodiac that have been combined will acquire permanent damage boosts; enhancements are rather significant and are often sought after by those who wish to improve their performance/meta-game.

Summary:

Along with character upgrades, Sidekicks are a means of improving player performance. They are arguably the most intricate and subsequently the most important aspect of the game: crafting the best dragon synergy for a specific game mode can become a game-changer when done carefully.

Sidekicks are also the biggest target for monetisation: often players are given opportunities to watch ads or spend gems (paid currency) to summon higher-grade dragons. Since players are given plenty of free methods to acquire new dragons, this form of monetisation can be perceived as non-intrusive and free-to-play friendly.
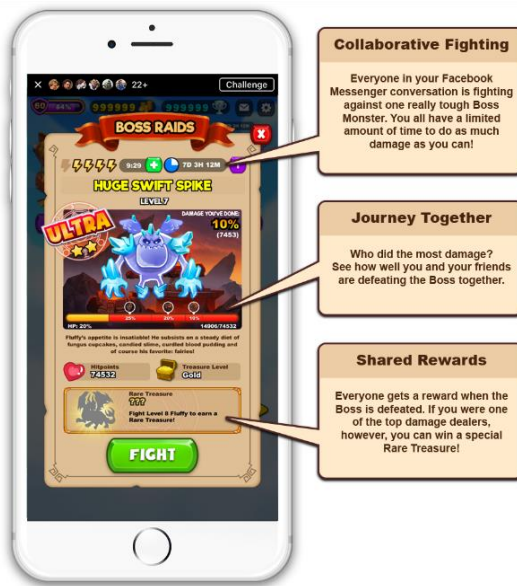
Boss Raids – Super-Boss Battles

Figure 8: A brief overview of Boss Raids, as seen on EverWing's Twitter

Boss Raids is perhaps the epitome of EverWing's content cycle thus far, boasting the opportunity to take down super-bosses with Facebook friends using strategy and communication. These super-bosses are augmented versions of their default counterparts, making their attack patterns familiar but challenging.

Players have 60 seconds to deal as much damage as they can before the fight ends. This damage is deducted from the boss' total health pool. They may then choose to battle the boss again, reducing their health even further. The total historical damage becomes the player's score.

What makes this event interesting is that players can band together with other people to defeat the boss. This is preferred, as the damage that one person can do pales in comparison to the boss' total health pool.

Summary:

Boss Raids, to the development team, is one of the most exciting features of EverWing. Jimmy Griffith, one *EverWing*'s developers, has said this:

> "… when Michael suggested Boss Raids to [our] team, we were blown away. We could hardly let each other finish a sentence as we all imagined the possibilities: creating guilds with friends, the insane bullet-hell style of the fights, the epic loot drops!"
>
> *~ Jimmy Griffith (Kong, 2017)*

The *Boss Raid* mode depicts the developers' overarching vision of what *EverWing* should embody: playing with friends in an action packed and co-operative PvE environment – any new game mode or feature should aspire to do the same.

Bosses provide a genuine challenge for the player, where simply upgrading their units will not help at all with their survivability. Positioning and reaction-timing is key: by taking this approach, players can feel that they have direct agency in the outcomes of these battles.

Leaderboard – Hall of Fame

As is a common commodity in competitive video games, *EverWing* includes a leaderboard system, where friends can match their personal records with each other for bragging rights.

However, as Fu mentions in an interview, *EverWing* is more than just a competition – it's helping friends and overcoming those challenges together. With that, the leaderboard system may seem contradictory at first. However, the ability for players to challenge their friends to beat their personal record can be seen as a way to encourage them to exceed their own expectations by setting a goal. Of course, whether this is intentional is unclear.

Figure 9: Left - Leaderboards tab. Right - Scores being compared post-game.

Summary:

Leaderboards are commonly shared globally, but Blackstorm Labs have set them exclusively for friends only. This is perhaps intentionally, as it may have been designed to promote comradery more so than to invoke rivalry. This is a serious consideration when attempting any changes to the current system.

Quests – Adventure Guild

Figure 10: Quests that players can choose from

The *Quest* system allows players to send their unused characters and dragons off onto missions. For the duration that the participants are off on Quest missions, they are locked from play. Upon completion, players receive coins and their dragons are awarded experience points based on a formula.

