Interacting with brands through advergames

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Advergames represent an increasingly popular advertising channel, but the way in which their design influences players’ attitudes and behaviour is still debated. This study proposes several models explaining the advantages and challenges of using advergames for promoting corporate, product or service brands. To explore the design elements that influence the perceptions and attitudes of players, we apply a testing procedure, asking ten subjects to play a series of three games released by Unilever, on the theme of Magnum Pleasure Hunt, and then to evaluate the effectiveness of games’ design using two sets of criteria. The results indicate that the design elements of these games are well realized, but the interaction between these elements and game players is often unsatisfactory. Our findings identify also an interdependence effect, as successive game versions are compared and judged in relation to previous versions, leading to customer bias towards the games’ attractiveness and novelty.

*keywords: advergames; brand experience; state of flow; interactive elements*

**Introduction**

In traditional marketing, brands are designed as an optimized solution to several problems: to distinguish an organization and its offer from competition, as well as to provide a representational platform for customers in order to identify, perceive, recognize, memorize, and act upon this organization and its offer. These processes attempt to transmit and reinforce in customers’ mind a certain meaning, but the large possibility to interpret a sign raises important challenges for both marketers and designers:

*Both interaction designers and information architects want to design objects with a singular meaning – a noble, albeit impossible goal. The best*
we can hope for is to create more consistently meaningful experiences. To do that, designers must better understand the interplay between designer intention and user interpretation: the ways that we can influence – but not dictate – user interpretation (Wendt, 2013).

The way in which an experience is perceived and interpreted in real life is hard to control, for several different reasons: first, external circumstances – such as the context, can influence the perception, experience and interpretation of a situation or artefact; second, customers’ state of mind and their memory dynamics can associate the experience with a wide range of emotions; finally, the interaction between the design object and customer can vary depending on customers’ experience, skills, abilities and/or intuition. The possibility to control at least a part of these influencing elements is provided by immersive virtual environments. In advergames, the designer builds around brand signs and symbols a dynamic universe that uses interaction and automation to tailor the online experience in relation to various users. Despite the enhanced possibilities offered by virtual reality, designing the online interaction to achieve a specific type of experience depends on several elements that are still not fully understood: users’ propensity to play the game, reaching and maintaining a state of flow, and the effect of playing the game on consumers’ behaviour in real-life circumstances. In this paper we identify and address an important knowledge gap, exploring the place of advergames in modern marketing, defining the elements that enhance consumers’ experience, and the way in which they are creatively applied in three advergames, used as illustrations to the theoretical elements discussed in the first three sections of our study.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we discuss the present situation of advergames as an increasingly popular medium of marketing communications, and we distil, from previous studies, the characteristics of a well-designed advergame. Second, we present the psychological mechanisms that influence users’ experience of an advergame, and how this experience can eventually impact customers’ intentions to buy and experience the product. To better understand the relation between various decision-making processes involved in playing, buying and consuming, we combine in this section three theoretical models that are relevant regarding consumers’ behaviour: the state of flow model, the theory of reasoned action, and the AIDA model, concerning the effect of marketing communication of consumer’s intention regarding a product or service. Third, we outline the methods applied to collect and analyse secondary and primary data. Fourth, we present the results of our analysis, which, fifth, are then discussed and interpreted. Sixth, we conclude the paper with a summary of the main findings and limitations, as well as with propositions for future research.

Advergames: Popularity and applications

Advergames have been defined as online games that incorporate marketing content (Dobrow, 2004; Thomases, 2001). They are interactive games that are developed around a brand, a product, or a character associated with a brand or a product. Branding and products are incorporated into the game itself through either associative or demonstrative methods – meaning that a game can be used to demonstrate the use of a product or to associate the product with an activity or a lifestyle.
The need to develop new Internet advertising tools arose from the rapid decline in the effectiveness of rich media advertising in the late 1990s (Chen & Ringel, 2001; Yuan, Caulkins & Roehrig, 1998). The interest in advergames has substantially increased in the last 15 years, because of their perceived advantages (FreshGames, 2002; WebResource 2004):

• low-cost marketing in comparison with the traditional advertising channels, such as TV and radio;
• a captured audience that can transmit valuable personal information about their demographic profile, behaviour, needs, attitudes and preferences;
• customer retention: the average time spent in an advergame is 7 to 30 minutes, which cannot be reached in the case of a classical TV advertisement;
• viral marketing – 81% of the players will email their friends to try a good game.

