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# Part I

## Digital Games as an Advertising Medium



## 2. Advergames: A Definition

### Abstract

Since the term *advergame* was first coined and defined, a growing number of scholars have turned their attention toward advergames and have proposed several definitions applicable to the different purposes of their studies. None of the definitions previously proposed, however, include all of the elements that are necessary to define this practice precisely and to differentiate it from other marketing strategies. In this chapter, I undertake a critical review of previous definitions proposed by scholars for the term ‘advergames’ and I propose a new definition for this concept.

**Keywords:** definition of advergames, advergames, digital advertising, new media marketing, critical review

The term *advergame* was initially defined by the conceptual artist Jonathon Keats in his column *Jargon Watch* in *Wired* magazine as “a downloadable or Web-based game created solely to enable product placements” (Keats, 2001). However, advergames are not only downloadable or web-based games as they are also available on other platforms and in other forms, such as console advergames,<sup>1</sup> which are distributed in a physical format. A good example is the console advergame *Volvo: Drive for Life* (Xbox, 2005) released exclusively for the Xbox console. Furthermore, advergames are not created solely to enable product placements, but also to convey advertising messages, which do not always use product placement.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Console advergames are advergames designed to be played on videogame consoles.

<sup>2</sup> “As an advertising technique, product placement involves inserting a brand or product into a movie, television show, book, or video game” (Glass, 2007, p. 23). As will be further explained, product placement is one of the techniques that can be used within advergames to convey advertising messages, but it is not always used and it is rarely the sole function of advergames.

Since the term *advergames* was defined, several scholars have proposed definitions for this concept.<sup>3</sup> None of these definitions, however, are useful for studying advergames from a persuasive communication perspective and none clearly differentiate this practice from other (similar) marketing strategies. Although it is not the aim of this book to collect all definitions proposed for the term advergame, some of them are reviewed here to establish a more accurate definition. For this revision, I have selected the most cited, and thus most prevalent, definitions of the term while disregarding less current definitions that presented inaccuracies similar to those analyzed below. After a critical review of previous definitions proposed by scholars for the term ‘advergames’, I will propose my own definition.

## Previous Definitions of Advergames

### Chen & Ringel's Definition

A definition commonly cited by scholars<sup>4</sup> was proposed in 2001 by Jane Chen & Matthew Ringel, analysts at the interactive agency <kpe>, in their ‘white paper’ ‘Can Advergaming be the Future of Interactive Advertising?’.<sup>5</sup> In their text, the authors define advergaming as “the use of interactive gaming technology to deliver embedded advertising messages to consumers” (Chen & Ringel, in Theodorou & Sirmakessis, 2009, p. 1).

An interesting point of Chen and Ringel's definition concerns the nature of advergames. The authors refer to the use of “interactive gaming technologies” instead of the use of “digital games” to deliver advertising messages. However, the use of interactive gaming technologies does not necessarily result in a digital game but can result in other kinds of interactive content such as an interactive movie, which can make use of interactive gaming technologies

3 See Bogost, 2007; Cauberghe & De Pelsmacker, 2010; Chang, Yan, Zhang, & Luo, 2010; Heide & Nørholm, 2009; Hernandez & Chapa, 2009; Hernandez, et al., 2004; Lee, Choi, Quilliam, & Cole, 2009; Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007; Purswani, 2010; Selva Ruiz, 2009; Theodorou & Sirmakessis, 2009; Vedrashko, 2006; Winkler & Buckner, 2006; Wise, Bolls, Kim, Venkataram, & Meyer, 2008.

