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Gameplay Marketing Strategies as Audience Co-optation: The Story of *The Dark Knight*, the *Cloverfield* Monster, and Their Brethren

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Case studies of marketing strategies that use some gaming structure and rules that encourage play(ing) are illustrated. In this paper, these strategies are referred to as "gameplay marketing." It is argued that these strategies have been inspired by established modes of gaming and can be found in at least four general types. The case studies discussed are four campaigns that represent these types: two television series, *Leverage* and *Heroes*, and two films, *Cloverfield* and *The Dark Knight*. The purpose of such gameplay marketing strategies appears to be to provoke viral marketing by creating buzz from the pleasure of these games. However, this trend also indicates what could be the reconceptualization of power dynamics in the relationship between producers and consumers.

Introduction

This was one woman's experience on the hot night of July 8, 2008, and it happened because she was a fan of Batman.[1]

> It's July 8th in Chicago and since I never kissed a boy in high school, I went to that Stand Up for Batman thing at 9:00 tonight . . . When a dude finally showed up to distribute a stack of Domino's Gotham City pizzas with instructions stapled to the tops of the boxes, it was as if he had taken a wiffle-ball bat to the side of a beehive full of *Aeon Flux* Blu-Ray owners: first, a lot of confused buzzing; then, suddenly, the crowd moved as one, sprinting down onto Lower Wacker Drive in pursuit of . . . what? Buses to a preview screening? Boxes of free T-shirts? An oiled-up, shirtless Christian Bale, waiting to welcome you into his powerful embrace and reassure you that it's not gay if it's Batman? All this seemed irrelevant in the heat of the moment, and I'd be lying if I claimed that I wasn't excited, tirelessly running back and forth through a couple of

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[1] My thanks to blogs UnFiction and ARGnet, and Jim Miller's Immersion Museum at Miramontes.com, for keeping catalogs and archives of the various ARG related marketing campaigns produced by Hollywood.

> misdirections and misreadings of the clues which would have been frustrating had I not been powered by pure nerd adrenaline.
> (http://community.livejournal.com/ohnotheydidnt/25460894.html)

What she describes was just one activity staged in the physical world that resulted from, and would lead to, more activities online. All of these activities were strategically arranged for marketing the movie *The Dark Knight*. This woman was not alone. According to the producers of this marketing campaign, 42 Entertainment, 10 million people from more than 75 countries participated in the campaign that lasted from May, 2007, to the movie's premiere in July 2008. 42 Entertainment had previously produced campaigns for successful Hollywood films *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*.

The story of *The Dark Knight*'s marketing campaign is part of a larger story about the use of games, gaming, and play as marketing strategies for film and television series. With new digital technologies, such as DVRs and the World Wide Web, impacting how people engage with advertisements, films and television series, "studios are trying to create Internet brush fires on behalf of their coming releases" (Barnes, 2010). These "Internet brush fires" being "powered by pure nerd adrenaline" are marketing campaigns that have been increasingly employed during the first decade of the 21st century.

The marketing campaigns I discuss here have been called, by academics, media professionals, and general consumers, "alternative reality branding" or "viral marketing." However, I think we need a term that reflects how these marketing strategies engender playing and playful activities by using some type of game and gaming features in their campaigns. Thus I prefer to use "gameplay marketing." This paper attempts to demonstrate that Hollywood has increasingly engaged in gameplay marketing to capitalize on audience activity as "lightning in a bottle" (Ross, 2008); that is, to move from linearly transmitting ads at the consumers to using the consumers to actively or passively transmit the ads. The paper focuses on four case studies that exemplify different types of gameplay marketing strategies, as those strategies have been inspired by advergames and alternative reality games (ARGs). It is not the goal of this paper to discuss how persuasive these marketing campaigns have been and why. Instead, the goal is to discuss the trend of gameplay marketing and what it could mean for the relationship between producers and consumers.

Gameplay Marketing

In order to talk about the case studies I illustrate in this paper, I have chosen to use the term "gameplay marketing." I define gameplay marketing as a marketing campaign that uses some type of gaming structure to promote gameplay activities as the means by which the advertisement is communicated. In using the term "gameplay marketing," my focus is on how the campaign requires active participation by the consumer in order for some goal to be achieved. This goal could be information about an upcoming film or ongoing television series, or it could be a prize for completing the game, or it could be the pleasure of further engaging with content already enjoyed in the television series or film. This goal is considered to be important to the player/consumer., The goal that is important to the producers,

however, is the creation and distribution of positive buzz about the media product that could eventually lead to further engaging with the marketed product.

In my definition, I am taking concepts from digital games research as the rise of such games is most closely tied to gameplay marketing for two reasons: a reliance on similar digital technologies and the assumption that the prevalence of such digital games in society and culture can be seen as foundational for the use of these strategies (Bogost, 2007). Thus, a gameplay marketing strategy is any advertising attempt that uses the conventions of a game's structures and rules to encourage play.

