

Advergames: games as marketing tools

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Abstract

The contemporary multiplatform environment, connecting many different devices, became a privileged ambient for advertising and marketing campaigns. In this context, it is also possible to cast a message for a brand, product or service using a ludic language through a gaming format. Acknowledging the prominence of digital networks and entertainment in today's *mediapolis* (Silverstone, 2007), games can be considered an ideal tool for branding and marketing campaigns. In this paper, we seek to analyze “advergames” – games developed specifically for communication and marketing purposes. Based on academic studies on communication and consumer culture, with special emphasis on digital marketing and games, our empirical research was done by the use of virtual ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000; Hine, 2005; Kozinets, 2009) and bibliographic approach. Our main objective in this paper is to discuss the essential features of this category of games and the most important points, to create an effective advergame. We have selected examples from different companies to illustrate our discussion. We also interviewed professionals from marketing and games area to understand and demonstrate how a game could be a marketing tool. It is important to highlight that, in this context, video games should be considered not only a product, but a media platform for advertising.

Keywords: marketing, advergame, in-game advertising, product placement

1. Introduction: defining “advergame”, “product placement in games” and “in-game advertising”

According to Cavallini (2006), the notion of advergame – a neologism formed from the juxtaposing of the words “advertise” and “game” – could be described as a strategy for marketing that uses games, mainly electronic, to advertise brands and products. That includes a large range that goes from complex games that are developed specifically for advertising purposes to common casual games. The Internet and video game consoles are great environments to use this strategy. Mobile media (smartphones and tablets) are already being tested by companies, which chose this marketing strategy too. For instance, the Brazilian branch of the soft drink brand *Fanta* launched in 2015 a hot site with ten advergames. Developed by Sioux Studio, the games emphasized *Fanta*'s branding features like happiness, friendship, radical sports and music. All the features of the brand appeared in campaigns displayed on television, magazines, movie theaters and on the Internet are present in the game; therefore, we can conclude that the game is an advertising piece like any other.

Cavallini (2006) also discusses the idea of product placement in games as a strategy that inserts a company's product inside the gaming interface and context. The characters in the game *Devil May Cry* wear pants with the *Diesel* brand in evidence. In *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell - Pandora Tomorrow*, the character uses a *Sony Ericsson p900* smartphone to solve missions, so the player virtually experiences the use of the device. In *Worms 3D*, by SEGA Studio, the characters drink a can of *Red Bull* energy drink in order to jump higher. In the last released *UFC* game, we can see the fighters wearing shorts and gloves from famous sporting brands. It is very important to highlight that this kind of strategy, as everything in marketing, needs its context aligned with the target audience. In all previous examples, the product fits in the gaming universe and dialogues with the players.

Another fundamental keyword in this context is in-game advertising. As Herrewijn and Poels (2011) define, in-game advertising refers to the use of games as a medium for the delivery of advertisements, and the authors point

out that there is one player branding experience during the gameplay. In this type of strategy, we can notice the use of banners, posters, radio spots, digital ads and billboards mixed to the game's landscape. In *Virtua Tennis 3*, as an example, it is possible to see *Bridgestone* tires and *Citizen* watches billboards all around the scenario. Both brands are present, sponsoring the real tennis matches, so it is very pertinent to be in the virtual game, creating a deeper sense of immersion to the player.



Fig. 1. (a) *Fanta* web advergaming; (b) *Red Bull* product placement in the game *Worms 3D*; (c) *Bridgestone* and *Citizen* brands in-game advertising in *Virtua Tennis 3* virtual billboards

In this topic, we are discussing examples developed for consoles, personal computers and mobile media. However, the advergaming strategy is not something created in the Internet age. In the beginning of the 1980s, we already could find some very interesting cases in the Atari platform.

2. The early years of advergaming

One research from Newzoo Institute (2016) shows that the global games market reached the mark of \$99.6 billion of dollars, being that mobile games generated 37% of this amount. A market of this magnitude can offer different kinds of games for a large number of different players in the contemporary scenario. However, this industry started its first steps by the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Impressively, when the video game industry was still rising in the modern entertainment scene, there were already brands/companies creating advergaming strategies for the Atari video game platform.

