

## Marketing video games in the cultural economy

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### Abstract

*Following in the wake of Internet technologies the video game industry is today transforming games to service outlets and promotional tools. Games are no longer products that are sold on a point of sale setup; instead developers offer the service to subscribe to games. In the midst of this transformation developers are also making use of the interactivity enabled by Internet technologies and crafts games as a sphere for promotion, a place for other organizations to display their products or services.*

As Internet entered the scene, in the mid 1990s, as a digital platform for interaction and transaction (Castells 1996), we have tried to gain understanding how marketing are affected; questions of how that which we already do know about marketing can be translated onto this platform, and how the uniqueness of this platform forces us to rethink marketing (Anderson 2006, Dahlén 2002, Evans and Wurster 2000). Although initial claims of hype and fads, and spiralling speculations, which burst at the turn of the century, Internet is today a very real and dominant platform in any marketing interaction, both in business ventures and in our private lives.

In making sense of marketing and Internet there is a need to provide local explanations, for local applications that use Internet. Internet is not one set of premises for interaction that create a homogenous pattern; it consists of technologies that enable a large number of applications, to be used for just about anything. These applications, in turn, create a large number of patterns, for interaction and transaction. So talking about marketing on Internet one would have to talk about marketing in, for example: Facebook, Google, MySpace, Spotify, Flickr or YouTube as different cases. Although one aspect of Internet and marketing that rarely find its way to academic discussions are video games.

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The video game industry has been around since the early 70s when it bulky arcade machines presented the only opportunity to interact with this digital media. With the impact of Internet this industry was transformed from an industry making product point-sales to an industry providing gaming services online. This possibility has opened up a market of entertainment that both affect how games are marketed and promoted. Here, in this short paper, I will present how the video game industry are entangled in an tight relationship with marketing; both the marketing of the developers, and publishers, own services, as well as the promotion of products and services from others.

### **The Game Industry**

Gaming has been around for a long time. In the summer of 1961 an MIT student by the name of Steve 'Slug' Russell was tinkering with the campus computer. It was not a very complex computer by today's standards, but by the standard of that time it was highly complex, not to mention expensive. Steve was exploring the possibilities of that machine - more precisely, trying to demonstrate with an engaging and fun program the capabilities of this machine. And making a game was, in his eyes, the best way to go about it. This creative achievement would not only be the start of Steve's career, but also of an industry that, just as in this first game, thrives on creativity and tinkering with computers.

The result of Steve's tinkering was the video game Spacewar. This game is credited as the first 'real' video game (Demaria and Wilson 2004, Kent 2001). Despite its crude setup, consisting of two spaceships duelling on a round monitor, it quickly achieved immense popularity. It is said that the game was copied onto most university computers in the USA at that time. The impact of this game grew as more, and more, people saw it, and played it. Nolan Bushnell, for example, was an avid gamer of Spacewar, he would later establish the Atari Company. This was one of the first large company developing video games, and it was highly successful in the early days of the video game industry.

The impact the video game industry has had on popular culture on a global level is a case of both digital development and of a new techno savvy generation coming into age, a Generation G (Beck and Wade 2004), the gaming generation that grew up embodying digital technology and its outputs that reach into both work and leisure. Video games has have been sold internationally since the mid-1980s, from arcade play to handheld

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consoles to online subscriptions; from imaginary spheres to self-absorption to violent recruitment devices for the military. The overall market of US\$30 billion grew 16 per cent annually between 2006 and 2009. The visibility of video games pervades all aspects of popular culture. As technology converge games find new ways to interact with us, the gamers, and taking advantage of digital evolution and techno savvy generations is at the heart of this global industry.

Today, in the age of Internet and instant communication, games are platforms that form a coherent sphere for different kind of promotion. Games are not only promoted as a product, but games themselves are tools for promotion. This is all enabled in the constant online communication between gamers and providers where the provider can decide what messages reach a certain group of gamers. In the end a development that both has created an upheaval in gamers communities, but also shown the versatility of this digital medium, both for commercial and counter-commercial purposes.

### **Marketing of Games**

Video games have, all from the start, been marketed as a toy for boys. In that sense games have been gendered as male, of having male technicity (Dovey and Kennedy 2006), as most technology. They have also been marketed as toys for kids. The main audience for games are thought to be in the upper teens. But, as has been argued in several places (e.g. Beck and Wade 2004), the generation that grew up with games in the 70s has today grown up. There are also ample of evidence that this generation continue playing games. This means that the average age of gamers are increasing, the first generation keeps growing and every generation after them also adopt this medium.

