Should game and app developers provide medical advice? Why/why not. Can health apps give accurate calorie recommendations?

Developers should feel free to provide “medical advice” within the apps and games they create. This is a very interesting topic of discussion and I originally took the opposite standing. So, what changed my mind? Developers have the right to exercise their freedom of speech, sometimes called the “freedom of expression.” Perhaps the same can be said for any product, regardless of how truthful or erroneous the content is.

The growing popularity of handheld devices has brought with it the evolution of “apps”, or the programs which run on these devices. As programming tools have become more feature rich, user-friendly, and available, more and more developers are able to create and market their apps. Just as a supermarket may sell different brands of the same product, most app stores sponsor several apps which advertise the same features. Each app is different, some better than others. The app developer has the freedom to advertise, and though unethical, they may use lies and deceit to lure customers into using their product. The end-user has the freedom to use, or not use, the product.

One of the topic’s main counter-arguments is that an app sponsoring erroneous information, such as medical advice, could potentially cause serious harm, maybe even death, to the end-user. There have been instances in our history where freedom of speech has been regulated to better protect society. As an example, cigarette ads were banned from being aired on television and radio back in 1970. The overwhelming influence of TV and radio along with the dangers of tobacco were recognized and put into check. I personally see this as a good thing. So, if apps are as influential as TV and radio, and erroneous medical advice is dangerous like cigarettes, why shouldn’t regulations be set into place on applications providing medical advice? There is! The checks come in the forms of app store advertising, user reviews, and user rating. Another regulation that could be put into place might be a type of FDA approval. The Food and Drug Administration give their approval upon certain products they deem safe, tested, and proven for their intended use. Likewise, medical apps could be given a seal of approval which could aid users in their decision of which apps they decide to download.

What can be said to the accuracy of apps which provide medical advice? Can a fitness app give accurate calorie recommendations? The keyword here is accurate. Even the best medical apps are only developed with a generic user in mind. As we don’t all come out of the same generic cookie-cutter, we likewise shouldn’t expect cookie-cutter medical advice to be accurate for everyone. Though technology has greatly advanced, and continues to do so, there is no substitute for seeing a health professional in person.

Resources:

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Food_and_Drug_Administration#The_1906_Pure_Food_and_Drug_Act_and_creation_of_the_FDA>
2. <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/04/01/congress-bans-airing-cigarette-ads-april-1-1970-489882>
3. <https://www.bmj.com/content/347/bmj.f5211.full>
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_speech>
5. [www.healthline.com/nutrition/5-best-calorie-counters](http://www.healthline.com/nutrition/5-best-calorie-counters)

