

PRODUCTIVE PLAY 2.0: THE LOGIC OF IN-GAME ADVERTISING

Abstract

Online video games are helping to pioneer the use of interactive advertising that targets consumers based on information about their behaviour, consumption patterns, and other demographic and psychographic information. This article draws on the example of in-game ads to explore some of the ways in which advertisers harness virtual worlds to marketing imperatives, and equate realism and authenticity with the proliferation of commercial messages. Since video games have the potential to serve as a model for other forms of marketing both online and off, the way in which they are being used to exploit interactivity as a form of commercial monitoring has broader implications for the digital economy.

Two suggestive events for the future of online gaming took place in the spring of 2007. One was news that Google had filed a patent for a system that would allow it to target advertising to players based on their style of gameplay and other demographic information. According to one press account, Google's patent envisioned a marketing scheme whereby:

User dialogue (eg from role playing games, simulation games, etc) may be used to characterise the user (eg literate, profane, blunt or polite, quiet etc). Also, user play may be used to characterise the user (eg cautious, risk-taker, aggressive, non-confrontational, stealthy, honest, cooperative, uncooperative, etc.). (Adam and Johnson, 2007)

In other words, video games, in Google's world, have become a way to profile consumers.

The second, related development was the announcement that Google had purchased the in-game advertising company AdScape. Google had both a plan and a company to implement it. The plan was in keeping with Google's strategy for targeted advertising that it is implementing not just online, but also via satellite TV and mobile telephony. It is a model that relies upon capturing detailed data about consumers, viewers and now gamers in order to design and serve targeted advertising. The company that developed the most successful algorithms for searching the vast infoscape of the internet is betting that it can also make sense of the tremendous amount of information it can collect through its various interactive applications.

The Google patent is expansive, noting that the interactive applications it envisions could 'also monitor people playing on any game console that hooks up to the internet, including the Sony PlayStation, Nintendo Wii and Microsoft's

Xbox. It says information could be retrieved from previous game details saved on memory cards: ‘Such saved information ... offers a valuable source of information to the advertisers.’ (Adam and Johnson, 2007) The goal is not just to be able to custom-target, but to deliver context-relevant advertising in real time: ‘If the user has been playing for over two hours continuously, the system may display ads for Pizza Hut, Coke, coffee.’ (2007)

The Google initiative is not unique: because of its popularity and the level of player engagement it fosters, online gaming is an emerging frontier in the development of interactive, customised marketing. In addition to AdScape, companies including Double Fusion, Massive Inc (owned by Microsoft) and IGA Worldwide are exploiting the interactive character of online gaming not just as a means of promoting viewer engagement, but as a way of gathering detailed information about a desirable demographic. As the Massive website puts it, gaming ‘presents unique marketing opportunities for brands targeting hard to reach consumers — specifically young adult males’ (Massive, 2008).

Thanks to the popularity and profitability of gaming, an industry whose revenues have surpassed those of both movie box office sales and the music industry in Australia, the video game industry is gaining interest amongst advertisers, especially in the rapidly growing online segment of the market (Woodhead, 2008). A recent report by the PC Gaming Alliance noted that online gaming is driving revenue growth in the industry — and that advertising accounted for some \$800 million in revenues in 2007 (Wireless News, 2008a). If, as Turow (2006) argues, databases are moving ‘to the heart’ of marketing, the interactive character of online gaming allows for the development of increasingly detailed databases that can be used for ‘dynamic’ forms of marketing: the delivery of ads in real time to users based on their moment-to-moment activities.

The goal of this paper is to explore the emerging commercial logic of interactive marketing by drawing on the example of online gaming. Interactivity is the next frontier for the information-intensive model of customised advertising. Video games, as Google recognised, are well positioned to lead the way. If the internet as a platform for interactive gaming is anything to go by, the strategies for generating profits from interactive media will be multifarious, flexible and constantly evolving. The video game industry, like other lucrative businesses in the digital era, is developing a variety of strategies for generating profits, ranging from sales of console games to subscription fees, advertising and the sale of in-game ‘products’ (for customising avatars). Nor are these strategies necessarily distinct — data about in-game purchases, for example, can feed into the algorithms that customise in-game ads (perhaps individuals who purchase particular in-game products might be targeted for related ‘real-world’ products). As further evidence of the bellwether role played by gaming in the digital era, these strategies are characteristic of other digital media (such as, for example, the renewed subscription paradigm in everything from TV viewing to music consumption).