4 See Bogost 2007, p.152; Heide & Nørholm, 2009, p.55; Pinto Neto, 2007, p.4; Theodorou & Sirmakessis, 2009, p.1.

5 ‘Can Advergaming be the Future of Interactive Advertising?’ was the first of a bi-monthly series of free ‘white paper’ reports, called ‘Fast Forward’, featuring original research on, and analysis of, digital media issues. This report was written by Jane Chen and Matthew Ringel, who were then working for the consulting firm <kpe>. The report is no longer available online (see Afshar, Banerjee, & Jones, 2004, p. 382).

to engage its audience. An example of this is the interactive branded movie *Being Henry* (Rover, 2011) released by Land Rover to convey the features and benefits of the Range Rover Evoque model. The outcome of the movie depends on the viewer's choices for the film's protagonist. Each choice that viewers make for the lead character, Henry, influences the particular set-up of the new model of the Evoque that is presented to the viewer when the film has finished. For example, if the viewer chooses to ignore Henry's family reunion to spend time with a young waitress, the car he ends up with is the two-door coupe version, rather than the five-door family version. The story has a total of nine different storylines and 32 potential endings. The idea of multiple choices is meant to embody the wide variety of options available for the Range Rover Evoque model.

*Being Henry* (Ibid.) uses interactive gaming techniques to engage the viewer and provide a unique experience. The final result, however, is a movie and not a digital game. I claim that advergames are always digital games and not any other kind of interactive branded experience. Audio-visual entertainment content, other than digital games, which are used as advertising media, should, in fact, be labeled as 'advertainment' (Martí Parreño, 2005, p. 29). Chen and Ringel's definition is therefore imprecise and can lead to misunderstandings, because it can be applied to content that is not advergames.

### Mallinckrodt & Mizerski's Definition

Although the term advergames has been related to digital games since the moment it was conceived, the marketing scholars Victoria Mallinckrodt and Dick Mizerski<sup>6</sup> link the definition of advergames to games in general, not only to digital games. The authors define an advergame as a "form of branded entertainment that feature[s] advertising messages, logos, and trade characters in a game format" (2007, p. 87). However, digital games have characteristics that clearly differentiate them from other kind of games, thus their persuasive potential as advertising media is unique and should be studied separately. For this reason, I consider it more appropriate to limit the use of the term advergames solely to digital games.

In addition, Mallinckrodt and Mizerski focus their definition on the way brands are embedded within games. The authors state that games

6 Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, specialized in marketing research, conducted a study that aimed to analyze the effects that playing an advergame had on young children's perceptions, preferences, and requests (2007).

feature advertising messages, logos, and trade characters to produce branded entertainment. However, the use of logos or trade characters represents just two of the multiple techniques that can be employed to embed advertising messages in games (see chapter 6 of this book). Consequently, I consider it inapt to include a list of the different techniques that can be used to convey advertising messages in any list of advergames' definitions, inasmuch as it is impossible to include a complete list of them without it being excessively long. It can be concluded that, although Mallinckrodt and Mizerski's definition of advergames is not necessarily wrong, it is at least incomplete.

### Heide & Nørholm Just's Definition

Another interesting definition was proposed by the media scholars Jonas Heide and Sine Nørholm Just,<sup>7</sup> who define an advergame as a "game whose main purpose is to boost sales of a product or service, whether through increased brand recognition, increased linking or other methods" (2009, p. 54). In this definition, authors again opt to relate the concept advergame to games in general, which I disagree with since it fails to recognize the specific procedural structures of advergames.

The definition proposed by Heide and Nørholm Just is focused on the purpose of advergames, which they state is to boost sales of a product or service, and the methods used to address that purpose. However, the purpose of advergames is not always to produce purchases as Heide and Nørholm Just claim. The purpose of the messages conveyed through advergames are the same as the messages conveyed through other types of media. Therefore, all advergames "are not, should not, and cannot be designed to produce immediate purchases on the part of all who are exposed to it" (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961, p. 59).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the strategies used in advergames are as varied as the pursued intentions. Thus, there is no point in mentioning an incomplete list of methods in a definition, which should be well demarcated and accurate. In sum, although Heide and Nørholm Just's definition provides an interesting approach to the concept, it is also inaccurate and incomplete.

7 Heide & Nørholm Just are specialized in online communication and conducted research focused on the rhetorical potential of advergames in which they include their definition of advergames (2009).

8 The purpose of advergames is further explained in chapter 7.

## Selva Ruiz's Definition

The most precise definition I have found was proposed by the business communication scholar David Selva Ruiz,<sup>9</sup> who defines an advergame as “un videojuego financiado por un anunciante y creado para un producto o marca con un determinado objetivo publicitario” (“a videogame financed by an advertiser and created for a product or brand with an advertising intention”)<sup>10</sup> (Selva Ruiz, 2009, p. 151). The author's definition mentions a relevant issue missing from the definitions proposed by other scholars, namely that an advergame is specifically designed for a product or a brand. This is a point that deserves special attention and I will come back to it later.

