Information Communication Technologies and Emerging Business Strategies

Shenja van der Graaf, LSE, UK

IDEA GROUP PUBLISHING
Hershey • London • Melbourne • Singapore

Information Communication Technologies and Emerging Business Strategies

Table of Contents

Section II: Commerce, Community, and Consumer-Generated Content

Section III: Creative Industries

Chapter VI

Games and Advertisement:
Beyond Banners and Billboards

David B. Nieborg, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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.

The "eyeball" time of gamers is worth billions of dollars. Game technology enables developers to develop true-to-life simulations and as a result games steadily move outside their role of entertainment technology. Games are increasingly used for education, testing of (military) technology, and propaganda. Games have become more than just mere entertainment (Nieborg, 2004, 2005). And because of the interactive and configurative nature of game technology, advertisement in games can go far beyond static in-game banners, posters, and billboards.

Consider the horrifying First Person Shooter game *Doom 3.* The in-game personal digital assistant (PDA) of the player provides vital clues as how to navigate through the Mars base where the main character is trapped. During the game, dozens of e-mail messages become available on the PDA, some of which praise the fictive company Martian Buddy—"the latest interstellar marketing

venture." (Martian B uddy, n.d.) As it turns out, investigative players, such as the author of this chapter, find out that surfing to martianbuddy.com provides a code to unlock a weapons locker. With an unforeseen wink to the subject matter at hand, the Web site explains its purpose: "Martian Buddy represents the best in direct marketing advertisements." (Martian B uddy, n.d.) The game developers are not far from the truth—the semi-annoying spam e-mails evidently did their work as the Martian Buddy Web site had more than 470,000 unique visits within 3 weeks after the release of the game. Naturally, the imaginary Martian Buddy brand is easily replaced by a global brand of choice.

The example of the fake Martian Buddy brand helps to pinpoint several essential elements in discussing games and advertising. The starting point of any analysis on games should always be the emphasis on its ludological nature, as games are systems "in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 80). Static in-game advertising may seem like a viable way to market a product or service, and in many ways it is, but games as rule-bound, interactive texts favor more than just an interpretive reading practice. Gaming is at the same time a configurative practice, combining "ends, means, rules, equipment and manipulative actions" (Eskelinen, 2001). The PDA in *Doom 3* is not merely encountered during a play session, it is operated by the player and a player cannot progress without using the device. Playing games involves engaging with the game's simulation model in a creative fashion. In this way, the process of "reconfiguration," creatively repurposing the rules of a game, could complement configurative gaming practices (Raessens, 2005, p.380). It is my belief that the forward leaning (inter)active nature of game play, whether or not they enable a reconfigurative mode of participatory media culture, should always be considered by those including marketing messages in digital play.

Today, the implementation of branded game designs takes various forms and shapes. In the following section the distinction between different sorts of advergames will be fleshed out after which a detailed case study of the PC game *America's Army*, will focus on the most elaborate form of advergaming, as it is wholly designed as a branded game experience.

Understanding Advergames

The number as well as the sophistication and implementation of game-based advertisement (or advergames) are becoming more popular with the maturing and penetration of the medium. An advergame could be defined as the integration of advertising messages in an online game and is increasingly used as an integral

part of Internet marketing and advertising strategies to promote goods and services to potential consumers (Buckner, Fang, & Qiao, 2002). Chen and Ringel (2001) distinguish three ways in which messages can be incorporated in games. The first is associative advergaming, that is, driving brand awareness "by associating the product with the lifestyle or activity featured in the game" (p.3), the second illustrative advergaming, in this way the product is heavily featured in the game, and a third way is demonstrative advergaming, featuring "the product or brand name in incidental ways" (p. 4). In addition, advergames can also serve as online tracking tools. By both active and passive data gathering, advertisers can learn from customers and collect all sorts of demographic data, e-mail addresses, and data on online behavior. The topology of Chen and Ringel offers a starting point to discuss the use of games for marketing purposes. But as they ignore the interactive nature of games, a different categorization will be proposed to deepen the understanding of both games and advertisement.

As the various examples in this chapter will make clear, game technology enables developers to incorporate the modes discussed by Chen and Ringel (2001) in more than one way in a single game. This chapter offers a different categorization of advergames and will address the use of advergames from a developmental perspective. There are considerable differences between simple tennis games featuring a company's logo and slogan, a high-profile commercial release developed for profit showing in-game ads, and state-of-the-art simulations offering immersive marketing experiences. In this chapter two main categories of advergames are proposed based on the rationale of a game, that is, advertisement in commercial games, hereafter *in-game advertisement*, versus *dedicated advergames*. The former category consists of commercially developed games, aimed to sell as many units as possible to profit both the developers and publisher. The latter category games are solely made to advertise. Both categories are inhabited by subcategories. These subcategories focus on the formal aspects of games, distinguishing between non-game-play integrated advertisement (logo's, slogans, banners, and billboards) versus game-play integrated advertisement. This second subcategory consists of advertisement integrated into the game's ruleset.

