

Characteristics, Limitations, and Potential of Advergames

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INTRODUCTION

Advergames can be defined as online games that incorporate marketing content. Initially, many companies have placed their brands or logos in the virtual environment of computer games launched by specialised gaming firms. However, this form of advergaming is rather static and ineffective, since the player is concentrated on the task required by the game and might not acknowledge the brand image displayed in the background. This limitation has encouraged the firms to create their own advergames, which are developed around a theme or a character directly related with their products and/or brands. In order to ensure a large diffusion of these games, they were made freely available on the Internet. The facilities offered by the Internet platform have increased the interactiveness of the game, and have added a **viral marketing** dimension.

Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence. The use of advergames corresponds well to a strategy of viral marketing, which incorporates the following principles:

1. Give away products or services
2. Provide for effortless transfer to others of these products/services
3. Scale easily from a small to a very large audience
4. Exploit common customer motivations and behaviours
5. Utilise existing communication networks to transfer the products/services, or messages about them
6. Take advantage of others' resources (existing users/customers)

The interest in advergames has substantially increased in the last 5 years because of its perceived advantages (FreshGames, 2002; WebResource, 2004):

- Low-cost marketing in comparison with the traditional advertising channels, such as TV and radio
- A captured audience that can transmit valuable personal information about its demographic profile, behaviour, needs, attitudes, and preferences
- Customer retention: the average time spent in an advergame is 7 to 30 minutes, which cannot be reached in the case of a classical TV advertisement
- Viral marketing: 81% of the players will e-mail their friends to try a good game

All these data demonstrate the huge potential of advergames (Rodgers, 2004). However, despite the hype created by this new advertising method, most of the information describing or debating advergames is professionally-oriented, often written in an advertising style (DeCollibus, 2002; Hartsock, 2004; Intrapromote, 2004). Very few academic studies have been initiated to investigate the characteristics of advergames, and their influence on consumers' perceptions and behaviour (Hernandez, Chapa, Minor, Maldonado, & Barranzuela, 2004; Nelson, 2002).

This article attempts to identify, based on the existent professional literature, the specific characteristics of an efficient advergame, and to verify the existence of these characteristics in 70 advergames that are active online.

BACKGROUND

Studies conducted in the U.S. have discovered that games are extremely popular among all categories of online users. A study conducted by Jupiter Media found that in December 2003, 84.6 million people visited online gaming sites (D5 Games, 2004). This number is projected to reach 104 million by 2007.

The preconception that only kids or teenagers are interested in interactive games is contradicted by the following findings: in the U.S., 66% of the most frequent game players are over 18 years old, and 40% of them over 35 years old, with the average age of a player being 28 years old (D5 Games, 2004).

Another study conducted between December 2003 and January 2004 in the U.S., has identified women over 40 years old as a major segment interested in on-line gaming (Arkadium, 2004). Female game-players over 40 spend the most hours per week playing games (9.1 hours or 41% of their online time in comparison with only 6.1 hours per week, or 26% of online time for men). These women were also more likely to play online games every day than men or teens of either gender.

The reasons for playing online games vary depending on the gender. The main reason of women is to relieve or eliminate stress, while the men are mainly attracted by the competitive factor of Internet gaming. The women prefer word and puzzle games, while men are more interested in sport, combat, or casino games (Arkadium, 2004).

The geographical location of the players seems to make a difference in terms of the type of game preferred and the reasons for playing (Arkadium, 2004). In Atlanta the main reason identified was the elimination of stress, in Dallas people play to alleviate boredom, in San Francisco the players are enjoying the competition, and in Washington D.C. they play online in order to get trained for real casino gambling.

The placement of products or brand names in movies or TV shows is a relatively old technique, but the studies regarding their influence on consumer perceptions and behaviour are inconclusive (Gould, Pola, & Grabner-Krauter, 2000; Russell, 2002). AdvergAMES present a few distinct characteristics that can eventually enhance their marketing effect:

- AdvergAMES are selected by the player and are not forced upon an unwilling viewer;
- The player interacts with advergAMES, adopting an active stance, in comparison with the passive attitude of the TV audience; and
- AdvergAMES incite the players to share the gaming experience with their friends or family.

From a marketing point of view, advergAMES attempt to capture the attention of players, and then to

transmit to them, in an indirect way, suggestions that aim to modify their perceptions regarding an enterprise, brand, or product. The psychological fundament of this process is the inducement and the use of the '**state of flow**.' This concept is used by psychologists to describe a mental state in which the attention is highly concentrated on a specific process, the environmental information is screened out, and the person experiences a harmonious flow of its present experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The state of flow is known to create a state of well being, as well as increased perception and learning capacity. This state of flow can be induced by any activity that is very interesting for a person: watching a movie, reading a book, or playing a game. In fact, the ludic activity is considered as one of the best inducers of the flow state for children, and often also for adults.

The interaction with Internet applications can also induce the state of flow in specific circumstances (King, 2003); the most successful Web sites offering interactive experiences, and not just content. The state of flow can be created online if the following essential conditions are combined: **user motivation**, **user telepresence**, and **interactivity** of the Internet application. On the other hand, the existence and the maintenance of the state of flow is a dynamic process that depends on the relation between the capabilities of the user—or player in the case of an advergAME—and the level of difficulty proposed by the game. Figure 1 demonstrates the three possible scenarios of the interaction between an Internet user and an advergAME.

Once induced, the maintenance of the state of flow requires a constantly evolving challenge for the player, because the player's level of capability is likely to improve after playing the game a few times. This raises the problem of including in the advergAME a progressive level of difficulty that can represent a dynamic challenge for players

If the features of the game are interesting enough and the playing experience provides satisfaction, the player will be inclined to send information about the available game to friends or relatives, participating directly to the spread of the advergAMES campaign. This action can be reinforced by creating complex games that require multiple participants.

As any other marketing communication tools, the advergAME characteristics will have to correspond to (1) the personality of the advertised brand, (2) the profile of the targeted audience, (3) the characteristics of the

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