# Encounters with consumption during computer-mediated play: the development of digital games as marketing communication media

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of digital games for marketing communications using two theoretical perspectives. Firstly, the external contexts in which video game play takes place and secondly, internal game processes that are likely to be of interest to marketers and game developers. Findings from exploratory focus groups support the use of brand placement in games. Players feel that it can increase realism and help support the costs of game development. However the repetitive nature of games may cause rapid message wear-out and players' frustrations with aspects of play may lead to negative evaluations of brands. Individuals may also use video games to explore the meaning and benefits of consumption and this raises the question of the degree to which game content supports or opposes existing consumer cultures. An agenda for further research is presented.

## Keywords

Marketing; brand placement; consumption; digital games

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores recent developments in the video game market, and in marketing practice that have resulted in brands being found in an increasing number of digital games, including PC/console [35,44] and online flash-based games [55].This later technique, referred to as 'advergaming' [9], may be set to become a $1billion industry by 2005 [47].

Video games are a growth market, currently worth more than $17 billion worldwide [21] and more than £1billion in the UK alone [41]. Research suggests that up to 70% of UK households have a machine on which digital games are played [40].

Recent improvements in hardware have allowed programmers to produce increasingly realistic simulations [48], but resulting increases in development costs and in marketing costs are also encouraging game developers to look for

alternative sources of revenue and to minimise licensing costs. Investment from brand placement is therefore becoming more feasible and attractive for developers [6].

Marketing has always been both 'geographically imperialistic', seeking out new places to present persuasive messages [37] and 'parasitic', borrowing from other cultural forms [34]. Fragmentation of traditional media has also encouraged considerable innovation in marketing communication practice. Brand placement in particular (including games) is becoming more popular and may be worth $1billon and rising [26]. There is already some evidence of the potential for brand placement in games. For example *Red Bull's* success has been attributed to a placement in a *Playstation* game [35] and *Mitsubishi* will export the *Lancer* to the US as a result of interest in the car generated by the game *Gran Turismo* [25].

So the development of brand placement in games may be driven by marketers' desire to exploit new opportunities to reach consumers with persuasive messages and developers desire for realism and willingness to integrate messages within games. Players willingness to accept games containing marketing messages may also be important because. their experiences (and subsequent actions) may determine the strategies of the other parties. This research will therefore focus on the experiences of video game players.

## UNDERSTANDING BRAND PLACEMENT IN VIDEO GAMES

This exploratory study considers two overlapping theoretical perspectives related to brand placement in games. Firstly, the context in which video games are produced and consumed is reviewed. This considers the cultural and social environment and requires an understanding of the relationship between consumption, play and video games. Secondly the experiences of play itself and the outcomes of time spent playing video games is reviewed. This requires an understanding of what happens to players when they encounter brands in video games. These areas are related because players' experiences of playing games containing brands may influence their attitudes to future play and in turn influence game development. Individuals may seek out games that simulate consumption of brands. Alternatively, they may reject games with brands in them.

By considering a broad range of perspectives it is hoped that this exploratory work will reveal more specific direction for future research.

### Video game play in context

Technologies tend reflect the society in which they are developed [62]. Digital products (including games) are products of consumer culture [17]. They are designed and marketed within consumer culture. Game designers, programmers and producers are themselves consumers and their experiences as consumers may influence their input into games – regardless of any brand placement deal. Research into video games is in fact research into anything that video games can simulate [1]. Research into consumption within games is therefore also research into consumption itself.

Many commentators on consumption (for example, [22]) highlight that consumption (as opposed to production) has come to define individuals. Postmodern conceptualisations of consumption see it as playful [24]. Baudrillard views consumption as a play of signs with no relationship to

physical products - advertising and the media has created a 'hyperreality' [4]. Individuals inhabit this idealised reality, with the expectation that real life will some how live up to the simulation. It is perhaps not surprising that members of such a society would find video game simulations attractive, or that some of these simulations should include the signs of significance to individuals in 'real' life: branded consumer goods. Video games are also a form of play, which separates us from our 'everyday lives' [59] and creates its own reality [12]. Video games are also referred to as a form of virtual reality, a term that asks us to consider that there may be more than one reality [49]. An understanding of video games realities may therefore add to our understanding of how consumers experience and make sense of multiple, but related realities that they are now expected to inhabit [50].