Advertisement in Commercial Games

The first category of games featuring in-game ads holds games containing some sort of brand placement. Similar to movies and television series, advertisers can insert praise for their goods in a commercial game in two ways. On the one hand, developers can choose to insert static advertisement, similar to a banner on a

Web site or a billboard on the background in a movie or television series. The exploratory research of Chaney, Lin, and Chaney (2004) found that first-person-shooter players, regardless of their experience with the genre, did recall encountering static advertisement in the form of billboards during game play, but did not recall a brand's name 15 minutes after. In this particular study, gamers were focused on playing the game, rather than paying attention to the (branded) environment.

On the other hand, developers can harness the interactive nature of games and blend an advertisement message into the game play. The moving picture equivalent of game-play integrated advertisement would be the cars of James Bond—for example, the BMW Z8 or the Aston Martin V12 Vanquish. Bond's use of his specially prepared and luxurious cars, bear direct relevance to the movie's plot. After all, a master spy needs a fast and powerful car to impress his opponents or in order to escape after a successful mission. It should be noted that the distinction between game play and non-game-play integrated ads is to a certain extent a theoretical one, many games have incorporated both mechanisms.

Let us now take a closer look as to how the two forms of in-game advertisement function in today's for-profit games. The popular and much debated game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is an interesting example in this respect. Albeit the game has no real world in-game advertisement, it could be regarded as a proof of concept as to how to use interactive play for marketing purposes. As it happens, the game does show a great range of fake advertisement—ranging from promiscuous sex jokes to nods at previous games in the franchise. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is available for the PlayStation 2, Xbox, and the PC and is best described as an urban simulation game. The player navigates the Afro-American avatar Carl "CJ" Johnson through the state of San Andreas, modeled after the state of California. At the beginning of the game CJ arrives at his mother's home in the city of Los Santos, where he meets his old "homies" and the games' mission structure sets off. The player can freely explore the enormous virtual world of San Andreas by foot or by using various vehicles, for example, trains, planes, automobiles, golf carts, and forklifts.

The game space is modeled after three real world cities—Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and San Francisco with similar architecture and atmosphere. Because of its plentiful real world references, there are numerous opportunities to advertise various goods or services. It is likely that the controversial character of the game made many advertisers hesitant to put up a signpost in San Andreas. The inclusion of a brand without prior consent can lead to difficulties as shown in the PlayStation 2 game *The Getaway*. This game contains 50 square kilometers of virtual London where gamers have to fulfill all sorts of driving missions. The game pictured a scene where a criminal was dressed up as a British Telecom technician, after which British Telecom protested, resulting in the subsequent

removal of the "advertisement" in future versions.

The easiest way to advertise goods in *San Andreas* is through the use of billboards alongside the road—a clear form of non-game-play integrated advertisement. To achieve missions in the game, players have to cover great amounts of terrain and road signs, and billboards are already a natural part of the game space. However, gamers do not have to interact with the billboards in any way. For instance, the billboards do not offer any secret codes to unlock doors. An opportunity to add game-play integrated advertising would be branding clothing of the main character. It is possible to completely customize the appearance of CJ, ranging from various outfits, (e.g., police uniforms, country or medic clothes) to watches and sun glasses. As new clothes make CJ look "cool" and improve his "appearance," it also positively influences his "respect" and thus clothes become integrated into the overall game play. Designers could go as far as to let the computer-controlled characters make positive remarks about certain brands—encouraging a certain outfit.

Similarly, the game features various unbranded cars which will take the player to the gym to build muscles or to one of the fast food restaurants, such as Cluckin' Bell Happy Chicken (a Taco Bell/KFC parody) where the player can eat a Cluckin' Big Meal and have a glass of Sprunk (a parody of the soft drink Sprite). Nelson (2002) found that when brands are integrated into the game play: "for example, the car selection in a racing game—short term recall is enhanced" (p. 89). And while driving their randomly picked cars, the players of *San Andreas* can visit Well Stacked Pizza Co. or Burger Shot. Similar to the fake ads of Martian Buddy in *Doom 3*, Cluckin' Bell has a Web site at cluckinbellhap pychicken.com, including the Cluckin' Bell Happy Chicken theme song and a list of the menus. Despite these various marketing opportunities, all these brands still are self-referential and they are part of the appeal of the game series—that is, the fake brands consist of typical *Grand Theft Auto* humor.

The games' soundtrack is one of the few in-game real world references in *Grand Theft Auto*. The moment the player gets into a (stolen) car, he can opt for one of the nine radio stations, ranging from a modern rock station to a country channel. A month after the release of the PlayStation 2 version of the game, an 8-CD, stand-alone version of the soundtrack box set hit the market, featuring all in-game radio stations. The box is clearly primarily meant as a collector's item rather than a marketing opportunity. Games do however prove to be a valuable medium to market (new) music or bands. Rapper Snoop Dog for example, let his single *Riders on the Storm* debut in the race game *Need For Speed Underground 2*. The *Need For Speed Underground 2* soundtrack is part of the EA TRAX initiative. The game industry's biggest publisher Electronic Arts (EA) teamed up with several record companies and started TRAX to promote new music in their sports games:

Record labels partner with EA because they understand videogames are a powerful channel for exposing new music to a large core of young opinion leaders. Record companies also realize the valuable demographics of gaming; its "cool" factor; the buzz and the size of the interactive entertainment industry have put videogames at the center of mainstream entertainment.[2]

In this way gamers might find their way to the latest hits via their games, rather than via their peers, p2p software, or the radio. In the same way that publishers put out press releases for movies and games, they put out independent press releases for a games' soundtrack.

