

ADVERGAMES: CHARACTERISTICS, LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL

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Advergaming represents a new advertising concept that uses Internet technology to implement viral marketing campaigns. Despite the potential of this interactive advertising method, very few academic studies have been initiated to investigate the characteristics of advergaming, and their influence on consumers' perceptions and behaviour. Using secondary data, this paper attempts to evaluate the characteristics of effective advergaming, and to analyse the effect of advergaming on players' perceptions and behaviour.

Keywords: online advertising, advergaming, effectiveness

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Introduction

Advergaming can be defined as online games that incorporate marketing content. Initially, many companies have placed their brands or logos in the virtual environment of computer games launched by specialised gaming firms. However, this form of advergaming is rather static and ineffective, since the player is concentrated on the task required by the game and might not acknowledge the brand image displayed in the background. This limitation has encouraged the firms to create their own advergaming, which are developed around a theme or a character directly related with their products and/or brands. In order to ensure a large diffusion of these games, they were made freely available on the Internet. The facilities offered by the Internet platform have increased the interactivity of the game, and have added a viral marketing dimension.

The interest in advergaming has substantially increased in the last 5 years, because of its perceived advantages (FreshGames, 2002; WebResource 2004):

- low-cost marketing in comparison with the traditional advertising channels, such as TV and radio;
- a captured audience that can transmit valuable personal information about their demographic profile, behaviour, needs, attitudes and preferences;
- customer retention: the average time spent in an advergaming is 7 to 30 minutes, which cannot be reached in the case of a classical TV advertisement.
- viral marketing – 81% of the players will email their friends to try a good game.

All these data demonstrate the huge potential of advergaming (Rodgers, 2004). However, despite the hype created by this new advertising method, most of the information describing or debating advergaming is professionally-oriented, often written in an advertising style (DeCollibus, 2002; Hartsock, 2004; Intrapromote, 2004). Very few academic studies have been initiated to investigate the characteristics of advergaming, and their influence on consumers' perceptions and behaviour (Hernandez, Chapa, Minor, Maldonado, & Barranzuela, 2004; Nelson, 2002).

Background

Studies conducted in the US have discovered that games are extremely popular among all categories of online users. A study conducted by Jupiter Media found that in December 2003, 84.6 million people visited online gaming sites (D5 Games, 2004). This number is projected to reach 104 million by 2007.

The preconception that only kids or teenagers are interested in interactive games is contradicted by the findings: in US 66% of the most frequent game players are over 18 years old, and 40% of them over 35 years old, with the average age of a player being 28 year old (D5 Games, 2004).

Another study conducted during December 2003 – January 2004 in the US, has identified the women over 40 years old as a major segment interested in online gaming (Arkadium, 2004). The female game-players over 40 spend the most hours per week playing games (9.1 hours or 41% of their online time in comparison with only 6.1 hours per week, or 26% of their online time for men). These women were also more likely to play online games every day than men or teens of either gender. The reasons for playing online games vary depending on the gender. The main reason of women is to relieve or eliminate stress, while the men are mainly attracted by the competitive factor of Internet gaming. The women prefer word and puzzle games, while men are more interested in sport, combat or casino games (Arkadium, 2004).

The placement of products or brand names in movies or TV shows is a relatively old technique, but the studies regarding their influence on consumer perceptions and behaviour are inconclusive (Gould, Pola, & Grabner-Krauter, 2000; Russell, 2002). The advergames present a few distinct characteristics that can eventually enhance their marketing effect:

- the advergames are selected by the player himself/herself, and are not forced upon an unwilling viewer;
- the player interacts with advergames adopting an active stance, in comparison with the passive attitude of the TV audience;
- advergames incite the players to share the gaming experience with their friends or family.

From a marketing point of view, the advergames attempt to capture the attention of players, and then to transmit to them, in an indirect way, suggestions that aim to modify their perceptions regarding an enterprise, brand, or product. The psychological fundament of this process is the inducement and the use of the 'state of flow'. This concept is used by psychologists to describe a mental state in which the attention is highly concentrated on a specific process, the environmental information is screened out, and the person experiences a harmonious flow of its present experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The state of flow is known to create a state of well being, as well as increased perception and learning capacity. This state of flow can be induced by any activity that is very interesting for a person: watching a movie, reading a book, or playing a game. In fact, the ludic activity is considered as one of the best inducers of the flow state for children, and often also for adults.