Although there is a long discussion possible about what are a game's structures and rules and what is play, the essential discussion focuses on the interconnectedness of these aspects in any gameplay situation. Games are structurations of physical, virtual and interpretive spaces by rules of procedure prescribed by the game's designer(s) for players to engage with the physical and virtual spaces to produce meaning in the interpretive space (Nitsche, 2008). When the gameplay concerns digital games, such structuration considers the nature of the media technology used to communicate the rules and the technical interface the person physically interacts with to control the game's content.

Play is the person's enacting of agency through, with, and at the structure of rules by using physical and interpretive interaction (Bogost, 2007). Games theorists have identified as central this interconnection between what the game allows as the rules and what the person does with those rules (Bogost, 2007). Understood in this sense, play refers to the possibilities for agency created by the game's structure itself. In some games, the rules are more flexible, producing more possibilities for agency, than others; sometimes, agency overcomes structure as the play breaks or modifies the rules (Nitsche, 2008).

However, what is important for gameplay marketing strategies is that player/consumers play the game by the rules, as those rules were chosen to capture the person's attention. These gameplay marketing strategies use a "procedural rhetoric" (Bogost, 2007), an attempt to persuade through the processes, the rules and play activities of the game. The concerns are how the game's rules can be structured to make an argument and how by experiencing those rules, the person may be persuaded to accept the argument. Indeed, using a procedural rhetoric may be more persuasive, given the naturalness of how people go through life as a series of processes or procedures.

Gameplay marketing strategies are attempts to persuade through the rhetoric of playing. Different strategies structure games with different rules and use different technologies as their interfaces. What follows is analysis of how two types of games appear to have been inspirations for gameplay marketing strategies, along with a brief discussion of four clusters of technologies being used as interfaces. After these introductions, the case studies are discussed to illustrate these games and interfaces.

Gameplay Marketing Strategies

In addition to using the fundamental nature of games and play, gameplay marketing strategies appear to have been inspired by two genres of digital games in particular: *advergames* and *alternate*

reality games. The former has primarily been used for marketing purposes, while the latter is more known for the cross-platform, mixed reality nature of its structure.

Advergames

According to Bogost (2007), the terminology and definition of advergames can be traced to work done by Jane Chen and Matthew Ringel in 2001. Their definition is "the use of interactive gaming technology to deliver embedded advertising messages to consumers" (as quoted in Bogost, 2007, p. 152). The presence of advergames can be traced to the Atari days in the early 1980s. With the rise of digital games, producers of consumer goods experimented with how to produce games for children to play and in doing so be persuaded. Currently, the majority of advergames are Flash or Java games on company Web sites.

When Bogost (2007) analyzed the history and texts of these games, he expanded the definition to one this paper uses: any game that features a procedural rhetoric about the claims of a product or service, usually through simulation of that product or service. Often advergames are games created for material consumer goods, such as cars, dental care, and fast food, that try to embody the qualities of the product through the design of the game's content and gameplay. The goal may not be to engender purchasing by the consumer; rather, it may be to produce a simulated, embodied experience within which the consumer can get a feel for the claims of the product or service. The goal is to associate the claims with the consumer's actual or desired lifestyle through affective-based persuasion. In other words, the goal is brand awareness more than immediate brand purchase.

With gameplay marketing campaigns, we also see a goal focused on the manufacturing of brand awareness—particularly positive brand awareness. The advergames in these campaigns are not selling a physical product or service; instead, they are selling the experience of engaging further with the film or television content the player already consumes—sometimes with the potential for prizes for doing so.

Alternate Reality Games

Alternate reality games, also known as ARGs or pervasive gaming, occur when some of the gameplay transpires in the physical world with the aid of mobile communication and computer technologies (McGonigal, 2007; Miller, 2004; Walther, 2006). Nitsche (2008) describes such gaming as immersing the player in the game world, where "players follow hidden clues through a complex network knitted from any available data from Web pages, telephone calls, Global Positioning System, film trailers, and other media sources" (p. 209). Live gaming events are conducted in public places where players carry out their instructions, usually while recording their doing so through photography and video to post online for others to see (McGonigal, 2007). The players are organized by the "puppet masters," the off-stage design team that manages the gameplay through the instructions. Through the agency of the players and the puppet masters, ARGs form "pervasive gaming worlds" where the player does not have to act through an avatar to experience the game: the player is the avatar (Nitsche, 2008).

As with advergames, there exists a structure of rules within which the player acts. These rules are given to the player by the unseen game designers. Unlike advergames, ARGs do not use rules that are prescribed, packaged and given to the player before the player agrees to engage. What sets ARGs apart is how the rules, and thus the content, are unveiled as the game progresses; with an ARG, the designers are involved in the real-time playing. They are hidden behind the curtain of communication technologies employed to disseminate rules and content (McGonigal, 2007). The designers create a gaming structure that is hidden from the players, allowing the players to experience the game without being shown the mechanics. With digital games and advergames, the mechanics cannot be hidden, as the videogame console or computer mediates the player and the game. With ARGs, being surrounded by the physical world, (Nitsche, 2008) the distinction between what is a game and what isn't blurs because there are fewer mechanically defined distinctions between when and where the game is and is not.