This article focuses specifically on the role played by forms of interactive monitoring in order to develop a more general critique of the double role played by interactivity: as facilitator or both participation and surveillance. Jenkins (1992,

2008) has focused on the former capacity, not least because it contributed to the mainstreaming of his interest in the participatory activities of media fans. In the era of user-generated content, we are all increasingly becoming what Jenkins (1992, drawing on de Certeau, 1993) calls ‘textual poachers’ as we repurpose media texts and images for our websites, mobile phones, MySpace pages and YouTube videos. Jenkins recognises the limitations of such forms of participation, but even in his more recent work he conserves an opposition between top-down media conglomerates and bottom-up, participatory media. Convergence culture, he argues, is ‘expanding the opportunities for grassroots groups to speak back to the mass media’ (2008: 132). It is an opposition that threatens to become outmoded in the era of convergence that Jenkins himself describes, and it is one this article interrogates. The example of the customised marketing model exemplified by in-game advertising enlists the promise of participation as a means of monitoring and managing interactive audiences. This is not to say that grassroots forms of accountability no longer exist, but rather that the nature of participation requires further scrutiny in an interactive era — not all forms of ‘talking back’ to power are empowering.

Bill Gates (1996) outlined the principles for mass customised advertising more than a decade ago, when he envisioned a world in which: ‘A middle-aged executive and her husband might see an advertisement for retirement property at the beginning of an episode of *Home Improvement*, while the young couple next door might see a family vacation advertisement at the opening of the same show, regardless of whether they watched the show at the same or a different time.’ (1996: 172) In the digital world, Gates predicted, advertisers would explore a range of possible avenues for customisation: sending ads for different product lines to different consumers; even using the same ads but varying ‘the actors by race or age’ to appeal to different markets (1996: 172).

The common denominator of these various forms of customisation — some of which have become common practice in the interactive era — is that they require increasingly detailed information about consumers and a flexible, digital platform. The advent of online gaming has the potential to meet both requirements, offering the prospect of combining three categories of marketing information — behavioural, contextual and demographic — to serve ads in real time, conduct controlled experiments on audiences and track viewer response.

Thus, for example, the in-game advertising company Double Fusion inserts software into client games that ‘can record how often the game is played, at what time of day and for how long the user plays the game, as well as the video ads and product placements players view ... Most importantly, it tracks down a player’s geographical and personal information, including the IP address.’ (Karim, 2006) As one incensed gamer put it: ‘This in-game ad software records how often you play the video game, at what time of day and for how long, what game play areas you visit ... which video ads and product placements you view, where your computer is located geographically, and who you are demographically. It monitors your choices and behavior, collates data, and reports back in real-time.’ (Jhutson, 2006)

Other in-game companies integrate products into the gameplay to force engagement with the product and provide guaranteed ‘impressions’ to advertisers. Players of *Worms 3D*, for example, can boost their jumping skills after consuming a virtual Red Bull, and players of *Test Drive Unlimited* can outfit their avatars in clothes from Ben Sherman. Thanks to these developments, the virtual world of online gaming promises to become as advertising saturated and commodified as the real world from which it offers a fantasy escape. This is the strange paradox of virtual realism in the era of digital capitalism: the freedom to invent virtual worlds unfettered by the constraints of reality is, increasingly, subordinated to the imagination of marketers seeking to find more innovative and creative ways to sell. Liberation from the laws of physics remains fettered to the laws of the marketplace. As we migrate into virtual spaces that allow us to transcend the limits of space and time as we play, socialise and communicate, these very spaces are increasingly designed to harness our activities to marketing imperatives.