So video games provide other realities for their players. But how do these realities connect with the simulation that is real life, if at all? Research into product placement at least hints at the role of brands in connecting the real and the fantasy. Viewers do not object to brand placement in films or TV programmes [43,28], although the acceptance varies according to the nature of product placed and the way that it is integrated into the plot [18,51]. The single published study on brand placement in games draws similar conclusions [44]. Consumers seem to prefer placement that is a seamless, or natural part of the film, programme or even game. It has also been suggested [16,19] that viewers use brands to help them to understand fictitious characters. Viewers [19] and players [44,46] may even expect films and games to carry representations of real brands and advertising to increase the level of realism and therefore 'connect' them to their everyday experiences.

So if players may use brands to connect realities should we be concerned about the growth of this technique? Huzinga [29] and Caillois [7] both highlight that historically, play has often been 'corrupted', for other purposes (Sutton-Smith [59] defines these arguments as *rhetorics of power*, the conceptualisation of play as a form of control). The 'high-jacking' of computer-play for persuasive purposes may be part of this process. For example, Southern, [56] drawing from Gramsci's idea of hegemony, explains how the portrayal of war in games is a form of propaganda, legitimising war. Brand placement in games may similarly help to legitimise consumption by presenting a consistent and non-oppositional view of the role of brands as objects of desire and status. It may also be that the influence of brand-owners on games may draw games into the consumption-orientated media reality that Baudrillard [4] believes individuals are now trapped.

There are concerns amongst marketers that the volume of advertising may be causing consumers to have negative attitudes towards marketing in general [23]. There is also evidence that some individuals wish to 'escape the market' [32,33]. Consumers may be finding it easy to avoid advertising and may be more selective of the messages that they do pay attention to [57]. Marketers' paradoxical response has been to look for more ways to reach consumers. Ideally, advertisers would like an environment free from other advertising clutter. They may believe that games provide an opportunity to control, or at least negotiate the communication environment. It has been acknowledged that product placement [3] and interactive media environments themselves [63] often cause a burring of what is advertising and what is content. Advertisers may therefore also hope that interactive environments reduce the willingness and ability of consumers to avoid advertising messages, although it has been

suggested that consumers have already come to understand that brands in films are often there in an attempt to persuade them to buy [19]. Consumers may quickly learn that brands in games also aim to persuade. More than this Turkle [60] counters claims of hegemony in games by suggesting the possibly that interactive games may allow players to come to know the 'built in rules' of a system - a form of consciousness raising about the simulations apparent in 'real' life. Through simulation of consumption, the rules of 'real' consumption may become more transparent to individuals.

Consumers then are locked into a game with marketers, largely defined by media experiences. The contribution of digital games to this situation has not been studied.

**Persuasive and learning processes in video games**
The psychology of play within interactive computer-mediated environments seems complex, but there are a number of approaches that suggest possible ways that brand placement may work.

The effects of direct and indirect experience on attitudes and on predicted behaviour have been researched [39]. Overall direct experience tends to result in stronger attitudes which are a better predictor of future behaviour. These ideas have been applied to interactive media and marketing communication. Experiment has tried to demonstrate that virtual environments that produce more presence (mediated experiences imagined as real), produce stronger attitudes [13,36]. Other human-computer interaction researchers have highlighted that individuals may have problems in distinguishing between real and simulated experiences, especially when they are recalled from memory [52] and especially when the mediated experience was from virtual reality simulations [53]. Presence (*telepresence)* may be determined by the vividness and interactivity of the medium, [58]. Vividness refers to the range senses addressed and the quality of reproduction of inputs. Interactivity refers to the speed to inputs a user can make, the number of possible inputs and the degree to which inputs 'map' natural behaviour (e.g. using a steering wheel input device to control a simulated car in a video game). Steuer [58] highlights that currently only video games score highly on both dimensions and they therefore seem likely to readily produce telepresence. He warns that as these new technologies develop so to do the possibilities for using them to '*manipulate and control beliefs and opinions',* [58]. It is therefore possible that experiences with brands in video games may be integrated into individuals knowledge of that brand as though those experiences were 'real'. This leaves us asking whether attitudes to goods and services gained via digital game-play are stronger and more predictive of behavioural intentions that those gained via non-interactive media?