The interaction with Internet applications can also induce the state of flow in specific circumstances (King, 2003), the most successful web sites offering interactive experiences, and not only content. The state of flow can be created online if the following essential conditions are combined: user motivation, user telepresence, and interactivity of the Internet application. On the other hand, the existence and the maintenance of the state of flow is a dynamic process, that depends on the relation between the capabilities of the user – or player in the case of an advergame - and the level of difficulty proposed by the game. Figure 1 demonstrates the three possible scenarios of the interaction between an Internet user and an advergame.

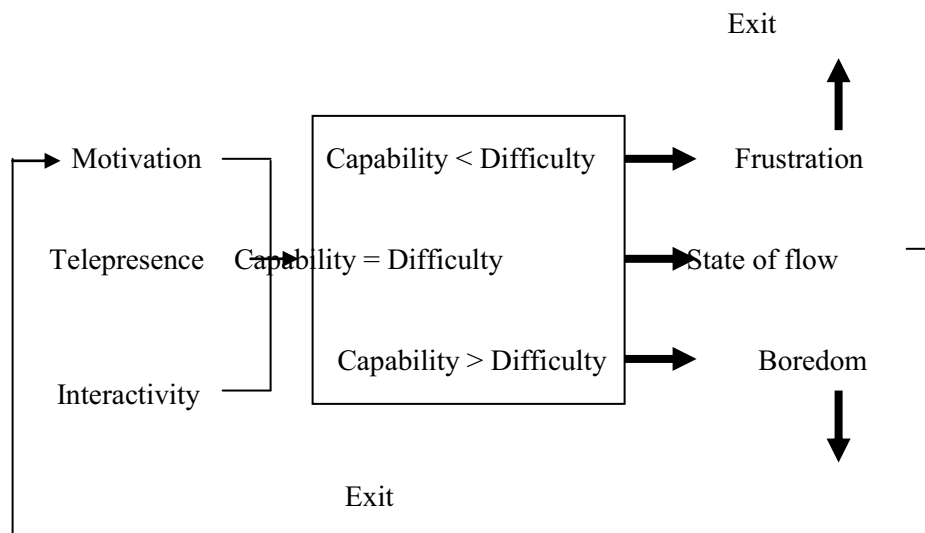


Figure 1. The inducement of the state of flow online

Once induced, the maintenance of the state of flow requires a constantly evolving challenge for the player, because his/her level of capability is likely to improve after playing the game a few times. This raises the problem of including in the advergaming a progressive level of difficulty, that can represent a dynamic challenge for players.

If the features of the game are interesting enough and the playing experience provides satisfaction, the player will be inclined to send information about the available game to friends or relatives, participating directly to the spread of the advergaming campaign. This action can be reinforced by creating complex games that require multiple participants.

As any other marketing communication tools, the advergaming characteristics will have to correspond to: (1) the personality of the advertised brand, (2) the profile of the targeted audience, (3) the characteristics of the medium – in this case the Internet, (4) the strategic objectives of the communication campaign and (5) the corporate image of the company.

The difficulty to concomitantly evaluate these complex variables is probably the reason for a low rationalisation of the advergaming development in the professional literature. The creation of an efficient advergaming is still considered predominantly as a creative work, that it is difficult to describe in a formal, precise manner.

The characteristics of an efficient advergaming

Considering the specific effect of advergaming on online players, the following characteristics are considered necessary for an effective advergaming:

1. accessibility: facility to identify the hyperlink between the firm/product site and the game, free access or required registration, specialised software required, downloading time;
2. difficulty of understanding: existence of explicit instructions/rules, and the facility of understanding these rules;
3. competitive level: number of players, the display of score lists, multiple level of difficulty;
4. relevance for the firm, brand or product: type of product advertised, type of game, advertising elements associated with the game;
5. capacity to induce and maintain the state of flow: multiple levels of difficulty, the possibility offered to players to choose a specific level of difficulty;
6. viral marketing: communication with friends and family members is encouraged.

An objective evaluation of the advergame relevance for the firm/brand/product advertised is difficult at this stage, because it is necessary to define a number of quantifiable criteria that can describe and assess the personality of a brand. The same type of problem is related with evaluating the capacity of the game to induce and maintain a state of flow. In this case, an experiential approach is more suitable, although the two variables defined for this characteristic are equally relevant, being derived from the relation between the capability of the online player, and the capacity of the advergame to propose an appropriate and dynamic level of challenge.

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