For a long time, games have been part of the complex intertextual web of popular culture (cf. Marshall, 2002). Initial research points to the direction that gamers do not object to the use of in-game advertisement, arguing that (fake) advertisement makes the game space more "real" (Hernandez, Chapa, Minor, Maldonado, & Barranzuela, 2004; Molesworth, 2003; Nelson, 2002; Nelson, Keum, & Yaros, 2004;), whether this (perceived) additional realism is effective has yet to be seen (cf. Chaney et al., 2004). An expressive example of the "need" for advertisement and the idea it increases a virtual world's authenticity, is a free downloadable user-made modification (*mod*) redecorating the virtual landscape of *Grand Theft Auto III*. The mod, ironically dubbed *RealGTA3* (or *RGTA*), is assembled and partly developed by a Czech modder, and contains a collection of many *Grand Theft Auto 3* modifications "trying to make GTA3 more realistic by adding real cars, buildings or advertisements all over Liberty City."[3] The mod could as well be named the best of international brands mod with in-game advertisement for McDonalds, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, IKEA, Media Market, Pizza Hut, and the inevitable Czech beer brand Pilsner Urquell. The long list of mod developers from all over the world who contributed to *RGTA* suggests the willingness of amateur software developers to take part in the voluntarily act of branding virtual worlds.

From Banners to Power-Ups

The willingness to consume, to experience, or even to co-develop advertisement is shown in a number of today's persistent MMOGs, such as *There* and *Second Life*. These worlds as well show a mixture of both game-play and non-game-play integrated in-game advertising. In the virtual playgrounds, such the one of *There*, users are able to produce their own (noncorporate) brands and use the same branding techniques as clothing companies to market their goods. With the use

of time, money, and technical skill, users are able to rival with corporate branded goods in regards of reputation within the virtual world (Book, 2004). Advertisement in MMOGs shows the active appropriation of brands used in the social and economic interests of gamers.

Some players actively choose to incorporate brands into their game experience to construct their online personae. In this way, the game world becomes an index of consumers rather than products, signifying consumers as cultural entities (Pennington, 2001). By a carefully constructed web of brands, consumers can market themselves within chaotic online worlds deprived of the necessary signifiers to construct one's identity. That a personality can be defined by naming a number of brands shows the former Web site Branddating.nl. Here visitors associated themselves with several brands to distinguish themselves from other daters, in addition with their gender, age, and place of residence. Research into MMOGs suggests that younger age groups have a more positive attitude towards advertisement and branding in virtual worlds than adolescents and adults (Book, 2004). This fits with the demographics from the Branddating.nl Web site where a majority of the daters were fairly young as well.

As said, the technological and innovative character of game technology can open up a window of opportunity for innovative and daring marketers. The tactical first-person–shooter game *SWAT 4* introduced customized in-game ads in their first (mandatory) patch. The marketing firm Massive Incorporated specializes in technology-linking ads with specific game audiences and already has some major game publishers among their clientele. When gamers play *SWAT 4* they will randomly encounter in-game ads such as Coca-Cola or Gamefly.com posters and data is sent back to the Massive Incorporated ad servers detailing which ads are looked at by gamers and for how long. In this way the advertisers can specifically target online gamers with ads of their taste, thereby changing static, hard coded, in-game product placement into truly interactive dynamic advertisement, although still not game-play integrated. It is even possible, as is done in the MMOG *Anarchy Online*, to include full-motion video and audio ads.

Soft drink company Red Bull has integrated its product in the platform game *Worms 3D* where it serves as a power-up. A clever integration, oddly shaped power-ups with ever weirder results are part of all games in the Worms series. In the game a can of Red Bull serves as a powerful simulation of the Red Bull slogan "Red Bull gives you wings." In a similar way game publisher Ubisoft and Sony Ericsson Mobile Communications made a deal to include the Sony Ericsson P900 and the T637 camera phone in the stealth game *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow*. The phones are integrated in the game play, similar to *Doom 3*'s PDA, as gamers have to use the mobile phone to receive messages from headquarters and to locate their position. And during hour-long single player game sessions, gamers are continually exposed to Sony Ericsson's technology

up to a point where they have to make a photo of an opponent with the T637 camera phone.