All these data demonstrate the huge potential of advergames (Rodgers, 2004; Sennott, 2004). It is predicted that advergaming will become a standard part of interactive advertising, as consumers become more annoyed with traditional ads. A study investigating the effect of advergames in comparison with classical 30 seconds TV adverts, found that both methods can lead to telepresence and a positive reinforcement of brand perception and attitudes, however, advergames led to a significantly better recall of the brand (Bellman, Kemp, Haddad & Varan, 2014).

The existing studies have identified three main categories of online gamers (Fattah & Paul, 2002; Santos, Gonzalo & Gisbert, 2007):

• children and teenagers;
• adult males; and
• adult females.

Advergame.com portal, a site dedicated to licensing advergames, is already using this market segmentation, proposing specific advergames for various categories of online players.

Children and teenagers represent the traditional market segment for games. The increased possibility of children and teenagers to get online (Santos et al., 2007) has created new opportunities for the advergaming industry. A study conducted in the US by eMarketer provides relevant information about the importance of gaming and online surfing for children and teenagers (Macklin, 2006). The research revealed that 39.4% of children between 8 and 11 years old and 73.4% of teenagers aged 12 to 17 are regular Internet users. Some of the most popular activities of children and teenagers are playing games (81% of children between 8 and 12 years old, 78% of teenagers between 13 and 15 years old, and 72% of teenagers between 16 and 18 years old), and surfing the web (46% of children between 8 and 12 years old, 76% of teenagers between 13 and 15 years old, and 87% of teenagers between 16 and 18 years old).

Surveys conducted in the United States indicate that there are more than 150 million casual games users. Contrary to most expectations, the majority of these players are not teenagers and male. Quite the opposite: according to the Popcap survey, over 70% of this group are female, and 89% are over 30 years’ old. This correlates with the Nielsen’s findings that 64% of all online gamers are female. Casual games represents a favourite
leisure pastime, which is ranked above watching television and listening to music (GamesIndustry International, 2006).

Another study conducted during December 2003 – January 2004 in the US, has identified the women over 40 years old as a major segment interested in online gaming (Arkadium, 2004). These female game-players spend 9.1 hours per week playing games (or 41% of their online time in comparison with only 26% of the online time for men). This trend seems also to be present in other parts of the world, with the exception of Asia (Wi-Fi Technology News, 2005). A global survey conducted by Global Digital Living indicated that in North America’s households, 52% of women play online games each month compared with only 39% of men. Similar gaps regarding online gaming exist among Internet-connected households in Europe (i.e., 39% of women and 28% of men), and in Australia (i.e., 53% of women and 27% of men). Only in Asia these gaming activities are almost equally distributed between women and men, at percentages of 49% and 50%, respectively.

The reasons for playing online games vary depending on gender. The main reason given by women players is to relieve or eliminate stress, while men are attracted by the competitive factor of Internet gaming. Women prefer word and puzzle games, while men are more interested in sport, combat or casino games (Arkadium, 2004; Fattah & Paul, 2002).

The geographical location of players also seems to make a difference in terms of the type of game preferred and the reasons for playing (Arkadium, 2004). In Atlanta, the main reason identified is the elimination of stress, in Dallas people play to alleviate boredom, in San Francisco the players are enjoying the competition, and in Washington DC they play online to get trained for real casino gambling. These findings raise the problem of online games’ adaptation to the specific characteristics and preferences of a clearly-defined population.