Furthermore, if an advergame is designed with an advertising intention, it would follow that an advertiser should finance it, as Selva Ruiz suggests in his definition. However, I would not include this stipulation in a definition of advergames. Consider, for example, the possibility that a game studio decides to reward its best client annually with a free advergame design. In that case, the advertiser would not be financing the design, but it does not mean that the game is no longer an advergame. Therefore, although Selva Ruiz's definition is quite precise and complete, I would amend it slightly to produce a more accurate definition.

## A New Definition of Advergames

Based on the critical analysis of previous definitions for the term ‘advergame’, I propose here a new, more accurate definition. I claim that an advergame is *a digital game specifically designed for a brand with the aim of conveying an advertising message*.

This definition can be divided into three parts, which will be explained in-depth below. The first part of the definition, in which I assert that “an advergame is a digital game”, aims to describe the characteristics of an advergame. The second part of the definition, in which I state that advergames are “specifically designed for a brand”, aims to differentiate advergames from other type of marketing strategies using digital games. Finally, the third part of this definition, in which I claim that advergames have the

9 David Selva Ruiz conducts research in the field of business communication and proposed a definition for advergames in a paper in which he analyzed digital games as tools for advertising communication (2009).

10 Translated by the author from Spanish into English.



“aim of conveying an advertising message”, tries to clarify the objective of this marketing strategy.

### **An Advergame is a Digital Game**

Previously, I claimed that, although other types of games can also be used to convey advertising messages, the term ‘advergames’ has been associated with digital games since its inception in 2000. In this section, I provide arguments to support this statement, including examining the term’s usage since it was coined. Furthermore, I will argue that digital games have characteristics that clearly differentiate them from other kinds of games. Thus, their persuasive potentials as advertising media are unique and should be studied in their own right. To illustrate this argument, I address the definition of digital games to identify those properties that make them unique media for conveying advertising messages.

As previously stated, the use of the concept advergames has been linked to digital games since it was coined in 2000 by Giallourakis. This portmanteau is a combination of the two key concepts related to the phenomenon: advertising and online games. Furthermore, Jonathon Keats’ initial definition also proposed linking the term exclusively to digital games (Danesi, 2009, p. 11).

Most of the definitions proposed by scholars also refer to the digital nature of advergames.<sup>11</sup> Those definitions that do not allude to the digital nature of advergames (e.g. Heide & Nørholm Just, 2009; Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007) are part of research focused on topics related to digital games.

Having illustrated the historical relationship of the term advergames to digital games, let us proceed by identifying the properties of digital games that make them unique advertising media. For this purpose, I will start from the definition of games, to determine the particular attributes of digital games and consider the advertising potential of particular attributes.

There are multiple scholarly definitions for the term *game*. All these definitions have been carefully reviewed by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (2004, pp. 73-80) and by Jesper Juul in his book *Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005, pp. 29-36). Rather than revisiting these definitions, in this work I adopt Salen and Zimmerman’s highly regarded definition: “a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined

11 See Chen & Ringel, 2001; Hernandez, et al., 2004; Martí Parreño, 2005; Selva Ruiz, 2009; Theodorou & Sirmakessis, 2009; Wise, et al., 2008.

by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 80).

Following Salen & Zimmerman’s definition, games should be considered as systems defined by rules. The authors define a system as a “set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole” (Ibid., p. 55) and identify four elements that all systems share: objects, the parts within the system; attributes, the qualities of that system and its objects; internal relationships among the system’s objects; and an environment that surrounds the system. Thus, if the environment that surrounds the system is an element of it, the physical medium of a game is a defining feature of it. In digital games framed as systems, digital technology should be considered as one element of the system (Ibid., p. 91). Therefore, the authors assume that digital games have special qualities that, while they may also be present in non-digital games, are more characteristic of the digital variety. Those traits are: immediate but narrow interactivity; manipulation of information; complex automated systems; and networked communication (Ibid., pp. 87-89).

