

Law of the Level

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Brands and Video Games: Three Steps for Finding a Perfect Match

Step 2: Balancing Interests in User Interaction

In the [first part of this article series](#), we looked at choosing a video game for product placement based on game attributes. Now we begin addressing the details of the branding deal—specifically, deciding how users can interact with the brands within a game. For brand owners, the concern is how in-game treatment of the brand will affect the brand's image. For game developers, the focus is more on how inclusion of the brand will affect overall game play. Balancing these sometimes-competing interests is the key to reaching an agreement that will benefit everyone involved.

To illustrate the examples in this article, we turn once again to the same hypothetical brands used in Part 1: 1) Cupquake brand cake-flavored soft drinks ("The soda that rocks your world!"); 2) Captain Victory brand sporting goods ("For the heroes on your team"); and 3) Kraken Financial Services ("Release the investor in you!").

User interactions with branded products inside of video games can be broken down into four basic levels. At the most basic level, there is no user interaction at all—users can merely view the item as part of the game's environment (for example, billboards alongside a race track). One step up from that is non-destructive user interaction with indestructible branded products (such as kicking a branded soccer ball as part of a sports game). Moving higher, the next level is destructive user interaction with indestructible branded products (racecars that receive no damage after hitting a wall). The final and most interactive level involves branded products that users can damage or alter through their in-game actions (a soda bottle that the player can throw and break against a wall).

Although use of real brands inside games can benefit both brand owners and game developers, a tension exists between their respective goals—brand control and realistic game experience. As branded goods move up through the levels of user interaction and increasing realism, brand owners risk losing control over the integrity of their brand and their marketing message. However, too much control can adversely affect the realism and quality of the game itself, which may lead to a negative reception of the game (and consequently the brand featured within the game). The key is to strike a balance between brand control and enjoyable game play. If that balance can be reached, both the brand owner and the developer can benefit from the partnership.

Level 1: Background Branding

The most basic form of branding within video games is "background branding." Common examples include billboards alongside race tracks, advertisements within baseball stadiums or hockey rinks, or unreachable brand name stores outside of the game character's linear path. This is traditionally the branding method most heavily used in video games. The prevalence of background branding is largely due to the fact that it creates an easy method of balancing the needs of brand owners and game developers—when done properly, it allows brand owners to completely control how their brand is presented in the game, while simultaneously creating a natural look to the game itself that doesn't detract from the game's quality.

Background branding is often a great way to present brands within games. However, this technique may not fully capitalize on the marketing potential of video games. For example, a banner advertisement in a baseball stadium for Cupquake's new frosting-flavored sports drink is fine, but Cupquake might gain even more benefit if users could equip the sports drink in order to give their starting pitcher an energy boost. Or, instead of simply advertising an mp3 player on a billboard alongside a freeway in a driving game, developers could create an interface in the car itself that allows users to select songs from the mp3 player to listen to while playing the game (an option that also creates more co-branding

opportunities with additional music brand partners). Increasing the level of user-interaction often requires more effort, but it can also lead to stronger relationships between users and brands, as well as a more realistic and immersive gaming experience.

Level 2: Non-Destructive Interaction + Indestructible Items

One way that brand owners can protect their message and product integrity is by allowing users to interact with the brand in a limited way, which cannot cause any damage to the branded product. Non-destructive interaction essentially means prohibiting violent or injurious conduct towards branded products. For instance, when placing a Captain Victory branded baseball bat inside a game, using the bat to hit homeruns would be the obvious non-destructive interaction for that object. In contrast, using the baseball bat used to mug pedestrians as part of a mafia action game would constitute a destructive interaction, and one that is most likely contrary to Captain Victory's desired image for its brand.

Destructive interaction refers to more than just a branded product taking physical damage. The term also encompasses any occurrence where the brand is denigrated in any way. For example, if game characters are fighting and dying during a hold-up of a Kraken Financial branded bank, that interaction would probably not create a desirable promotional effect, even if the bank itself is not physically harmed. Interactions that cast an unfavorable view of brands would not increase the marketability of branded products and are therefore obviously disfavored by brand owners.