Fattah and Paul (2002) indicate four possible ways to target a specific category of users:

- the advergame content is tailored to suit the targeted customer – for example, games of strategy are directed towards upscale, more educated users, while action games are appealing more to younger players;
- adapting the channel used to promote the advergame (e.g., using email marketing campaigns or web sites);
- expressing the contest structure of the game in relation to a specific target audience (e.g., how players win the game);
- considering the geographical location of players: using demographic information to facilitate the access of gamers to the promotions launched by local dealers or retailers.

Although the profile and the evolution of the main demographic categories are not yet clearly defined, the existing results are very encouraging for the advergames industry. The number of people accessing online games is large and growing every day, these players representing excellent prospects for advergaming marketing campaigns. However, more market research is necessary to identify the number and the profile of online game players in different parts of the world. Until now, the majority of such studies were conducted in
the US, the figures describing the population of online players in other countries being vague and controversial.

Despite the large number of academic and professional publications targeting advergames and their effects on players, the creation of an efficient advergame is still considered predominantly as an artistic work that is difficult to describe in a formal, precise manner (Smith, 2007). However, it is possible to distil from the extant professional literature the main characteristics of an efficient advergame (3RD Sense, 2006; D5 Games, 2004a and 2004b; Skyworks, 2007; Zodal, 2007):

- Careful selection of the game genre to appeal to the targeted demographics.
- The game relates closely to the core brand messages to be communicated.
- The brand message is fully-integrated into the game, enhancing both the effect of the game and of the brand.
- Carefully managed progression from simpler to more complex game levels, compelling the player to improve his/her performance and to stay in touch with the game for extended and repeated brand exposure.
- Registration system for players inviting them to input personal data in order to post scores or enter competitions.
- Communication tools that encourage the player to share the experience with friends or relatives – the viral marketing aspect.
- Competitions with prizes encouraging players to register and to keep returning to the site.
- Visible score tables that encourage players to improve their performance, to compete against each other, and to invite other people to join the competition.

The advergames’ influence on consumer perception and behavior

The placement of products or brand names in movies or TV shows is a relatively old technique, but studies regarding their influence on consumer perceptions and behavior are inconclusive (Gould, Pola & Grabner-Krauter, 2000; Russell, 2002). The advergames present a few distinct characteristics that can eventually enhance their marketing effect:

- the advergames are selected by the player himself/herself, and are not forced upon an unwilling viewer;
- the player interacts with advergames adopting an active stance, in comparison with the passive attitude of the TV audience;
- advergames incite players to share the gaming experience with their friends or family.

From a marketing point of view, the advergames attempt to capture the attention of players, and then to transmit to them, in an indirect way, suggestions that aim to modify their perceptions regarding an enterprise, brand, or product. The psychological fundament of this process is the inducement of the ‘state of flow’. This concept is used by psychologists to describe a mental state in which attention is highly-concentrated on a specific process and the environmental information is screened out, the person experiencing a harmonious flow of dynamic perceptions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). The state of flow is known to create a state of wellbeing, as well as increased perception and learning capacity.
The interaction with Internet applications can induce the state of flow in specific circumstances (King, 2003). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, professor at the University of Chicago, and world specialist in the state of flow, outlines that the most successful web sites are the ones that offer interactive experiences, and not simply content. The state of flow can be created online if the following essential conditions are combined: user motivation, user telepresence, and interactivity of the Internet application. The motivation of the online player is usually a complex construct, determined and shaped by a combination of various needs: relaxation, competition, social interaction, etc., which are satisfied through the interaction with the online advergame. The primary motivation of the online player will determine his/her choice of the advergame, this variable representing an important segmentation criteria. On the other hand, the maintenance of the state of flow is a dynamic process that depends on the relation between the player’s capabilities and the level of difficulty proposed by the game. Figure 1 demonstrates the three possible scenarios of the interaction between an Internet user and an advergame.

![Figure 1 The inducement of the online state of flow in gaming](image)

When the capability of the player is lower than the level of difficulty of the advergame, the player will experience frustration and will abandon the game with a negative feeling. If the capability of the player is higher than the level of difficulty proposed by the game, a feeling of boredom is likely to result, having as a direct effect the exit of the player from the advergame environment. Finally, if the capability of the player matches the difficulty of the advergame, the state of flow results and reinforces the motivation of the Internet user to revisit the site and to replay the game. This model contradicts the statement of Chen and Ringel (2001) that games should be kept simple as complex games may deter continued interaction.