Three of the special qualities of digital games proposed by Salen and Zimmerman overlap with the four essential properties of digital environments identified by Janet Murray in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997). Murray asserts that digital environments are procedural, which is related to their nature as complex automated systems; participatory, which is related to their nature as interactive systems; encyclopedic, which is related to their capacity to hold and manipulate information; and spatial, which is related to their power to represent spaces through which players can navigate (Ibid., p. 71).

Since the nature of advergames is digital, it can be concluded that advergames also feature these mentioned traits. Thus, as digital games, advergames are procedural, spatial, interactive, encyclopedic, and networked environments. The following five sections are focused on describing how these properties can be exploited to convey advertising messages.

### Advergames as Procedural Environments

Murray uses the term procedural to refer to digital environments’ “defining ability to execute a series of rules” (Ibid., p. 71). She explains that, in the same way that “drama allows us to explore action, simulation narrative can allow us to explore processes”<sup>12</sup> (Ibid., p. 181). As procedural environments,

<sup>12</sup> Processes are understood as the “methods, techniques and logics that drive the operation of systems” (Bogost, 2007, p. 2).

digital games can embody and execute processes and allow players to collaborate in the performance. Hence, players can “enact, modify, control and understand processes within advergames in a very different manner [than] they do in other media” (Ibid., p. 181).

In his influential book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Ian Bogost claims that procedural expression implies the creation of a symbolic system that governs human thought or action (2007, p. 5). He understands that while not all procedures are expressive, processes that might appear unexpressive may, actually, entail a higher order of expression that comes from symbol manipulation. Therefore, Bogost defines procedurality as a “way of creating, explaining or understanding processes” (Ibid., p. 2). The author defines the term ‘procedural rhetoric’ to designate the practice of conveying arguments through processes. Those arguments are made through the manipulation of rules of behavior that in digital games are ‘authored’ in the code (Ibid., p. 29). Therefore, advergames can make use of the procedural nature of digital games to embed persuasive arguments within the rules of the game.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the presence of a system of rules within digital games is sometimes undetectable, because digital environments do not readily reveal their internal workings. The rules authored in the code that makes games work in a specific manner are usually not available to the player (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 88). This capacity of digital games to obscure the system can be useful in advergames to overcome players’ resistance to persuasion. If players are not aware of the presence of a system of rules within the game, they are not going to be aware of the arguments made through the manipulation of those rules. Because of the procedural nature of digital games, players feel that their performance may influence the behavior of the system (Murray, 1997, p. 74). In other words, players feel in control of the situation, which may cause them to let their guard down against possible persuasion.

Furthermore, digital games have the potential to automate complicated processes, which facilitates the design of complex games “that would be too complicated in a non-computerized context” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 88). This potential facilitates the conveying of complex messages through the manipulation of the rules of complicated processes that involve several dynamic variables.

13 Bogost’s statements on procedural rhetoric deserve special attention, and I will return to them in the next chapter.

In addition, the rules of digital games usually cannot be discussed and changed during play (Sicart, 2009, p. 27). Unlike analog games, in which players commonly discuss, negotiate and change rules, in digital games, rules are non-negotiable during play because they are authored in the code, which is not accessible to players. Thus, the manipulation of rules with persuasive intentions is more easily accomplished within digital games, whose rules cannot be changed by players.

An example of how advergames can make use of procedural rhetoric to convey advertising messages is *Hit it Pure* (Hello Design, 2009), an online game that allows players to hit pure shots with two Callaway Golf drivers, the FT-iQ and the FT-9. The game was designed in a realistic physical setting to let the player experience the precision of these models. The physical settings of the game give players a realistic simulation of the behavior of a golf ball in real life, which makes them aware of the benefits of the drivers without the need for complex explanatory texts.

### Advergames as Spatial Environments

Digital games are also characterized by their power to simulate spaces through which players can navigate (see Aarseth, 2001; Murray, 1997, p. 79). Henry Jenkins gives special relevance to this property of digital games in his article *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, in which he describes game designers as architects who design worlds and sculpt unique spaces that can be explored, mapped, and controlled by players (2004, p. 13).

