Chapter XXI
Online Games as Powerful Food Advertising to Children

Richard T. Cole
Michigan State University, USA

Elizabeth Taylor Quilliam
Michigan State University, USA

ABSTRACT

As Internet marketing has evolved, customized online games created to promote specific brands or products have been embraced by food marketers. At the same time that these advergames, a hybrid of entertainment and advertising, have emerged, childhood obesity in the United States has reached what some consider epidemic proportions. Advertising to children is frequently implicated as contributing to children's poor dietary choices, and ultimately to childhood obesity and its attendant medical risks. In this chapter, we describe the nature of advergames, consider their effectiveness as teaching tools and advertisements, and suggest public policy issues related to the continued use of advergames to promote non-nutritious foods to children.

INTRODUCTION

Online games, designed by food marketers, have emerged as a source of free entertainment for young children. But they need to be seen as much within their context as a new tool for advertising to children as they are for their entertainment value. Game designers may be in the entertainment business, but their clients are not. Food manufacturers and marketers are making available children's advergames, customized online games embedded with food brands, products, and brand mascots, because they perceive them to be a new tool for encouraging the purchase and consumption of their products. In the process, they are increasingly vulnerable to the charge that this online marketing to children is contributing to childhood obesity.

Obesity in children, and its resulting consequence to individuals, their families, and society in general, is a topic of international concern. For children born in the United States since 2000, the lifetime risk of diabetes has been estimated at 40% for boys and 30% for girls—and that is if the rate of obesity remains at its current level. Besides physical health problems associated with obesity, children are likely to develop a variety of psychosocial problems related to being obese in a society that stigmatizes this condition (Koplan, Liverman, & Kraak, 2005).

Numerous researchers in several disciplines have documented the degree to which advertising to children contributes to eating habits. This chapter includes reference to a study conducted at Michigan State University in the summer of 2006 (Lee, Choi, Quilliam, & Cole, 2007) that inventoried free online advergames and identified marketers using these games, and videos for purchase or rent, for promoting their brands and products to children. The study found what even the most casual surfer of food marketing Web sites would find. There *are* a large number of free games that promote food to children.

Taking the long view, the chapter can be seen as an early stage of suggesting the power of a new online "technology" that could become an effective teaching tool. On the other hand, what is most disconcerting is the degree to which this new technology may be responsible for shaping maladaptive food-eating behavior of young children. A contrasting interpretation would suggest how, if redeployed, this technology could be transformed into a contributor to positive eating habits. The problem may not be with the online games, but rather with how these games are being used to produce the next generation of fatter people. Video games are being used to encourage unhealthy eating habits—behaviors that promote abnormally high intake of non-nutritious foods and can result in a shortened lifetime of obesity.

In some respects, the emergence of video and online games as a major influencer of children's behavior should come as no surprise. A half-century ago, renowned psychologist B.F. Skinner (1958) predicted the development of new "teaching machines" and demonstrated how, in the appropriate paradigms, these machines would be used to dramatically accelerate educational processes. Skinner (1980) was roundly criticized by "large universities and school systems." It is a "matter of finances, organization, logistics of supply, with almost no attention to what is happening as the student learns. The programmed text and the teaching machine go back to the individual, and are damned for 'neglecting individuality'" (p. 97).

Skinner's colleague James Holland (1966) opined that the attention to the technology behind the nascent teaching machines was obscuring the most important element of the debate. "Enough of machines—they should not be allowed to obscure the truly important feature of the new technology, namely, the application of methods for behavioral control. We need to say no more about the well-known principle of immediate reinforcement. Behavior is learned only when it is emitted and reinforced. While working with a machine, the student necessarily emits appropriate behavior, and this behavior is usually reinforced…" (pp. 77-78).

BACKGROUND: HISTORICAL INTEREST IN ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN

Researchers have long studied the effects of advertising on children and expressed concern about the degree to which evidence confirmed that childhood eating habits are being shaped by the commercials children watch.

The degree to which exposure to advertising stimulates the consumption of sugared cereal has been known for three decades. Scammon and Christopher (1981) extended earlier research by Atkin (1976) in finding that advertising to chil-

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