Big corporations, such as McDonalds, already invest in branding online worlds. In *The Sims Online* users can purchase a McDonald's food kiosk, an element deliberately integrated into the game play. Book (2004, p. 13) demonstrates that the McDonald's food kiosks "function more as billboards than anything, they do not live up to their interactive potential." Pointing out that game-play integrated advertisement is not necessarily more successful than the non-game-play integrated subcategory. While both modes of in-game advertisement may become more ubiquitous, the sociocultural, political-economic, and technological characteristics of digital play facilitate yet another form of commodified game play, games focused on one product or service; the dedicated advergame.

Dedicated Advergames

The category of dedicated advergames inhabits a wide array of games, ranging from simple Internet advergames, mostly using Macromedia Flash technology, to sophisticated online worlds. A distinction can be made between three subcategories of dedicated advergames. First, there consists a wide range of singular dedicated advergames. Secondly, there are transferal dedicated advergames, and thirdly there is the subcategory of experiential dedicated advergames.

The first subcategory of simple nonpersistent advergames are probably the widest employed subcategory of dedicated advergames, for its low costs and simple development cycle. The notion of singularity derives from the games' focus on single-style game play. A singular advergame only has one core game-play element, such as games focusing on motor skills or (e.g., a race game), problem solving (e.g., a puzzle game). Many of these games are modeled on the classic games of yesteryear, such as *Pacman* or *Tetris*. A puzzle game with *Tetris*-style game play could be turned into a dedicated advergame by making it appear on a specific Web site in a pop-up window. Gamers who are interested can play the game on the spot or sometimes download it to play on a moment of choice. Other advergames offer a new but familiar design. Car manufacturer Jaguar promoted their new S-type R model with a Flash game offering an online Urban Golf course.[4] The car in the back of the game had nothing to do with the actual game play. A player has to finish a Golf course in central London and the hole is replaced by a red postbox. Players who supply their e-mail address can win golf lessons from a pro.

These simple advergames arguably lack the game play to engender immersive play and are primarily used to raise brand awareness and direct visitors to the various Web sites for more information. The games have their own Web sites or may pop up when visiting a random Web site and cannot be saved to one's computer, thus the game becomes a random encounter and in many cases the nonpersistent achievements—that is, points—do not encourage gamers to play the game again. Making the game available off-line, on the other hand, can aid the viral distribution of a game and thus its marketing message. In the Jaguar advergame example, players may send the Web site's URL to their "mates" via the Web site and can compete to beat the top scores. The International Game Developers Association (IGDA) in their *Online Games Whitepaper* promote these kinds of advergames as "a powerful and effective tool for delivering branding and advertising messages" as these games tend to be "sticky," nonintrusive and able to generate various demographic data of consumers (2003, p. 35). As said, small PC Web-based advergames can tap into a large group of 50 million U.S. gamers, whereas PC CD-based games, such as *The Sims* or *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3*, have a much smaller potential market of less than 5 million U.S. consumers.

A more sophisticated form of dedicated advergaming are games offering a transferring experience, or what Chen and Ringel (2001, p. 3) would call "associative advergaming." Here brand awareness is raised through lifestyle association. The subcategory of transferal advergames may also feature the advertised product and thus can be seen as an illustrative advergame—offering as much in-game product exposure as possible. The sole intent of these kinds of advergames is to put users into contact with its brand and harness a positive game experience within a controlled and branded (persistent) online world. The games in this subcategory may or may not contain any links to external Web sites of the advertised service or product and does not enable gamers to actually experience a particular product or service.

A successful example, in terms of the amount of visitors and time spent on the Web site is the online world of *Coke Music*, developed by order of Coca-Cola.[5] *Coke Music* has all the elements of an MMOG and contains all kinds of simple social activities, which can be very time consuming, ranging from chat to the production of simple music compositions. The technology is completely Web based and gamers can only play online. Established in 2002, this Web site counted "over a million views a day, the number of new visitors increases monthly with 200,000, and people spend about 25 minutes on the site" (Van der Graaf, 2004). Additional gain for Coca-Cola is added through putting out surveys to collect various gamer data. The Coca-Cola brand is omnipresent and many ad campaigns in other media slip into *Coke Music*—and vice versa.

The example of the branded world of *Coke Music* shows how existing game genres can be repurposed to fit the advertisers need. Built upon the template of the commercial game/chat environment of *Habbo Hotel*, Coca-Cola successfully appropriated the game mechanics of a proven game concept and offers a free branded alternative. *Habbo Hotel*, developed by the Finnish company Sulake Labs, is a moderated, Web-based chat environment with many franchises all over the world. It is a huge success among young children and has 3 million unique users visiting virtual hotels within 16 countries on four continents. As both *Habbo Hotel* and *Coke Music* are free games, the choice between both games may be somewhat arbitrary and has a social dimension. In a way Coca-Cola's virtual world is more than a game; it is a social structure:

(...) based on the constant negotiation of cliques, inner circles, in-crowds and social drama that is enacted throughout a variety of settings. The corporate sponsor is just as likely to be completely ignored in the pursuit of these activities, especially when more powerful metaphors can be found (Book, 2004, p. 21).