Gameplay marketing campaigns that are inspired by ARGs illustrate the desire to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction. In addition, they have the presence of puppet masters working behind the scenes to propagate the game and the game's procedural rhetoric. Indeed, it is the interplay between the players' agency and the producers' design goals that may indicate a shift in the power dynamics between media producers and consumers.

Types of Gameplay Marketing

Gameplay marketing strategies appear to differ in how they structure virtual and physical spaces. Although some do structure a virtual space to generate a basic or advanced ARG, others simply provide places for more basic online advergames. In considering the digital technologies and how they are used, there are at least four types of gameplay marketing: within Web site; across Web sites; across platforms; between online and offline.

Within Web Site

This type occurs when a Web site contains some form of game that is related to the film or television series. The game, or games, could be any of the variety of genres that occur online, from action/adventure to puzzle games. Another form of this type manifests in marketing campaigns in which a contest occurs that requires the audience to complete a puzzle or series of puzzles to compete for prizes. Prizes and puzzles vary, but they are connected to the content of the advertised media product.

Across Web Sites

This type manifests when a game is developed to occur not just in a Web site clearly related to the media product but also in other Web sites that are linked to the media product by knowledge of the media product. The additional Web sites portray themselves as representing some aspect of the media product's diegesis, typically representing that aspect as if the individual has stepped into the world of the media product by engaging with those Web sites. Often these Web sites resemble Web sites for physical entities that exist in the real world, such as organizations, businesses, nonprofits, individuals' blogs and even media companies.

Across Platforms

At first glance, this type would appear very similar to the previous type, as both rely heavily on the creation of fictional Web sites. However, the distinction for this subset is in the fact that other newer media technologies are brought into the game. These campaigns spread the places the person can find an enhanced experience to other media and communication platforms, encroaching further on the player's media environment and everyday life.

Between Online and Offline

When the campaign does any of the previous tactics and brings the online experience into the physical world, this type appears. These games are constructed to occur across various media platforms that serve as the impetus and information sources for online and offline activities that must be completed individually and/or cooperatively for the game to progress.

A Decade of Gameplay Marketing

The current use of the Internet for marketing television series and films is often traced to the promotional scheme for the horror pseudo-documentary *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999. The first use of an ARG for marketing purposes was when the ARG *The Beast* originated as publicity for *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* in 2001 (Nitsche, 2008): Players sought fictional clues about the film in physical as well as virtual locations and had to collaborate to solve puzzles. Other marketing campaigns followed, using aspects of what was started with *Blair Witch* and *A.I.* These included *S-Men* and *Freakylinks*, from the creators of *Blair Witch,* in 2000; *Alias* in 2002 (see Örnebring, 2007); and *Push, Nevada* in 2002. In 2004, the presence of gameplay marketing campaigns increased (Figure 1). In this paper, I am discussing only four examples that occurred during the period of 2007–2009. As the list below indicates, many films and television series used some type of gameplay marketing strategy before and during that period.

- In 2004: *The Village; The Grudge; I, Robot; Super Size Me; The Manchurian Candidate; National Treasure; Resident Evil: Apocalypse.*
- In 2005: *Lost*.
- In 2006: *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest, Kyle XY, The Fallen, The Da Vinci Code, Mission: Impossible III.*
- In 2007: *The Host*, *The Dark Knight*, *Heroes, Transformers, Cloverfield, Numb3rs, Jericho, Sopranos, Room 401, The 4400, Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles, Smallville.*
- In 2008: *Star Trek, Hancock, Vantage Point, Wall-E, Hellboy II: The Golden Army, Eagle Eye, 2012, Fringe*, *Dollhouse*, *The Prisoner, Leverage*.

- In 2009: *Surrogate, Angels & Demons, District 9, Watchmen, Terminator: Salvation, Monsters vs. Aliens, X-Men Origins: Wolverine, Dragonball: Evolution, Tron: Legacy, Inception, Sherlock Holmes, The Ghost Whisperer, 24, Chuck*.

To show that these campaigns continue, the first half of 2010 saw campaigns for *Super 8, Dexter* and *Repo Men*.

In Figure 1, the chart accounts for only campaigns known up to the end of 2009. This chart does not include television series that have only basic arcade games for their gameplay marketing; those numbers are handled in Figure 2. Regarding the apparent drop-off in television series after 2007, it should be noted that some television series that started their gameplay marketing campaigns in 2007 or earlier continued them for years: the numbers here reflect only when a new campaign started, not how long it lasted. Additionally, this chart is not intended to be comprehensive, illustrative only of the trend for increased use of gameplay marketing strategies for Hollywood television series and films over the past decade.