Once induced, the maintenance of the state of flow requires a constantly evolving challenge, because the player’s level of capability is likely to improve after playing the game a few times. This raises the problem of including in the advergame a difficulty progression that represents a dynamic challenge for players.
In terms of consumer behavior, one of the most popular models in explaining the effect of marketing communication messages on the prospective customer – the AIDA model - can be used to investigate the possible effects of advergames. Considering the effects of an advergame on the perceptions and behavior of a player/consumer, we can define for every stage of the model a specific influence (see Figure 2).

![AIDA Figure]

**Figure 2**  *The possible influence of the advergame on the perceptions and behavior of players, explained through the four phases of the AIDA model*

Considered in connection with the state of flow, the first stage of the AIDA diagram includes two distinct phases:

- in the first phase, the online advergame should attract the attention of the potential player, either through classical online promotions and/or adverts, or through messages sent by other players as an effect of the viral marketing campaign. The online user will then decide to play or not the game, depending on his/her level of motivation and on the personal circumstances surrounding the online activity;
- the direct interaction with the game will determine either the voluntary exit of the player (because of boredom or frustration), or the experience of the state of flow, when the gaming activity captures the attention of the player, increasing his/her wellbeing, as well as his/her receptivity to the promotional messages embedded in the game.

The stimuli received during the interaction with the online advergame will then arouse the Interest of the player, both in the game itself, and indirectly, in the product/brand associated with the advergame.

A major problem may appear during the transition between the second (Interest) and the third stage (Desire). Some players may completely ignore the marketing dimension of the advergame and, although they continue to play, their behavior does not evolve towards an action of purchasing the advertised product. Ideally, the desire to play the game should
influence in an indirect way the consumer’s perceptions, creating the desire to experience the advertised product that can eventually lead to a purchase action.

The application of the AIDA model to advergames has a number of important limitations. First of all, the presented situation corresponds well to a singular company-customer interaction. Nowadays, the development of a long-term relationship between the firm and its customers (3RD Sense, 2006) has become essential for increasing and stabilizing the profitability of the company, which transforms the use of advergames in a dynamic, iterative activity (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3 The iterative application of the AIDA model for advergames in the context of relationship marketing](image)

On the other hand, the viral marketing dimension is not represented in the above model. Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for an exponential growth in the message’s exposure and influence (Wilson, 2000). The use of advergames corresponds well to a strategy of viral marketing, which incorporates the following principles (Wilson, 2000):

- give away products or services;
- provide for effortless transfer to others of these products/services;
- scale easily from a small to a very large audience;
- exploit common customer motivations and behaviors;
- utilize existing communication networks to transfer the products/services, or messages about them;
- take advantage of others’ resources (existing users/customers).
Therefore, from the perspective of a viral marketing strategy, the application of the AIDA model to advergames becomes even more complex (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4** The iterative application of the AIDA model for advergames in the context of relationship marketing, using the framework of a viral marketing strategy

Considering the specific influence of the advergame on the player during the four stages of the AIDA model, it is possible to identify the characteristics of an effective advergame. As any other marketing communication tools, the advergame will have to correspond to: (1) the personality of the advertised brand, (2) the profile of the targeted audience, (3) the characteristics of the channel – in this case the Internet, and (4) the strategic objectives of the communication campaign.

Considering the interaction of the player with the online advergame, the creation and maintenance of the state of flow are facilitated by adapting the design of the game to the primary motivation and to the capability of the player. Once the state of flow is reached, the game should aim to maintain this state, progressively increasing the difficulty of the game, and to transmit brand and product information, providing specific communication channels for viral marketing.

