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## For the Love of the Game

### Exploring the (relatively unrealized) power games hold for brands

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-By Matt Freeman

Gaming may well be the best brand medium in history. Games are a most unlikely modern medium -- one where consumers willingly spend huge sums of time, are relaxed, focused and eschew multi-tasking, and one where consumers are open to interacting with brands. Games are magical.

For any marketer who seeks to generate meaningful engagement with their consumers, games now offer a rich, diverse and massive opportunity. In this world, products can metamorphose into popular characters and campaigns into levels, and brands have the ability to freely select modes from "beginner" (simple sponsors) to "expert" (sought-after publishers).

The real question most brands are faced with is not whether to play, but how.

#### State of play

We've come a long way from the sticky quarters and darkened arcades of our youth. Video games are a social, mass and relatively omnipresent phenomenon. With gaming's platform proliferation from arcades to consoles to handhelds to online to mobile to everywhere, audience proliferation has followed suit. Games are less a platform or a title than they are a mechanic or a behavior.

Gaming as a business has undergone many of the same long-tail tectonic shifts as the Web itself. As the same competitive barriers of distribution, development cost and expertise have crumbled, gaming has gone from being the domain of a few well capitalized professionals to a much broader, more inclusive and pervasive world.

Yes, there are still huge franchise players (Halo, Madden, etc.) that generate huge audiences and revenues (complete with the Hollywood-like investment gambles of \$15-25 million per release). But for brands, these mega-titles are a diminishing piece of the puzzle. Gaming has become a spectrum of media apertures that needs to be planned against specific objectives -- meaning it's no longer just a binary "sponsor or not" decision.

Recent trends of social dynamics in gaming (from Xbox Live to Facebook games) have also fused the marketing phenomena of entertainment and viral. Unlocking a brand's place in the world of gaming can now be rewarded with explosive growth in brand popularity and offline sales.

### **Why brands should care**

Games are important to brands for two primary qualities: reach and depth.

You have no doubt seen the (somewhat staggering) reach statistics yourself: over 65 percent of American households play computer and video games; the average age of a gamer is 35; 21 million moms play games online; moms spend more time playing games online than shopping. (All figures are from the Entertainment Software Association.)

Less well documented is gaming's quality of depth. Measured by both consumer time spent and consumer "mind state" (dedicated focus on a single experience), games outperform any other medium.

Cognitively, gaming creates the mind state of "deep play" -- a state ideal for generating lasting impressions for brands. Our research shows that games categorically produce the highest consumer impact for brands on every measure from recall to purchase intent.

Key to success is divining the right balance between medium and message. If a game is true to the brand attributes, but not particularly entertaining, no one will play. If it is fantastically entertaining, but has no cogent connection to the brand, no one will buy your product.

### **Where to start**

The best way to start is to play. So block off the calendar, close the office door, put on the headphones and settle in -- you're headed for a strategic research seminar.

Here are a couple to get you started (and to show that games can be both brand relevant and entertaining, not to mention reach a huge audience): <http://www.miniclip.com/games/quesadilla-breaks/en/>

### **Players guide**

**Discover:** Your brand has an entertainment value (whether it's Pepsi or Pampers, I swear it does). Find it, define it, then extrapolate it into the world of gaming. Stick to this premise as a touchstone -- your concern is building your own brand, not selling someone else's game title.

**Map:** Plan against gaming as you would against any other medium. Map the total gaming universe of your target audience (including the various platforms, titles, peripherals, etc.) in a typical day overview. Evaluate the apertures on a consumer reach and depth basis. Then make a "build/buy

/modify" assessment. What gives you the best cost/return ratio: putting your logo into something pre-built or custom building something from your brand's own DNA?

Play: Test and learn. Repeat. Inaction is the only real mistake. As you wade (or wade further) into the swirling world of games, make sure you have a consistent benchmark of success. Is it time spent? Brand KPI (favorability, purchase intent, etc.)? Action taken (coupon, sample, referral, etc.)? Whatever matters most to you, keep the measurement consistent to optimize learning and performance over time.

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