

The Future of Advergames

2009 and Beyond

Game development in the casual games sector is much different today than it was three years ago. Our little corner of the industry is now seeing thousands of new games introduced each year, and everyone is competing for limited distribution opportunities. Soon we will see a new breed of game enter into the casual games market to compete for these highly coveted launch slots: deep and highly contextual branded games.

Advergimes have been around us for a while. For those that aren't aware, these are a special type of game created solely for the delivery of an advertising message. Until recently, these games have been commissioned directly by the advertisers and brand owners, and were solely used on their own proprietary sites as a means to make a portal "stickier." Examples of this can be seen on Wrigley's Candystand (www.candystand.com), or Orbitz Games (www.orbitzgames.com). These games have traditionally been shallow, twitch style games and not meant to compete within the gaming industry.

What we are seeing today is a shift in this paradigm. Brand owners and advertisers are looking to create deeper games and really engage the player in ways unseen before. With this increase in quality, the intent is to reach further toward the users that have been consuming a version of

We now stand on the verge of a monumental shift in how games are developed, distributed and consumed.

this product for many years in order to deliver a message within a low friction environment. As a result, the distinction between advergimes and branded games is beginning to blur. Some recent examples of this include *Merv Griffin's Crosswords* (Oberon Games, 2007) and *Etch-a-Sketch* (Freeze Tag, 2008).

According to Parks Associates, US spending on in-game advertising is expected to rise from \$370 million to \$2 billion (USD) in 2012 (Parks Associates, 2006 report on in-game ads). In response to this huge influx of money, branded games are going to enter the traditional distribution pipeline. This is not something that the development community should fear as competition, however; rather it should embrace the opportunities that this surge will provide.

Why are advertisers becoming more interested in the videogame medium? A recent study by Nielsen BASES and Nielsen Games (Brightman, James 2007) provides some insight. Among those exposed to ads while playing a game:

- 82% felt the games were just as enjoyable with ads as without
- 61% had more favorable opinions of products advertised after playing the game than they did before exposure
- Aided recall increased 44% compared to pre-game levels
- Positive brand attribute association increased 33% across all brands compared to pre-game results

As you can see these are very encouraging (and potentially lucrative) results both for the gaming industry and for advertisers. Advergimes promise advertisers that their message will be consumed by a highly receptive audience—suggesting that advergime budgets will continue to rise on a game-by-game basis. Not only does this suggest that individual game revenues are likely to rise over time; it also could help to mitigate the risk involved in self-published products.

Advergimes have always been somewhat taboo within the development community, often seen as the bottom rung for aspiring developers. However, we believe that we now stand on the verge of a monumental shift in how games are developed, distributed and consumed. By getting involved as early as possible there is potential to exponentially increase your effectiveness and growth within this segment of the business.

The Nature of the Opportunity

Mention the term "advergime" and many developers hold up their arms and start backing away, looking around as if to say, "He said it, not me." It's not that they're averse in principle to producing

By Adriano Parrotta, Gabriele Parrotta and Mark George

Adriano can be reached at adriano.parrotta@casualconnect.org.

Gabriele can be reached at gabriele.parrotta@casualconnect.org.

Mark can be reached at mark.george@casualconnect.org.



Games such as this licensed version of Etch-a-Sketch for the iPhone and iPod Touch is blurring line between advergimes and branded games.

The Future of Advergames

2009 and Beyond

sponsored entertainment; but there does tend to be general agreement that advergames aren't games in the truest sense, and that therefore they must be less satisfying to create and to play. This might lead developers to approach this market warily or with lowered expectations. That would be a mistake.

Advertising is, without a doubt, a fantastically creative industry. There are many cases in which the intelligence, cleverness, and sheer dynamic energy of advertising equals or exceeds that of the editorial content it supports. Think of how the GEICO cavemen ads (by The Martin Agency) were so superior to the lame ABC sitcom of the same name. Why can't this be the case with advergames?

"Because the client ruins the game," is a common answer. And therein lies the problem—not with the client (although to be fair there are certainly examples in which excessive client feedback has negatively affected a game), but rather with the mindset this belief implies: that the inclusion of an ad message is responsible for tanking a game. Too often developers have the perception that the branding packet negates their creativity and sense of play.

We are fast-approaching the day when advergames will begin driving traffic to major portals.