To understand how the advergame’s features and induced experience may influence the intention of players to buy and consume a product or service, we consider now the theory of reasoned action, developed and validated by Ajzen (1991). This theory states that (1) intentions represent the main antecedent of behavior, and that (2) attitudes, social norms and perceived behavioral control over ones’ actions will determine intentions. There is
also a link between the perceived behavioral control and behavior, because in a situation in which the person is not capable to effectuate his/her intentions, the passage to act is not realized (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5  The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991)](image)

If we consider various variables included in this model, probably the two main objectives of the advergame’s experience are (1) changing the attitudes regarding the advertised product or service, and (2) modifying the level of the perceived behavioral control. Generally, attitudes change by associating positive emotions with the product or service experienced during the state of flow created by a finely-tuned advergame. On the other hand, the perceived behavioral control over buying and consuming the product can be induced by the capacity of the player to fully-control the game and to win the advergame competition. However, this is not the same with the behavioral control over purchasing or consuming a real-life product – even if a surfer in a virtual reality advergame has a sense of complete behavioral control over the surfing board, this may not be the case with a real surfing board battled by real winds and waves.

**Methodology**

In the last 15 years, several different approaches have been proposed to analyse advergames’ structure and content. Among these, Malliet’s (2007) developed an analytical toolkit and used it to analyse the presence of violence in games. Later, the same toolkit containing 2 elements for representation analysis (audio-visual style and narration) and 5 for the simulation analysis (complexity of controls, game goals, character and object structure, balance between user input and pre-programmed rules, and spatial properties of the game) was applied to examine the appearance of a brand in a game (Theodorou & Sirmakessis, 2009). Another perspective is to evaluate the mechanisms that facilitate the players’ interaction with the game, as well as the tools that enhance customer relationship management:
• accessibility: facility to identify the hyperlink between the firm/product site and the game, free access or required registration, specialized software required, downloading time;
• facility of understanding: existence of explicit instructions/rules, and the facility of understanding these rules;
• competitive level: number of players, the display of score lists, multiple level of difficulty;
• relevance for the firm, brand or product: type of product advertised, type of game, advertising elements associated with the game;
• capacity to induce and maintain the state of flow: multiple levels of difficulty, the possibility offered to players to choose a specific level of difficulty;
• viral marketing: communication with friends and family members is encouraged.

In this paper we apply a combination of these approaches, considering first the elements that can attract the player to the game, then the elements that are embedded in the game to induce and maintain the state of flow, and finally, the elements that may encourage the player to purchase and consume the product.

To apply this research methodology we selected three advergames that were created by the same company – Unilever, in order to advertise the Magnum Ice Cream: Magnum Pleasure Hunt 1, 2 and 3. The advergame is developed as a series of three games, introduced successively on the Internet. Each game is fully independent and does not require knowledge of the previous games in order to be played and enjoyed. However, there are a few common elements that create the perception of a series of episodes: the main character is the same – a young lady who in real life is a French ballet dancer; the central narrative of the three advergames consists in a quest, although each advergame proposes a different type of quest, and finally, each game require the collection of as many as possible Magnum bonbons, which are transformed in points won.

To eliminate the bias of a single player, we proceeded into three stages: first, we realised the analysis ourselves, filling in the matrixes that evaluate the main characteristics and features of the three advergames; second, we invited ten French master students (five males and five females, average age 23.5 years old) to play the game, and then to describe their on-game experience; third, we asked to the same ten students to play the games again, but this time to pay attention to the various design elements that shape and enhance their experience, and fourth, we asked these students to fill in the same matrixes and declare if their intention to buy Magnum Ice Cream is lower, higher, or about the same with their purchasing intentions before playing the game.

Each dimension in the matrix was evaluated with notes from one to ten, where one represented a poor note, and ten, an excellent note. For example, regarding the complexity of controls, a score of ten was indicating a low complexity – and therefore a high facility to manipulate the character(s), while a score of one was indicating high controls complexity. However, for the intentions to buy Magnum Ice Cream, the scores were distributed as follows: 1 to 3 - lower intentions, 4 to 7 - same intentions, and 8 to 10 - higher intentions than before playing the game. The scores were then averaged to understand the general effect of the three games on the testing group. The evaluations are presented in the next section.
Results
The three games analysed in this paper are quite different despite their resemblance in terms of product and style of narrative.