This version of market-supported ‘freedom’ is perhaps one of the implications of what the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2006) describes as the ‘Real’ of capital: the way in which, at the very moment capitalism becomes virtually all encompassing, it disappears into the background as the unquestioned horizon within which our activities take place (2006: 196). Even putting privacy issues aside, one of the striking aspects of the digital era is the way in which activities that were once free of an explicitly commercial component — such as emailing one another, playing a video game, looking up a dictionary definition — are increasingly enfolded into the marketing embrace of a commercialised digital enclosure. Now, when we email or ‘poke’ one another online, when we share photos, chat and read our favourite newspapers or magazines online, these activities take place against a background of ever more tightly targeted advertising.

As in the case of commercial broadcasting before the advent of the internet, advertising offers a fee-free way of financing the growing array of interactive digital services that have become essential to the twenty-first century lifestyle. The advent of the World Wide Web helped make the internet a commercially friendly environment, and contributed to the increasing privatisation and commercialisation of the internet documented by Fabos (2004). As in the case of broadcasting, however, the choice to rely on a commercial infrastructure has profound implications for the information environment in which we are immersed. To the extent that our social, political and economic interactions and transactions migrate on to these newly commercialised platforms, our lives are subjected to perpetual monitoring and colonised by the resulting forms of target marketing. Gaming provides a model for engaging viewers while it puts them to work generating information about themselves. In so doing, it models some of the characteristic attributes of interactive marketing that will be taken up in the following sections: the promise to facilitate consumer surveillance, to cut through the clutter of an increasingly ad-saturated environment, and to commodify virtual worlds.

Consumer 2.0

Time magazine famously described the empowering character of the interactive citizen when it named ‘you’ — all of us — Person of the Year in 2006. This

celebratory reception of the interactive revolution came across as somewhat paradoxical: the flagship magazine of one of the world's most powerful media conglomerates hyping what it described as an epochal power-shift away from major media corporations: 'It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.' (Grossman, 2006) The 'power to the people' rhetoric falls by the wayside when marketers and their associated outlets talk *about* audiences instead of *to* them. A press release about a collaboration between the in-game advertising company Double Fusion and the social networking site v-side portrays the interactive consumer in starkly different terms: 'The culture of the demographic that make up v-side's membership is about expressing yourself through brand affiliation.' (*Wireless News*, 2008b)

The Web 2.0 version of consumption may be about interactivity, but not at the expense of familiar strategies for managing audiences. Consumers may be active in this account, but their activity can be captured, channelled and directed — at least according to the new generation of interactive marketing strategists. The head of Kuma Games, one of the companies that partners with Double Fusion, describes the participatory consumer not as a challenge to the advertising industry, but as an opportunity: 'Today's 18–35-year-old man demands more action, more immersion, and more community interaction in his entertainment than old media can ever provide ... Kuma engages "Man 2.0" with the intense 3D action he craves, free of charge, while providing sponsors with brand exposure and deep emotional engagement that's really unattainable in any other way.' (*Business Wire*, 2007) Perhaps not surprisingly, the repeated refrain of advertisers is the insistence that custom-targeting is merely a response to consumer demand in the digital era: 'Consumers' attention spans are shorter than ever, and they expect information to be provided to them in a relevant, contextual fashion. This makes the one medium where they are fully engaged — video games — a must buy for any advertising plan.' (Double Fusion, 2008)

Seen in this light, the interactive audience looks quite different from the empowered audience described by those who portray digital media as the antidote to the top-down, one-way, twentieth century broadcast media. Shirky (2008), for example, contrasts the participation facilitated by online collaboration with the narcotising effect of the mid-century TV situation comedy. Calling mainstream TV entertainment a 'cognitive heat sink' for the 'cognitive surplus' freed up by twentieth century technology and prosperity, he describes interactive forms of participation as a means of rousing the populace from its TV-induced slumber: 'It's only now, as we're waking up from that collective bender, that we're ... seeing things being designed to take advantage of that surplus, to deploy it in ways more engaging than just having a TV in everybody's basement.' He contrasts this braver new world of interactive audiences to the rat-race circuit of old media: 'How much can we produce? How much can you consume? Can we produce more and you'll consume more?' (2008) For Shirky, interactive media allow us to break the cycle. However, the marketing world spins the notion of interactivity

in a different direction: rather than breaking the cycle, interactivity can accelerate it by exploiting the productivity of the interactive consumer.

