Advergames’ Content Analysis: 
Applying a Methodological Toolkit based on Ludology Principles

Lenia Theodorou,  
Panteion University, Athens, Greece  
leniatheodorou@yahoo.gr

Spiros Sirmakessis  
TEI of Messolongi & Computer Technology Institute, Patras, Greece  
syram@cti.gr

Abstract
Advergames represent the new trend in interactive and internet advertising, especially after banner’s failure on the internet. Research in advergames has been restricted to consumer’s behavior and effectiveness. Given that ludology returns as a methodological games’ studies approach and incorporates simulation elements, advergames seem to have much to offer to simulation understanding and analysis. This research is only a first attempt of introducing ludology’s principles to advergames’ content analysis.

Keywords: Advergaming, Ludology, Content Analysis, Methodology

I. INTRODUCTION
While Game Studies and Game Analysis are evolving research fields, Advergaming research has been bound to consumer’s behavior. Researchers have merely focused on consumer’s attitudes towards branding, cognitive branding representation, recall and recognition, elements that tend to represent advergames effectiveness. That was though expected, since advergames’ creation and existence occurred from advertising and commercial needs. However, games of this kind appear to be extremely interesting in structure, format and content.

Beyond Chen and Ringel (2001), our bibliography review has detected no advergaming content analysis researches.

a. Definition and Typology
According to Chen and Ringel (2001) advergaming is defined as “the use of interactive gaming technology to deliver embedded advertising messages to consumers… It incorporates branding directly into the gaming environment… The advertising message is central to game play”. Chen and Ringel (2001) provided a typology based on brand integration and immersion in the game, according to which three types of advergames exist:

- **Associative Advergaming** can drive brand awareness by associating the product with the lifestyle or activity featured in the game.
- **Illustrative Advergaming** can prominently feature the product itself in game play.
- **Demonstrative Advergaming** can leverage the full arsenal of interactivity by allowing the consumer to experience the product within the virtual confines of the gaming space.

Since Chen and Ringel’s (2001) approach, different perspectives of advergaming definitions and typologies have been presented, distinguishing advergames from in-game advertising. Their main difference lies in the purpose the games are designed for. On one hand there are advergames that are entirely designed around a brand for
promoting this brand, while on the other hand lies in-game advertising that involves the placement of brands in computer games, designed for entertainment and used by advertisers to promote brands. At least 5 different types of in-game advertising have been reported (IAB).

b. Motivation
Advergames made their appearance more as an evolution of interactive advertising, than as actual games and thus adopted advertising structural rules, more than game play structure. Nowadays, due to technical development and consumers’ familiarization with the medium, advergames are becoming more complex in structure, virtual environment and interactivity, in order to fulfill their goal. They tend to be more games than advertisements and for that they must be methodologically approached and analyzed as games.

c. Ludology
Representations “ruled” our world for many decades. Theorists and researchers were focused on analyzing and understanding them. When Aarseth (1997) presented this theory about analyzing hypertexts as cyber-texts, representation and narrative analysis could no longer contribute in the game analysis research. For the first time, simulation seemed to be a much better method for analyzing games. In 1999 Frasca introduces again ludology, as a methodological approach for analyzing computer games.

Ludology can be defined as a discipline that studies games in general and video games in particular. (Frasca, 2003). Ludologists claim that games are not held with narrative structure and focus on understanding not only the structure, but also the elements and create typologies and models for explaining the mechanisms of the games (Frasca, 2003).

During the last decade, much discussion has been made and different theories have been proposed regarding games’ analysis and structure, examining them as cybertexts (Aarseth, 1997), as second-order cybernetic systems (Kücklich, 2002) as rule-based systems (Juul, 2005), as simulations (Frasca, 2003).

Though so far no research, applying ludology principles, has been made to advergames, Frasca (2003) considers advergames to have contributed to simulation knowledge more than games themselves, due to advertisers’ tension towards imitation than authenticity. More than this, according to Frasca (2003) brand – product placement in a game represents the most simple and obvious type of advergaming, having the chance to model the product itself and produce an almost alive experience of the brand, and does not just provide a simple representation of it.

In this work, we selected to investigate only advergames made entirely for advertising, for the only reason that no previous content analysis research has been found.

II. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In this work we apply the principles of ludology to advergames and introduce the use of a methodological toolkit based on these principles, in order to examine if this toolkit can be adopted and adapted for further advergames’ content analysis. Furthermore, we suppose that content analysis shall guide us to Chen & Ringel’s integration scale.