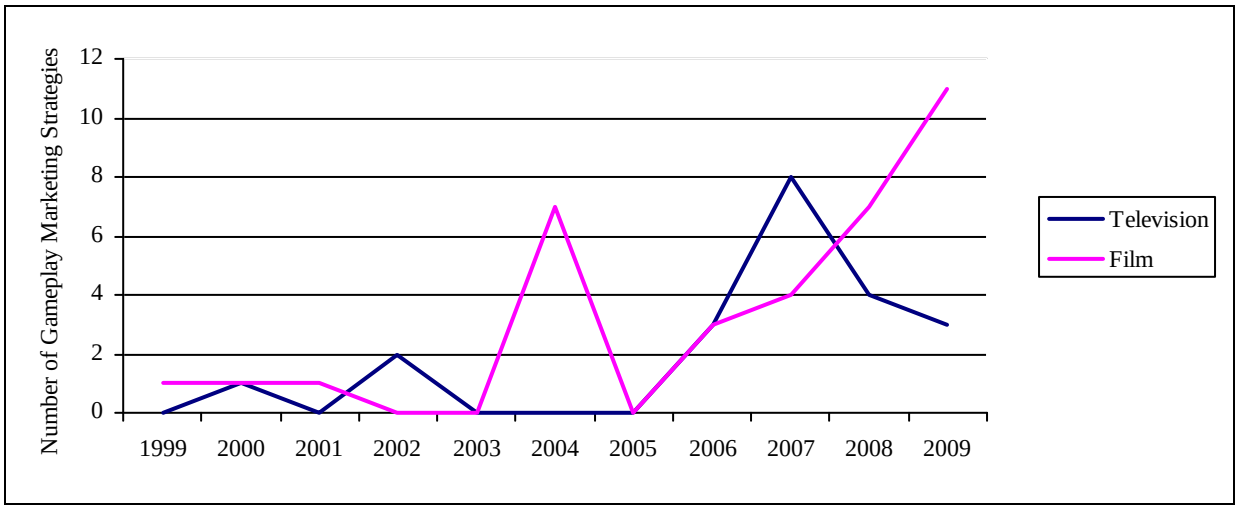

Figure 1. Gameplay Marketing Campaigns for U.S. Television and Films from 1999 to 2009.

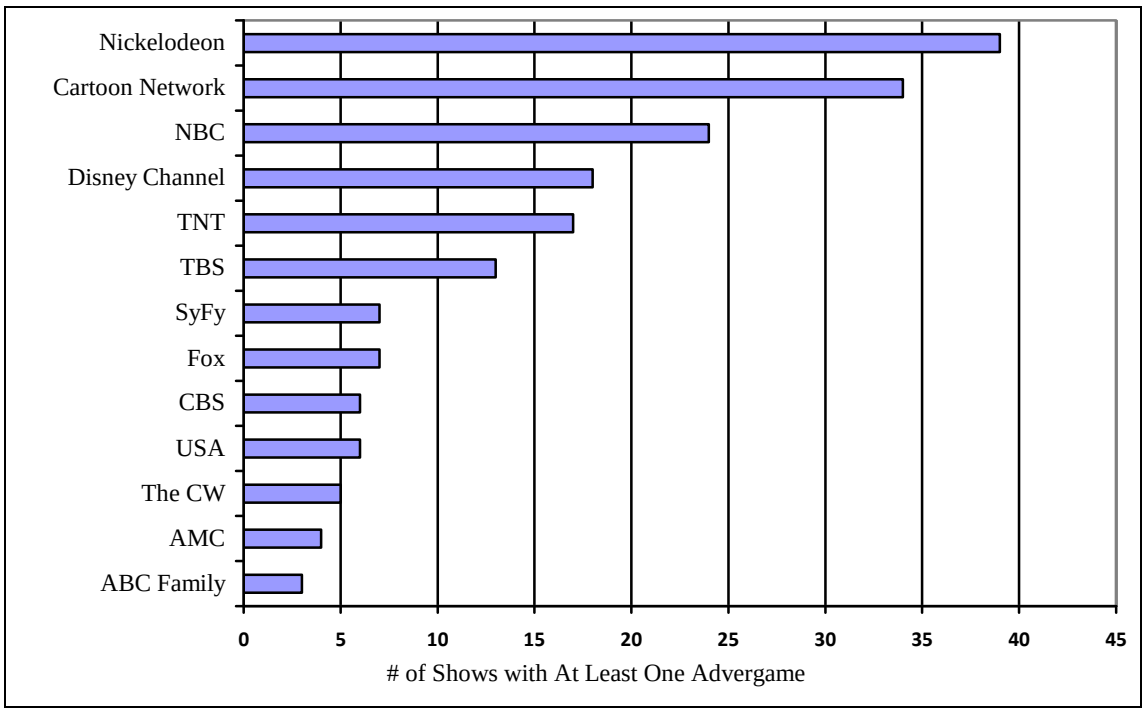

Figure 2. Ranking of Network Web sites with Games to Promote Television Series.

