

The Disappearance and Reappearance and Disappearance of the Player in Videogame Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the short history of videogames the ways in which they have been advertised has changed dramatically. Although videogame advertising has yet to be adequately studied it played a key role in the constitution of and education of potential videogame players. While most modern videogame ads feature the games themselves, early videogame ads prominently featured the players as a tool not only for selling the new gadgets but also as a way of showing consumers how to use them. This paper will explore the ways in which videogame advertisements functioned to change the ways in which consumers thought about the home and the ways in which they could actively control the electronic media that made its way into the home.

Author Keywords

videogames, advertising, history, media

Videogame Advertising

The sounds of a traditional Japanese instrument begin to play. A Fortwo model Smart car drives into frame. A hand knocks on a door. The door opens. The reverse shot reveals two Japanese men standing outside the door. One of the men raises a white remote control, bows, and with a Japanese accent says, “We/Wii would like to play.” At this point the sound of the traditional instruments is joined by an urban drumbeat. Quick edits show one of the men stands in front of the television gesturing wildly and then each of the homeowners doing the same. Intercut with these scenes are shots of the videogames they are playing. The Nintendo Wii system is shown. The men get back into the car, put on dark glasses, and drive into the sunset as the double “i” in the “Wii” logo bows. While the homeowners and the games played change, the other details remain the same through the series of commercials that Nintendo used to introduce the Wii to the US audience.

Although the unique control scheme of the Wii has attracted the most attention, the commercials are also quite interesting in their own right. Unlike most other videogame commercials, the Wii commercials devote more time to showing the players as they do to showing the games. While these commercials are obviously attempting to give the impression of bringing the Far East to the West they are also performing the important work of showing potential consumers how to use the system. Using a controller

radically different from any previously used by a home console, Nintendo feels the need to educate the public on the proper use of the “Wiimote.” Perhaps more important than this education is who is shown playing. Rather than only showing the stereotypical white 20-something male the series of commercials show a wide variety of genders, ethnicities, and ages. The commercials are clearly trying to send the message that the Wii is for anyone be they male or female, any ethnic background, or young or old. The other gaming systems may be for gamers but the Wii is for everyone.

While focusing almost exclusively on the people playing the game rather than the games may seem unique, in reality it is simply the latest series of advertisements to feature players as a way of modeling both how the videogames should be played as well as who is meant to play them. When videogames were first brought into the home and whenever a new form of videogame hardware is introduced the print and television advertisements have frequently featured players rather than the games. In doing so, these ads have served as a way of training the public on how to use these devices as well as illustrating who is seen as the product’s intended user. In the same way that the popularization of radio and television changed the ways in which people thought about homes and brought the public sphere into the private sphere into the home, the popularization of home videogames reconfigured our relationships to mass media and changed the ways in which people thought about using media. As the medium has matured and become more entrenched in the psyche of American consumers, the actual purpose of the advertising has changed from one of teaching users how to use the system to publicizing specific games in a manner very similar to film trailers.

Examination of the types of educational and audience creating ads reveals the ways in which advertisers have attempted to force a restructuring of the American home as well as how successful advertisers have been in that restructuring. Home videogames and videogames systems were once advertised in a manner quite similar to staple items such as clothing, food, or activities. Commercials for these products, like those for early videogames, focused on showing how much pleasure individuals derived from consuming the product and typically showed the consumer actually enjoying the product. In the decades since those

early advertisements, advertising that focuses on showing the smiling consumer has practically disappeared only to return when advertisers want to educate the consumer on a new feature such as the Nintendo GameBoy's portability, the X-Box's online play, the PSP's ability to do more than play games, or most recently the Wii's controller.

In her book, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal In Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel argues that the introduction of television forced consumers to "make room for TV" in both a literal and figurative sense. Family rooms became TV rooms as the television replaced the hearth as the gathering place for the family. The public sphere of the outer world was brought into the private sphere of the inner world of the home. While the introduction of videogames into the home did not result in a literal reconfiguration of the home's architecture, bringing videogames into the home did serve an important role in a reconfiguration of the culture of the home. By transforming *watchers* of television into *players* of games on television, videogames reconfigured the ways in which many Americans would understand the home and created a new discourse surrounding the ways in which consumers interacted with and thought about television. The advertisements were the vehicles that educated the public and spread the discourse of this new method of entertainment. By watching the player(s) in commercials, consumers were being indoctrinated into a new way of thinking about what their television could do. Looked at chronologically, videogame advertisements can be made to serve as a cultural history of videogames in the American home.