The truth is that video games are neither toys for boys, nor toys for kids – they are toys, period. The demographic of gamers are today wide. Although there are geographical differences the average age of gamers are about 30 years, and half of the gamers are women (Kerr 2006). The pattern of gaming, and what gamers one prefer to play, do change between different groups (note that this does not necessarily have to be defined by gender).

Although this heterogeneous audience, game developers themselves are very homogenous (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Sandqvist 2010), in: gender, age, class, education, political views, cultural preferences etc. This means that developers many

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times build games without an understanding who their actual addressees are. Instead of a marketing approach to the development they use themselves, I-methodology (Akrich 1995), to define the content of the game. But, the developers are actually not to be blamed here. The game industry is structured similar to other cultural industries with a publisher that carries the financial risk in a project. The formal marketing decisions are many most times also taken at publishers. But, being a cultural product, with problems of defining success beforehand (Caves 2000), game publishers tend to be very conservative – innovations have the capability to be very successful, but threatens the return of investment in these high-risk projects. Resulting in very few game publications that break with patterns already established on the market.

The result is how games have been marketed to gamers this far is a marketplace where there are few variations of games. Developers build games with themselves as ideal user, and publishers do their utmost to balance innovation with conformity not to jeopardise the money invested. This has resulted in gamers, not belonging to the focus group, playing games despite of its content – not because of its content; just as they buy games despite of its promotion – not because of its promotion. But, there are signs that the industry is changing.

Riding on the global success some video games has also grown too big for a single medium. As the graphical content of video games became representative it also enabled the gamer to identify with the character played in the screen (Poole 2000), and the character in the game become a brand in itself. It is argued that Pac-man was the first to achieve this (Wolf 2003), initiating a line of development where graphical representation was to be achieved. This identification has made it possible for these characters of video games to migrate from the digital interaction in video games to visual enjoyment on the cinema. The character that has had the highest impact is Lara Croft, the heroine in the game series Tomb Raider (Gustavsson and Zackariasson 2005, 2007, Deuber-Mankowsky 2005). In two films the audience has the possibility to watch the actress Angelina Jolie wrestle her way through the obstacles of the film, a setting that was copied from the games where the gamer instead of being a voyager instead is Lara Croft. These heroes of the video game will continue promoting the games and gaming throughout their appearances in films, books and fan-culture (Jenkins 2006).



### Promotion in Games

Today most games use Internet in creating an online interface for a game, meaning that it constantly communicates with a server at the developer of the game. This feature makes it possible for gamers to play with each other, no matter their geographical location. It also makes it possible for gamers to build and share their own content in the game. But, it also enables the developer to constantly update the game: fixing errors (bugs), improving and introducing new content. It also enables developers to use these games as a sphere for promotion.

Through different types of in-game advertising game developers sell advertising spots to a third party, just like in the real world. The idea of promoting brands and products in games are not new in itself, this was already present in early soccer games (mimicking the ads displayed on the side of the soccer field). What has changed is the introduction of a dynamic in-game advertising where the ad can be customised to the gamer and third party. For example, depending on what games you play a third party organization can target you as their audience.

There are different ways to introduce ads into games, some of them are copied from our physical setting, and some of them are enabled because of the uniqueness of the medium. Amongst the most common are: advertising billboards and product placement.

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No matter the method used for promotion the driving philosophy for all games are that the content of the promotion have to be in line with rest of the content of the game. Games are built to form an internal logic; for example being a futuristic world, ancient world, or any other. The promotion then have to add to the content, or the suspension of disbelief – immersion – is ruined.

First, as shown in the picture above, games, just as the physical world, can contain billboards. Therefore it is possible to display ads on these, as in the physical world. Billboards then are used quite in the same way as in our physical world, as a digital form of billboards in a digital world. Secondly, just as in film, TV and magazines video games use product placements. And just as in these other medium, the products displayed in games must be in line with rest of the content, or the break between the game world and product will be too great and any immersion will be impossible. For example, placing a can of Coca Cola in a game that uses a medieval setting will break the historical context. Although using a bottle of Coca Cola in a game displaying, for example, New York in the 1950s will only increase the credibility of the game. Compared to other media, games have a great advantage when using product placement – the gamer can interact with the objects. Drinking a bottle of Coca Cola in a game could, perhaps, have a greater impact on consumption then watching a person in a film drinking one.