Game 1
Magnum Pleasure Hunt, launched in 2011, was the name of a worldwide online campaign realized by Unilever to promote its Magnum Ice Cream by using advergames. The first game was highly successful in terms of reach – with more than 7,000,000 players and an average engagement per user of approximately 5 minutes. The campaign was propagated using viral marketing methods and several social networking sites. As a result of its popularity, Unilever decided to introduce two more sequels, using the same character and style of narrative.

The first game described the quest of the main character – a young lady – to collect as many Magnum bonbons as possible, in an online race that crosses over several real and imaginary websites that promote and sell luxury products and services. The race continues no matter if the lady collects or not points, while the game set changes continuously. The producers of the game make a very original and creative use of the selected websites, using their features to stage specific experiences that the lady character goes through in her race for the Magnum Ice Cream that waits for her at the end of the game – no matter how many points she has collected. From this perspective, the competitive nature of the game is ingeniously divided into two elements: first, it is the race itself, the quest through a large diversity of websites, but which share the same style and level of quality; second, it is the (quite limited) manipulation of the character by the player, which moves her up, down, left and right in order to collect as many Magnum bonbons as possible. At the end, a score is displayed, representing the amount of points gained by the player, however, the lady from the game does not seem concerned by this score, as she always gets to the end of the game, and receives as price the Magnum Ice Cream.

Personally, I consider that the design of the gaming experience is surprising, being enhanced by the race of the main character, who crosses so many different websites keeping an alert rhythm, and constantly changing the scenery. However, towards the end of the game, during the interaction with a couple of websites, I cannot stop asking myself how long is this still going to continue, as I started to have a déjà vu experience.

The students were impressed with the design execution, as, at least in the first half of the game, the glide from one site to another is effortless and full of creativity. On the other hand, eight out of ten students confirmed the impression that the last few scenes were more static and less interesting than the ones presented in the first part. The boys were mostly attracted by the action and skills required to collect the points, while the girls focused more on the experiences lived by the main character. All ten students said that they would like to play again the game, inviting friends and family to try as well. However, only three girls and one boy declared that playing the game enticed them to try to advertised product. Although they understood the association between the other luxury products/services and the Magnum Ice Cream, they perceived a dichotomy between the advertised product – whose consumption or qualities are not presented or experienced during the game, and the race that represents the main narrative of the game.
**Game 2**

Magnum Pleasure Hunt 2 was launched in April 2012, in order to capitalize on, and continue, the success of the first game. The success was quick, as after a little more than a month, more than one million people worldwide had already played the game.

In this sequel, the same character – a young lady, is launched in a race to collect as many points as possible (Magnum bonbons again) running through the street of New York, surfing in Rio de Janeiro, or flying in Paris. The scenes are highly realistic, as each location was photographed and then reconstructed in the studio with all the existing details. For this new project, the producers created promotion partnerships with Bulgari, KLM, Quicksilver, Hotel Fasano and Bing – the search engine – all these brands being displayed in the game.

Despite the new trick of running through the streets of three of the most beautiful and famous cities of the world – a truly global exploit, I perceived the new game as too similar with the first one. The principle of points’ collection was the same: the lady raced in her own rhythm from one scene to another, while the player tried to control some of her movements in order to collect maximum points. Finally, reaching the destination, the lady received again the Magnum Ice Cream, irrespective of the number of points scored.

The realism of locations added more charm to the race, allowing players to eventually recognize places they already visited themselves, however, the overall impression of that of repetition – not enough creativity and originality was injected into the second game to make it interesting and different from the first one.

The students invited to play were fascinated during the first run of the game, but many of them protested that ‘it is all the same’; the race ‘reason’ was not good enough to keep them interested, and after the first experience, they quickly became disenchanted and started to criticize various design elements. This time only seven people out of ten declared that they will talk about the game with friends or relatives, inviting them to play; and only two said that they will play the game again in the future. Amongst the main criticism was the limited number of cities, the fact that some of the best places, shops or monuments from these cities were not displayed or included into the game; and finally, the limited control of the player over the motions of the main character.