While there have been histories of videogames such as Steven L. Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, as well as documentaries by sources as varied as PBS and the CNBC, all of these have focused on the games, the hardware, the makers, and the consumers but have, without exception, neglected even the most cursory examination of the role played by advertising. In the late twentieth century how are most consumers first introduced to a new medium or product? Through advertising. Spigel argues, "Magazines, television programs, and advertisements give us a clue into an imaginary popular culture – that is, they tell us what various media institutions assumed about the public's concerns and desires" [13]. Thus, to ignore the advertising, especially the role of early advertisements, is to ignore the place where the older patterns of life are first disrupted.¹

Although, what is generally recognized as the first videogame, "Tennis For Two," was created in 1958 as part of a museum display at Brookhaven National Laboratories (see figures 1 and 2), videogames would not become popular

¹ This is not to say that advertisements can provide a clear, undistorted window into the culture into which a new medium is introduced. Advertisements are the product of advertisers and are produced with the goal of selling a product

until 1972 when Magnavox took an exclusive license on Ralph Baer's concept and began selling the system as the Odyssey and another company, Atari, would begin creation their own videogames [12, 6].



Figure 1: The BNL Instrumentation Division's Visitor Day display from 1958 showing the oscilloscope and electronics which ran the Tennis For Two video game (below arrow). [5]



Figure 2: The Tennis For Two video game in action. [5]

Videogames became successful by changing the way in which people thought about television and their relationship to television. As Spigel tells us, the entry of television into the home was part of a radical restructuring of the home. She notes that in the 1869 version of Catherine Beecher's *The American Woman's Home* the piano was displayed as, "a permanent fixture in the family home" and put forth an image of the home which the, "domestic space and recreational pursuits within the home were sharply differentiated from the chaotic urban environment where industrialization presented both spatial and social confusion" [13]. That image, however, was to be revised in the decades following the publication of *This American Woman's Home*, and soon, "the home began to reflect the burgeoning

consumer culture of the outside world” [13]. As society’s notion of leisure began to change, new technologies entered the home and found a place within it. As Carolyn Marvin argues in her book *When Old Technologies Were New*, “Old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances” [8]. For example, Spigel writes, “...in 1929, one home manual even suggests that the phonograph might replace the piano as a center for family recreation” and that a phonograph was a good second choice for families who did not know how to play a piano” [13]. Although one could still sing along with or dance to a phonograph, the piano’s replacement by the phonograph indicates a growing tendency away from creating an entertainment of one’s own, to relying on technology to provide the entertainment. This, combined with other technological advances such as the automobile and film that took the family outside of the home and into the public, eroded the distinctions between public and private [13].

This process would continue after World War II, as the television took the place of the piano or fireplace as the gathering place for the family and enable the world to enter the home [13]. However, its rise to dominance over leisure activities such as playing the piano, embroidery, reading or painting was not smooth and, “as the television set moved into the center of family life, other household fixtures traditionally associated with domestic bliss had to make room for it” [13].

Similarly when *Pong* was introduced into the home it forced a change in the ways in which family lives were organized and would also reconfigure the ways in which people thought about television. Before videogames came into the home, televisions brought programming in from the outside via the antenna, cable or satellite and typically the only control over that content that viewers had was what to watch (or not to watch). Bringing videogames into the house transformed television from a relatively passive medium which could be consumed with little active participation into a medium which required the consumer to be both physically and mentally active in what happened on the screen. Because of this, videogames in some ways reflected back to family tableaux of pre-technological home in which individuals took a more active part in the creation of their own leisure. The simple fact that one is said to *play* a videogame, *play* the piano, and *watch* television signals the distinctly different ways in which we think about videogames when compared to television.

Advertising shows the way in which families achieved this change from passive to active. When Atari introduced the home *Pong* machine newspaper display ads and television commercials would first appear and these ads illustrate the process of reconfiguring the way in which Americans imagine the home. One such ad appeared in the Feb 27, 1976 edition of the *Los Angeles Times* that shows a white father and son in front of a television playing game of *Pong*, with a score of 5 to 6 and in front of the TV sits the *Pong*

machine (see figure 3). The son has his hand raised in the air in triumph and with his mouth open, presumably shouting in victory after having beaten dear old dad. The text above the image asks the question, “Nothing on T.V. tonight?” and gives the advice, “Play ‘Pong’ instead.” Another line from the ad copy reads, “For new family fun, it’s ‘Pong’ ...the exciting game of skill you just hook up to your own TV. Your TV screen actually becomes the playing field, and ‘Pong’ adjusts to any size screen.” The text ends, “Automatic digital score appears on screen. ‘Pong’ anyone? New from Atari. 99.95”



Figure 3: An ad from the February 27, 1976 *LA Times* shows a father and son playing *Pong* [11]



Figure 4: Pong advertised alongside sweaters and a buzzing belt [10].