In addition to providing detailed information in a range of registers — demographic, behavioural (past activity) and contextual — interactive audiences are doubly productive. The more social they are online, the more productive they can be, not only in generating increasingly detailed information about themselves and their peer group, but in spreading the word about products. As Youn et al. (2003) note: ‘Online gamers were more engaged in word-of-mouth communication than were non-gamers ... This finding emphasises the potential that online gamers can spread games by word-of-mouth or email throughout their social network.’ Moreover, an interest in gaming can be mobilised to engage players in interactive advertising promotions: ‘Greater acceptance of the Internet among gamers indicates that they are more liable to participate in other interactive online activities delivered through game sites or advertisers’ own websites.’ (2003) Thanks to the interactive capability of the platform, all of the gamers’ activities can be captured — not just to profile them, but also to more accurately track ad exposure and eventually response. Down the road, the goal is not just to send gamers ads for pizza or Coke after an extended game, but to find out when and where they’ve ordered it. The real objective is to catch hold of an ever elusive measure of ‘return on investment’ — not just to deliver custom-tailored advertising, but to measure exactly how effective such ads are, and to guide modifications that make them increasingly so.

This type of monitoring is often framed in terms of the threat to consumer privacy. Underlying, and too often absent from, discussions of privacy is the emerging culture of control associated with commercial monitoring. The goal of such monitoring is not so much an obtrusive invasion of privacy as it is a strategy for managing what Beniger (1999) describes as a crisis of control: the need to keep up with the rate and complexity of production. What is at stake is economic control — the management of distribution and of consumers — which is perhaps why commercial monitoring tends to get less attention in the literature on surveillance than digitally enhanced forms of state-sponsored monitoring (perhaps understandably in the post-9/11 era). Still, books like *The Naked Consumer* (Larson, 1992), *The Transparent Consumer* (Lace, 2005) and *Profiling Machines: Mapping the Personal Information Economy* (Elmer, 2004) trace the outlines of an emerging surveillance *economy*. In such an economy, the goal of monitoring is not the negative form of power invoked by Foucault (1977) — the power to deter or coerce — but rather its generative side: the mobilisation of productive bodies. The participatory forms of productivity captured by interactive monitoring are a form of the ‘free labour’ described by Terranova (2000) as a characteristic of the online economy in which some ‘work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine’ (2000: 35).

Viewed through the lens of productive labour in the interactive economy, online monitoring becomes not solely an issue of privacy, but one of control over productive resources. Moreover, the binary opposition between control and resistance, top down and bottom up, becomes complicated by an emerging regime

of participatory control. On the one hand, digital interactivity offers the possibility of enhanced forms of corporate accountability — the forms of participation invoked by Jenkins (2008). On the other, to the extent that interactivity serves as a cybernetic feedback mechanism for the marketing process, it confronts interactive audiences with ‘their own absence of agency and freedom in the free expression of the generative capacity offered to them’ (Jarrett, 2008).

Cutting through the clutter

The appeal of video games, at least to the advertiser, is that they command a higher level of attentiveness and engagement than that required by ‘background’ media which can be on and running without viewers or listeners paying attention. If, in the advertising world, the goal is no longer simply to generate impressions but to foster engagement, games present themselves as an ideal medium for cutting through the clutter. In the industry jargon, the goal is to capture ‘mindshare’: ‘Videogame advertising will not lose your brand in the noise of banners and buttons. This uncluttered and immersive environment raises your brand to the audience’s top-of-mind.’ (Double Fusion, 2008) The stated goal of these immersive advertising campaigns is to channel the focused attention of interactive gamers. As one media consultant put it: ‘What is interesting is that it demands the consumer’s attention, because if they are not concentrating on the game, they will die, crash, lose or whatever. In this media-fragmented world, where it is hard to capture people’s attention, that is not something that is easily sniffed at.’ (Murphy, 2008) Double Fusion makes the promise of engagement a centrepiece of its campaign: ‘Video games by their very nature are the only medium that can command the audience’s complete attention. No texting or channel surfing here.’ (Double Fusion, 2008)