In their review of presence Lombard and Ditton [36] also discuss, *social reality* and *perceptual reality* as important aspects of virtual reality. New technologies have allowed ever-increasing visual and audio resolutions, increasing perceptual reality, but many games that people choose to play involve little social contact with others and are therefore low in social reality. On the other hand, play within online chat-rooms, or online games may be lower in perceptual reality, but the experiences of users may suggest that they are high in social reality [5,14]. But what is the relative importance of social and perceptual reality when considering the ability of video games to carry commercial messages? It has been suggested that one element of brand

placement in films is that brands help create a social bond between viewer and character [19]. Brands are known to act as a form of social communication [38], so does this mean that 'effective' brand placement requires social reality?

Alternatively Csikzentmihalyi [15] considers the concept of 'flow' as optimum self-rewarding experience, or 'fun' - an individualised rather than social aspect of play (Sutton-Smith refers to this a r*hetoric of the self)*. Video games seem to be very good at producing 'flow' and outcomes of flow include increased learning, positive feelings and a desire to return to activities than produce flow. Marketers may consider this mind-state desirable for receiving brand messages.

Computer-mediated play may produce strong effect and the effects research may therefore also inform our understanding of brand placement in games. Sutton-Smith [59] classifies arguments related to the effect of play as *rhetorics of progress*. From this perspective we often consider children play as preparation for adult life. This foregrounds ethical issues related to the placement of commercial messages in games. Grodal [14] reviewed the range of video game effects literature, highlighting its inconclusive and contradictory nature. Some studies suggest that individuals may learn violent behaviour from the media (including games) and then copy this in real life. This is of interest to marketers because if players learn to be violent, they might also learn to consume. There is also a growing body of literature on the educational value of games which claims that video games can produce considerable learning (eg [11]). We might hope to understand what individuals learn about consumption from game-play.

However the contradictory research into the effects of video games may suggest limitations to the medium's use for marketing purposes. Grodal also highlights research that suggests that some individuals may seek out violent video games as an outlet for violent behaviour – a catharsis effect. If the experience of 'ownership' of goods or services in digital game environments is also sufficient to satisfy the strong desires to consume, this might result in virtual consumption replacing other consumption activity. It has been suggested that young people use brand websites to fantasize about (play with) the purchase of products that they might never hope to actually buy[42]. Campbell, [8] conceptualises consumption itself as a system which stimulates the imagination and it has been suggested that this explains why window shopping is in itself a satisfying experience (rather than a desire-laden step towards ownership) [24]. Games may serve a similar role - virtual consumption may be satisfying in itself.

It is possible to construct a number of rhetorics around the placement of brands in digital games. Existing theory is ambiguous and fragmented and little deals directly with the experiences of players when they encounter brands in games. We may see these encounters in terms of power: marketers attempt to 'control' consumers; or individuals gaining new insight into consumption, or even escape from the market. Alternatively, we may see these encounters as simply a pleasurable way to learn about products and brands. We may also see them as just part of individual, hedonistic pleasure, or yet another way that individuals can create meaning for themselves and others via brands.