This observation shows that the complexity or sophistication of an advergame does not equal (instant) success for the advertised product or service. There is always such a thing as good game design. A brand may be cleverly integrated into the game play or to put in the words of Hernandez et al. (2004) a brand may be congruent and thus less intrusive, creating meaningful play is an art in itself (cf. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Young gamers may freely wander through the branded world of *Coke Music*, whether or not they will associate their own lifestyle with the soft drink's brand is a question certainly worth further analysis. Next, the third subcategory of dedicated advergames will be discussed— experiential advergames.

Experimental Marketing

Games add the representational mode of simulation to the marketing mix. In games, brands can be shown repeatedly and through carefully branded simulations, games enable consumers to "transfer meaning to themselves, defining themselves as cultural entities" (Pennington, 2001, p. 50). But the gift of interactivity adds a significant "bonus level," through game-play products or services can be experienced. The intangible and arbitrary associations evoked by brands as symbols, become tangible, allowing gamers to experience what it is like to drive a car or being a soldier by immersing themselves into carefully

constructed virtual simulations. Economists Pine and Gilmore (1999) offer a useful concept to understand this new marketing paradigm: "Cyberspace is a great place for escapist experiences" (p. 34) and the game can stage such memorable experiences, situating itself within existing community structures and design conventions in order to offer a "show." This shift is in line with the notion of "the experience economy," where the former offerings of the commodity economy are replaced by an economy relying on staging memorable and personal experiences.

The branding of virtual worlds offers a complete new range of opportunities for advertisers to create a web of brands. Brands get their meaning partly through opposition (Pennington, 2001) and the previous example of *RealGTA* shows the low technical, social, and virtual barriers of the branding of virtual worlds. Major global brands such as Microsoft, IBM, General Electric, and Intel do not have the advantage of being able to create experiential branded simulations. Computer software and hardware and consumer appliances seem to miss a central point to create meaningful play. Coca-Cola bypassed this problem by facilitating social interaction in a branded virtual world where teenagers can chat and come together within a branded community. Car manufacturers are arguably one of the other few major brand holders being able to tap into existing game genres and develop engaging experiential simulations, that is, a racing game rather than a branded simulation, for example, a puzzle game sponsored by a car brand.

An interesting example of a successful experiental dedicated advergame, from an economic perspective, is the PC game *America's Army*.[6] This game goes beyond a transferal experience as it is a game that relies mainly on the simulation of combat. The state-of-the-art game facilitates rich and immersive virtual experiences, showing consumers virtual insights in an interactive world previously not accessible to the general public. "By creating leads and traffic through America's Army's design and characteristics, the Army's brand is not about 'just a logo. It is much more, namely, it is the experience that occurs when a gamer comes into contact with the Army's game" (Van der Graaf & Nieborg 2003, p. 329).

For most players *America's Army* is first and foremost an online multi-player-tactical, first-person-shooter PC game. Developed by the U.S. Army, the game is freely available on various Web sites and the games' design is inspired by other popular first-person-shooter games such as *Counter-Strike* and *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six*. In *America's Army* the player takes the role of a U.S. Army soldier and engages in man-to-man combat against human opponents in authentic environments by using a range of real-life weaponry in order to complete a mission or objective. *America's Army* is primarily a multi-player game. The single player part entails several training missions, which need to be completed in order to unlock certain roles, such as a medic or a sniper.

America's Army could be seen as a simulation of the U.S. Army, many unrealistic elements from the first-person-shooter genre are changed. For realism's sake, the game play is much more structured and bound by the rules of physics and warfare. Players become soldiers with a persistent record. Shooting team members is ruled out and maps, weapons, and roles cannot be changed. In *America's Army* you will always be put in the boots of a U.S. Army soldier. Through the use of a software trick every gamer sees himself and his team as U.S. soldiers and the other team as the Opposing Forces (OpFor) and vice versa.

America's Army is not the only advergame issued by the U.S. military to promote its services. There is the free downloadable real-time strategy game *Guard Force* to aid recruitment for the U.S. Army National Guard. While the U.S. Marine Corps was heavily involved in the development of the first-person-shooter, training tool spin-off *Close Combat: First to Fight*, this game is a commercial game with game-play integrated advertisement. Gamers have to buy the game and its primary goal is to sell as many copies as possible. The U.S. Navy issued the action game *Navy Training Exercise (NTE): Strike & Retrieve*. This game however is a transferal-dedicated advergame as the game play does not directly simulate the activities of Navy recruits. *America's Army* then is marketed as a combat experience, and by simulating U.S. Army values through a true-to-life infantry combat experience, the Army educates gamers about soldiering. How *America's Army* works as a dedicated advergame and an experiential marketing tool, will be explored more in depth in the following analysis.

