

SOCIAL MEDIA: CREATING COMMERCIAL BUZZ THROUGH WEB GAMES

**By Nir Ayalon
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*“Daring ideas are like chessmen moved forward.
They may be beaten, but they may start a winning game”
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

Background

The idea of using games to support ideas and create communities isn't new: it goes back to the first Olympics at 776 BC, and probably even before. And yet, the Internet and its growing penetration across the globe introduced a whole new spectrum of opportunities for the game genre and – some may say – redefined it overall. The Internet-based game enjoys a vibrant community, drawing its members from every corner of the Web – without any physical or geographical boundaries. It is much less predictable, and many times offers only a general rules/plot frame, depending on the development of a vibrant player community creating ‘inflow’ of content from its members, that shapes the way the game develops.

The following summary examines this fast-growing, fascinating genre of online social games, focusing on the growing commercial utilization of social games by various companies, and new trends that are constantly evolving.

Commercial Online Games (Online Advergaming)

Advergaming is defined at Wikipedia as “the practice of using games, particularly computer games, to advertise or promote a product, organization or viewpoint.” The term "advergaming" was coined in *Wired* magazine's "Jargon Watch" column in 2001 and has been applied to various free online games commissioned by major companies.

Following is an overview of the different categories, and a more in-depth summary of one of the most interesting advergaming categories - alternate reality games.

- **Commercial advergaming banner**
A banner enriched by a game concept allowing the consumer to ‘play’ with the commercial, thus transferring the commercial message in a ‘soft’ way, with less consumer antagonism. Most advergame banners stick to the individual-player concept and don't promote community or user generated content.
- **1X1 online game**
An online game, surrounding a commercial, political, or educational theme. Games in this category are dependent on the viral impact a games world makes. One of the most successful utilizations of personal games was made by Burger King, that

launched the '*subservient chicken*' site in 2004 (www.subservientchicken.com), as a campaign for its new chicken tenders products. Web surfers, excited by the fact they could 'give orders' to an oversized chicken, flooded the site, which has reported more than 40 million entries so far. Burger King lately embarked on a similar venture, offering 'king games' to its clients.

A few interesting, more recent examples are the *consider-yourself-warned* site by tag (www.consideryourselfwarned.com) or *Cost of life* (www.costlife.org) which is sponsored by UNICEF and allows surfers to live the hardship of the Third World.

- **Multiplayer online games**

In order to increase popularity and average stay on site, many online games started offering a new incentive, other than 'fun': competition. This was done by adding community aspects to the game – player recognition (by nick and/or aviator), player ranking, and UGC options (IM between the players, option to invite other players to a 'private room' etc.). A good example for a multiplayer online site can be found at the game portal Riddler (www.riddler.com). Sites belonging to this genre usually target 'casual', less savvy consumer segments, that treat the game as a 'quick break from life' (work, study, etc.) The community exists, but its member obligation and loyalty is generally low.

- **Massive multiplayer online games (MMOG)**

This category includes massive server-based, multi-player, online games. It attracts savvier Internet users, usually from the teen and young adult segments. Most popular games, such as *World of Warcraft* (www.worldofwarcraft.com) or *Everquest 2* (everquest2.station.sony.com), create communities of hundreds of thousands of players and usually generate revenue mainly from subscription to the game or buying of hardware needed to play. However, some MMOG sites, such as *Secondlife* (<http://secondlife.com/>) or *Entropia Universe* (<http://www.entropiauniverse.com>) have created 'online economies,' allowing users to buy and sell 'game money' and exchange it into real money – creating a new revenue channel and further blurring the line between fiction and reality.

The last kind of multiplayer online game, that presents an innovative, all-dimensions kind of game and brand immersion, is the alternate reality gaming (ARG) genre.

Pioneered commercially by online campaigns for brands such as the film "AI" and the game "Halo 2," the ARG genre blends hoax-like Websites that don't announce their commercial affiliation, and online quests, unfolding mysteries, and even real-world activities such as messages disguised in 'innocent' newspaper ads, or messages received at phone booths at a pre-announced time and place.

These games (which are usually free to play) fully utilize the 'constantly connected' concept to involve the player in the story plot and characters, and create a community that 'hubs' in the Internet – having no geographic boundaries and constantly 'buzzing' as such - but offers (and demands) its players to actually get up from their

computers in order to find clues and other planted assets in the real world. Many puzzles can be solved only by collaborative efforts, thus encouraging the players to connect with each other and initiate team work – on the Internet as well as in the ‘real’ world.

Many have linked ARG to the wildly popular 80’s (offline) multi player role playing game “dungeons and dragons.” However, the first wildly successful implementation of the ARG concept is attributed to Microsoft, launching an online game to support the movie *A.I.*. The game – called ‘The Beast’ -- ran for 12 weeks during the summer of 2001, and was the first to use the mantra later adopted by other ARG games – “this is not a game.” The site answers.com describes the basics of this ARG and its promotion:

“The Beast... was set in the year 2142, fifty years after the events chronicled in *A.I.* There were three overlapping entry points to the game, or "rabbit holes" in ARG parlance. First, some trailers and posters for *A.I.* had a credit for Jeanine Salla as Sentient Machine Therapist hidden among the credits for Spielberg and the actors. Second, one of the trailers encoded a telephone number in markings on the promotional text; if a player called this number and followed the given instructions he/she eventually received an email stating in part that "Jeanine is the key" and that "you've seen her name before." Third, an *A.I.* promotional poster sent to some technology and entertainment media outlets had a very simple code stating "Evan Chan was murdered. Jeanine is the key..."

Players following these clues were eventually directed to online hoax sites, presenting further clues and using a variety of channels – Internet, phone calls and magazine ads – to deliver further clues, revealing more and more parts of the ‘plot.’ Another early stage successful example was E.A.’s game "[Majestic](#)," which blended computer game play with prerecorded Webcams, phone messages, and other sinister-seeming "intrusions" into gamers' real-world lives.

A recent interesting example is of the ‘Year Zero’ ARG ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Year_Zero_\(alternate_reality_game\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Year_Zero_(alternate_reality_game))), named after the Nine Inch Nails record and launched in February this year, as a disguised promotional tool for the band.

The buzz around the concept is high – and it seems that the future promises even more options to support stronger than ever, 360 degree communities across the world. Rather than 30 seconds of exposure to a brand, these games generate stickiness that can last days, or even weeks, creating a strong viral effect to draw in users and leveraging user generated content and player initiatives to create a game that is not only ‘delivered’ by its providers, but also constantly reinvented by its players. From a branding perspective, these tools have the potential to be far more powerful and long lasting than the short viral video clips that get passed around or somewhat gimmicky one-trick ponies.

Is it a game? ARG players would probably have mixed answers to this question. For marketers, however, the answer seems clear – this is reality.

Links to a few new ARGs:

<http://www.cathysbook.com/>

<http://www.descry.us/>

<http://www.poorrichardmusic.com/>

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