In April of 1976, another version of the ad appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* with the same text but featuring a drawing of the scene rather than a photograph. Along side this ad, the May Department Store running the ad also chose to run ads for their “spring sweater set” and a “Tummy Trainer Belt” that buzzed when you forgot to pull in your slouching tummy (see figure 4). A month later, in the *Los Angeles Times*, Bullock’s Department Stores featured their own *Pong* ad that featured an illustration of the system and the television screen (see figure 5).



Figure 5: Pong advertised alongside an alarm clock and a gardening clock [4].

Also advertised were a clock radio and the “Fairfield Flower Planting Clock” which showed phases of the moon and seasons.

In these early videogame ads, two related processes can be seen. The image and text in the ad convey a great deal about how hard the advertisers had to work to inform the consumer about just exactly “Pong” was, how it worked, and how we were supposed to interact with it. Similarly, by placing it on the same page as ads for sweaters and the equivalent of a girdle, or clock radio and a gimmicky clock, the advertisers

can be seen as attempting to figure out exactly what “*Pong*” meant to them as retailers. Retailers were attempting to figure out where the product fit in with their existing product line while simultaneously attempting to tell consumers where their product fit in with their lifestyles.

In the introduction to *When Old Technologies Were New*, Marvin argues, “Media are not fixed natural objects. They have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication” [8]. Therefore, these earliest ads are evidence of the construction of the complexes surrounding videogames. Is *Pong* more like an electric clock or is it more like clothing? And, perhaps more tellingly of the mindset of the department stores, is *Pong* more like the common, everyday sweater and alarm clock or is it more like the gimmicky tummy trainer or garden clock?

Because home videogames were a new category, the advertisers had to fall back on existing practices and expectations which led to the advertisers putting the devices next to a variety of products before they could determine how society would shape the products. Would videogames become common everyday objects or would they be a passing fad? Spigel offers up an explanation for this scattershot approach when she writes that new technologies “do not simply cause social change” but instead, the very ways in which they are used “are shaped by social practices and cultural expectations” [13]. It seems that by advertising videogames next to a wide variety of goods, the consumers were attempting to cover the bases of cultural expectations for new electronics.

Similarly, the Wii ads are attempting to change the expectations of videogames as only appealing to boys and young men. By showing a multitude of people playing and enjoying the games Nintendo is attempting to reshape the current dominant “social practices and cultural expectations.” They are attempting to restate the discourses surrounding videogames in much the same manner that earlier ads were attempting to create them.

These early ads are also important indicators of the ways in which advertisers were attempting to educate the public on how the games worked. The ads told consumers that in order to make *Pong* work, “you [would] just hook up to your own TV” and that “your TV screen actually becomes the playing field” [10]. And just to allay any fears consumers may have had that their television was the wrong size, the ad copy assures, “‘Pong’ adjusts to any size screen,” and would “easily [hook] up to any television set” [10]. The ad text ends by assuring those consumers with black and white televisions that *Pong* would “[display] in color or black and white, depending on your TV” [10].

These explicitly informative advertisements were by no means limited to print and television commercials made these types of educational moments became even more explicit. In many early commercials for the Atari 2600, not only would there be scenes of the people sitting in front of

the TV playing the game, but there would also be scenes of the system being plugged into the wall (see figure 6). Even when the Super Nintendo was introduced to North America on September 9 of 1991, commercials for the games still frequently included scenes of the game being inserted into the console (see figure 7) [6].² Telling customers that you play the game on your television or that you need to plug the system in may seem silly or incredibly obvious, but that is a testament to both how successful those advertisements were and how commonplace videogames have become.

Using advertisements as ways of educating the public on how to use a new device was not unique to videogames. In her analysis of the early depictions of television, Lynn Spigel notes that these information ads were common in coverage of televisions and suggests that these early depictions are markers of a phase in which "...magazines, advertisements, newspapers, radio, film, and television... spoke in seemingly endless ways about [a medium's] status as domestic entertainment" [13]. She suggests that, "By looking at these media and the representations they distributed, we can see how the idea of [a medium] and its place in the home was circulated to the public. Popular media ascribed meanings to [a medium] and advised the public on ways to use it [13].



Figure 6. Plugging the Atari 2600 into the wall.

While telling consumers such basic information would become less necessary as the public became more familiar with the technology, whenever a new way of playing is introduced, advertisers bring the players back into the commercials as a means of modeling the recommended ways of playing the games.