In order to find that balance between the needs of the brand owners and game developers, brand owners who wish to limit the amount of destructive interaction of their branded products within the game environment should seek specific types of video games where such non-destructive use will be most natural. Referring back to the previous article on [game attributes](#), certain video game genres incorporate violence and destruction more so than others. Common genres without destructive interaction include most sports games, children's games, puzzle games, and simulation games. For instance, as part of a café simulation game, users could be given a Cupquake soda dispenser to place in their café that increases the speed at which their food cooks. Branding within these genres may require more creativity, but if done properly, brands can maintain control of their marketing message while allowing users to have meaningful interaction with their brand.

Level 3: Destructive Interaction + Indestructible Items

Brand owners can protect their product's integrity by requiring that the branded items be indestructible—always functioning at peak performance without any signs of damage. For example, in a racing game, branded cars could hit barriers and walls at unbelievable speeds without receiving any form of structural damage. In another example, a first-person shooter, the user fires a rocket launcher at a Cupquake vending machine, after which the machine is unscathed.

While indestructible items can protect a brand's image, the lack of damage may detract from a video game's realism and may create an unnatural experience for users. In games where users anticipate destructive interaction, users often also expect to see the natural results of that interaction. In addition, game developers often pride themselves on making games with realistic physics behind the movements and effects of objects in a game. Brand owners that wish to see their products remain intact should be cautious before placing their products into games where users expect destructive results. Defying user expectations can create animosity towards the video game as well as the brand itself, and an unsuccessful game is unlikely to create a successful product placement.

Beyond the issue of physical damage to branded products, brand owners should also consider whether the brand should be susceptible to destructive interaction in the first place. Even if a Cupquake vending machine doesn't receive damage from a rocket blast, firing rockets at Cupquake products is maybe not the relationship Cupquake (or most brands) wants to create with users. From a marketing perspective, brand owners generally want to promote the positive aspects of their products rather than the "coolness" factor of destroying their products in a video game. If the branding creates a relationship with users largely based on destroying, attempting to destroy, or misusing branded products, the brand owner may want to re-think whether that partnership is beneficial to the brand.

Level 4: Realistic Brands, Realistic Destruction

Reaching the highest level of user interaction means allowing branded products to receive realistic damage or alteration due to user interaction. From a Captain Victory baseball bat splintering upon hitting a pitch incorrectly, to destroying a Kraken Financial bank with an air strike, the possibility of lifelike damage and alteration to branded products creates an

added sense of realism in videogames. For video games that are marketed based on their realism and the ability of users to interact fully with the game environment, this level of interaction may be necessary for game developers to allow branding opportunities within certain games.

For brand owners, realism can be risky for their marketing scheme, because it generally involves relinquishing control over the way branded products are used. In games that allow users a high level of autonomy, a brand owner may not know whether its branded car will be used for racing or used as cannon fodder for a user with a rocket launcher. The former is good—the brand owner can show users how well its cars can perform. But if users opt for the latter, the brand owner receives little benefit from having its cars destroyed.

Reaching a point where realistic user interaction with destructible goods benefits both brand owner and game developer can be difficult, but it is not impossible. Users could be encouraged to treat brands in a positive way through in-game incentives. For example, after drinking a Cupquake soda in the game, in a realistic environment, the user could potentially toss the bottle at a building, destroying the bottle and leaving glass shards on the sidewalk. However, if the game mechanics penalize the user for doing that (say with a movement reduction resulting from wounds from the glass shards, or a reduction in points for littering), and encourage the user to treat the brand well (such as gaining a bonus for placing the bottle in a recycling bin, thus highlighting Cupquake's environmental friendliness), then the brand can protect its image to some extent while not detracting from the realism of the game.

A theme throughout this article series is achieving mutual benefit and balance for both the brand owner and game developer. Overall, in-game branding can strongly benefit both parties, however hammering out the details of the branding agreement can create a number of issues where the interests of the parties are competing with each other.

Determining the level of user interaction appropriate for the game and product in question is an important fundamental issue of the agreement, and reaching a balance between the parties' interests is key. Too much control over the brand may leave a game feeling artificial and unrealistic. Too high a level of user freedom when interacting with the brand may be counteractive to promoting the brand. When the right balance is struck, however, both brand owners and game developers win.

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