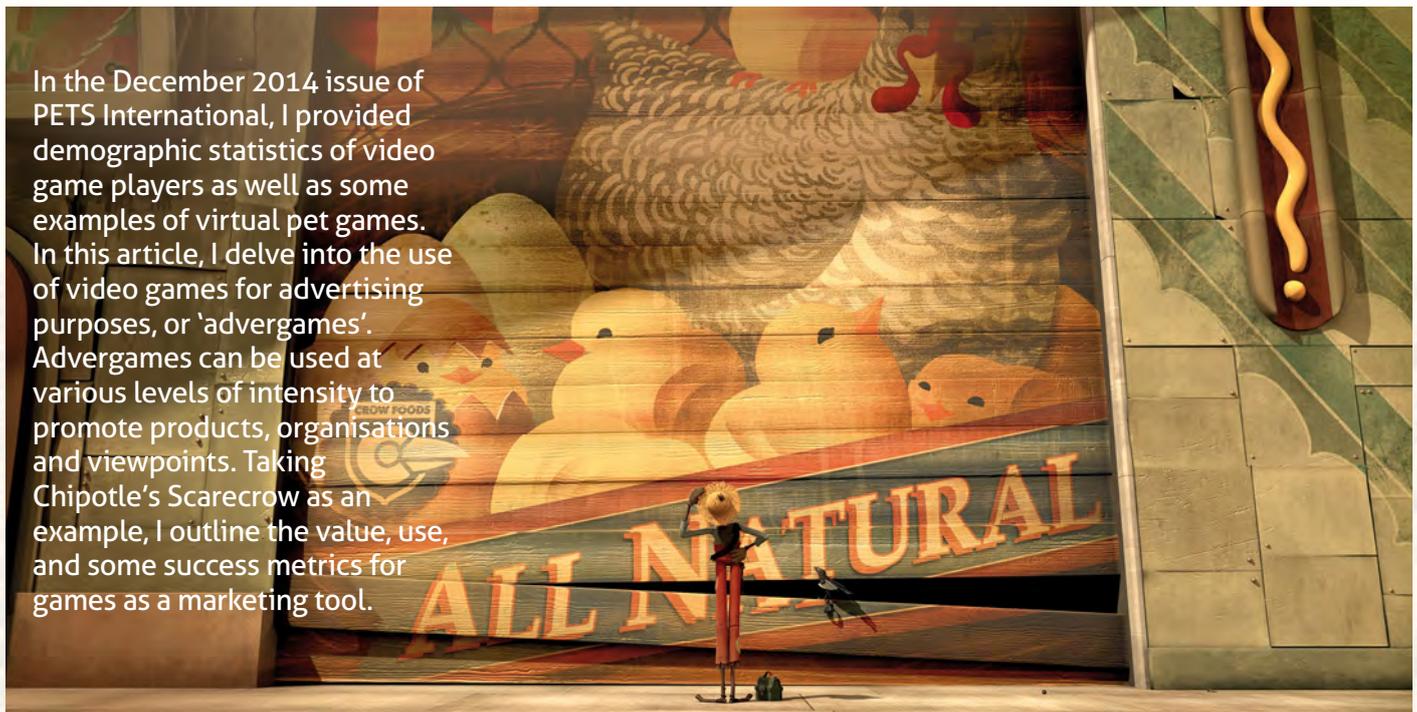


Successfully using games as a marketing tool

The case of Chipotle's Scarecrow

By: Joost Rietveld



Chipotle's Scarecrow campaign

In September 2013, restaurant chain Chipotle Mexican Grill set out to promote its new corporate initiative 'Food With Integrity' (FWI). The FWI initiative was meant to draw attention to Chipotle's emphasis on sourcing sustainably (i.e. local and organic) grown food. The low-cost restaurant chain known

for its burritos and tacos went against the grain with promoting its corporate ethos to the outside world. Instead of opting for a traditional marketing campaign, Chipotle contracted digital production agency Moonbot for the development of a mobile video game accompanied by an animated digital short film, both titled 'The Scarecrow'.

Chipotle's Scarecrow was released on September 12, 2013 for Apple's iOS platform (iPhone and iPad). After five days, the adventure game had already accumulated 300,000 downloads and stormed Apple's US game charts. At the same time, the animated short film got over 5 million views on YouTube, fuelled by coverage by The New York Times and numerous other publications applauding the campaign. Venturebeat labelled the Scarecrow campaign as 'one of the most successful marketing campaigns in history'. Since then, the video game has continued to do well, and the video has had nearly 14 million views on YouTube.