A 1990 Nintendo press release supports this claim of using players in advertising as educational devices by stating that incorporating "real-life scenarios" in a particular line of commercials, "demonstrates how its Game Boy portable



Figure 7. Inserting a cartridge into the Super NES.

video game system can play a role in the lifestyles of two disparate age groups: kids and teens [...] and adult males [...] [9]. The article states that "[...] Nintendo faced the challenge of educating adult players that Game Boy isn't just for kids [...]" and argues that the "[...] new adult Game Boy spot play on real-life reactions to the game play experience by demonstrating that it's okay to have fun" [9].

However, showing the players not only educates the audience, it also configures the audience and explicitly shows the audience to whom these games are being marketed. In his famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser discusses interpellation and suggests that it is the operation through which ideology functions in such a way as to "'recruits' subjects among the individuals" "or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects" [1]. Althusser well known example involves someone being "hailed" by a police officer shouting and when the hailed individual turns around, "he becomes a *subject*" because that individual "has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed'" [1].

This process of interpellation can be seen in the videogame advertisements as certain consumers are "hailed" while others are not. Those who identify with, have similarity with, or want to be like the players featured in the commercials are thus interpellated into becoming players. However, this notion of a specific audience is one that has not always existed within the videogame industry. Before advertisers were "hailing" a specific group of individuals – usually white males in their teens and early twenties – the advertisers had a much more scattershot approach and attempted to attract the attention of as many people as possible. Rather than interpellate a specific segment and aim at a specific group of "gamers" the advertisers would attempt the more general type of interpellation and aim at a wider audience of consumers that lie outside of the normal age and gender categories which are now considered to be the subject of videogame ads. This construction of the audience was a crucial element of the "work" that early videogame advertisements were doing.

² September 9 would go on to be the launch date of the Sony PlayStation and Sega Dreamcast.

Conversely the Wii commercials are trying to undo the notion that videogames are for a narrow group of people. However, rather than the scattershot approach of early commercials, the Wii commercials seem to be quite purposeful in their attempts to hail as many people as possible. Rather than throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks as early ads did, the Wii is striving to attract individuals outside of an already constituted audience. Besides the previously discussed commercials another of Nintendo's attempt to attract a non-traditional audience occurred when in May and June of 2007 they ran a unique live ad in UK Theatres. An article about the ad states that during the pre-film commercials the theatre would be interrupted by a woman looking for her son who is sitting in the audience. Once the son is found, "the pair will face off by playing a Wii Sports match live on the screen" [3]. These kinks of live ads further the notion of attempting to sell the system to people who are not typical gamers, showing someone, in this case a mother, who is not normally thought of as a gamer, and giving theatre goers a live demonstration of the control system.

It is interesting to note that while having actors perform a live sales stunt is unique, the storyline of having a young person introduce an older person to videogames is one that dates back to a series of Atari 2600 ads. In one, a blond pig-tailed girl tells "Uncle Frank" about *Space Invaders* and the Uncle goes on to win the game. In a second, a brunette pig-tailed girl asks "Grandpa" to play *Pac-Man* with her and proceeds to beat Grandpa at the game. In the final commercial, a nerdy boy in glasses shows his babysitter *Yar's Revenge* and the babysitter promptly tells him to go to bed, presumably so that she can continue to play.

Clearly, in these commercials, Atari sees children as their gateway to the home. However, perhaps realizing children would not be able to purchase the system and games on their own, these commercials are attempting to appeal to older men and teenaged girls. The commercials go to great lengths to show the adults and teenager playing the game and enjoying it. A fourth ad touting the number of arcade games one could buy on the Atari 2600 cuts back and forth from the game and a family that starts with two boys playing, then joined by a father who plays, then a mother joins and plays, next the neighbors are playing, and finally grandma playing with a whole host of people crowded around including the mailman and pizza boy (see figure 8). The message is clear, while kids and young boys in particular may be initially drawn to the medium, no one is immune to the black hole-like pull of videogames. (A similar scene is seen in Nintendo's commercial for the Mii feature of the Wii. see figure 9).

In attempting to define the market of videogames as largely as possible, videogame advertisers were not only attempting to maximize profits, but were also attempting, perhaps unconsciously, to make sure that videogames were not seen as a gendered or aged medium. In this context, the trio of commercials with children introducing videogames to adults

and the growing crowd of players makes sense. They wanted to show that not only were videogame systems so easy that a child could operate them, but that they were so easy that a bumbling uncle, an out of touch grandfather, or a self-absorbed babysitter could not only operate the games, but could actually enjoy them just minutes after sitting down in front of them. Spiegel notes that Warren Susman "argues that the public often resists new technologies" [13]. She adds, "this resistance can also help determine the form that communications media take" [13]. This is, of course, the same trajectory that Atari attempted to take when they introduced videogames to the mainstream public and the trajectory that Nintendo is attempting to follow. Make the strange familiar and make it as user-friendly to as many people as possible.



