Don't mess with the gameplay

Gaming offers the opportunity to connect with the hard-to-reach audience of young affluent males. But how can you advertise within this environment without alienating the gamers? *Damian Thompson* with *Meridith Jamin* offers some advice.

Brands have permission – but not an all-areas pass

I do not mind advertising in video games, as long as they do not detract from the gaming experience itself. US respondent

The good news is that gamers are giving clear permission for brands to appear within and around games – but only where appropriate: which means wherever, and however, the brand can help players more thoroughly immerse themselves in the game.

In short, brands have limited permission to do certain things in certain places.

Gaming's great benefit for brand communication is its intense consumer involvement

Mediaedge:cia's belief is that the most effective brand communication actively engages people – creating genuine interaction between brand and consumer. And what gaming offers brands is the chance to interact with people in a highly involving medium.

If I'm playing RPG [role-playing-games] or action games, I will be totally engrossed, and whatever my family says to me, it will not get through. Singapore respondent

I can't do anything else while I'm gaming –

I can't even listen to music, in case it distracts me.
Germany respondent

It's true that, as with any medium, brands can use games to reach and interrupt particular types of people. But the real challenge for brand owners is ensuring that in-game communication only enhances gaming's involving experience (rather than interrupting it), and in so-doing, enhances people's involvement with their brand.

So how is this done? The first step to understanding how a brand should behave 'in-game' relies on understanding what it is that gamers want from games.

Benjamin Wachenje

Gaming's great benefit for gamers is escapism, within an alternate reality

Gamers all over the world are looking for the same thing: escapism – the opportunity to participate in an alternate reality. Within this alternate reality, fundamental human desires are satisfied – the drive to explore, with the promise of reward. But what does this mean for brands?

The optimum role for brands: enhancing the alternate reality experience.

The challenge for a brand wishing to involve players of a particular game is to increase, not reduce, the appeal of that game, which will be based on the basic human drives outlined above. Having questioned gamers around the world about their reactions to different types of brand involvement, it became clear that the optimum role for a brand within a game is to enhance the gamer's sense of escapism, by strengthening the alternate reality experience.

This is something that is specific to each game. In a racing game, it could be as simple as an official real-world sponsor's logo on the side of a car; but a similar logo on a car in a role-playing game might be completely out of place.

I've played many baseball games and have been a little upset every time Fenway Park is played; there is usually no Citgo sign. That Citgo sign has practically become synonymous with Fenway Park and the Boston Red Sox. US respondent

So, for best results, this is something that needs to be considered on a game-by-game basis, to identify a role that is specific to a particular place in a particular game. In order to do this, there are a number of areas that need to be considered:

Advertising that doesn't feel like advertising?

Product billboards in sports games and on racing cars… I guess wouldn't count because that is part of the sports game and not put in there to try to sell their product. US respondent

It feels as if you're at a real racetrack. South Korea respondent

Advertising placements that mimic real-world ads – such as billboards in sports or racing games – are generally accepted by gamers because they are perceived to add to the realism of the game.

Similarly, customisation can be a powerful tool for increased engagement – allowing players to personalise their own in-game experience (such as choosing the strip their team uses in a

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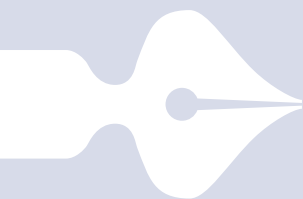
Joining the conversation

Consumer Generated:
from Mayhem to Marketing
Joel Cere, Hill & Knowlton, London

Consumer-generated marketing is a new buzzword for something that has been around for a while: word of mouth. It is an activity that has been proliferating at a rapid rate, thanks to the explosion of newsgroups, discussion forums, blogs and consumer rating sites. What's more, according to author Joel Cere,

word of mouth not only carries a higher trust factor than any kind of advertising, when it comes to buying a new product, it is also valued 1.5 times more highly today than it was in the 1970s.