Case Studies

The cases discussed in detail are those that I personally followed during the time span of 2007 to 2009 because I am a fan of the materials being promoted. Although I have engaged with others because of being a fan, these four case studies represent each of the four types of gameplay marketing. I will discuss in more detail how I engaged with each case when it is discussed. Two case studies relate to television series, and two relate to feature films. As an example of marketing within a Web site, the TNT television series *Leverage* is discussed. As an example of marketing across Web sites, the J. J. Abrams film for Paramount *Cloverfield* is discussed. As an example of marketing across platforms, the NBC/Universal television series *Heroes* is discussed. As an example of marketing between online and offline experiences, the Warner Bros. film *The Dark Knight* is discussed.

Within Web site

As of this writing, almost every major American television network, broadcast and cable, that produces some type of original fictional content has online games associated with that content, as seen in Figure 2. The only network for which I could find no online games is ABC. These Web sites have a main link to the games on their home pages, indicating the importance of such activities to the layout and

function of the Web sites. Such games have been a common occurrence on Web sites for children's cable and broadcast programming for years (Rockwell, 2007; White & Preston, 2005). Figure 2 shows, as of mid-2010, how many shows on each network use at least one type of game to promote a television series.

It is this type of gameplay marketing that most closely aligns with the structure and function of advergames. Mostly these games are arcade games, such as puzzle games or quizzes that feature some aspect of the original product's content. Sometimes these games will feature sweepstakes; a game or series of games will provide the basis for a contest. One such contest game was the campaign in which I participated.

I began watching the TNT television series *Leverage* from the first episode in December 2008; I have been a loyal viewer since, using iTunes to follow the series while abroad. When *Leverage* premiered, TNT promoted the series with a sweepstakes game called *Leverage HQ* that ran for the first season of the show, ending February 25, 2009. Through television commercials that were broadcast during the series, the audience was invited to log on to http://www.leveragehq.com to complete a series of puzzles designed to reflect the characters and plot of the series.

As the series focused on a group of criminals who work to help people fight back against corrupt businesses, organizations and individuals, each game had the players try to master the skill of one of the characters: thieving, stealth, technology, con, and mastermind. In Figure 3, I played a game based on the thief character and her penchant to scale buildings, which led me to properly calculate jumps from a building and memorize the layouts of rooms as I descended.

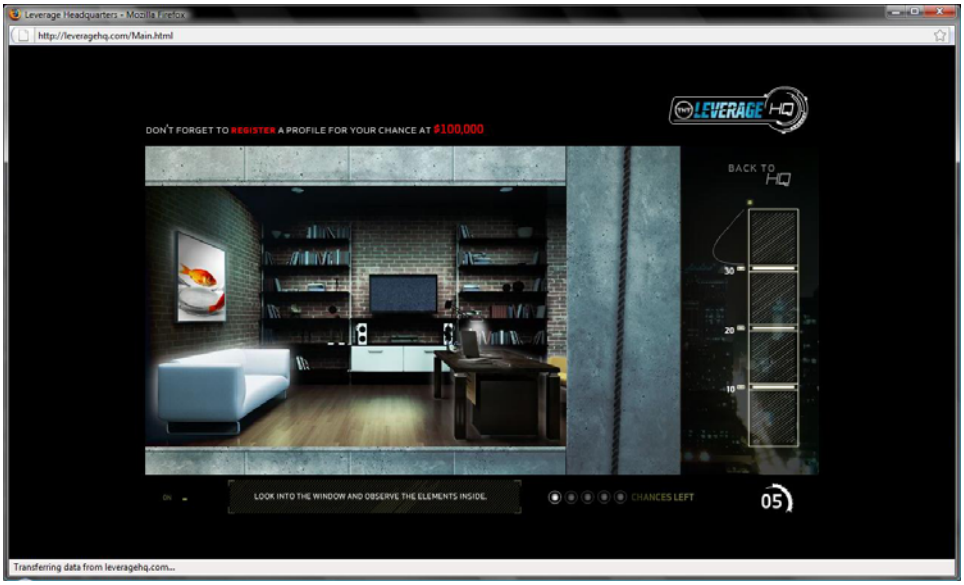

Figure 3. Example of Advergame Used to Market TNT Series Leverage.

These games were housed within a virtual replication of the office used as the characters' headquarters during that first season. The contest ran for 10 weeks, with a new mission, or game, revealed after each week's episode. The completion of each game would uncover a clue in the headquarters that revealed how to collect a grand prize of $100,000. Every week there was also a trivia contest in which the audience had to answer a question about that week's episode for a chance to be entered to win other prizes; weekly cash prizes were $2,000. I competed but, alas, I never won.

Since that initial sweepstakes game, the show has had two other seasons, without a repeat of the contest. Instead, the *Leverage HQ* game continues by offering the missions for people to complete, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Home Page for TNT Series Leverage After Contest.

The game was joined by a quiz and a memory recall game that are similar to the other basic arcade games found for other television shows across the network Web sites listed above.