## RESEARCH METHOD

By acknowledging this wide range of perspectives we may hope to better understand the experiences of players. Specifically, game developers, marketers and policy makers may all need to understand the following:

1. To what degree do players use brands to connect game worlds and 'real' life?

2. Do encounters with brands in a game change consumers' relationship with the 'real' brand or with consumption?

3. How aware are they of the persuasive potential of brands in games and what do they make of this phenomenon?

Much of the research into digital games and virtual reality has been based on scientific experiment. To some degree experiments have been useful in isolating those elements of video games and other computer-mediated environments that increase the likelihood of certain outcomes (arousal, aggression, presence, etc.). Some researchers have started to explore the implications of presence for memory and persuasion [31]. The only published study of brand placement in games [44] also takes an experimental approach, and results are therefore limited by the artificial setting and restricted game software used. There is clearly a need for many more experiments to establish a full understanding of the experiences of individuals in computer-mediated environments and the effects of these experiences on psychological processes. However, a limitation to this 'scientific' approach is the rather narrow and fragmented picture of experiences that it produces [10].

Initial insight into brand placement in video games could be better gained by talking to players about their experiences. Players can talk about how they choose and play games. They can comment on when placement is acceptable and what value it might have in a game. They can also talk about the relationship between games, their broader lifestyle and specific consumption activity. Qualitative approaches have been usefully employed in previous studies which have attempted to understand the experiences of individuals in computer mediated environments [60]. Qualitative methods (focus groups) have also been used to understanding the relationship between young adults and marketing communication [45] and DeLorne and Reid [19] in particular highlight the importance of an understanding of the interpretations of individuals through qualitative means to gain insight into brand placement.

This exploratory study is consistent with the initial approach taken by DeLorne and Reid [19]. Four focus groups with a total of 24 experienced video game players were conducted. Seven participants were female. Ages ranged from 19-38. Participants were recruited from students and staff (administrative and academic) within a university in Southern England. Each group consisted of time for discussion and time to play games. Discussions lasted between 1 and 1_ hours and the session themselves lasted up to 2_ hours. Discussion was kept as open as possible and participants were initially allowed to explore any aspect of game play that they wanted to. Towards the end of the groups the moderator introduced issues related to brand placement. Transcripts of the discussions were then analysed for emerging concepts and themes. A sample of respondents was used for member checking summaries of key themes.

**FINDINGS**

Findings provide evidence to support many of the theoretical ideas presented, although some themes emerge more strongly than others. Players readily discuss the relationship between games and reality and the role of consumption in this connection. They also talk about their encounters with brands in games and their attitudes to these encounters.

**Consumption, play and video games**

Video games are part of consumer culture. Players talk about their consoles and their collections of games. The physical products have meaning to players. Some have more than one console and others have kept older consoles even when they have been replaced by newer technology. They return to these to play favorite games.

One respondent also recognised that game developers themselves are likely to be influenced by broader culture:

> 'Like any cultural artifact, it's going to have connections with what we experience in the real world, because it is produced by people in the real world for people in the real world'.

Players can describe different types of game realities, for example abstract games, fantasy games and simulations. What is important seems to be the integrity of the 'reality' created by the game. Where the game is a simulation, players seem to feel that brands help create that simulation:

> 'You experience brands in life and you experience advertising in life and you can't drive down the street without seeing advertising and you encounter the brands in life. So if you are trying to increase the compatibility between the game and real life then you have to have brands'.

But in some games, in order to create a convincing reality, it is only important that advertising and consumption are simulated, not that real brands are used. Here the familiarity of a consumer society creates an appropriate context for play:

> [R1]'In something like Grand Theft Auto or Vigilante 8, games which do make a thing of the atmosphere being like a perception of real life, then you have to build in the things that appear in real life'.

> [R2]'It doesn't have to be real advertising, just that there is advertising like there would be in real life'.

Not everyone likes simulations. Some players do not want games that refer to an everyday reality:

> 'It's different from the real world. I want it to be separate. I don't want it to try and pretend it is the real world'.