**Game 3**

Considering the success of the first two instalments – with 23 million people playing the games, Unilever launched in 2014 the third game from the Pleasure Hunt series, this time introducing a much more complex plot: the main character – the same lady from the first two games – attempts now to save a man kidnapped by a team of Bad Girls. In her endeavour, she has to play five different games, obtaining at the end of the race five different Magnum kisses: ‘Crème brulée’, ‘Meringue aux fruit rouges’, ‘Tiramisu’, ‘Gateau au chocolat’ and ‘Tarte tatin’. The actions taken by the main character are more complex, having to collect Magnum bonbons while running on top of Paris metro cars, throwing back the bombs launched by the Bad Girls, or fencing in a desperate fight.

The students were first happy that the narrative has finally changed and became more complex. However, the game did not fully attract their attention, maybe because they already knew the main character. After playing once, the majority (eight students)
declared that the design is new in comparison with the two previous instalments, but has a rather low interest to them to find out what are the ingredients of Magnum Ice Cream Kisses. Only one declared that it will talk about the game with friends and relatives, and none said that he is willing to play again the game.

Table 1  Evaluation matrix of the three games in terms of game design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation criteria</th>
<th>Magnum Pleasure Hunt 1</th>
<th>Magnum Pleasure Hunt 2</th>
<th>Magnum Pleasure Hunt 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio-visual style</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narration</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity of controls</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game goals</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character and object structure</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balance user input/programmed rules</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial properties</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When interrogated regarding the comparative evaluation of the three games, the students indicated that the first one was the best, as it contained the surprise element, and the idea of travelling through cyberspace, by entering and crossing various websites.

Table 2  Evaluation matrix of the three games in terms of game-player interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation criteria</th>
<th>Magnum Pleasure Hunt 1</th>
<th>Magnum Pleasure Hunt 2</th>
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<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Facility of understanding</td>
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<td>Competitive level</td>
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<td>8.6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of association</td>
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<td>7.8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to induce the state of flow</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to maintain the state of flow</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viral marketing tools</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
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<td>Capacity to improve attitude towards products/services</td>
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<td>Capacity to induce desire to buy the product</td>
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Discussion
Considering the definition of design that we retain for this study (Khandani, 2005) - developing an optimum solution for a specific problem, we need first to identify what are the problems that designers attempt to solve through advergames.

Considering the rich academic and professional literature on advergaming, we can identify at least five such problems that are inter-related:

1. to raise the interest of the potential player to interact with the advergame;
2. to induce and maintain the state of flow;
3. to create positive impressions/feelings regarding the advertised brand, product or service, during the state of flow;
4. to incite the player to talk favourably about the advergame, acting as a viral agent;
5. to determine the player to purchase and consume the advertised product or service.

From this perspective, we start to understand that probably only the best games are capable to achieve simultaneously all these objectives, by using an appropriate design. The answers of the students invited to play the three Pleasure Hunt Magnum games clearly indicate which problems have been solved by the innovative design of these three advergames, and which elements have failed. Regarding the design elements of the three advergames, both male and female respondents indicated particular problems with the game goals: “too trivial”; the balance between user input and pre-programmed rules: “no matter what you do, you are forced to follow the same tract, with the speed decided by the programme”; and spatial properties: “screen sometimes too crowded to be capable to register and understand the layout”. Among the positive points we can list the audio-visual style and the complexity of controls. Narration is generally receiving high scores, with the exception of the second game, from the male respondents who give an average note of only 7.8.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the interaction elements, the evaluations are poor for the relevance of associations: “too many products, brands and locations that have no clear relevance of Magnum Ice Cream”; the existence of viral marketing tools: “you can’t play simultaneously in competition with another person”; capacity to improve attitude towards products/services: “product associations seem sometimes arbitrary and confusing”; and the capacity to induce the desire to buy the product:

*at the end of the game, you don’t know exactly what you’ll like to buy – as the Ice Cream is not really presented in a purchasing or consumption context.*

On the other hand, the games are not exceptional regarding their capacity to induce and maintain the state of flow. It is interesting to note that to both these dimensions, the best notes were given to the first game. The respondents justified this by the surprise element, and by the ‘cool’ idea that the main character is racing through various websites:

*Version two and three of the game were quite predictable, once you played the first version. Although they changed the layout, the narrative and the
goals were mostly similar. They made a special effort with the third version, but then you have five different games, some better than others.