This needn't be the case. The most successful developers in this space shift their point of view from "advergames are games that have been saddled with a branding message" to "advergames are ads that have been juiced by an interactive component." The point is to be receptive to the potential that interactivity brings to advertising rather than resisting the burden the advertising message places on the game. In other words, look at that glass again: it's half full.

Another tactic is to generate creative energy by pushing against the limits of the medium. Put simply, rules and boundaries foster creativity. For example, many ad professionals believe the medium of radio sparks some of the cleverest advertising. The lack of an image (compared to TV) and the generally disengaged nature of the audience (driving, at work, doing the dishes) are limits or boundaries that challenge producers to a higher level of originality. These conditions force a highly creative response.

Billboards are another example. The writing for outdoor advertising is among the most concise and original that can be found. You've got eight or nine words to grab someone's attention (someone who is speeding by and shouldn't be looking at your billboard in the first place) and deliver a memorable message. In many cases the word limit inspires creativity in language and image that cannot be found in a newspaper or magazine ad.

Similarly, circumventing the limits imposed by advergames—shorter length, disinterested audience (at least initially), and yes, client input among others—requires a shift in attitude. Instead of looking at these as problems, they should be viewed as opportunities for elegant solutions.

All of this matters because clients (ad agencies, their clients) are just now developing the necessary sophistication to judge a game as a piece of entertainment rather than just a branded message delivery vehicle. As their understanding increases, we can expect them to demand increasingly compelling game-play from their advergames. Likewise, audiences will expect superior game-play as well. This will in turn raise the bar for developers, challenging them to produce a product that aligns with and reinforces the brand identity—but that is first and foremost a good gaming experience.

All of which can only mean one thing: that we are fast-approaching the day when advergames will begin driving traffic to major portals. Won't happen, you say? Think of the nearest analogy in the world of television: the Super Bowl. How many people say they only watch the Super Bowl for the commercials? We should be striving for that same level of innovation and originality within advergames. And when that day comes, when the form has matured to the point where it is both challenging and satisfying to create (and play), then the mere mention of the word won't send developers running towards the exits. Instead they'll step forward and ask, "How do we get in?"

Games such as this licensed version of Etch-a-Sketch is blurring line between advergames and branded games.



To The Masses

To ensure a successful campaign once your adverggame has been completed, it is important to get your new game in front of as many people as possible. This will increase the chances of getting new customers and will ensure the success of the marketing campaign behind your game.

A recent study by BIGresearch states that video-gamers are very receptive consumers and serious media multi-taskers (some 41% watch television while online). The study also states that videogame audiences come from all ethnic groups, with Hispanics and African Americans making up almost 30% of the gamer market. This makes adverggames a great vehicle for getting your brand out to a broad, receptive audience (Watershed Publishing LLC, 2007).

Distributing your adverggame over multiple web portals is another way to increase the di-

versity of your audience since different sites attract different demographics (different age groups in particular). Building and maintaining strong processes is the key to making sure that you can effectively and efficiently distribute your titles to multiple portals. This allows you to launch your games to all of your partners at once without artificially isolating anyone due to your inefficiencies.

In addition to having good processes in place, successful adverggame distribution depends on quality portal relationships. Two factors have the greatest effect on your ability to work closely with portals: the effectiveness of your communications and the quality of your games. Staying in contact and having positive and meaningful communication with the portals will enable you to understand the current distribution climate and to get the marketplace insight you need

to better reach your intended audience. And creating fantastic adverggames for that audience will encourage portals to give your games the additional promotional support they need once they go live. ■

Sources

Brightman, James. "Gamers Embracing Contextual In-Game Ads, says Nielsen and IGA" GameDaily (Online) 17 June 2008, <http://www.gamedaily.com/articles/news/gamers-embracing-contextual-ingame-ads-says-nielsen-and-iga/?biz=1>

Watershed Publishing LLC, (2007). "Study: video gamers valuable for advertisers." Retrieved August 22, 2008, from: <http://www.marketingcharts.com/television/study-video-gamers-valuable-for-advertisers-1409/>

M E R S C O M



National Geographic Channel



Airs November 23

Announces

HEROD'S LOST TOMB

The First Casual Downloadable Game Based on a Major Television Event!



www.merscom.com