For these games brand placement is felt to be strongly inappropriate, although other aspects of reality remained important. These aspects included 'realistic' gravity, or even enemies recognisable as 'human':

> 'I have a preference for blowing away things that I can recognise as people…It's easier to relate to and I suppose you're fooling yourself into thinking that you're there'

There seems to be a continuum of simulation. At one end is the physical behaviour and appearance of objects. At the other end there are also representations of everyday objects already loaded with sign-meaning. But regardless of the varying degrees of connectedness with everyday reality, games served a role of allowing players to act out dreams/fantasies. These fantasies varied to include acting out favorite films:

> *'You can recreate moments from the movies that you liked when you were a kid. So it's a bit of a nostalgia thing'.*

Or acting out ownership of luxury products. In game choices in particular may be influenced by existing perceptions of brands, for example as illustrated by theis discussion about *Gran Turismo* On *PS2:*

> *[R] 'Improving your car is about the most important part of the game. Obviously you have to make sure you buy a nice foundation to work on'.*

> *[Moderator]'How do you do that?'.*

> *[R] 'I guess you use your life experience about what is a nice car, what looks like a nice car. Obviously it make a difference if you are looking for cars to buy and there are like Porches and Audis'.*

One respondent discussed satisfaction from game-play in terms of an ability to express their identity through in-games purchase choices in *The Sims*:

> *'A good game is where you can express yourself on an individual level. Your personality can be reflected in how you approach the strategic, do you know what I mean, things that are presented. So I think that is getting more and more exciting because the bigger and more powerful games are getting. You know, you can be an individual in the way you play'.*

But games did not just 'mirror' reality. Several respondents suggested that they could see in games a simulation of reality that revealed something about the meaning of consumption. The following exchange between two *Sims* players revealed an understanding of a negative aspect of consumer society:

> *[R1]'It's got to the point where you've got too much to control. You're like 'Well shit, he's not happy', but he' got lots of stuff to make him happy'.*

> *[R2]'They're happier having affairs'.*

> *[R1]'But the more you give them the less happy they are as well. They just become really complacent. It is quite heavenly because it's so human. You know, you can't just get to a point where you've bought them everything and their happy, because then it goes down and you're like 'Well what's missing from their lives?' you know 'What can I do for them now?''.*

> *[R2]'They need a computer game!'.*

In a different group a respondent makes an even blunter statement about the way that games may reflect society:

> *'What you are seeing in games is reinforcing the life that we are born into. You are born into this capitalist state which is about progression and money and it is actually reinforcing that. It's actually in the game so its feeding you the rewards that you find in life'.*

**Experiences of brands in video games**

Play dominates the experience of players. This is what play researchers mean when they suggest that games create their own reality. Regardless of any issues related to brands placed in the games, if a game plays well, then little else matters:

> *'If the game plays well and it is entertaining then what difference does it make* [if it has product placement*]? But if it is overkill or they abuse the privilege then it is just going to ruin the game and if the game is not playable then nobody is going to see the ads'.*

Flash games and mobile games are discussed differently by players. They were considered simply '*a distraction'* rather than escapism. This highlights a problem with our immature terminology. We might call all these experiences 'playing computer games', but they serve very different purposes for the individuals involved and these differences are of clear significance to marketers considering games for marketing communication. Online Flash-based games are generally played for short periods of time, typically respondents suggested:

> *'There's not so much depth to the Flash games. They've got playability, but just not depth to keep you engaged'.*

However, console play can be an intensive experience, lasting many hours at a time. Some play is planned, for example when a new game comes out individuals may even take time off work to play it. Console and PC games produce extended play in many, some claimed up to 60 hours a week. Several players described the concept of *presence* and its role in game play. *Flow* also seems to have been experienced:

> *'If it's really good I get up and play it before I take a shower, press pause, come back, play a bit more, get the late bus'.*

Players readily describe very focussed attention during play and suggest the impact that this might have on message processing. Peripheral information may not be processed, including ads that are there for 'atmosphere', such as track-side, or stadium advertising:

> *'I don't really see them. I'm too busy concentrating'.*

Players also suggested that messages between levels may be only superficially processed:

> *'You get a little brief and you don't remember much of that really. All you want to do is go on and shoot people'.*

Alternatively one player also provided a warning that repetition of ads may be frustrating if their positioning was more prominent.