The intensity of focus cuts two ways: one of the hurdles facing in-game advertisers is convincing their clients that gamers pay attention to the ads, as opposed to the fast-changing conditions of game play. The result has been an emerging body of research on gamers, much of it devoted to determining the payoff of interactive, targeted advertising. The research has gone so far as to argue that distraction can be turned to the advantage of advertisers. As one study puts it, ‘when participants are immersed in the narrative, they are distracted from the advertisement and therefore do not think critically about it’ (Glass, 2007). Related findings, published in the *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, highlight the apparent impulsivity of online gamers as compared with non-gaming internet users and non-internet users: ‘Greater impulsiveness among gamers,’ the study observed, ‘may lead to more susceptibility to online tactics and strategies that promote instant gratification for immediate pleasure over delayed gratification.’ (Youn et al., 2003)

The point here, intriguingly, is the exact reverse of the Jenkins-inspired notion that active engagement (rather than ‘passive’ viewing) fosters critical engagement. It offers a somewhat disconcerting rejoinder to the equation of interactivity with critical participation that has become a truism in those quarters of new media studies that assume, with Coleman (2004), that: ‘Interactivity is political: it shifts control towards the receivers of messages.’ (2004: 35) From a marketing perspective,

however, the goal is to mobilise interactive engagement as a form of control over audiences: a means of cutting through their defences against advertising messages. As Glass (2007) puts it: ‘The video game should take the player’s guard down when it comes to advertisements.’ Frenetic interactivity, on this account, helps to mask the forms of control that it works to reproduce: the very incitation to interact doubles as a technique for managing audiences and channelling their activities. We might describe this as the flip side of the Foucauldian (1978) insight that where there is power there is always also resistance. In the interactive era, it is important to emphasise the obverse: that where there is a celebration of critical participation and resistance, there is also, increasingly, the reconfiguration of control.

Virtual realism

The online video game *Football Superstars* announced in mid-2008 that players could imitate their football heroes by wearing sponsored clothing — at least in the virtual environment of the game. They wouldn’t receive free football boots like the celebrity players, but their online avatars would be able to outfit themselves with Puma’s ‘v1.08 Speed Boot’ and ‘visit an in-game replica of Puma’s Carnaby Street concept store in London to kit their avatar out with the latest Puma clothes’ (Bowser, 2008). If Puma sponsors players in the real world, why not have them virtually equip online players: ‘They are leading the way by providing footballers with everything they need to succeed on the pitch and now they will be doing the same on the virtual pitches of *Football Superstars*.’ (2008) Puma’s presence extends beyond the virtual playing field, permeating the game with ‘its own branded virtual training academy where players can train. The Academy’s trainer will be wearing Puma training kit, as well as the players ... The academy will also feature Puma footballs, Puma pitch-side advertising hoardings, a Puma pitch logo and a video wall.’ (2008) This heavy-handed in-game product placement was promoted as a feature that made the virtual game more realistic. As the head of the company that produces *Football Superstars* put it: ‘With a brand like Puma interactively involved we further blur the divide between reality and our virtual world.’ (2008)

The equation of the contrivance of advertising with authenticity and realism is a recurring theme of the in-game advertising industry. According to a study by Nielsen Interactive Entertainment, ‘about 70% of heavy gamers said that contextual ads make games more realistic’ (Sapre, 2008). The finding represents what might be described as the triumph of commercialism as authenticity: we have become so inundated with advertising that commercial-free environments seem strange and unreal, especially virtual environments that represent real spaces where advertising is commonplace. As one of Double Fusion’s focus group participants put it: ‘In *Ghost Recon*, you have the Dodge billboards in the urban areas, and I think that is pretty effective ... it adds realism because, you know, you see ads in the real world.’ (Double Fusion, 2008) It is hard to imagine that all gamers are this enthusiastic: one post to a *City of Heroes* bulletin board responded with exasperation to the proliferation of in-game ads: ‘I don’t really get why your

[sic] all so happy about this, I play this game to ESCAPE from reality. Not to be Spammed to death by reality.’ (MsBunny2u, 2008)

Nevertheless, advertisers invoke the research findings to suggest that if fake ads were used instead of real ones, or if ads were eliminated altogether in spaces where advertising is commonplace, the paradoxical result would be a distracting sense of contrivance.