According to Cere, some 81% of 30-64 year olds use the web to research new products and services, and the result is millions of 'conversations' taking place on the internet at any one time, offering both recommendations and complaints about individual products. The good news for corporations, says Cere, is that the digital trail left behind means marketers can look at what consumers are saying about their products, increasingly measure the impact of word of mouth, and ultimately turn it to their advantage.

He has seven tips for doing so. Some are quite simple.

For example, Cere says that marketers are failing to capture the interactive data from their call centres – which could prove a rich seam of information about consumer issues. The transparency of the web means they also need to fix what is broken quickly. Marketers should be prepared to join in the conversation, he suggests, and they should seek to identify the 'influencers' in their sector and treat them like VIPs with exclusive product previews and consultations. Make it easier for consumers to help distribute your marketing, he says, and create a platform for them to express themselves.

Finally, take a leaf out of the book of companies like Tupperware and Avon and turn your consumers into ambassadors, even marketers. ▪

sports game) involves them more deeply in the game, drawing them further into the game's alternate reality.

Isn't it cool to be able to choose the brand name I like while playing games, just like I do in real life? China respondent

But these attitudes should not be interpreted as a willingness to accept advertising anywhere in the virtual world as we might expect to see in the real world. This is because the presence of 'advertising' or brands does not, in itself, enhance reality. It isn't the advertising that adds a benefit to a game – it's a brand's ability to boost the alternate-reality experience at a particular moment in a game.

To do this requires dexterity from both advertiser and developer, but the acid test is that when done properly, in-game communication feels like a natural part of the game.

[In] Need for Speed Underground 2... I can almost quote you every brand that appears on the edge of the tracks... You remember them clearly because you use them as markers ("in the one after Burger King, there is a shortcut"). Mexico respondent

[In] Metal Gear Solid 2, when you opened up the enemy's lockers, you could see FHM posters inside [featuring] beautiful girls in swimsuits. France respondent

So while some brand placements can add realism to a game – and some genres lend themselves more naturally to this – there is a delicate balance between enhancing realism, and obstructing escapism. In-game communication should always facilitate escapism. The difference is perhaps between what looks like advertising and what feels like advertising. Don't assume that 'real-world' creative will work within a game.

In-game advertising firm Massive Incorporated has opened up a whole new world of suck in the online game Planetside, rendering the game's sci-fi environment thematically useless. Clickable Culture

To avoid disrupting gameplay or the in-game environment, communication should ideally be tailored to its exact position within a game. A creative and effective real-world campaign may well jar a game whose environment doesn't reflect the world the ads were created for. Where possible, a game's designers should work with brand owners to develop a brand's involvement.

In theory, all games are possible venues for brand placement

Sports or racing games are the obvious example of environments where brand or product place-ment will easily fit. Although it will be much harder to involve a modern brand in, for example, a sword and sorcery epic, in theory it's not impossible. What is certainly true is that knowing that a particular audience for a brand can be found playing a game is insufficient information to allow the creation of effective communication.

I'd hate to be playing some shooter set in 2275 and see an ad for a 2004 Jeep Cherokee. Gamer, Slashdot.org

The key is understanding the player and the game itself. The purpose and plot of a game, and the particular culture around it, must all be taken into account – in many countries, what happens around a game (such as the PC bang [internet-cafe-like games venues] culture in Asia) is as important as the game itself. As with all forms of communication, relevance (to consumer, location, and occasion) is essential. Wizards with cola cans or aliens brandishing chocolate bars are almost certainly wrong.

The golden rule: don't mess with the gameplay

As long as the ad doesn't affect the game's function or integrity, and has not ruined the picture, then I'm happy to see the ads in games. Taiwan respondent

Gameplay is the essence of what makes a game good or bad: it is the basic experience of playing the game – graphics, plot and characters aside.

A brand's presence in a game should never interrupt, delay, or inappropriately alter gameplay.