> *'I think it would become very annoying if it's* [an ad*] on the same wall that you keep on walking into or something like that. It would get really irritating. With a film, you've seen it once and you've gone past it but a computer game you might spammed by it'.*

Many brands are easily recalled from games, but not always positively. Games produce strong emotions in players, but often aggression and frustration at not being able to complete parts of the game. Players reject the idea that experience in games have a direct influence on external behaviour, but they are easily able to cite examples where the game experience has 'leaked' into

real life. This includes perceptions of in-game products that they now hold true of the actual product:

> 'I can think of the Dodge Viper on Gran Tourismo 2. I was just useless at driving it and I just got a dislike to it. I really didn't like it. I much preferred the Porsche. And every time I think of the Dodge Viper now, sort of on a very low level I'm just reminded, well I did actually think, 'Well they're terrible to drive.' And I do actually think that the Porsche Sport is a lot better'.

Although a different respondent, when discussing a similar game, highlighted how the game may actually encouraged consumption behaviour in real life:

> 'I've been playing Sega GT and it's a wicked game and just getting the cars developed and putting turbos into them and putting extra, bigger turbos on and advanced brakes, shock absorbers, it kind of got me thinking actually I'd quite like to start doing this to my [GM/Vauxhall] Astra'.

### Attitudes to brand placement in video games

Branded messages were seen as acceptable in return for free play in online, flash based games. Players accept this in the way they do for other media and we might therefore consider that they might work in a similar way:

> 'I've played quite a lot of the viral games on emails and they're usually branded or sponsored because it's advertising. So I don't really mind consuming those because it's up to you isn't it if you want to consume the advert or not? And the obvious aim if it's a good game then you'll play it and send it on'.

However, a few didn't like brand placement in console games. They didn't like the idea that they have paid for an ad. This may be an indication of some underlying resentment towards advertising in general:

> 'When you think about it, it is an invasion of your privacy. Because you're paying to own something that you are going to bring into your house, that's yours, and yet they've still managed to worm their way into it. And, you know, it is an invasion of privacy really'.

But most were positive about brand placement for two main reasons. It increases realism:

> 'I think that advertising in games is a really good idea generally. Because if you go into a bar in an RPG and there's like Jim Beam behind the bar, then it adds to the realism and I just think it's a really ... I'd be like 'That's really cool''.

And it gives money to game developers. Many players expressed concerns about the financial state of the industry and about the overall cost of gaming:

> 'I also like it when companies are paying to put their products in games because then, or hopefully, in the end, it will help to make games cheaper. If they're getting money through advertising, and it's seen as an effective means of advertising then they won't have to charge us so much'.

Several felt nervous about the future impact of brand placement on games, in terms of both the type of game that may ultimately be produced:

*'If they start to see product placement as a major revenue stream then obviously the games that have more potential for product placement have got more potential for revenue before they have even run the risk of trying to sell them to the public'.*

And in terms of the impact on the creative approach taken by game designers:

*'I think there are positive benefits for games but they are different from the benefits that ultimately companies are going to see in it and I don't think in that fight the games are going to come of best because they haven't done in other industries, like the film industry. I mean the thing that struck me about the film industry was the Bond comparison. In the Bond films people pay to have their products, but Fleming used to put product in the original novels, but he did it to build the characters, he wasn't being paid, he told us what James Bond smoked because that build the character, now we are told what he eats and drinks, etc because they want us to buy the product'.*

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although players have some concerns, mostly they are positive about brands placed in games. Placement in games may be similar to placement in films, especially in enhancing realism and building characters. This may be of interest to game developers. Consumption is a rich area for creating game experiences. Brands, whether real or fictitious, can add to characterisation, realism or atmosphere. Games give players the opportunity to live out their fantasies and at least some of these are related to consumption.