These factors include: Guardian level, Sidekick levels, number of enemies defeated, number of floors cleared, and the *Reward Bonus* (a reward multiplier assigned to each quest).

Summary:

For new players, this feature would seem rather insignificant, who would more than likely have only two or three units (unless they have out-performed, earning them more gold and experience points). However, for meta-gaming competitive players, this feature is crucial for progression.

Shop – In-App Purchases

The *Shop* feature offers players the ability to spend real money for in-game currency – also known as In-App Purchases (IAPs). Alongside the typical "gems", egg-bundles are also available for purchase.

Summary:

Making IAPs too costly can often spur disdain from the community, as there is a heavy stigma against *Pay 2 Win* features especially when it comes to the *Free-to-Play* gaming model. This problem becomes clear when it comes to exclusive content – they can sometimes be advertised as "premium" items and would thus be gated behind pay walls. However, *EverWing* gives a solid balance of free items (requires ad-viewing) and purchasable content
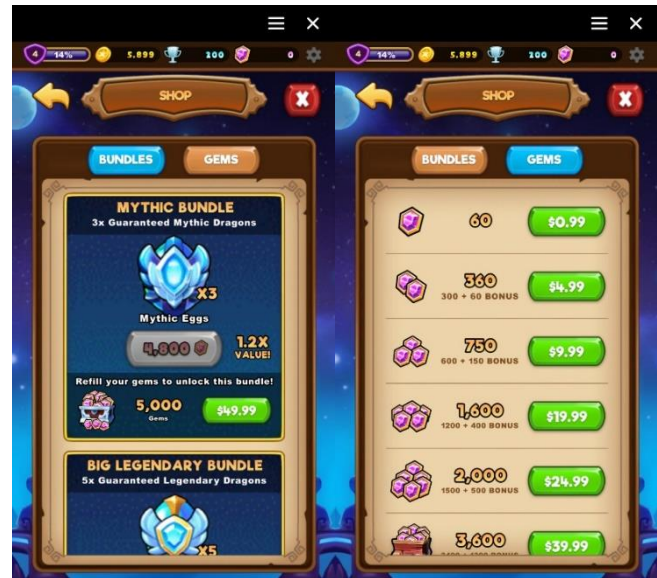

Figure 11: Left - egg + gem bundles. Right - gems

Events – Bonus Content

Figure 12: Events Tab

Events, often a staple in mobile games to maintain player retention, is a feature that periodically sets new goals for players and diverts interest into special features for them to discover. For the duration of each event, exclusive content is often presented to the player, where they are tasked to 'do Y in X amount of time to receive Z'.

Players are given the opportunity to receive exclusive Guardians while clearing special Event Boss Raids. Each exclusive Event Guardian is desirable for their vastly unique ability.

Summary:

Perhaps the underdog amongst the many elements of *EverWing*, this feature is likely to be the driving force that makes players want to come back. With fresh Event content each month, users will always be enticed to return to the game.

1.4   Points of Interest

Core Gameplay

The most fundamental part of any game would be its gameplay – which often defines a game and makes it easily identifiable by its players. For example, if an avid gamer were to be shown a still photo of *Angry Birds* gameplay, they would immediately be able to identify it as *Angry Birds*. Although the game has been updated many times, the game mechanics and underlying features have remained consistent.

Figure 13: Angry Birds gameplay

Therefore, before considering any new game modes for *EverWing*, it is necessary to define the existing identifying features of core gameplay. Any new feature should align fluidly with existing core gameplay, to enable the user to quickly adapt to changes.

- The player only has one life
- The player's character fires projectiles in the forward direction from the player
- The player strafes left and right to dodge bullets and to control the character's projectile path
- The enemy spawns in waves constituting rows of five
- The enemy spawns items (or *things*) on death
- The boss is a unique unit in the game
- The boss has a unique attack pattern
- The boss serves as the climax of the journey

It certainly isn't important to adhere to all the core elements of the game. For example, *Boss Raids* foregoes having a wave of enemies at the start and instead skips straight to the final battle. These factors are important to keep in mind when going forward.

Boss Raids

Boss Raids is the most prominent feature of EverWing, therefore it is important to identify what makes this feature so attractive to users. It is also perhaps the game-mode that is most fitting for the brief, making it a key point of interest.

