Advergames, their use and potential regulation

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature, history, features and benefits of advergames and the issues that this new advertising medium has raised. Advergames are interactive online games used by companies to advertise their products to consumers. Concerns have arisen about the morality of advergames, in that they can be used to advertise unhealthy products to minors in a much more concealed way than other products; and about the regulation of the industry.

Keywords: social media, advergames, marketing communication

Introduction

This paper explores the nature, history, features and benefits of advergames and the issues that this new advertising medium has raised. Advergames are interactive online games used by companies to advertise their products to consumers. Companies, mostly of the soft drink, cereal and sugary snack industries, host advergames on their websites. Like all advertisements, it is essential to use the right medium to reach the right audience; considering other aspects such as when the audience will use the medium, how long they will use it, and how much competitors are spending on the medium. Cognitive theory can be used to describe how consumers experience the advertising message in advergames, and how it is essential that the advergame launches the company’s brand into the evoked set of products for the players. Concerns have arisen about the morality of advergames, in that they can be used to advertise unhealthy products to minors in a much more concealed way than other products; and about the regulation of the industry.

Advergames

Advergames are interactive video games whose purpose is to advertise, they are usually hosted on the Internet, where players (usually children or young men) take the role of a character in completing certain objectives. The brand logo may comprise part of the character, or may be visible in the background. Other forms of advergaming also include ‘sponsorship of events’ where consumers are offered tickets to real life events via the game; as well as ‘adverworlds’,...
which are interactive worlds designed to inform consumers about their products. Associative advertising is also used, which is where a product is associated with a certain lifestyle or activity (Shah & Thadamalla, p. 45, 2008). The type of advergame focused on in this report is direct, web-hosted advergames.

The ancestors of advergames were mail-order Atari cartridge games used to advertise products, but the concept has not altered significantly. These mail-order advertising games were rare and largely ignored back in the 1980s, unlike the contemporary advergame. In the 1980s, Johnson and Johnson created the mail-order ‘Tooth Protectors’ game for the Atari, where you must deflect unhealthy snacks from falling onto teeth (Bogost, 2007, p. 203). These teeth lie on the bottom of the screen and represent a mouth. After a tooth is hit by three snacks, it begins disappearing; and you may heal one tooth at a time which involves brushing, flossing and mouth-washing. It is impossible to deflect all the snacks, reflecting that it is impossible for all snacks to be avoided in real life, they must merely be controlled. Purina’s ‘Chase the Chuckwagon’ is another mail-order game from the same era, but it was a simple maze game and lacked the social education value of ‘Tooth Protectors’ (Bogost, 2007, p. 203).

Even in these early days there was a discrepancy between advergames which used the opportunity to educate; and those which did not. It can also be seen that advergames were produced cheaply and did not directly compete with full-priced retail games. This trend continues in contemporary times, with most advergames being flash games played on the internet, and made relatively cheaply.

An example of a contemporary advergame is ‘Red vs. Green’, a checkers-type game programmed by M&Ms to advertise their candy (M&Ms, n.d.). In the game you control either the Red or Green M&M, and have to convert the other side’s M&Ms to your colour by surrounding them and positioning your pieces. The shape of M&Ms allows easy integration of the product into the game. In Red Bull’s ‘Red Bull Soapbox Racer’ you control a car shaped like a can of Red Bull and compete against other cars (Red Bull, 2009). You drive along a track avoiding obstacles which can damage your vehicle. In this racing game, to jump-start the car again after an accident, or increase speed, you inevitably consume part of your energy bar. To refill your energy bar you must collect cans of Red Bull that are scattered throughout the track. This game lets the player control a branded character in intense situations with the product linked into the gameplay. The term ‘advergame’ will be used to refer to modern online versions of games, which also come in simple and complex versions.

The most common users of advergames are most likely children and men, and the nature of most advergames attests to that. According to the study performed by Mediamark Research & Intelligence Studies at the behest of the American Kids Study, 78.1% of children aged 6-11 years who were online in
the month prior to the study (65.9% of the sample group) played some form of online game (Lee, Choi, Quilliam & Cole, 2009). The article describes another study by the NPD, which showed that approximately half of children aged 2-17 play games five hours or less per week and the other half play six to sixteen hours or more per week. Video games are largely played by males, and despite a growing female demographic of gamers, are still advertised to males. There is definitely a market segment of men who spend most of their spare time playing video games, and many advergames are designed to incorporate what companies think these players want; including shooters, sports and real time strategy games. 70% of men aged 18-34 play video games, and 75% of households with a man aged 8-34 own a console (IABUK, 2008, p. 203). Women tend to prefer games with less commitment such as pogo.com or interactive games, with over 70% of Sims players being women under 25 (IABUK, 2008, p. 204). Even though the majority child and male demographics must be catered to, advergamers should take the opportunity to make games that can appeal to women as well, to increase market share and become even more relevant.