Military Advertisement

With the end in 1973 of the mandatory military service, better known as the draft, the U.S. military had to rely on its recruiting efforts to enlist personnel for its new All-Volunteer-Force. Over three decades later, the U.S. military has to persuade more than 200,000 recruits annually to fill its ranks, but one of the biggest problems facing contemporary recruiting efforts still is its effectiveness. Today, the U.S. armed forces rely on three pillars for their recruiting efforts. First, there is a 15,000 strong force of recruiters. Second, various (financial) incentives are available upon joining and in order to raise awareness, and third, to help recruiters reach their target groups, the military invests heavily in advertisement. From 1998-2003, the total advertising budget for military recruiting almost doubled from $299-$592 million while the total recruiting budget approached $4 billion

(General Accounting Office, 2003). In order to keep up with contemporary marketing, the U.S. Army created the "U.S. Army: An Army of One" brand.

As any other brand, the U.S. Army brand needs constant expansion—a process taking up enormous amounts of financial recourses. To expand the Army brand, the U.S. Army sponsors a NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) racing team, a NHRA (National Hot Rod Association) Top Fuel team, and a NHRA Pro Stock Bike team. And in line with the ubiquitous transgressive character of brands (Pennington, 2001), there are three (official) Web stores offering licensed material with the "U.S. Army of One" logo and slogan on it, ranging from clothing to mugs, playing cards to key rings, and other knick-knacks.[7] With half of the military advertising funding going to the Army and the constant need to reinvent and explore new advertisement platforms, there is room to experiment and try new initiatives to reach the core group of 18- to 24-year-olds. Probably the most high profile advertising experiment of all, could well be *America's Army*.

It was the advergame dimension, the Army's goal of attracting more recruits, that became at the conception of the project, the guiding design rationale. The U.S. Army does not label *America's Army* as a recruiting tool or an advergame, but as a strategic communication tool (e.g., Davis, 2004). The goal of the game is to inform popular culture rather than to persuade and to raise awareness rather than directly recruit, which is done by U.S. Army recruiters. Raising both the awareness of the U.S. Army brand and the U.S. Army as a possible career are central to the design of the game and its community. With less influencers, people with a positive attitude towards the Army and a willingness to communicate this attitude present in the U.S. society (e.g., former soldiers), the Army has to rely on other mechanisms to enter the "consideration set" of America's youth. "So when a young person turns 18 — 17, 18 — and they start to think about what their options are for the future, what does that list look like? Go to college? Get a job? Hang out with my friends? We want 'join the Army' to be one of those lists of options" (Department of Defense, 2001). With this statement, the former Secretary of the Army, Louis Caldera, articulated one of the main goals of the "Army of One" campaign.

What makes *America's Army* fairly unique is that it could be considered one of the first multidimensional games (Nieborg, 2004, 2005). Analysis shows that the game has more than an advergame dimension. It is used to train U.S. Army soldiers as well as to educate gamers about the U.S. Armythe *edugame* dimension. Through off-line PowerPoint lectures followed by multiple choice tests and through online game play, gamers may learn what it takes to be part of the "Army of One." The games' third dimension is its use as a test tool. New military technologies are carefully modeled in the game, allowing military experts and soldiers to test these future weapon systems in the virtual world, after which

they can be easily incorporated into the edugame dimension. Gamers can be tested as well. Similar to off-line test tools, such as the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) freely available at U.S. high schools, the U.S. Army is able to virtually test the aptitude of potential Army recruits. The fourth and last dimension of *America's Army* is its propaganda dimension. The game is both an example of a public affairs instrument, as an instrument of public diplomacy, as it shares many of the same goals and characteristic of both strategic communication tools. However, it is the role of *America's Army* as a tool of public diplomacy that signals a shift away from the advergame dimension towards the *propagame* dimension. Both dimensions still interact and reinforce rather than replace each other. The initial goal of a recruitment aid and raising the brand awareness of the U.S. Army is partly bypassed when looked at the global use of the game, thereby giving way to the propagame dimension.

Encapsulated in the first-person-shooter genre are several key features ready to be appropriated for (successful) digital marketing. The U.S. Army as a brand transformed into the *America's Army* brand and appears able to tap seamlessly into existing game community frameworks. Kierzkowski, McQuade, Waitman, and Zeisser (1996) provide five distinct recommendations for success in digital marketing, all of which are present in the production, distribution, and consumption of the official U.S. Army game. First, there is the advertisement on and alliances with gaming Web sites such as GameSpy.com and Gigex.com. Second, providing participants with a stimulating and motivating game is evident in *America's Army's* much acclaimed realism. Third, participants are instantly rewarded and have the prospect of beating top scores. This is constructed by the extensive and persistent honor system which gives a gamer certain credits and acknowledgement among peers as well as goals to aim at (e.g., getting more honor points than a peer). Fourth is the identification of user preferences by providing choices within the game. In *America's Army* players can play in theatres of operation all over the (virtual) world, playing different rolls and familiarizing themselves with a plethora of weapons. And the fifth and final aspect is retaining users which is partly taken care of by the community, which consists of the official homepage with its message boards, several (semiprofessional) affiliates and fan sites and several IRC channels. Game communities are known for their collaborative and peer-supporting character (Jenkins, 2002; Newman, 2004) and *America's Army* is no exception to this rule.