Many propositions have been made during the past few years, about designing a toolkit that incorporates ludology principles, such as simulation, for game analysis. Malliet’s (2007) approach was selected for this research. Malliet provides 7 elements for content analysis, 2 for representation analysis and 5 for simulation analysis. Malliet (2007) used these elements to
examine the presence of violence in games. In this research, we use the elements to examine the presence of a brand in a game.

\textbf{a. Representation Elements}

\textbf{Audiovisual Style}

Within this category, the audiovisual elements of grafical user’s interface are described. Adapting this to advergame’s analysis, we should examine the way brands appear in audiovisual game’s environment.

\textbf{Narration}

In advergames, beyond narrative, it is examined the way that the brand contributes and influences the narration of the game.

\textbf{b. Simulation Elements}

\textbf{Complexity of controls}

Within this section, beyond complexity of controls upon the game program, there is a focus on the complexity of controls upon the brand presented.

\textbf{Game Goals}

Within this category it is examined the game play regarding brand and marketing elements, such as prizes and rewards linked to the brand presented.

\textbf{Character and object structure}

Within this category the availability of controlling and interacting with the brand is investigated. More specifically the opportunity the player has to elaborate the brand’s elements, such as color, type, and the complexity of this control, if existed.

\textbf{Balance between user input and pre-programmed rules}

Adapting this element in advergame analysis, we focused on the way the players manipulate the brand, how they use their power and the influence each way of manipulation has on the game play.

\textbf{Spatial properties of the game world}

Within this category, it is investigated the way the brand appears and moves in virtual game environment.

\textbf{III. RESULTS}

10 advergames have been analyzed with the selected methodological approach. We present here the BMW example. The name of the game is “be the first one” and it was uploaded in \url{www.be-the-first-one.com} and retrieved in September 2008.

The game’s audiovisual style is very simple, with graphics similar to a comic. Even car’s representation is simple, although precise and realistic, but with no details. The brand’s presence in the game is discrete and appeared for relatively short period.

Game’s narration is linear. Some flashbacks appear between the episodes, so as to connect each episode to the next one, but they do not affect game’s narrative. During the episodes, apart from the main game play, the players have to overcome some challenges, in order to continue. We see the
brand for the first time at the 3rd episode, there are totally 5 episodes, but it activates the plot from the first episode. It is due to the car that the adventure begins, as Fat Freddy abducts the two heroes-owners of the car, because he needs the car in order to fill his plans.

From the 3rd episode and forward the car becomes part of the challenges the player has to overcome, e.g. in one challenge the player has to drive the car in order to escape from the police.

“Be the first one” is an easy enough game to play, control and interact. Apart from the challenges, where keyboard use is needed, for the rest of the game the player uses the mouse. It provides the player the chance to somehow drive the car in a very simple way. Driving involves the use of three arrow keys, turn right-left and speed up, while starting the engine only requires a mouse click.

The game is mainly explorative and the only reward is the downloadable challenges. In that way the player may play again apart from the game play.

Both characters’ and brand’s structure are fixed. The player can’t elaborate brand elements, such as color and type. The whole game is based on pre-programmed rules, the player can intervene in the sequence of commands (adventure type game), but only one command advances the plot eventually.

The game’s world is 2D and the brand is realistically incorporated in the virtual game environment.

IV. CONCLUSION

Advergame Content Analysis may adopt Ludology principles and use the methodological toolkits based on these principles, but adaptation of the toolkit is needed in order to fit to advergames’ requirements. Generally in our sample, brands appeared more in representation elements than in simulation, although we were able to associate the brand with every Malliet’s element. Of course this result may have occurred from the games’ selection and may be circumstantial.

The representation elements meet with the first two Chen & Ringel’s integration scale. The more simulation elements exist, the greater the brand integration. In fact, considering Chen & Ringel’s typology, we could say that associative advergames are linked only with Malliet’s first representation element “audiovisual style”. The more the brand influences the narrative, the game becomes illustrative. Finally the more simulation elements, the greater the integration and the game become demonstrative, though in our sample we didn’t come across this type of games.

Our suggestion is that further research and analysis should take place on simulation elements regarding brand integration.
REFERENCES:


IAB, Marketer & Agency Guide to Online Game Advertising