Furthermore, in the same way that the expressive capacity of procedurality is unique to digital games, so is the expressive capacity of spatial design. Game space embodies a rule set capable of structuring the play in a way in which the geographic layout, the architecture, and mise-en-scène become expressive (Ferrari, 2010, p. 2). All the space elements of advergames can be designed with a persuasive intention. Moreover, the possibilities provided to players to navigate through the space can also be designed to be expressive themselves.

However, there appears to be a preponderance of advergames that minimize spaces that can be 'freely' explored by the player, such as mazes and arenas, and instead opt for track-spatial structures, such as side scrollers, racing games, rail shooters, and corridor shooters that guide the player's performance within the game (Ibid., p. 30). In this style of game structure, even if the diegetic space seems to continue outward and away from the track, the player is not able to explore it.

However, limiting the player's freedom in order to ensure persuasive effectiveness shows no respect for the specificities of the medium. Providing freedom of movement to players makes them feel in control of the situation, which makes them let their guard down against persuasion, an effect that can be useful in advergames to overcome players' resistance to advertising messages. Moreover, it can also be used as a strategy to increase the retention of players, who can be motivated to return to the game to explore the uncharted territory.

An example of the latter is the advergame *OCB Blackthinking* (Medusateam, Inocua the Sign, Physalia & Nitsnets, 2010). This advergame was part of a viral campaign aimed at promoting a special edition of OCB rolling paper that used the blackthinking movement born in 2007. The blackthinking movement was based on independent thought, and its leitmotiv could be summed up as 'do what you think, don't think what you do'. The game starts with the following sentences, encouraging the player to feel free and to be creative: "Welcome to a place where you are not allowed not to think. Not allowed not to imagine. Not allowed not to create. Not allowed not to decide. Welcome to a place where ideas take on a life of their own." The space of this advergame is a village that can be explored by the players, where they are able to face challenges, interact with characters, and create their own designs. This space design is very much in tune with the communication concept of the advertising campaign, which aims at individual creativity, ingenuity, and imagination. Thus, the possibility to freely explore the game space becomes meaningful itself.

### Advergames as Interactive Environments

Digital games are capable of representing not only visual spaces that can be explored by the player, but also abstract environments that are discovered "by the interactive process of navigation" (Murray, 1997, p. 80). The interactive property of digital games facilitates the design of environments that support actions and return outcomes from players' choices. A designed interaction, with an internal structure and context, provides meaning to the actions taken by players (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, pp. 58-69). Therefore, designed interaction can be used with persuasive intentions within advergames. This type of interactivity was identified by Salen and Zimmerman as 'explicit interactivity', which implies "interaction in the obvious sense of the word" (2004, p. 60). However, the authors identify three other modes of interactivity that should be taken into consideration when designing advergames: cognitive interactivity; functional interactivity; and

beyond-the-object-interactivity (Ibid., pp. 59-60). An advergame's designer can work with the four modes of interactivity to assign brand-related meaning to the actions taken by the player. This can be a powerful way to convey advertising messages through advergames.

Cognitive interactivity is the "psychological, emotional and intellectual participation between a person and a system" (Ibid., 2004, p. 59). This mode of interactivity cannot be designed, but it can be triggered by the whole advergame experience. For instance, a game design can generate complex imaginative participation. The psychological, emotional, and intellectual responses elicited by the advergame can be linked to the advertising message and can encourage players to establish connections between what they experience and the brand.

Functional interactivity is determined by the "structural interactions with the material components of the system" (Ibid., p. 59). This type of interactivity is defined in advergames by the design of the interface. The possibilities provided to the players to interact with the system are structurally provided by the interface. The response of the interface to specific actions of the player and even its visual presentation can be designed to become meaningful.

Finally, beyond-the-object interactivity is the "interaction outside the experience of a single designed system" (Ibid., p. 60). Again, this mode of interactivity cannot be designed by the advertiser but can be triggered by the advergame design. Beyond-the-object interactivity can be useful to spread the advertising message. The way players share their experiences with other people can be facilitated by the system through the introduction of social interactive features, which will be explained in detail below. However, the impressions that players share about the advergame or the advertising message cannot be controlled by the advertiser and will depend on the unique experience of each player.