One iconic game launched in 1983 by *Johnson & Johnson* named *Tooth Protectors* is one example that fits our discussion. Developed by *DSD* and *Camelot* studios, the game was an integral part of a large *Johnson & Johnson* campaign in the United States, and was not sold in game shops; the cartridges were distributed as a prize for customers who mailed in proof of purchase stamps to the company.

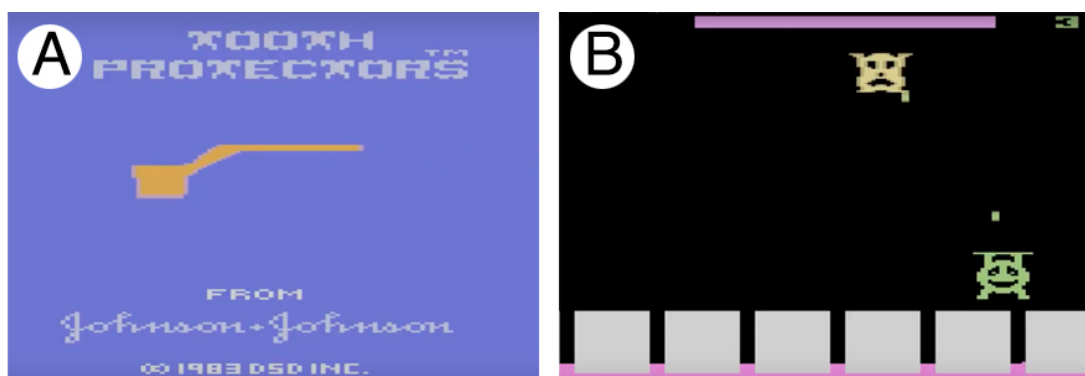


Fig. 2. (a) *Tooth Protectors* opening screen with the brand *Johnson & Johnson*, highlighted; (b) *Tooth Protectors* interface

The game mechanics is very simple and the player must protect teeth from the attack of the cavities. You earn points by folding the harmful elements that fall from the top of the screen. Despite being very simple, *Tooth Protectors* is the precursor of many examples we see today in more sophisticated platforms. One important element

to observe is the game's manual; it represents the interface of the game with the main rules of play and there is an area that highlights some *Johnson & Johnson* products, such as dental floss, toothbrush and fluoride dental rinse.

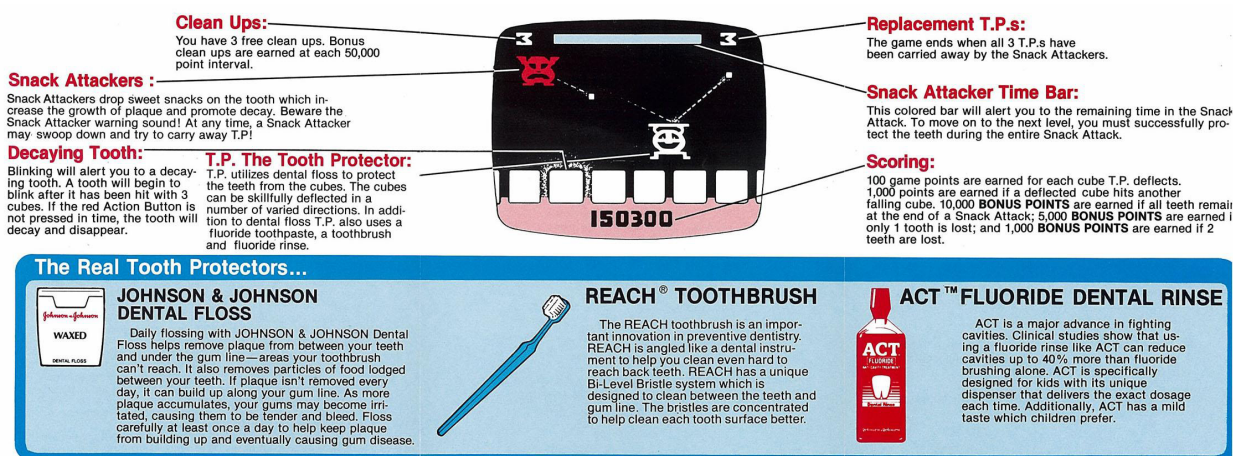


Fig. 3. *Tooth Protectors* rules of play with products advertising.