When I play games on the Bian Feng network, many ads pop-up after you open the first window. I am never interested in these ads, and usually close them immediately. I'm sure other people do the same. China respondent

Don't underestimate the power of play

Games present an excellent opportunity for some brands to allow potential purchasers to extensively 'try' their products, under conditions that wouldn't be possible in the real world. What is surprising, though, is the reaction that such trials can provoke – it seems that a product's in-game appearance can influence real-world brand perception:

Probably the first time a brand name affected me in advertising was when the original Gran Turismo came out. I'd never really heard of Nissan Skylines or Subaru Imprezas, but after playing the game I always saw these cars in awe, as the performance on the game meant they were now a desirable car for me in real life. UK respondent

How many of you remember saying to yourself when you're playing a racing game that you'll probably get a Mitsubishi Lancer if and when you have the money because of how well it performed in the game? Singapore respondent

Brands can't always be precious about their appearance within a game

Proper integration within a game may mean being flexible about a brand's appearance or integrity. One of the benefits of an alternate reality is that gamers can do what would be impossible or impermissible in the real world – far beyond a simple test-drive, for example.

You're travelling at over 200 kmh and you run into a wall. The car isn't damaged. It just bounces back! France respondent

No one wants to drive a car in a racing game that you can't smash to pieces. The risk of maintaining rules about how a brand is portrayed in the real world is that this may inhibit a game's alternate reality – it's impossible for a brand to increase a game's engagement if it prevents a gamer from playing.

Brand placement is by game, not in 'games'

[It is] meaningless to generalise about 'game play' when there are thousands of games in dozens of genres. It is... equivalent to suggesting that all television programmes, radio shows, and movies are the same.
The Economist, August 6 2005

When considering the use of games to target an audience, it is unrealistic to generalise about players or gaming locations, and wide-ranging genres mean that each in-game opportunity must be evaluated on its own merits. 'Games' are not a single communication channel, and each in-game opportunity has to be evaluated on its own merits – similar to a product placement or sponsorship opportunity.

'Advergames' are hard to do well... but there are alternatives

I haven't heard of any games entirely based on products but if there is one that is based on say, X [leading sports-goods manufacturer], that would be the worst game ever. UK respondent

Advergames – games designed around a particular product or brand – are rarely well-received by gamers, unless they are developed to the same standards as regular games (e.g. America's Army). Because their main purpose is promotion, rather than entertainment, they can be poor at creating the required alternate reality, and this problem is compounded by the financial

challenges of producing a game that offers the quality most gamers have come to expect.

As development costs for ever more impressive games increase, the costs for in-game involvement with major titles could rise dramatically, as a growing number of brands seek to place themselves in a declining number of blockbuster games that offer guaranteed audiences. However, as gaming's appeal continues to broaden, other opportunities may arise:

There's not a lot I want to play right now... A lot of the games out there are just too long; if you're not interested in spending that time with them, you're not going to play.
Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo

Most women are too busy to devote 12 hours a week to gaming, so it will have to be gaming experiences that are shorter.
Kathy Vrabeck, president, Activision publishing

The games-development industry appears largely focused on 'full-length' titles, but there is a growing need for games that satisfy the desires of newer, less committed gamers, who may game during in-between times. This sits well with how many gamers claim to play games – during down-time or when they're supposed to be doing something else. If the games industry responds to this, development costs for shorter games should be lower, presenting economical opportunities for brands to reach more targeted, non-traditional audiences.

However, the deliberate move to promoting shorter engagement times suggests a need for greater impact of in-game communication – something that would have to be carefully assessed to ensure compatibility with the in-game environment.

ROI measures are not yet where they need to be

In spite of recent developments, effectiveness measures for evaluating many in-game opportunities are unfortunately still inadequate, with much evaluation relying (at best) upon the use of traditional measures (eg impressions/opportunities-to-see) to evaluate games. It is perhaps unnecessary to point this out, but the two mediums (of television and gaming) are only physically the same – the consumer experience is very different. ◾

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Playing with Brands:
Engaging Consumers with Brand Communication