What this campaign demonstrates is a more complex form of the advergames. The initial game consisted of a series of puzzle games, each of which could have been a separate advergame except that the overall structure of the game was a contest. Since the initial sweepstakes, the games associated with this show became more standard advergames: they offer an affective experience of further engaging with the television content the player originally found enjoyable. The goal would primarily be to maintain audience loyalty by providing viewers with more enjoyable ways of furthering their relationship with the content. A secondary goal may be the hope that people surfing TNT's Web site may find these games enjoyable enough to warrant moving from Web browser to regular viewer.

Across Web Sites

This next case study could also be considered a more complicated, greatly expanded advergame as it occurred over several Web sites. The Paramount feature film *Cloverfield* produced a campaign I followed on my blog because I was there from the beginning of the buzz, a teaser trailer that premiered in front of the June 2007 DreamWorks/Paramount feature *Transformers*. In the beginning, there was no name for this film; the trailer had only a release date of January 18, 2008, and the name of an established fan favorite, J. J. Abrams, the creator of *Alias* and *Lost*. Like others who saw that trailer that day, I wanted to know what it was all about. The trailer did its job of energizing fans of Abrams' work, as the Internet was soon abuzz with speculation and attempts to find spoilers. By the time Abrams revealed more information a month later at the annual comic book and popular arts convention, Comic-Con 2007, it was known to be a monster movie with various tentative titles circulated to confuse potential spoiler spies.

I attended Comic-Con 2007, where Paramount had an official presentation at which the teaser trailer was played again and the official posters were unveiled. No information about the story was released other than confirmation of the premise of people surviving a monster attack, as indicated in the teaser trailer. Everyone who attended that presentation received a swag bag full of materials to promote upcoming Paramount products. However, one gray T-shirt, with the logo for a health drink company called Slusho!, did not match any of the presentations. After the convention, I found out online, through various sources, that there was a Web site for a fictional Japanese company at www.slusho.jp, shown in Figure 5.

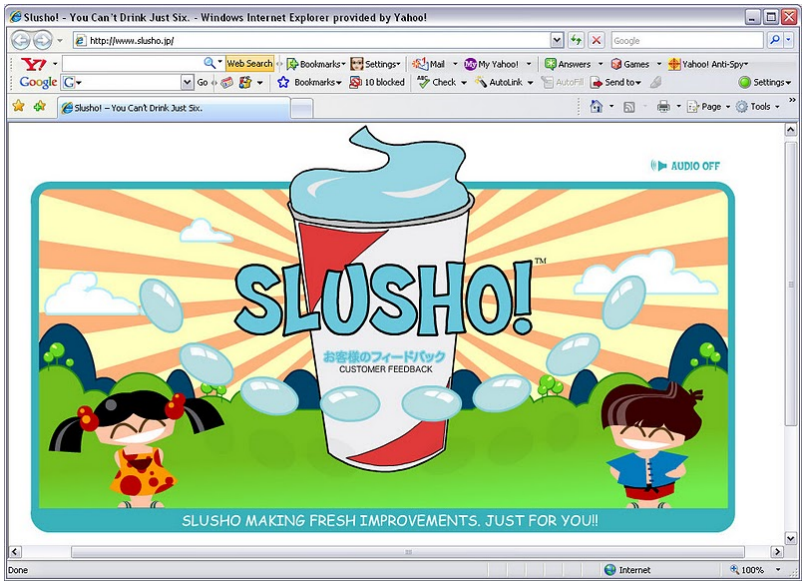

Figure 5. First Web site Involved in Marketing Cloverfield.

It took fans going online, talking to one another, and searching for the link to reveal that the drink being advertised was once referenced in an episode of Abrams' *Alias*. Still, knowing that Slusho! was connected to this upcoming movie did not reveal anything about the final product.

Around that time, the official Web site for the film was launched, www.1-18-08.com; the name referenced the release date, at the time the official title of the film. This Web site slowly gathered images from the movie, as seen in Figure 6, of people panicking, of damage, and so forth, images that could be moved around the screen but nothing more.

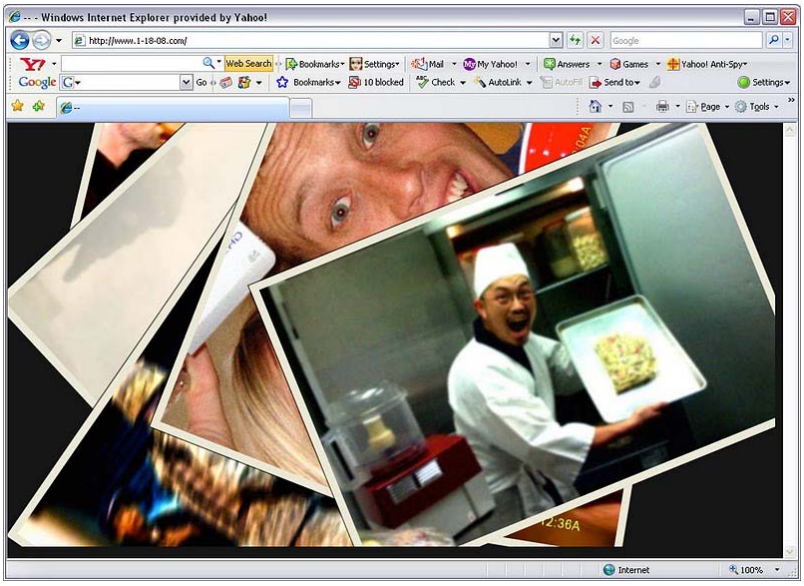

Figure 6. Official Web site Released for Marketing Cloverfield.