One of the questions asked by every journalist and academic unfamiliar with *America's Army* is: "is the game effective and do you have figures showing how many people joined?" Such figures are nonexistent and the design of both the game and the community are not set up in a way that such data can easily be obtained. One thing about *America's Army* as an advergame is clear; the game is extremely cost effective. The game cost $4 million a year from 2000-2003.

With a breakdown of $2 million in wages, $300,000 for game engine costs, and $1.5 million in operational costs (Zyda, Mayberry, McCree, & Davis, 2004). In the upcoming years, staffing costs and licensing fees are likely to grow. The $20 million spent on the game pales into insignificance considering the following remark: "The Army estimates *America's Army* has the potential to save some $700M-$4B per year" (Zyda, 2002, p. 9).

Conclusion

In a society where even sand can be branded, the competition for attention is enormous (cf. Klein, 1999). Advertisement in our post-modern, media-saturated world is omnipresent but at the same time extremely fragmentary. The eyeball time of young people has become a commodity in itself, with every medium fighting for attention trying to sell audiences to a growing pool of companies and brand owners. Over the years and with the maturing of the medium, childn's play has become heavily commodified (Kline et al., 2003). Product placement in digital games is ubiquitous and gamers seem to praise the efforts of game designers to include their favorite brands in a game to make the game space more "real." The console hardware developers have become established brands themselves, up to a point where gamers identify themselves with the hardware. Gamers even have names for such aficionados: "fanboys." As a result "The industry has come full circle: conditions for its spectacular growth were set in existing youth-oriented media niches; now for gaming is itself poised to create marketing opportunities for other corporations that are seeking to target the youth audience" (Kline et al. 2003, p. 236). The multiple identities of gamers as both fans and consumers are not without consequences, the voluntary activity of play becomes intertwined with the discourses of a commodified game culture.

Where TV commercials, print ads, and the World Wide Web rely on representation for the conveying of their message, dedicated advergames add the extra dimension of simulation. The ever-rising processing power of computer chips, doubling every 18 months according to Moore's law, enables rich and immersive virtual experiences, showing consumers virtual insights in interactive worlds previously not accessible for the general public. It is the usage of marketing through games that differs considerably. Commercial games increasingly include some sort of marketing message. Increasingly, dedicated advergames are used to advertise, varying from singular advergames which may be freely distributed via popular Web sites or on a company's homepage, to the more sophisticated experiential advergames, which encompass elaborate, persistent, virtual worlds.

As the early abstract games of *Pong*, *Spacewar,* and *Tetris* turned into lifelike and realistic simulations, developers are now able to turn their intertextual references into commercial representations and simulations. Games as one of the new intertextual commodities have to:

... posses the elasticity to incorporate the imaginary reconfigurations of its images, stories and products by users. Although corporations protect their trademarks and images, they have also developed sophisticated structures and architectures that allow certain images of their film or game to float freely across the Internet as promotional sirens of their cultural commodity (Marshall, 2002, p. 76).

America's Army is a successful example of such a cultural commodity, marketed as a simulation of the U.S. Army. Game-play-integrated advertisement seems to be favored by gamers over non-game-play integrated forms—a cleverly integrated branded car of PDA adds flavor to a game and aids brand recall. Advergames can move beyond in-game banners and billboards. However, while the goal of brand placement is raising brand awareness (Nelson, 2002), interactive entertainment is able to move beyond this marketing model as well. *America's Army* shows that gamers are able to learn (U.S. Army) values, basic skills, and a considerable amount of knowledge and information, just by playing the game. Gamers willfully subject themselves to minute long PowerPoint lectures to advance in the game. A career in the U.S. Army is literally played out. In *America's Army*, the U.S. Army brand is ubiquitous and encompasses all modes of advergaming.

The game constantly supports brand awareness, for the brand and its simulation are interchangeable. By using various new media technologies, the U.S. Army is able to directly reach their target group in an active and engaging manner that corresponds with the media use of today's youth. Being able to simulate conflict by using existing game design conventions, the U.S. Army both redefines elements within the first-person-shooter genre and taps directly into the very fabric of popular culture. In a similar way *Coke Music* is based on the popular format of *Habbo Hotel*. The question would then be if the designers and publishers of future advergames are willing to leave existing game genres behind and if, through innovative game design, they not only will profit from game technology and culture, but contribute to it as well.

References

Book, B. (2004). *These bodies are FREE, so get one NOW!: Advertising and branding in social virtual worlds*. Social Science Research Network. Retrieved August 25, 2004, from http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=536422

Buckner, K., Fang, H., Qiao, S. (2002). Advergaming: A new genre in Internet advertising. *SoCbytes Journal, 2*(1).

Chaney, I., Lin, K., & Chaney, J. (2004). The effect of billboards within the gaming environment. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 5*(1), 54-69.

Chen, J., & Ringel, M. (2001). *Can advergaming be the future of interactive advertising?* Retrieved September 1, 2005, from http://www.locz.com.br/loczgames/advergames.pdf

Davis, M. (Ed.). (2004). *America's army pc game vision and realization*. San Francisco: U.S. Army and the Moves Institute.