Due to the interactive nature of advergames, players adopt an active stance toward them that differs from the passive attitude of traditional media audiences. Whereas the majority of advertising forms are interruptive, advergames are a marketing strategy that operates on pull, which means that it is the player who voluntarily approaches the advertising message. Thus, "advergames are one of the few examples where brands can successfully entice consumers to play with advertising messages" (Kempt, 2009, p. 25). Furthermore, advergames have the potential to allow the player to interact with the advertised product in its natural environment. That interactivity occurs in terms of immediacy, but at the same time it is also confined by the narrow specification of the digital device on which the game is being played.

A good example of the latter is *FMX* (Valentin & Byhr, Normal Inc., & Lucky Punk, 2010), an advergame launched to present a new truck model for the construction sector from Volvo. The game is designed as a realistic driving test experience in which the player is challenged to confront difficult situations that drivers encounter in the physical world, such as climbing a steep hill. A special feature of the truck, which serves to overcome the difficulties, is presented in each challenge. In the case of the steep hill, the game shows the player how to use the i-Shift control to let the truck handle the downshift. In this advergame, the players have the opportunity to interact with the truck in a space that simulates its natural environment. However, this experience is confined within the possibilities of the computer device, so players have to control the truck using their keyboards and not the wheel, the pedals and the gearshift. Thus, they can get some information by interacting with the truck in the advergame, but there is some valuable information that cannot be conveyed through interactivity because of the limitations of the digital device.

### Advergames as Encyclopedic Environments

As digital games, advergames also have the potential to contain large amounts of information encyclopedically that can be selectively revealed at appropriate moments during play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 88). This trait makes advergames a unique medium for conveying complex advertising messages without triggering players' resistance.

Advergames are useful for conveying complex messages because of their capacity to store large amounts of data in different forms, such as text, video, audio, images, or 3D animations. In fact, every aspect of an advergame's program can be regarded as information, such as the mechanisms for handling players' interactivity (Ibid., p. 88). All this data can be designed to convey a complex advertising message that takes advantage of the communication potentialities of the different formats of stored information.

Moreover, advergames can avoid players' resistance to such complex advertising messages by selectively revealing information during play. As complex automated systems, advergames can hide information from players and then reveal it at particular moments of the game session, depending on players' performance. This property also allows advergames to convey customized messages, revealing different information depending on players' performance.



An example of how advergames can store large amounts of information and reveal it selectively during play can be seen in *Get the Glass!* (North Kingdom, 2007), an advergame developed for the Milk Processor Board of California. The communication concept of the game is focused on the idea that milk consumption brings physical and psychological benefits that impact positively on players' health and social lives.

The communication concept of *Get the Glass!* is presented in the story of the game, whose protagonists are four members of a family, the Adachis. The Adachi family is chased by the police after several attempts to steal a big glass of milk that is protected inside a fort. The goal of the family is to get this big glass of milk, because without milk they suffer physical and psychological problems. Each of the four members of the family has a personal story concerning the physical and psychological problems caused by the lack of milk consumption.

Many audiovisual elements in the game contain information that complement the message presented by the story. The most remarkable thing is the audiovisual treatment of the object of desire of the family, the glass of milk. The player can also find other visual elements that hold valuable information connected to the advertising message, such as X-rays that show the weakened bones of the father, or the son's decayed teeth caused by the lack of milk consumption.

Furthermore, the mechanics of the game also contain information related to the communication message. In one of the challenges, for instance, the information is held in the mechanism that handles players' interactivity. The objective of players is to help the father drive a van along a winding road. In this case, the system responds to the players' performance in an unexpected way, making it difficult for them to control the van. The argument conveyed through this interactive process is that it is difficult for the father to control the van because his muscles are weakened and he does not have enough strength to control it properly as a consequence of low milk consumption. In addition, there is also a lot of textual information present in the game that contains in-depth information about the benefits of milk consumption, such as the family members' criminal files or instructional texts of the challenges and fortune cards. All of these texts contain arguments that reinforce the advertising message.

