Chapter 8.12
Games and Advertisement:
Beyond Banners and Billboards

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ABSTRACT

The use of digital games for the promotion of goods and services is becoming more popular with the maturing and penetration of the medium. This chapter analyzes the use of advertisement in games and seeks to answer in which way brands are integrated in interactive play. The branding of virtual worlds offers a completely new range of opportunities for advertisers to create a web of brands, and it is the usage of marketing through games that differs considerably. This chapter offers a categorization of advergames and will address the use of advergames from a developmental perspective, differing between commercial games with in-game advertisement and dedicated advergames. Where TV commercials, print ads, and the World Wide Web rely on representation for the conveying of their message, advergames are able to add the extra dimension of simulation as a mode of representation, resulting in various interesting game designs.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing sociocultural and economic importance of digital games not only caught the attention of politicians, academics, and journalists but advertisers as well. Modern day gamers complement their use of the television screen with playing games, and use their PCs for Web browsing and buying books online as well as gaming. Marketers may have found their way around in the cinema and the television set; but the virtual world has yet to be fully explored. Slowly but steadily, the adaptive character of advertisement is spilling over to digital games. Besides money earned from the original purchase and subscriptions another revenue stream may become equally important for game publishers and developers. Why have digital games become such an interesting medium for advertisers? And in which way are brands integrated in interactive play? This chapter seeks an answer to both questions.

Digital play on its part can no longer be seen as child's play. The question is, if games ever have been child's play. Due to the graphic nature, but also the complexity and sophistication of many contemporary PC games, children are not by default the primary target group of game publishers. As stated elsewhere in this volume, the average age of a gamer is not 13, not even 20, but 29, while 59% percent of the players are male. A significant number (43%) of all of all U.S. *gamers* play online and the gender breakdown of online players is similar to the overall demographics (ESA, 2004). And when gamers do play, they take their time. They have to, as contemporary console games for the big three—Xbox, PlayStation 2, and GameCube—as well as the majority of PC games, allow gamers to invest dozens of hours of their free time.

Single-player, narrative-driven role playing games such as the *Final Fantasy* series can take hours to complete, more open ended simulation games such as *The Sims* series or the *Rollercoaster Tycoon* series can grip the short attention span of Generation Y even longer, and online multi-player games can in theory be played indefinitely, for those considering playing games as an essential part of their lives. For the "hardcore" gamers, gaming is part of their lifestyle. The complex social worlds online multi-player games have become, makes playing such games even more rewarding from a sociocultural perspective, as discussed by Sal Humphreys elsewhere in this volume (Chapter IV). Spending 5 hours a day—on average—playing *Counter-Strike* with friends or clan mates, or playing 6 hours a day—role playing as a level 60 Night Elf Rogue in *World of Warcraft* with guild mates—is not an uncommon activity at all.

The *Online Games White Paper 2003* by the International Game Developers Association (2003) estimates the U.S. market size of PC CD-based online games at less than 5 million gamers, and the PC Web-based category at 50 million (or more) gamers. The growing broadband penetration in the United States, Europe, and parts of Asia proves to be invaluable for the distribution of all sorts of digital content, and games are no exception to these advancements. As game technology gets cheaper and more pervasive, the group of online PC gamers is projected to steadily grow over the coming years. The introduction of massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) such as *World of Warcraft,* showed the remarkable smooth distribution of a subscription-based game among millions. Only a month after the games' introduction on the Chinese market, the Warcraft population increased with 1 million new gamers, surpassing the 4 million player limit worldwide (Schiesel, 2005). *Counter-Strike* and *Counter-Strike: Source*, the most played, online *first-person-shooter games*, facilitate online game play for 2.4 million players every month.[1]

As such, digital games are arguably the most influential product of contemporary computer technology. Many aspects of the omnipresent and growing cyber culture are surfacing in this new form of digital amusement and profound questions regarding the complex interplay of marketing, technology, and culture are yet to be addressed. Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) gave their take on the interaction among game technology, game culture, and marketing and argue that game culture has become part of "a web of synergistic advertising, branding and licensing practices spreading through contemporary popular culture" (p. 21). The commodification of digital play is commonplace and games as "the ideal commodity in the post-Fordist society" are natural inhabitants of this new high-technology capitalistic society. The post-Fordist society, also dubbed "post-industrial capitalism" and "information capitalism," signals "changes in the workplace, in patterns of consumption, in media of communication and in the role of government" (Kline et al., p. 64). It is a move towards perpetual innovation, from material to experiential commodities and towards the development of media, information, and digitization. This society seems to welcome the synergy of advertisement and games with arms wide open.