- Unforgiving bosses cast a skilful challenge
- Sharing scores provides co-operative competition
- Active Facebook notifications simulate the typical MMO raid chat
- Ads and IAPs to upgrade units gives an easy way to improve player performance

Methods of Monetisation

Blackstorm Labs most likely has their own policy when it comes to monetisation in *EverWing*, thus it would do good to identify these rules and to conform to them. Making drastic changes or being too greedy could have a negative impact on the player base.

Watching advertisements allows players to:

- upgrade their Guardian's damage
- acquire new dragons
- acquire trophy-currency
- double their coin income on-defeat
- access improved quests
- attempt to open extra chests

Spending on In-App-Purchase allows players to:

- purchase gems
- purchase egg-bundles using gems
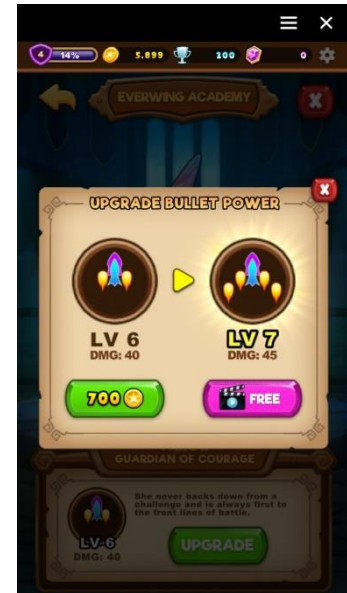
Figure 14: Watching ads to permanently improve damage
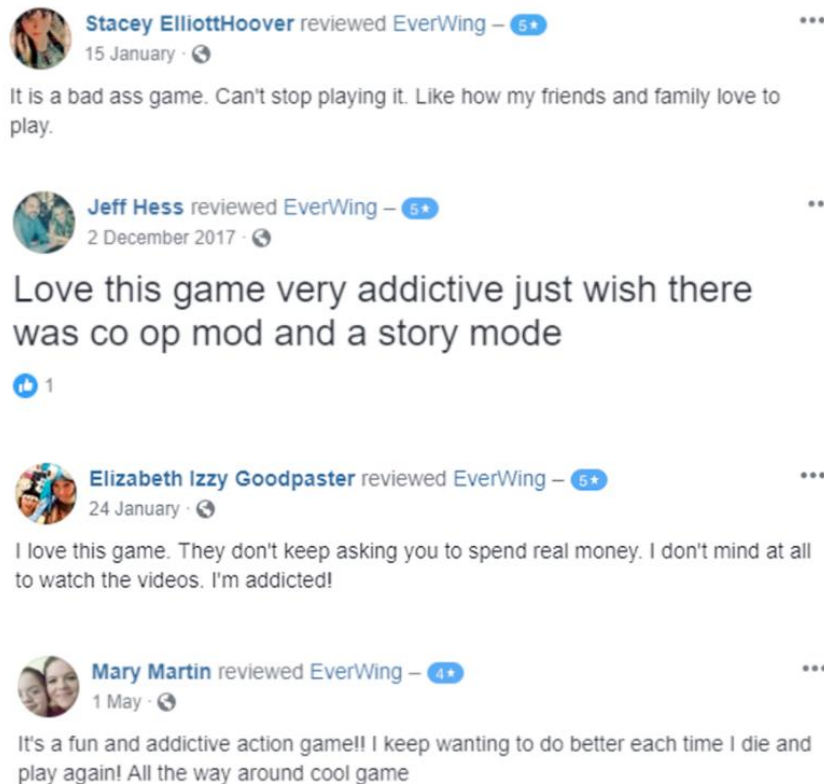
Generally, advertisements are favoured over IAPs: as noted by reviews for this game (discussed later), the consensus seems to be that players prefer watching ads for free content – they are not concerned over having to watch a 10s ad to enhance their experience. This seems to be the safest approach for monetisation.

IAPs seem to generally be avoided. This could be due to the negative stigma around p2w games. They are generally used for features that would have a large impact on player performance, but already have plenty of free-methods to achieve the same. In this case, high quality eggs can be received for free by watching advertisements, making the paid option look less desirable. Otherwise, opportunities for players to spend real-money on the game are currently scarce, opening possibilities to do so in the future. Due to this dearth, it would be advisable to take caution in introducing more IAPs in the future.

2.0   Facebook Reviews

The opinion of the audience is a value ingredient to making better games, post-launch. Caution needs to be observed when being too selective with what reviews to feature – it is often the developer trap when becoming too engrossed in the vocal minority. Thus, they should be taken with a grain of salt.