But not all game-types may be suitable for placement and some important audiences may have a preference for games that do not easily support placement. Some fantasies are not related to consumption. This again is a reference to realism. The 'realism' of fantasy or science fiction-based games in particular may be diminished by commercial messages that are out of context.

Short, online games are played in a very different way and for different reasons to larger PC and console games. Branded *Flash* games and placement of brands in console games might therefore be considered different (but related) techniques. *Flash* games may function more like traditional advertising where entertainment is exchanged for an opportunity to see a sponsored message relevant to a brand [30].

For marketers, placement in larger games may be more problematic. Brands are easily recalled from games, and there is even a suggestion of changes in attitude and even intention to purchase consumer goods. But games are played repetitively for long periods of time and over-exposure to ads presents a risk of message wear-out and subsequent negative brand evaluations [30]. It is also clear that during these extended periods of play, players are deeply involved and enjoying themselves. And this deep involvement might suggest further limitations. Very focussed attention means that peripheral messages may not be processed at all. In addition, although valuations of brands used in games, can be transferred to real products, these evaluations might not always be positive. In particular games sometimes leave players angry and frustrated at and this may be transferred to brands. Clearly great care needs to be taken in deciding the form and timing of placement and this complexity may discourage use of the technique. Yet, whilst players attention is focussed on game play, they are not consuming other media. Marketers may need to understand this complexity

if growth in video and digital play continues and they what to reach those audiences.

The game playing experience is not the same as watching a film. In particular the player has more choices, sometimes including a choice of brands. This suggests a difference between the way that game realities and other media-created realities are experienced – the game player can exert some control over the environment. Players might choose brands in games based on their knowledge and preference of 'real' brands and in this respect brand placement in games may reinforce brand attitudes. Another outcome of choice is that players can use games to express and explore aspects of their personality and to explore/build their identities. Arguably brands have long had a role in identity formation [54], 'virtual' brands may be used in similar ways. Games even have the potential to allow individuals to explore wider issues related to consumption. In particular some simulations (*The Sims*) encouraged players to consider the benefits of consumption for their game characters, supporting Turkle's suggestion that games may allow players an opportunity to gain a better understanding about the way that society works [60].

Exploratory findings therefore support brand placement in digital games as a potentially effective, if complex form of marketing communication. Findings also suggest that brands and consumption may be useful cultural resources for game developers. However players highlight a wider issue related to consumption and digital games. The relationship between brand placement in video games and consumption may be more complex than just brand reminders and encouraging presence. Games may allow consumers greater freedom and opportunity to explore their relationships with consumption. Perhaps Walsh gives another indication of this [61]. He incites *Sims Online* players to use the game 'rules' to attack the product-placed *McDonalds* franchises – suggesting that this protest is easier that in the 'real' world. A further example is *Rockstar*'s *State of Emergency*, a game where you take on the role of anti-capitalist protester [2]. Dobson describes yet another, *There* is a playful, virtual environment were players are encouraged to design and sell virtual products in return for real money [20]. So do games have the ability to change discourses about consumption? The ideologies built into games may ask that some players re-evaluate their relationship with consumption. Players don't just learn about brands in games, they learn about other realities where brands and consumption may have different, or little meaning to them.


**FURTHER RESEARCH**

It is possible to see several projects developing from this exploratory work. Further research could explore the relationship between game ideologies and consumption. What do games have to 'say' about consumption? Perhaps related to this, further study might explore how players use games as a way to express and/or build parts of their identity.

Further studies might also consider the persuasive processes within games in more detail. Which types of games are most appropriate for placement? How are brand messages processed? Where are brands best placed with the game? When does message wear-out occur? What role does emotion and mood play in brand message processing? This research might supplement and contrast with similar work on other media and marketing communications.

This is a broad agenda for research, but an important one as the use of interactive entertainment continues to increase.

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