Overall, although the traditional design elements scored quite well, the elements that facilitate the interaction with customers and that should determine a change in attitude and purchasing behaviour, are poorly designed. However, this dichotomy between design and interactive elements is artificial because the design elements should ultimately incorporate the entire experience of the player. Future studies should thus attempt to unify these two evaluation scales, or develop a new scales that takes into account both the structural and the functional elements of advergames.

In addition to all the elements taken into account in this paper, it is important to understand that the perception and evaluation of an advergame is never done in complete isolation from past experiences and memories. In other words, an advergame that applies a successful, well known narrative, but fails to deliver in terms of interactivity and attractiveness in comparison with other videogames, will not be analysed in itself, but rather in relation to other previously-experienced games. These complex associations introduce another layer of influences, which makes extremely difficult to predict the degree of success of a new advergame.

This effect is easy to identify when analysing, as in our case, a series of advergames with the same main character. Although the setup of each successive game changes substantially in comparison to the previous version(s), all three advergames use the central motive of the quest, which is transformed into a dynamic race through different settings. The competitive goal of the game is trivial – collect as many bonbons as possible, which on the one hand succeeds to induce rather easily the state of flow, but cannot maintain it for long. However, the hidden goal of the game is just to experience different brands which participate to the same universe of consumptions as the Magnum Ice Cream. This creates diversity and change, but on the other hand may confuse the player, failing to sufficiently reinforce the positive attitudes towards the Magnum product, and to transform the player into a potential customer. The students that played the game indicated that they felt attracted towards a lifestyle of leisure, diversity and modernity, represented in the game by a whole series of actions, products, locations and brands. The Magnum Ice cream certainly is a part of this lifestyle, but only minor one:

I do not understand why I have to run around three cities, located in different continents, to get at the end a Magnum Ice Cream. The game is interesting, but the connection with the core product is far too weak.

Concluding remarks
The design approach is used more and more in organizational and business studies to provide optimum solutions to dynamic problems, involving repeated interactions of a person (either employee, stakeholder or customer), with the product, brand, or specific processes within the value-added chain of the corporation.

As with any problem-solving technique, to achieve a good result in terms of design, it is necessary to define clearly the problem to be solved, as well as the specific characteristics and constraints of the environment. Nowadays, the accent of design research and activity shifts from the development and combination of static elements in specific artifacts, to
dynamic interactions, to influence customer’s experiences that contribute to the established goal(s) of the project.

In this study, we identified the main goals that should be fulfilled by a well-designed advergame, and we explored the main requirements and challenges encountered in the process of fulfilling these goals. To illustrate the complexity of this approach, we also analysed three advergames created by Unilever as a promotional series, centered on the theme of Magnum Ice Cream Pleasure Hunt. The findings indicate that the three advergames are perceived differently on various evaluation criteria, an important element being not only the influence of games’ characteristics on player, but also the signals sent by players’ memory – as an advergame is often compared with previous similar experiences.

The main limitations of this study stem from its methodological approach. The sample of players that tried and evaluated the three games is rather limited, the reason being the exploratory nature of this research. Based on our findings, future studies should attempt to increase the size of the sample, and/or to develop and validate a unified evaluation scale that addresses both the structural and the functional elements of an advergame.

References


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**Dr. Calin Gurau** is Professor of Marketing at Montpellier Business School, France. His present research interests are focused on Marketing Strategies for High-Technology Firms, Internet, and Sustainable Development. He has published more than 70 papers in internationally refereed journals.
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