

The potential of massively multiplayer online games for advertisers

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are becoming popular in households throughout South Africa, according to Brad Aigner, MD of Universal McCann SA. "As the speed of online access gathers momentum, MMOGs offer huge potential for advertisers to engage and connect with the elusive hardcore gamer, often with disposable cash," he says.

MMOGs are computer games that enable thousands of players to interact simultaneously in a game world connected via the Internet. According to global Jupiter research, MMOGs generate roughly US\$350 billion a year and is the fastest growing entertainment segment in the world. The typical MMOG user is male, aged between 18 and 34, and spends an average of nine hours a week playing PC games. *Wired* magazine says that 'in-game advertising' is worth US\$60 million, set to grow to half a billion by 2009.

The following marketing and communication opportunities have been identified by Universal McCann Global:

In-game ads: these are popular in reality-based games and lend themselves especially well to sports-themed games, racing games, and first-person shooter games. Billboards, vending machines, movie posters, and other 'real life' ads enhance the gamers' experience. A unique 'in-game' advertising campaign can make the game more real as users interact with the brand in their alternate reality.

In-game interaction with ads: lifestyle-based games lend themselves to more than billboards and movie posters - they encourage marketers to become an interactive part of the virtual world. Internationally, Nike created the option of gamers to use virtual shoes to allow gamers to run faster; iPod has virtual mp3s for sale that pumps music through the users' PC speakers and Levi Strauss offers designer jeans for purchase in the virtual world.

Sponsorship of MMOG events: events, contests, sweepstakes and prizes are constantly offered to users. For example, the Electronic Sports World Cup is an annual tournament in which hardcore gamers commune and compete for prizes of up to U\$400 000. Sponsorship of such an event allows marketers to reach an otherwise elusive audience.

Reality-based games: these offer a rich landscape for sponsorship as well, albeit of in-game events. The game 'Second Life' has already been host to a number of events, including a fashion show hosted by MTV, an 'opening night' party for the 20th Century Fox release of X-Men 3, and a virtual "Relay for Life" walk for the American Cancer Association which earned about U\$5000.

Adverworlds: Some brands have already had success creating didactic MMOGs for the teen market, dubbing their games 'adverworlds'. One company used a virtual game to educate teens about money use; a car manufacturer, through a

separate game, educates users on road safety.

Real pizza in a virtual world: Dominoes Pizza and fantasy MMOG Everquest recently created an application whereby a user can order food without ever having to leave his keyboard. By simply typing 'pizza' into the application, the user connects to a nearby Dominoes and types in his order. This is both a luxury and a convenience for gamers and should appeal to marketers.

What would your alter ego do? any and every avatar (an icon or representation of a user in a virtual reality) and the choices it makes in an MMOG can be tracked in a database, providing great opportunities for behavioural studies. This notion can prove highly profitable in terms of behaviour research; a user can, and will, make bold choices, through his or her avatar, they wouldn't ordinarily make in the real world.

The Gamer Generation (Gen G): this latest buzzword describes a generation who grew up with games as a mainstream media, like the previous generation did with television. This has caused their mindset and perceptions to be unique and so, too, will the approach marketers take with them. As marketing touch points evolve into the game world, it will not only be about presence but also interactivity and how the message is communicated to this new generation. The online world is about spills, thrills, unlimited possibilities and even life-threatening situations - if marketers don't take a cue from this, it could be 'game over'.

Female gamers: numbers are low for female MMOGs in general; video and PC games have traditionally been a male phenomenon. But women do participate in this atmosphere, albeit not widely in the more popular, competition-based games like World of Warcraft and Everquest. More and more, women are joining the ranks in reality-based, lifestyle MMOGs such as Second Life and Sims Online. The appeal to women in these games is the high level of social interaction, as opposed to the emphasis on lore and combat in other MMOGs.

According to Universal McCann, most MMOGs operate from a PC platform. Fantasy-themed games dominate the market right now with titles like World of Warcraft, Everquest, and Eve Online leading the way. The most popular are reality-based games that focus on building a virtual life, owning land, and even making and selling products.

For users, they are a creative and stimulating outlet for building a parallel life in a parallel world. These worlds have their own rules, norms and standards. Universal McCann believes that MMOGs offer a marketing challenge and provide an opportunity to engage with a hard-to-reach youth demographic.

"According to *NAG* magazine, the two most-played MMOGs in South Africa are Guild Wars and World of Warcraft," concludes Aigner. "We believe that there is a huge amount of opportunity for advertisers wishing to make their mark in the virtual world."

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