By the middle of that fall, an audio clip of the monster's roar could be heard on the Web site—as long as viewers didn't manipulate the images on the screen. The presence of this audio clip was not officially released; it could be learned only through fansites and spoiler sites, such as AICN.com, where I learned of it.

During the fall, these two sites slowly put out more information, but nothing as substantial as revealing the nature of the monster. By November, the Slusho! site revealed that the company had a new distributor, the Tagruato Corporation, which had its own site www.tagruato.jp, seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Web Site for Fictitious Company Involved in Marketing Cloverfield.

The company claimed to be an underwater research firm. Fans were left pondering this new information. Even the release of the official trailer in front of the Paramount feature *Beowulf* in November revealed only the official name of the film.

As the release date drew nearer, the official site revealed more photos, but it was the connection through the Tagruato Corporation that revealed more hints about the final product; that is, it revealed the information if viewers knew where to look online for it, or if someone else had already found it. Several fake news stories from different countries were put online to cover an accident at a Tagruato offshore drilling platform, an attack that careful viewers could see was the work of some monster, as the same roar was heard. Another Web site, for the activist group T.I.D.O., purported to reveal secret experimental work being done by Tagruato.

All such activities led to the release of the film, on January 18, 2008. Typically, an advergame exists within one medium: a Web site, a console system, et cetera. Abrams and Paramount created an advergame that spanned various Web sites specifically created for the marketing, similar to Abrams' work promoting his television series *Lost* (see Ross, 2008). Additionally, the puzzle nature of the game generated cooperative activity by consumers across still more Web sites. However, while the players could work together, it was not required for them to do so to solve the puzzle; instead, someone learned some information and passed it along. This means the marketing campaign was not an ARG. Like the *Leverage HQ* sweepstakes, it was an expanded advergame that created an atmosphere of inquisitiveness.

Across Platforms

The next case study is a campaign that involved many strategies during its course (Reinhard, 2008; 2009). What I focus on here is another hybrid campaign that uses elements of advergames and ARGs. As with *Cloverfield*, a variety of fictional company and organization Web sites were created. Unlike *Cloverfield's* campaign, this one used media technologies besides Web sites.

Because I am a fan of superheroes, I was there from the beginning with the NBC/Universal television series *Heroes.* I started going to NBC's Web site for the series when I heard about comic books created to expand upon the superhuman characters. NBC was diligent in the creation of this official Web site to be the premiere site for fan activities regarding consumption of *Heroes* (Woodson, 2007). Through this Web site, the producers provided consumers with a variety of activities: message boards, space to display fanart, comic books, and various sweepstakes.

Then came *Heroes: Evolution,* a game that constructed various Web sites for entities and corporations in the series, as well as the use of e-mail and Short Message Service (SMS) to send instructions to players to accomplish online tasks. As they were with *Cloverfield*, the satellite Web sites were connected to various aspects of the series: a paper company; a Las Vegas casino, as seen in Figure 8; a minor character's blog; and some research initiatives.

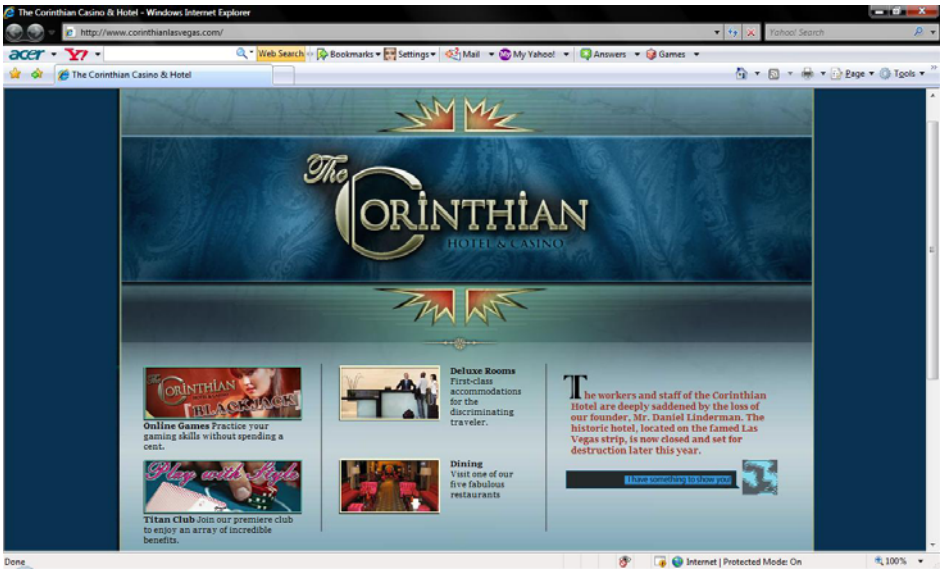

Figure 8. Example of Fictitious Organization Web site Involved in Marketing Heroes.