Department of Defense. (2001). *Army announces new advertising campaign*. Retrieved August 22, 2004, from http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2001/t01102001_t110army.html

Entertainment Software Association (ESA). (2004). Top ten industry facts. Retrieved December 10, 2004, from http://www.theesa.com/pressroom.html

Eskelinen, M. (2001). The gaming situation. *Game Studies, 1*(1). Retrieved from http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/

General Accounting Office. (2003). *Military recruiting: DOD needs to establish objectives and measures to better evaluate advertising's effectiveness*. Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office.

Hernandez, M. D., Chapa, S., Minor, M. S., Maldonado, C., & Barranzuela, F. (2004). Hispanic attitudes toward advergames: A proposed model of their antecedents. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 5*(1), 116-131.

International Game Developers Association (IGDA) Online Games Committee. (2003). *IGDA Online Games White Paper*. San Francisco, CA: IGDA.

Jenkins, H. (2002). Interactive audiences? The collective intelligence of media fans. In D. Harries (Ed.), *The new media book*. London: BFI.

Kierzkowski, A., McQuade, S., Waitman, R., & Zeisser, M. (1996). Marketing to the digital comsumer. *The McKinsey Quarterly, 32*(3), 5-21.

Klein, N. (1999). *No logo*. New York: Picador.

Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital play—The interaction of technology, culture, and marketing*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Marshall, D. P. (2002). The new intertextual commodity. In D. Harries (Ed.), *The new media book*. London: BFI.

Martian Buddy. (n.d.) Homepage. Retrieved May 16, 2006, from http://www.martianbuddy.com

Molesworth, M. (2003, November, 4-6). *Encounters with consumption during computer-mediated play: The development of digital games as marketing communication media.* Paper presented at the Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference, Utrecht, Holland.

Nelson, M. R. (2002). Recall of brand placement in computer/video games. *Journal of Advertising Research, 42*(2), 80-92.

Nelson, M. R., Keum, H., & Yaros, R. A. (2004). Advertainment or adcreep? Game players' attitudes toward advertising and product placements in computer games. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 5*(1), 3-30.

Newman, J. (2004). *Videogames*. London: Routledge.

Nieborg, D. B. (2004). *America's army: More than a game.* Paper presented at the Transforming Knowledge into Action through Gaming and Simulation, München, Germany.

Nieborg, D. B. (2005). *Changing the rules of engagement—Tapping into the popular culture of America's army, the official U.S. army computer game.* Unpublished masters thesis, Utrecht University. Retrieved September 1, 2005, from http://gamespace.nl/thesis

Pennington, R. (2001). Signs of marketing in virtual reality. *Journal of Interactive Advertising, 2*(1), 43-55.

Pine II, B. J., & Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The experience economy: Work is theatre & every business a stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Raessens, J. (2005). Computer games as participatory media culture. In J. Raessens & J. Goldstein (Eds.). *Handbook of computer game studies* (pp. 373-388.). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Schiesel, S. (2005, September 6). Conqueror in a war of virtual worlds. *The New York Times,* E1, column 4.

Van der Graaf, S. (2004). Viral experiences: Do you trust your friends? In S. Krishnamurthy (Ed.), *Contemporary Research in E-Marketing,* 1, (pp. 166-185). Hershey, PA: Idea Group Publishing.

Van der Graaf, S., & Nieborg, D. B. (2003, November, 4-6). *Together we brand: America's army.* Paper presented at the Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference, Utrecht, Holland.

Zyda, M. (2002). 2002 In the MOVES Institute. MOVES Institute. Retrieved August 14, 2004, from http://www.movesinstitute.org/MOVESactivity2002.pdf

Zyda, M., Mayberry, A., McCree, J., & Davis, M. (2004). *From Viz-Sim to VR to games: How we built a hit game-based simulation.* Monterey, CA: The MOVES Institute.

Endnotes

[1]   Retrieved September 4, 2005 from http://steampowered.com/status/status.html.

[2]   Retrieved September 1, 2005 from http://www.info.ea.com/downloads/eatrax.doc.

[3]   From the RGTA Web site General Info section located RealGTA.net. Retrieved August 23, 2004, from http://www.doupal.cz/realgta/info.htm.

[4]   Retrieved September 1, 2005 from http://www.jaguarurbangolf.co.uk.

[5]   See: http://www.cokemusic.com.

[6]   America's Army is continually updated and there is no finished version of the game. The first version, released July 4, 2002, was dubbed America's Army: Recon, followed by America's Army: Operations and America's Army: Special Forces. Each Special Forces update has its own label, for example, America's Army: Special Forces (Direct Action) v2.5, released October 13, 2005. During each update, content is added and the game's design differs constantly.

[7]   See for example: http://www.armyproducts.com/default.aspx, http://shop.ipledge.com and http://armyofone.usptgear.com. Retrieved August 22, 2004.