It is also relevant to point out that *Tooth Protectors*' game follows the basic idea of marketing. Kotler (2015) teaches us that the aim of marketing is to create value for customers and to capture value from customers in return; this author (Kotler, 2015) also emphasizes the importance of delivering satisfaction to the customers. In this case we can observe the attempt to create value and satisfaction to the individuals involved in the ludic experience through a gaming interface, always highlighting the branding features and the product line.

The company is not only sponsoring a simple game in this case, it is an attempt to connect the brand with an emergent audience of gamers from the 1980s, demonstrating some benefits of the products in a ludic way. Bedendo (2015) reminds us that one brand does not only offer differentiation in functional benefits to its products, but also offers emotional and symbolic aspects that may be equally relevant in a marketing strategy context.

In this example, we can observe the three categories mentioned previously. *Tooth Protector* is an advergame tailor-made for the *Johnson & Johnson* brand, with in-game advertising and product placement features in its interface.

Today, we have more complex examples, like the game *Beercade* (a name created joining "beer" and "arcade"). The McKinney Ten Percent, the ad agency's incubator that encourages all employees to devote 10% of their time to focus on new applications of creativity and technology unrelated to current client business, has found a way to breathe new life into both beer tasting and arcade gaming. The agency created the first-ever beer-dispensing arcade game for *Big Boss* beer brand, that puts two players against each other in a simple fighting game. Players choose one of five characters, each one representing one kind of beer from *Big Boss Brewing Company*. The fight begins and the winner receives a glass full of beer from the arcade machine.

Beercade, apparently, could be much more complex and funny than *Tooth Protectors*, but the basic principles of the *Johnson & Johnson* game generate an important reflection to understand the current advergames and give content to think deep about this subject.

On the next topic, we will discuss some aspects of entertainment in the contemporary scenario and what motivate some companies in creating advergames for its campaigns.

3. The magic circle idea and the playgrounds scattered throughout everyday life

From countless mobile gadgets with wireless and fast track connection to the Internet, or using more traditional modes of access, people are increasingly blurring the lines between near and far, public and private, work and leisure, online and offline. The impressive rates in social appropriation of communication and information technologies entail changes in the way we live, get together, do business and – of course – have fun.

Having fun, in this scenario, is closely linked to the large number of entertainment languages that pervade our daily experience. As we discussed in the first topic of this article, the languages of entertainment are crisscrossing boundaries in the quotidian landscape and games become media and a relevant tool of marketing for many

companies. We can find games and languages of entertainment in our mobile devices, Facebook site, television shows, videogame consoles, mobile applications and lots of other platforms.

Everything indicates that, more than never, individuals are searching for ludic/entertainment/gaming experiences to disconnect for some moments from the chaotic quotidian, the pressure of working hours or the accelerated routine of big urban centers; in certain way, people are trying to reach places of catharsis, dreaming and fiction to escape from this. Based on the Huizinga's (1995) thoughts, they are searching for different "magic circles".

Johan Huizinga (1872 – 1945) was a Dutch historian and one of the founders of modern cultural history. In his book *Homo Ludens*, from 1938, he discusses the possibility that playing is the primary formative element in human culture. In this book, the author (Huizinga, 1995) presents the idea of the "magic circle". As described by Adams and Rollings (2009), Huizinga did not use the term as a generic name for the concept: his text refers to the actual playground, or a physical space for playing. Inside the magic circle, real-world events have special meanings; in the real world someone kicks a ball into a net, but in the magic circle someone scores a goal leading the crowd to celebrate this act. (Adams; Rollings, 2009).