Maintaining the realism of the contrived game environment, we are told, requires introducing those very forms of contrivance that we associate with our commercial-saturated reality. As the CEO of the Christian-themed Left Behind Games put it: ‘The ads in our games actually enhance the gaming experience. Billboards in our virtual creation of New York City are brought alive with ads similar to those seen in real life.’ (*Market Wire*, 2007) Commercial capitalism has created an advertising environment that serves as the standard for what passes as reality — even in a virtual environment.

Conclusion: Mediatized subjects

Virtual worlds have come a long way since the text-based days of online communities like LambdaMoo and the WELL that envisioned realms freed from the laws of the physical world, limited only by the capacity of the human imagination. As the infrastructure for these worlds becomes increasingly complex and costly, and as the internet becomes privatised and commercialised, the limits of the human imagination may well become increasingly delimited by those of the marketplace. The example of in-game advertising illustrates how the abstract potential of virtual reality is constrained by its realisation in a concrete, commercially subsidised form. The fact that the analysis in this article is narrowly focused on one aspect of the commercial infrastructure of gaming should not be read as an attempt to assert that the gaming experience can be reduced to its economic aspect — or that the economics of online gaming are limited to in-game advertising. Subscription-based forms of gaming may well turn out to be just as robust, if not more so. Rather, this article has chosen a particular lens through which to view the interactive economy with the goal of developing some more general observations about the commercial exploitation of digital, interactive environments. The goal is to isolate and highlight elements of this commercial logic to see what it might tell us about an interactive economy in which gaming is a trail-blazing industry.

In particular, the essay seeks to draw attention to what Slavoj Žižek (1999) has described as ‘the constitutive ambiguity of the notion of mediatization’. His formulation invokes the political meaning of mediatization — the process whereby, for example, rulers conquered by imperial powers are allowed to keep their symbolic position while being stripped of meaningful power. In the digital era, he asks whether something similar might be said of the newly crowned interactive consumer: ‘Does not ... the same not hold also for today’s progressive computerization of our everyday lives in the course of which the subject is also more and more “mediatized”, imperceptibly stripped of his power, under the false guise of its increase?’ (1999) Such is the image of ‘Consumer 2.0’ envisioned by those marketers who see interactivity not as a form of consumer empowerment but

as a strategy for collecting information, channelling activity, capturing attention and building customer loyalty.

It is worth considering some of the more concrete implications of the commercial model envisioned by the promoters of in-game advertising. Product placement privileges particular types of games — those which take place in more or less contemporary or familiar environments, in which advertising fits seamlessly into the background. In-game ads in fantasy role-playing games, for example, would not only seem jarringly out of place, but might interfere with the illusion being created — the ‘realism’ of the fiction, as it were. The games likely to thrive in an advertising-based environment are those with the potential not only for ad and product placement, but for product tie-ins, as in the case of *Football Superstars*.¹

Pushing the logic of in-game advertising a bit further, it is worth asking whether this economic model helps promote forms of interactivity that undermine what Coleman (2003) describes as its political potential by replacing critical reflection with unreflective immersion. The model of monitoring-based interactive advertising envisions a world in which digitally enhanced forms of activity, from socialising to searching for information on the internet to playing, become productive contributions to the process of marketing to ourselves. What is at stake in the proliferation of interactive monitoring is not simply personal privacy but also the control and management of consumers and citizens associated with the increasing asymmetry of control over productive resources and the forms of monitoring and productivity they facilitate. In the interactive era, we are faced with the complex challenge of differentiating between those forms of participation that hold power accountable and those which facilitate its operation. Failure to interrogate the forms of control associated with the market-based version of interactive participation reinforces the double aspect of mediatisation outlined by Zizek (1999): ‘On the one hand, reduction of reality to a virtual domain regulated by arbitrary rules that can be suspended; on the other hand, the concealed truth of this freedom, the reduction of the subject to an utter instrumentalized passivity.’

Note

1 I am indebted to conversations with Sal Humphreys for the development of this idea.

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