Product placement is an adoption from other media, in films it has been used, and is still used, to the extent that it has become industry standards. The difference is that placing products in games not only enables the gamer to be visually stimulated of the message, more important is that the gamer interacts with the product in the narrative of the game. There are strong evidence that this seemingly small aspect impacts the understanding of the product and inscribe virtual experiences with, for example, driving cars that have a real-life brand, or drinking soft-drinks that have a real-life brand (Nelson 2002; Winkler and Buckner 2006; Acar 2007; Glass 2007; Mackay, Ewing, Newton and Windisch 2009).

An interesting contractual phenomenon that has arisen is the relationship between game developers and third party organizations whose products are promoted in games: who pays who? As the practice of using promotion in games has not been developed,



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compared to other media, the question of relationship is still an open one. If one would build a racing game, using tracks and cars from the physical world, would the game developer pay the car manufacturers and track owner for the use of their brands, or do the car manufacturers and track owners pay the developers for promoting their brands? This is a question that still seems to be unsolved.

### **Games as a Promotion Tool**

A last use of video games, that seem to be growing, is to define the medium itself as a tool for promotion. Whereas the commercial games described above, this type of games are developed in order to communicate one specific message. As the medium itself is neutral, the message can be just about anything: from commercial to political. The impact of these games is in the interactivity they offer. Instead of being a receiver of a message, the gamer is the co creator of that message in her acts, her interaction with the game.

One could call these types of games for Serious Games, games that has other purposes then pure entertainment. This I an umbrella term that include a number of sub categories of games with different characteristics. For example: advergAMES, edutainment, persuasive games and art games. Although the games have different goals, be it the communication of knowledge or art, they all share the use of doing other things with games the entertaining. But, here to draw the line between entertainment and its counterpart is sometimes a delicate issue.

One of the most popular Serious Games, although it might not be categorised as such, is America's Army. This is a game funded by the U.S. Army and published by Ubisoft, a traditional game publisher. The game has been developed specifically to communicate the good life of an American soldier, in order to get more US kids to sign up to the military; and a secondary goal to communicate a positive image of the American soldier abroad. The game is free to play and has over 8 million registered users.

In the America's Army game, players are bound by Rules of Engagement (ROE) and grow in experience as they navigate challenges in teamwork-based, multiplayer, force versus force operations. In the game, as in the Army, accomplishing missions requires a team effort and adherence to the seven Army Core Values. Through its emphasis on team play, the game

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demonstrates these values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage and makes them integral to success in America's Army.<sup>1</sup>

While America's Army is a big production, many companies use smaller games to promote their product, or services, called advergames. These games most times have a very simplistic construction. It could be a three in a row game with Coca Cola caps, or a shoot-em-up game where you hit Carlsberg bottles with a pistol. These games are spread for free over the Internet, or played for free on the company's homepage. Many times they also have a ranking system and prizes for high-performers. These games are never long-lived as the construction does not offer much of game play, although the goal is not game play, but getting a consumer to interact with a brand.

There are also advergames with political goals. Games have previously been used in, for example, political campaigns: what better way to explain what the suggested reforms will do the economy than getting the citizens to experience it first hand through a game? Below is a screenshot from a game called September 12<sup>2</sup> (developed by Gonzala Frasca) and it is a contribution to the discussion about terrorism and violence. When entering the webpage the gamer are presented with these two screens.



<sup>1</sup> Source <http://www.americasarmy.com/about/> 2010-09-13

<sup>2</sup> Can be found at <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>



The game cannot be won in a traditional sense; rather, it demonstrates the fruitlessness of using violence in a war against terrorism. When identifying the terrorists on the screen and firing a missile on them there is a delay that will kill civilians instead. As one civilian is killed, other will gather and mourn, then turning into terrorists. So by interacting with this game, the gamer will interact with a political statement about the physical world.

## Discussion

The growth of the video game industry together with constant improvement of Internet technologies has provided us with an environment where the market and digital entertainment has converged. There is no doubt that the development we are seeing today will increase. The game industry has a proven track record of evolutionary growth and of assimilating new technology, driving the technological change, into their products. At the same time the economic model seem to be changing for a considerable number of developers, from subscription to micro transactions. This mean that the gamer, the participant, will be subjected to more purchasing decisions once inside a game world – decisions that without any doubt will bring with them not only virtual goods, but physical good to be enjoyed in the physical world.

Therefore it is pivotal that the knowledge we build on the local marketing implications on Internet, on social media, also includes video games. Video games are no subculture, it is part of our mainstream media, and as such marketing will always be an important part.

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