Value of games as a marketing tool

Chipotle is by no means the first firm to apply advergaming, the use of video games for advertising purposes, as a promotional strategy. A wide range of firms has successfully used the interactive medium to promote its products, organisation or (corporate) viewpoints. The first advergence



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was the computer game Lunar Lander (1973), where players can land their spaceship next to a McDonald's restaurant and have lunch. Since the advent of social and mobile gaming platforms such as Facebook, iOS, and Android in 2008, advergames has enjoyed a surge in popularity. Current examples of advergames include KLM (Aviation Empire for iOS and Android), Burger King (Sneak King for Xbox and Xbox 360), and Barclaycard (Waterslide Extreme for iOS).

Advergames offer a dynamic, engaging, and social form of proliferation that cannot be offered easily by other media. There are a great many advantages to using games as a promotional vehicle:

- the entertainment value of games makes them a particularly sticky and engaging form of advertising, resulting in high levels of brand awareness and brand engagement;
- due to their digital and standalone nature, advergames can easily be shared by people and thus have the power to go viral and spread at no additional cost;
- video games are often surrounded by communities of enthusiast players that last until long after a game's initial release. Advergames can thus create strong brand communities of loyal consumers;
- games offer the ability to collect rich and detailed data about players, either at the time of registration (basic demographics such as gender, age, and location), or by tracking player behaviour with various objects (e.g. customisation of in-game products).

In short, advergames can be a great market research tool offering rich insights for improved market segmentation and customer targeting.

Production process of advergames

The aforementioned examples all comprise bespoke advergames in which a new game

has been designed and produced from the ground up. As with the example of Chipotle's Scarecrow, the development of these games is often outsourced to firms that have the production of advergames as their core-business. Digital production agencies such as Moonbot make a bid for commissioned work from contractors such as Chipotle, or an intermediary, such as Ogilvy & Mather, that is responsible for a contractor's entire marketing campaign.

Given the unpredictable outcome of video game development efforts, digital production agencies are often selected by virtue of their track-record and the look-and-feel of their previous projects. Projects are executed and delivered on the basis of guidelines set out by the request for proposal (RFP) with which the agency initially won the bid. Informed by the contractor's objectives, a project's guidelines demarcate the production trajectory in objective (e.g. deliverables, budget, timeline, platforms, genre) and subjective (e.g. art direction, entertainment value, quality) terms.

The costs of an advergame highly depends on the amount of bells and whistles demanded and can range from \$10,000 (€9,000) for re-skinning existing games up to \$500,000 (€460,000) for more elaborate offerings.

Advergaming, getting it right

While there are some difficulties in predicting and measuring an advergame's performance, it is clear to see why Chipotle's Scarecrow was bound to be successful.

First of all, Scarecrow's production values are exceptionally high. The game was produced by a reputable team that put effort into designing a distinct visual style and quality gameplay. Even the game's theme

song is performed by a Grammy Award winning artist.

Second, the game was offered to players free of charge. In a landscape where other – non-advergaming – products are competing for consumers' dollars, advergames can get ahead by offering something that's fun and free. In the end, advergames are 'just' an advertising medium meant to gain maximum exposure.

Third, the video game was integrated into a wider marketing campaign for Chipotle's FWI initiative. The animated short film was released in conjunction with the video game and referenced the game before ending. Additionally, both were accompanied by a dedicated Scarecrow mini-website that fit into Chipotle's wider push for the FWI initiative.

Where The Scarecrow could have received more kudos was in its platform distribution strategy. Certain video game platforms can be easily grouped together from a production standpoint. Mobile gaming platforms such as Apple's iOS and Google's Android share a similar technological infrastructure and can be easily produced for in tandem. In cases like these, it pays off to span the widest possible market range by releasing games simultaneously onto multiple platforms.

In my third and final article for PETS International, I will present a set of guidelines for when to use various forms of advergaming and how to select the right mix of platform(s) for distribution. ■

The author is in no way associated with Chipotle's Scarecrow, Moonbot, or the game's contractor Chipotle Mexican Grill. Several advergaming studios were contacted for some of the insights underlying this article.