Advergames aim to produce telepresence, which is the feeling of being present in the gaming environment. This emotional connection to the advergame can, if developed strongly enough, create a positive image of the brand (Lee et al. 2009). Evidence does show strong brand recognition is frequently gained from playing advergames; the apparent benefits of advergames are the interactivity and the repetitive entertainment value (Cauberghe & Pelsmacker, 2010). There is research that shows a link between children playing the Fruit Loop Toss advergame, and increasing brand preference by those children for Fruit Loops (Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007). However the advergame’s implied claims that Fruit Loops are better for you than eating normal fruit (tossing a Fruit Loop into the mouth scored 10 points and a very satisfied sound whereas tossing a piece of fruit scored 5 points and a moderately satisfied sound) did not have an effect on the children; with the post-survey revealing they still believed Fruit Loops to be unhealthy. This Fruit Loop Toss advergame was crafted well in terms of variability and replayability, but did not have a compelling story or character that could create telepresence. Most advergames will increase brand recognition but only games that truly achieve telepresence can increase brand loyalty.

Companies spend a large amount of money on advergames, indicating there would be pressure for companies to explore this medium and use it effectively. The Veronis Suhler Stevenson’s communications industry forecast calculates that total U.S. spending on advergames was estimated at $264 million in 2006 and was expected to grow to $676 million in 2009 (Johannes & Odell, as cited in Lee et al. 2009).

To summarize, the attractive features of advergames are the ‘easy adjustability, cost-effectiveness and the viral marketing component’ (Ipe, 2008, p. 4). Advergames are easily built around the product as flash games are not
especially difficult to create, and these games offer variety to consumers. The medium is relatively cheap for companies to use, and for consumers to play. Advergames offer many advantages over other mediums. Consumers, faced with repetitive and obtrusive advertisements, will typically react with irritation and experience negative feelings towards the product (Ipe, 2008). Advergames are more effective than banner advertisements, due to growing cynicism about banner advertisements as well as the advantage of having the product in the background or as part of the main character in the interactive game (Kretchmer, 2004). Displaying advertisements in the background during certain games (for example on billboards) is more accepted than other occurrences of advertising, since consumers feel it advertisements to the realism of the game (Ipe, 2008). The average amount of time spent on advergames is 7 to 30 minutes, longer than television advertisements (Ipe, 2008, p. 9). Grigorovici and Constantin (2004) demonstrate that 30 percent of in-game advertisements are recalled in the short-term and 18 percent in the longer-term. Thus, the longer a user experiences the advertising content the greater the benefit for the company.

Consumers can log onto advergames at any time, which is an advantage of the Internet, and the replayable nature of the games helps increase the time people are exposed to the ad, and keeps them coming back. Unlike other forms of advertising, advergames can create telepresence and this involvement in the goals of the game and the fate of the character can help ingrain the brand into the user’s memory and experiences.

Advergames must be structured and utilized properly in order to harness their potential advantages. Advergames need to offer different and varying experiences each time the user plays the game, and they also need to reward playability, so the message will sink in. Users are not completely aware they are being advertised to, as they are focused on fulfilling the goals of the game as their ‘avatar’ or character. Advergames can negate their inherent advantages if the games used are clones of classic games like Space Invaders, with a product slapped on; or by making the advertising too obvious (Davidson, 2008). The advertising content must be subtle and the game should be captivating and relevant to the product.