Figure 8. Playing Atari draws a crowd.



Figure 9. Playing a Wii also draws a crowd.

The fact that women or senior citizens did not seem to take up the joystick indicates that advertisers cannot control the trajectory of products and that advertisements "do not directly reflect the public's response to the new medium" [13]. While advertisers were able to market the new medium of the videogame and change the way in which people

interacted with television, they were met with limited success. In Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream*, it is noted that advertisers "intensely aware of the problems presented by their social, cultural, and intellectual distance from the mass of consumers" [7]. Thus even though advertisers may have attempted to advertise to a wide variety of audiences, they are not always successful. Thus it will be interesting to see if Nintendo's attempt to get more women and older people to play the Wii is successful.

Looking at early advertising for videogames show that not only was the cultural meaning of videogames uncertain, but that advertisers were unsure of how to sell this new device. Even though the people in the commercials were racially homogeneous, they were not homogeneous in terms of age or gender. Advertisers attempted to maximize the potential number of buyers as well as make the new technology seem less threatening by showing an enormous variety of people from children to senior citizens playing and enjoying the games. Even before these commercials, an analysis of print ads shows that not only did the advertisers not know who their target market was, but that they didn't even know how to categorize it as evidenced by putting *Pong* next to sweaters, buzzing belts, alarm clocks, and clocks that would tell you the best time to do your gardening.

Initial print ads and television commercial focused on the players and attempted to educate them on such simplicities as plugging in the system and inserting the cartridge. As the audience is defined, the player disappeared from the commercials. After the initial wave of commercials which featured babysitters, grandparents and valley girls, the advertisers began to focus on an audience of teenage boys and young men and the educational aspects were eliminated. Once the consumers had become interpellated as players, the advertisers were free to become less concrete and more abstract. The medium became transparent and therefore the advertisers could adopt cinematic advertising styles. Players were erased from the videogame commercials leaving behind only the games themselves. However, as in the case of the Wii, the player will always return when a new gaming device or genre is introduced.

The dramatic shift from audience or player centric advertising to product-centric advertising seems unique among contemporary American advertising. Videogame advertising is distinct because unlike almost any other form of advertising, the ads are selling both the medium as well as the device used to engaging with the medium. When selling a videogame system, they are also selling all the great games you can play on the system. When advertising the games they are also selling the fact that you need a system to play the games. The shift from showing players to showing the games is therefore evidence of the growth of the place of videogames within our culture. Early advertising served to educate people on not only have to use the hardware, but also on the relationship between the hardware and the games.

It is this initial educational period that is the key to

establishing the genre and the reason why the audience is so important at that time. When videogames were new, advertisers did not know how to sell the product or who it would be best to sell them to. Therefore, everyone was seen as a potential player and the player took center stage in the majority of the advertisements. Once players were educated on how the medium operated and how to use the hardware, the player slowly became irrelevant to the advertisements. Showing the player serves to educate the audience. While most advertisements do not show the player, you can be sure that once a new system with new capabilities arrives on the scene, the player will return to center stage, if only for a little while.

While advertisements for Pong and the 2600 showed players how they could interact with their televisions – regardless of size or black and white or color displays – once those patterns of interaction have become routine, the advertisements excise the players and focus on the game. However, such excisions are only temporary. As new ways of interacting with computer generated images are developed, the player inevitably returns to the advertisements. The Wii commercials are only the latest interaction of resurrecting the player as commercials for portable gaming devices and internet enabled games have also shown the players as a way of modeling the intended use as well as the intended users.

Common to all of these reservations is the fact that each of them asked consumers to rethink their relationships to technology and their home. Each of these commercials is asking consumers to make room for that device in their lives. While videogames allow consumers to actively control their televisions in a way that television never could, advertisements for the videogames and videogame systems serve a crucial first step in the process. In this way the ads not only offer up what Spigel argues is "the ability to bring the outside world into the home," "domesticate nature," and "the chance to travel imaginatively into the outside world while remaining in the comforts of the home" but also provides as a way for educating and constructing a potential audience for these games [13]. This paper has presented an initial investigation into the ways in which videogame advertisements change the ways in which we think about the home and how to interact with mass media. Hopefully, this will be the first in a long line of research into the role advertising has played in the popularization and commodification of videogames and not simply some short-lived fad like the hula hoop.

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