In-game marketing, and why it works

Anyone familiar with product placement in films and TV knows this is a booming area for advertisers. Whether it is Aston Martin designing a bespoke new car for the latest Bond film, or the Democrat party elite glued to their AppleMacs in *House of Cards*, big, powerful brands understand the cachet of aligning themselves with slick, popular mainstream media.

The benefits flow both ways. For a filmmaker, the inclusion of established brands – especially aspirational ones, of the kind mentioned above – strengthens the sense of continuity and synergy between the invented fictional universe and the real world, as experienced by the viewer. The softly glowing Apple logo provides a comforting reference point in a fictionalised arena of props and empty coffee mugs; a talisman that helps to narrow the gap between the lives of real people and the lives of characters on-screen.

If the product placement is done with sufficient skill, the viewer may be consciously unaware they are being subjected to advertising. Such was the case in *The Matrix*, when the Nokia phone used by the central characters helped to reinforce the techy aesthetic of the film, and to create a lasting fashion for those kinds of squared-off, business-like handsets.

In-game marketing does not differ conceptually from the kind found in the film and television industries. Similar products may be advertised in similar ways – for example on billboards in a virtual city, or by reproducing existing vehicles that can then be virtually driven around. The difference lies in the advertising potential based upon the progress of the technology in which it is embedded.

For example, in the film *iRobot*, starring Will Smith, Audi designed a concept car to show off its new design direction. This allowed viewers to marvel at its angular, futuristic lines, which have indeed been transferred on to subsequent road cars. In the *Gran Turismo* game series, however, players can become

familiar with the look, sound and handling characteristics of real cars, which have been licensed for digital reproduction by the manufacturers. This level of interactivity allows gamers to develop a deeper appreciation for the products they are presented with.

Computer games have been nibbling at the edge of "photo realism" for a couple of years now, giving advertisers an increasingly attractive market shelf from which they can display their wares. In terms of getting it right, and subtly promoting products without becoming an annoyance, and a source of aggravation, advertisers must aim to embed their messages into the fabric of the game universe, without relying on gimmicks or jarring cut scenes. For example, if the object or service being advertised is genuinely useful to the character in the game, then the player may overlook the product placement, whilst building familiarity with that object or service. From there, familiarity will either breed affection, or contempt, depending on merit.

The market for in-game advertising is growing rapidly, which is to be expected, given the explosive growth of the gaming industry. From being worth $34 million in 2004, it was predicted to hit $1 billion in 2014. There is no reason to think this trend will slow down any time soon. With a major breakthrough in the market for virtual reality on its way, thanks in large part to the Oculus Rift, the gaming industry is facing a paradigm shift away from screen-based entertainment to fully immersive 3D experiences, with the potential of mirroring our earthly, non-simulated existence to an uncanny degree. The scramble to advertise on the most popular platforms is likely to be immense, because – unlike our non-simulated existence – virtual reality offers the chance to advertise anywhere, any time, anyhow. The basic rules of engagement will remain the same: anything perceived as being too intrusive will be shunned, potentially with negative consequences for the company in question.

However, for those companies that embrace these opportunities with nerve and imagination – and with an emphasis on subtlety – the rewards could be limitless. Because, as VR and augmented reality become ever more ubiquitous, and the line between the virtual and the non-virtual worlds dissolve, the products and services that become established in one world will naturally migrate to the other. Those ideas generators, who weave their messages like threads of the greatest delicacy, through the new digital fabric of our projected consciousness, will inherit market pre-eminence, of the kind occupied by Google, Facebook and Apple today.

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