Positive Reviews:

Besides the ones shown above, many positive reviews indicate that the main selling-point for the game is the gameplay – commonly identified as challenging and addictive. Otherwise, no reviews indicate as to *why* they find it fun to play. This means that making drastic changes to existing gameplay can be risky.

Many reviews key in to the co-operative competitive side of the game, often finding themselves playing with friends and family.

A large amount of comments show appreciation on the lack of dependency on IAPs, with the frequent supply of free content and that they don't mind the occasional advertisement to get them.

Negative Reviews:

Negative reviews, of which there are many. Many of them indicate problems with bugs, crashes, and lag issues – or in other words, not gameplay related content. These are problems that can often only be resolved by the programming team. As such, they are not *usually* problems for the designers.

The most frequent problem is an issue with the advertisements system. Many users have been left for weeks without being able to gather free dragons and trophies as they have either run out of advertisements to watch or they are simply not working. There is perhaps an over-reliance on free rewards for player progression. For example, the main source for eggs are in advertisements and in-app-purchases, where players must rely on chance or become top-scorers in *Boss Raids* to get them as rewards. Coincidentally, eggs give Sidekicks, and having good Sidekicks can become game changers for competitive meta-gamers. There should be serious consideration into making farmable content for new game modes that they release.

When players are defeated, they can ask a friend for a revive. However, there is an associated cooldown for that player if the request is accepted – that timer is 10 days long. Understandably, for most, this duration is far too long, especially when players may not have many friends who coincidentally play *EverWing*.

3.0   Facebook "Instant Games" as a Platform

Facebook *Instant Games* is still a relatively fresh platform – *EverWing* itself only officially launched on 29th November 2016, which is when *Instant Games* began seeing use. It boasts many advantages and disadvantages to other similar apps such as *Google Play Store* and *Apple's App Store*.

Figure 15: Matchmaking in EverWing

There is no need to download games using *Instant Games*. Rather, the way it works is very reminiscent of *Miniclip* and *Kongregate* games, where games are played through a website, meaning that data is streamed to the device rather than having to download all the files. This makes the platform incredibly powerful, as oftentimes people are left trying to manage their storage space when having many mobile games to play. Instead, players can easily try new games without the concern of needing to delete apps temporarily to make space.

With Messenger being available on browser, *EverWing* supports play with PC players as well. Not only that, it comes to no surprise that cross-platform is possible with other users as well – iOS and Android alike. This feature is most notable for users who prefer to play games on the desktop platform, who can still play with friends on the go.

The first *Instant Games* feature to appear when playing *EverWing* is the use of Facebook to create game lobbies for *Boss Raids*. With Facebook being such a large platform, and alongside the cross-platform compatibility, it makes it easier to find other people to play with and for new players to join the game, making longevity less of an issue.

The second most prominent feature is the use of Facebook's already established *Facebook Messenger*. Where games often use push-notifications, players can instead receive game-related information via *Messenger*.

The implications of using a social media platform as communication can immediately frame how people receive game-related messages. At the very least, empirically, they were far less intrusive and felt more personal, easing the negative impact that can sometimes occur with games when push-notifications can feel like spam.

In addition, its use in *Boss Raids* is rather intuitive – sending damage notifications and kill confirmations through *Messenger*, which is shared with a group chat, allows people to comment on other people's results as well. Overall, it makes it easier for people to bridge the wall that is often found when talking to strangers – such is the impact of social media in this modern age. It would be an oversight to not take advantage of these features when using this platform.
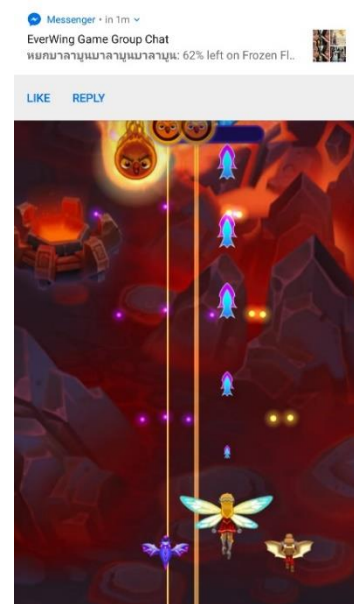

Figure 16: Damage notification from other players in the same Boss Raid

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