

## Chapter 22

# Advertising: It's in the Game

**Paul Skalski**

*Cleveland State University, USA*

**Cheryl Campanella-Bracken**

*Cleveland State University, USA*

**Michael Buncher**

*Cleveland State University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The diffusion of digital media technologies since the 1990s has opened many new channels through which advertisers may reach consumers. This chapter examines the manifestations and effects of advertising in video games. Although early video games rarely and purposefully included advertising, its presence in many contemporary game genres (particularly sports and racing titles) is impossible to ignore. In-game advertising has become a more than \$60 million dollar industry (Gaudiosi, 2006) and is expected to grow to almost \$2 billion by 2010 (Shields, 2006). The present chapter covers the history and types of advertising in video games before shifting to a discussion of research on its effectiveness. The chapter concludes by highlighting the potential of advertising in games, from both applied and research perspectives.*

### **A BRIEF HISTORY...**

In-game advertising has a history almost as old as video games themselves, and like the medium in which they take place, games have gone through considerable changes over time. This section chronicles the history of in-game ads and touches on some of the reasons for its recent explosion in popularity. This is not meant to be an exhaustive history<sup>1</sup>, but simply an overview noting key events

of in-game advertisement history and providing some perspective on its recent developments.

In-game advertisements did not originate solely in early video games, but can be traced back to the coin-operated devices that preceded video games, including pinball. In 1964 there was a *Mustang* pinball machine that feature artwork resembling the car that Ford released that year, but it is not known if the brand name was licensed (Vedrashko, 2006). This may not be the very first example of gaming-related advertising, but it is certainly similar to some of the early and current

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-792-8.ch022

instances of advertising in video games where the goal is not so much to sell a product unrelated to the game, but to incorporate a real product into a game environment to enhance the believability and authenticity of the experience.

Many examples of video game advertisements were brand placements fairly unrelated to the game content, however. A graphical version of the 1973 text game *Lunar Lander*, for example, included an element where the player could make a McDonalds appear by landing in a certain location (Lunar Lander, 2008). After the restaurant appears, the astronaut is shown ordering a Big Mac to go. Similar to *Mustang*, this example illustrates how real world brands can make it into virtual environments and games without the owner of the brand necessarily paying for the “advertisement.” Some early game ads were for other products from the game company or designer. For instance, *Adventureland*, a game by Scott Adams released in 1978, featured an ad for an upcoming game of his called *Pirate Adventure* (In-game advertising, 2008).

Besides these early examples, of which there are too many examples to cover completely, one type of in-game advertisement, the adverggame, really captures many of the early attempts at integrating advertisements into video games. Here, the term *adverggame* is used to describe those games developed or modified primarily for the purpose of advertising, branding or promotion. Although many past and current games have product placements or billboards that are analogous to the real world, those advertisements are generally added for either additional revenue or to enhance the authenticity of the experience. True adverggames in the purest sense are not subtle and started to appear in the early 1980s. A prime example is 1982’s *Tooth Protector*, which was a mail order game from Crest Toothpaste producers Johnson & Johnson. In this game, the player controls a character known as the “Tooth Protector” who protects a row of teeth from food particles dropped by the “Snack Attackers.” The

*Tooth Protector* bounces the particles back at the Attackers; otherwise three hits to the same tooth causes it to decay and the player must save it with a toothbrush, dental floss, and rinse (Bogost, 2007). Another early and very rare example is a game called *Pepsi Invaders*, which was a clone of the popular *Space Invaders* produced by Atari for Coca-Cola in 1983. The game looked and played similarly to *Space Invaders*, but instead of shooting aliens the player’s ship shot at letters spelling Pepsi and a Pepsi logo which replaced the original game’s command ship that soared across the top of the screen. The game is notable for adopting the unusual in-game advertising strategy of the “attack ad,” since the Pepsi name and logo were included in a negative context with no mention of the sponsoring brand (Vedrashko, 2006). A final adverggame of this era that deserves mention is *Chase the Chuck Wagon*, produced by Spectravision for the Atari 2600 to promote Ralston Purina’s Chuck Wagon Dog Food. Like *Tooth Protector*, this game was only available by mail. Its rarity has led some video game collectors to refer to searching for rare games as “chasing the chuck wagon” (Cassidy, 2002).

Adverggames like these were produced during a relatively short period of time before the video game industry crash of 1983, which essentially put an end to their development for awhile. At least one game released before the golden age came to an end, however, transcended the standard definition of an adverggame. For the arcade game *Tapper*, developers Bally-Midway came to Budweiser with the idea for a game featuring a bartender with the goal of serving drinks and picking up empty glasses. The Budweiser brand would be used for various bar items and on the arcade machine’s artwork. The marketers of the game hoped this would make it easier to get the game into bars serving Budweiser, thereby increasing sales of the machine. This game was not developed solely to advertise Budweiser, but also to make a good game and sell arcade machines. The addition of the Budweiser brand was done to

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