

Managing Advergames

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INTRODUCTION

Advergames have been defined as online games that incorporate marketing content (Dobrow, 2004). They are *interactive* games that are centered around a brand, a product, or a character associated with a brand or a product. The game can be used to demonstrate the use of a product or to associate the product with an activity or a lifestyle.

Studies conducted in the U.S. 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, 2004a). 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 findings: in the U.S., 66% of the most frequent game players are over 18 years old, and 40% of them over 35 years old, the average age of a player being 28 year old (D5 Games, 2004a). Another study conducted during December 2003-January 2004 in the U.S. has identified women over 40 years old as a major segment interested in online gaming (Arkadium, 2004)—they spend 9.1 hours per week playing games or 41% of their online time in comparison with only 6.1 hours per week, or 26% of their online time for men.

These data demonstrate the huge potential of *advergames* (Rodgers, 2004; Sennott, 2004). However, despite the hype created by this new *advertising* method, most of the information presenting *advergames* is professionally-oriented (DeCollibus, 2002; D5 Games, 2004b; Hartsock, 2004). Very few academic studies have been initiated to investigate the characteristics of *advergames*, and their influence on *consumers' perceptions* and *behavior* (Hernandez, Chapa, Minor, Maldonado, & Barranzuela, 2004; Nelson, 2002).

This article attempts to identify, based on the existent professional literature, the specific characteristics of an efficient *advergame*, and to verify the influence of *advergames* on players' behaviour. Therefore, the research objectives of this study are the following:

1. To present the potential of *advergames*.
2. To discuss the theories explaining the effect of *advergames* on consumers' perceptions and behaviour.

3. To analyze the influence of *advergames* on consumers' behaviour, using the empirical data collected through an experimental research project.

The following section of this article presents the main characteristics of *advergames*. Section 3 opens a theoretical debate regarding the mechanism of action of *advergames* on consumers' perceptions and behaviour, based on the "state of flow" and the AIDA models. The effect of *advergames* is empirically investigated in Section 4, which presents the results of a survey conducted in Montpellier Business School, France. The article concludes with an overview of the study and with proposition for future research.

DESCRIPTION OF ADVERGAMES

The interest in *advergames* has substantially increased in the last five 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 *advergame* is 7 to 30 minutes, which cannot be reached for a classical TV advertisement.
- Viral marketing: 81% of the players will e-mail their friends to try a good game.

The *advergames* industry is using the format of classical computer games: the Internet user is able to access a set of instructions that describe the game, the main commands and the tastes that activate them, and then he/she is invited to start playing. Although the *advergames* are free, some games require registration, the data introduced by the player providing important information about the profile of the audience. Depending on their complexity, the *advergames* can have one or more game levels, and can be played alone or together with other participants. The score is displayed on the screen, and, in line with the viral aspect of *advergames*, the players are often encouraged to send information about the game to

their friend and relatives, an e-mail facility being offered for this purpose. In order to increase the motivation of players, some advergames promise gifts, prizes, or promotional incentives to the best scorer(s).

The companies specialized in creating advergames have identified and presented the characteristics of an efficient advergame (D5 Games, 2004b):

- Accessible to all users, and especially to non-gamers;
- Immersive and engrossing—it should capture and hold player's attention for 5 to 30 minutes;
- Easy to understand, but challenging;
- Competitive—encouraging repeated visits;
- Relevant for the firm/brand/product that is advertised;
- Viral—to encourage communication with friends or family.

An advergame can be designed and used for various reasons, such as:

- To increase the notoriety of a firm, a brand or a product;
- To associate positive emotions with a firm, a brand or a product;
- To initiate an action of *viral marketing*;
- To introduce and facilitate a promotional campaign;
- To induce the purchasing behaviour, and therefore to increase the volume of sales; or
- All of the above.

As any other marketing communication tools, the advergame 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, and (4) the strategic objectives of the communication campaign.

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

THE INFLUENCE OF ADVERGAMES ON CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR

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 of the “state of flow”. This concept is used by psychologists to describe a mental state in which attention is highly concentrated on a specific process, the environmental information is screened out, and the person experiences a harmonious flow of 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.

The 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. 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). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, world specialist in the state of flow, outlines that the most successful Web sites are the ones that offer interactive experiences, and not simply 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 presents three possible scenarios of the interaction between an Internet user and an advergame.

When the capability of the player is lower than the difficulty of the advergame, the player will experience frustration and will abandon the game with a negative feeling. If the capability of the player is higher than the level of difficulty proposed by the game, a feeling of boredom is likely to result, determining the exit of the

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