Therefore, *Get the Glass!* contains an amount of information about the benefits of milk consumption that is unimaginable in advertisements in any other media. The information is also selectively revealed within the game and only those players who are really interested in detailed information obtain it, which helps to overcome resistance.



## Advergames as Networked Environments

As networked environments, digital games can ease communication among players and between players and game designers. What makes digital games different from other kinds of games is that this communication can be established over long distances and participants can share a range of social spaces (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 89). This communication, I claim, can be voluntarily or subconsciously established and consciously or subconsciously perceived.

In advergames, game designers can consciously manipulate game elements to convey an advertising message that can be consciously or subconsciously perceived by players. On the other hand, players can voluntarily or subconsciously communicate with brands during game play, which can provide the latter with relevant information on consumers' preferences and needs. In addition, players can establish communication with other players with whom they can voluntarily or subconsciously spread the advertising message.

Communication among players and brands within advergames can be established in many forms. Brands can communicate with players manipulating all the elements of the game design with the purpose of conveying an advertising message. Players can communicate with other players during the game session through chats, social media features, real-time audio or video, or in-game interaction, for example. Furthermore, players can voluntarily or unwittingly communicate with brands during the game session through social features, registration forms, contact forms, email, chat, or even through their own performance in the game. Thus, networked communication is a powerful property of advergames to increase player acquisition, retention, and virality, three terms directly related to advergames' effectiveness.

Player acquisition techniques are focused on attracting new players to the advergame. The best practices are those that help to increase participation rates and minimize acquisition costs. As participatory environments, digital games are able to integrate directly into the gameplay player acquisition techniques, such as friend invitations and game mechanics that require contributions of friends to succeed. These strategies also permit an increase in player virality, the degree to which one player invites other players into the game. These practices provide powerful benefits when they are deeply integrated into the game experience. Furthermore, player retention techniques have the aim of extending the loyalty and lifetime value of players. The integration of social challenges and competitions within advergames are strategies that take advantage of participatory features of games to increase acquisition rates (Whitehead, 2011, p. 1).

Examples of how social features can be used within advergames to increase player acquisition, retention, and virality can be found in the advergame *Pleasure Hunt 2* (Lowe Brindfords, B-Reel, & Plan8, 2012). The advergame is a race across the internet launched by the ice cream brand Magnum. In the game, players are invited to collect chocolate pieces of Magnum across New York, Paris, and Rio de Janeiro. The game uses Bing's streetview-like interface to provide the backdrop. After the experience, the players are invited to share the game with their friends and acquaintances on Facebook and Twitter. By June 2012, more than 3.8 millions of users had already 'liked' the game on Facebook, evidence that players are sharing their experiences with others. Moreover, the game also enables players to create a challenge on Facebook, inviting some friends to join it. In creating the challenge, players give Magnum's Facebook application access to their social profile, providing the brand with better knowledge of consumers' profiles, preferences, and needs.

After a detailed analysis of the properties of digital games that differentiate them from other kind of games, it can be concluded that acknowledging the properties of advergames can be useful in understanding how they can be exploited to convey meaningful experiences. Now that the digital nature of advergames has been established, I will continue the discussion of the definition of advergames proposed above by explaining what differentiates them from other type of strategies.

### **An Advergame is Specifically Designed for a Brand**

In the definition I propose above, I specify that advergames are specifically designed for a brand. This stipulation, which has not been included in most of the definitions reviewed above, is of particular relevance because it serves to differentiate advergames from commercial digital games in which advertising techniques are used to promote products or services. This means that advergames are designed for brands that need to convey an advertising message, which implies that the whole experience is conceived with that purpose. Commercial digital games have a purpose that is different from advertising, most likely entertainment, but they resort to advertising as a source of revenue and, in certain genres, as a way of enhancing the realism of the game.<sup>14</sup> In-game advertising and product placement are the most

<sup>14</sup> Nelson has demonstrated that when advertisements are placed in scenes that match the physical world, they help to enhance the game experience (see 2002, p. 88).

common techniques for advertising products and services in commercial digital games.