The effect of advergames on consumers can be studied using cognitive theory. Consumers of the sugary products industry will mentally observe and search the large variety of appealing products available in shopping malls, and narrow them down to a preference set, then an evoked set; from which they make their final decision. This is often the stage where advertising can exert an influence. A consumer ‘selects the media or impulses that are being sent to him. These selected stimuli are organized and interpreted by the individual’ (Thomas, p. 110, 2008). Thomas describes an ‘Absolute threshold’ which is the minimum level of stimuli that can get the consumer’s attention, and a process called ‘Sensory Adaptation’; which occurs when consumers get so used to an ad that they lose interest or notice in it.
The benefits of the advergame medium are the interactivity, replayability and entertainment value offered; this can offset the natural decay experienced by all advertisements. Consumers observe the background or character-specific advertisements all the while when they are playing the game. The involvement of the player in the fate of the character creates the feeling of telepresence; this emotional connection to the events of the game is a unique advantage in advertising. Users are encouraged to go back and play the game over the long term through achievements and unlockables that use codes on the wrappers of real products. This minimizes decay of the information and message, and cognitively helps to bring the product into the preferred set of products; or may even increase brand loyalty if telepresence is achieved fully. Companies can use advergames as a viral form of advertisement, with in-built features allowing players to pass on the game to their friends. 86% of internet users pass on viral content to one friend, and 49% pass them on to three friends (Ipe, 2008, p. 9). This exposes a larger number of consumers to the game. All of these advantages also have a high chance of exceeding Absolute thresholds because of their interactivity, and the replay ability and entertainment could prevent sensory adaptation. Level ups, both linked to game play and codes on physical products of that brand, encourage repeat play; as does variable and addictive gameplay. Consumers are being advertised to even in the post-purchase stage, due to this replayability. Entertaining an audience while advertising to them is effective in contemporary times where audiences are no longer captive, being able to fast forward advertisements on TV and seek out their own information on products. The most complex reason that advergames are an effective medium to make a product stand out with, is the fact that they create a positive emotional investment in the player using telepresence, ingraining their brand in the consumer’s memory.

Regulation of advergames is a multi-faceted issue, as regulations covering traditional mediums like TV and print do not cover advergames. According to a study of 15 corporate websites including Kraft and Nabiscoworld, very few companies incorporate nutritional information into their advergames, despite being publicly supportive of good nutrition (Dahl, Eagle & Baez, 2009). 13 of the companies surveyed had a ‘fun’ section featuring advergame ranging from simple games to more complex ones; but most featured clear attempts at persuasion, going beyond information provision. Regulations concerning traditional media stipulate that informational content and advertising content need to be differentiated, but only ten of the 13 advergame-hosting sites investigated had messages declaring their advertising intent. 6 sites required some form of purchase to enhance the game playing experience, with one requiring a code available on the physical product to play any games at all. Ten sites used some kind of viral marketing encouraging viewers to send emails to their friends about the site, but one site shut this feature down citing legal
problems. Six of the web sites offered additional download advertisements like screen savers and the ability to play the games offline, blurring the distinction between information and advertising. Some companies used domain names for the advergames that did not mention their company product, further moving away from declaring their advertising intent. Most sites had no real way of preventing people under the ages 13 and 16 to from disclosing personal information when playing advergames, using the viral marketing component or using the main site. Depending on the nature of the information requested 13 or 16 can be the minimum ages for disclosing personal information.

The potential problems with the ability to hide advertising intent are plain to see; to pressure prospective consumers to purchase products, to experience the advertisement, the lack of nutritional information and the lack of restrictions on information gathering. These problems lead to moral issues that are provoked by the use of advergames, since many of the games are targeted towards children and endorse unhealthy, fatty products. Studies show that children under 12 can have a difficulty understanding that they are being subjected to advertising, or defending themselves from persuasive content (Lee et al. 2009). Advergames do not make advertising intent as obvious as other mediums of advertising, due to the interaction and entertainment offered by the games. If consumers are aware they are being subjected to advertising they will see the advertisements in a more clinical light. Advergames can obscure their advertising intent and lower consumers’ ability to analyse the content. Other media like television and magazines are heavily regulated on how they can advertise; often they are forced to state their advertising intent, to avoid pressuring children into unhealthy habits, and to protect children from giving away personal information. There is a growing push to increase regulation of advergames, to force companies that use the medium to disclose the advertising nature of the games, and to limit how the companies advertise to children. However regulating this in an international environment will prove difficult.

**Conclusion**

Advergames are a very effective new medium linked to the Internet, an omnipresent and relevant technological vehicle. The benefits of the medium include telepresence, immersion, replayabilty and accessibility. Companies need to avoid producing simple or generic advergames, or risk losing the advantages offered by the medium to consumer cynicism. Companies that use advergames have to seriously consider using the medium as a method of educating consumers, and need to enforce data protection and child welfare in their practices. These actions would have great benefits for consumer awareness and at the very least would prevent a regulatory or grassroots backlash against said companies. Advergaming will continue to grow due to the widespread use and financial investment in the medium.
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References