The magic circle is a place of dreams and fantasy. It's an escape from everyday problems and chores. Most importantly: everything inside the magic circle is, in some way, transformative. Each time a person leaves the magic circle, they bring meaning and experience to the real world. The arena, the card-table, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are examples of the magic circle idea. It is important to mention that authors like Bogost (2016) discuss that "magic circle" is too dramatic a name for this kind of processes and embraces the term "playgrounds" as an alternative.

Regardless of the categorization – whether "magic circle" or "playgrounds" – it is important to understand that the contemporary stage is full of platforms that we can access entertainment/games and there are lots of individuals attached to these ludic experiences. Following the principles of marketing discussed previously, we can suppose that companies/brands/products/services will try to connect its selves to the audiences immersed in these experiences, platforms and languages. Based on this assumption, we understand more clearly how games also become communication and marketing tools.

Below, we present some insights from gaming market professionals discussing the most important points in creating advergames.

4. Some thoughts from experts

Based on these principles, we selected four experts from the gaming field and asked each one the following question: what are three essential characteristics for an effective advergame? Below, we present and discuss the answers.

Fabio Tola, Brazilian elementary school teacher and specialist in the use of games for education, says that one advergame 1) must reach the target audience; 2) convey the branding/product message effectively; 3) become viral – this last item is very important to quickly expand the marketing message to the social media environment.

For Guilherme Camargo, CEO of the Brazilian gaming studio Sioux, the three essential characteristics for an effective advergame are: 1) have a well-defined purpose aligned to the brand, product or service (it seems obvious but, often, an advergame is detached from the core concept of a campaign); 2) know your target audience to match the style, mechanics and other characteristics of the games; 3) be fun – it is fundamental to create something that strengthens engagement through entertainment languages

Mauro Berimbau, Brazilian high school teacher and specialist in advergames ponders that 1) in this modality of games, is elementary to send a clear marketing message; 2) to observe the historical socio-cultural aspects of the players; 3) to study the player's interpretations and responses to the system.

From these opinions, we can ponder a lot before an advergaming project or an analysis of an advergame. We will discuss these ideas in the final topic of our article.

Laura Herrewijn, guest Professor at University of Antwerp, says that 1) it is important to be sure that your audience will have fun, to create an original game in which you integrate your brand message in a central, prominent way; 2) it's necessary to focus on the moments where the player has no attention left to perceive the brand messaging; 3) you need to make sure that the behavior you want to promote (e.g. visiting a website, buying a product) is made as easily as possible (e.g. to include a very visible link/ a coupon, etc.).

5. Conclusion and final thoughts

In this paper, we discussed that games are a media platform and a very important element from the contemporary culture. More than that, we highlighted that individuals are searching for ludic experiences in different "magic

circles” and “playgrounds” in the quotidian stage. In order to attract new consumers and satisfy loyal consumers, companies are using entertainment languages on their marketing and communication strategies, where advergames is one possible tool among others.

This combination of multiplatform media technologies and entertainment languages, somehow, accelerates communication processes and allows huge trunks of information to travel long distances, by the touch of a screen, and rapidly reach broad audiences everywhere. It is well worth remembering that media is plural in its cultural forms, technological features, and – logically – in its effects (Couldry, 2010). The delicate relationship between consumers and brands/companies in a digital environment seems to require special care on both sides. It is important to highlight that marketing, entertainment and technology are no longer separate worlds.

By discussing advergames as a marketing tool, we hope to demonstrate how useful gaming languages could be for companies and consumers in the contemporary digital ecosystem. We believe it is of utmost importance to stay alert for fast changes in this scenario and the new possibilities that are appearing everyday in different platforms.

Our empirical data comes from specialized bibliography, interviews with experts of the gaming field by e-mail, and many hours of playing different types of advergames in sites, mobiles devices and social networks. The intersection between all this information gave us enough content to ponder on the topic addressed and create a deeper reflection about the multiple connections between marketing strategies and games.

We welcomed the opportunity to present this relevant discussion as a means of contributing to the ongoing efforts in exploring the role played by the games – especially advergames – in media, marketing, technology and entertainment context.

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