Chang, Yan, Zhang, & Luo, who studied the effects of in-game advertising, define the concept as “the placement of brands in games usually in the form of billboards, posters, or sponsor signage in sports and racing games” (2010, p. 63). However, the potential of this strategy grows and changes as quickly as new technologies do. Thus, ads can appear in digital games in every imaginable way and not just in the form of billboards, posters, or sponsor signage, as Chang et al. state, but also as dynamic streaming content or real-time viral messaging, for instance. An example of the potential of the technologies used to integrate ads in digital games is the advertising system Spyware,<sup>15</sup> incorporated in *Battlefield 2142* (Electronic Arts, 2006), which is able to selectively deliver ads by region.

The concept of in-game advertising should not be confused with the strategy of product placement in games, even though the boundaries between the two can sometimes be difficult to distinguish. I would argue that the term “in-game advertising” can be replaced by “in-game ad placement” in comparison to “in-game product placement” to clarify that the former refers to the strategy of placing ads in games while the latter refers to the strategy of placing products in games. Product placement in digital games is an attractive strategy because it gives the players the opportunity to interact with a product in its natural environments and implies endorsement when an actor or character uses the product (Kuhn, Love, & Pope, 2004, p. 1). Nike shoes, for example, were integrated into *NBA 2K6* (2K Sports, 2005), released for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. In standard gameplay mode, over two hundred athletes wear Nike shoes, which they normally use on the court in the physical world. The game also integrates Nike’s online shoe customization software, which enables players to design and personalize shoes that can be worn by players in the game.

The combination of in-game advertising and product placement techniques within commercial digital games can result in unique branded experiences. An illustrative example of this is the location-based special edition of *Angry Birds*, which came about through a collaboration between Rovio and McDonald’s in China in 2012. In this special edition, *Angry Birds* gamers playing in McDonald’s restaurants in China were able to unlock a variety of content, such as game modes, stages, and power-ups, depending on which McDonald’s outlet they were visiting.

15 This advertising system uses a player’s IP address to determine the region of the player, enabling the advertiser to deliver appropriate ads by region and language.

However, no matter how well-integrated a brand is in a commercial digital game, it will always be an outsider in an experience that was designed for other purposes. Advergames, on the contrary, are branded games specifically designed to accomplish an advertising purpose. Consequently, their content is fully controlled by the advertiser, which means that the entire experience is designed to embody the advertising message. Again, in-game advertising and product placement are common techniques that are used within advergames to achieve the advertising goals. Yet, in advergames, marketers can also persuade players by manipulating other game elements, such as the story, the characters, or the rules. The sixth and seventh chapters focus on understanding which elements of digital games can be designed to convey advertising messages and what techniques can be used for that purpose.

### **An Advergame Aims to Convey an Advertising Message**

Up to this point, I have argued that an advergame is a digital game specifically designed for a brand and that the purpose of the advergame is to convey an advertising message. Thus, a digital game is understood here as the medium selected by a brand to convey an advertising message in the communication process it establishes with its customers.

I have assumed that, as digital games, advergames are participatory environments. That means that the communication process that the brand establishes with its clients is not a one-directional communication process as in traditional media, in which the brand is the sender and a group of consumers are the receivers. In advergames, the communication process is bidirectional, and its final result depends not only on players' choices on designed interaction, but also on their personal way of interacting with the environment, the decisions they take that are not part of the designed interaction. Therefore, the interactive nature of digital games makes players co-authors of the advertising discourse. When playing the advergame, players interpret an unrepeatable message that is the result of their performance during the game experience.

There are at least three actors that must be taken into consideration in this communication process: the brand, which wants to convey an advertising message; the game, which is the medium selected to convey the message; and the player, who is the target of the advertising message. Relationships are established between these three actors that need to be considered to understand how this communication process works. Firstly, there is a relationship between the brand and the player: the brand wants to convey an advertising message to the player by making use of an interactive medium,

which results in the player's interpretation of the advertising message. Secondly, there is a relationship between the brand and the game: in order to convey the advertising message, the brand needs to properly embed it within the game, which results in a branded experience. And finally, there is a relationship between the player and the game: the player makes his own choices within the game, which results in an unrepeatable player performance. Thus, the players' interpretation of the advertising message depends not only on their personal performances within the game, but also on the way the advertising message is integrated within the branded experience.

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