There were a series of puzzles across these sites, where enthusiastic consumer/players could learn more about the universe of the show by arranging the pieces and putting them together. The data provided were not spoilers for the show as much as they were spoilers for the expanded universe: new Web sites, new online characters, and so forth. During the hiatus caused by the 2009 strike by the Writers

Guild of America, these online activities were intensified to provide the loyal fan with a weekly "fix" of a new experience with the object of affection, as doled out by the producers.

All of these satellite sites are accessible from the official Web site created by NBC, which was not the case with *Cloverfield*. However, this was not the only avenue to these sites. When I signed up for the experience, I started to receive e-mail and text messages from a secondary character from the show alerting me to what actions needed to be taken in the game. From October 2007 through May 2008, I received 33 text messages from "46622," the code for the secondary character Hana Gitelman, asking me to do various activities online. I received e-mails with nearly the same requests. At the end of the series, the e-mails were sent by "Rebel," a character who initially appeared in the show only via networked technologies like phones and the Internet. Using Rebel to connect the canon and the expanded experience helped to create an immersive experience for fans who perhaps, on some level, wished they could become part of the series.

Additionally, in the fall of 2009, NBC attempted to colonize a virtual world. Habbo.com operates within standard Internet browsers and represents itself as a virtual world primarily targeted toward and populated by teenagers; marketing in this world was an attempt to reach a very specific demographic. As seen in Figure 9, the marketing focused on creating a group that Habbo residents could join to receive powers like those of characters on the television series.

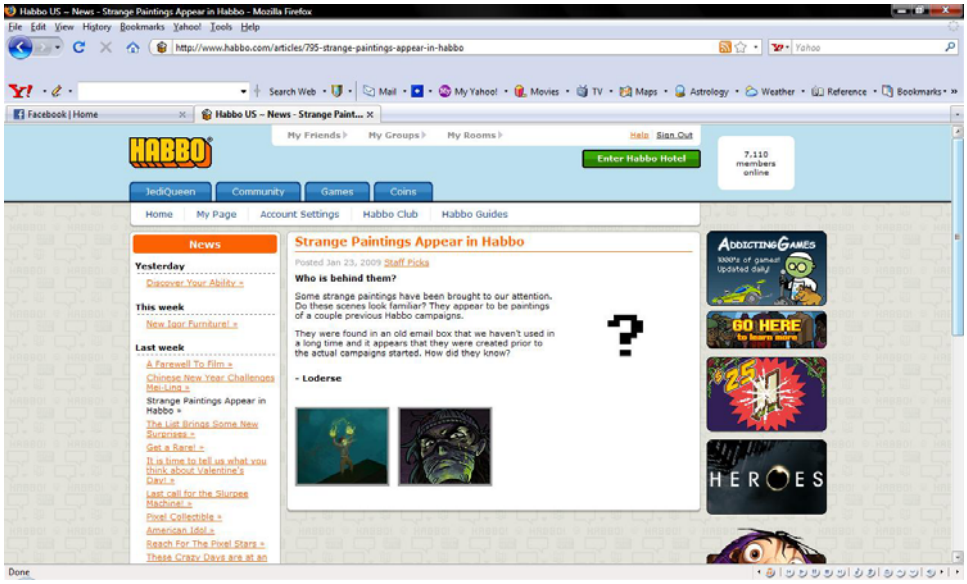

Figure 9. Utilization of Virtual World for Marketing Heroes.

A character was created in the virtual world to be the face of NBC's *Heroes*, and there was an attempt to tie its activities to the series by having the same mysterious paintings from the show appearing around the world of Habbo. However, compared to the other online activities created for this marketing campaign, less was accomplished in Habbo. Yet the fact that NBC attempted to market in this platform

indicates how this strategy attempted to maximize the locations through which it could reach its target audience.

Given the number and type of activities associated with this marketing campaign, *Heroes: Evolution* was decidedly more than a traditional advergame; the level of desired immersion was far greater because of the use of multiple communication platforms to encroach on the everyday lives of the players. However, the campaign was not a true ARG for the same reasons *Cloverfield* was not. First, the puzzle did not necessitate cooperative activity in order for the game to be advanced. Second, there was no inducement of actions in the physical world; all activity, although perhaps initiated by e-mail and mobile phone, occurred through Web sites. *Heroes: Evolution*, then, was just a more complicated, more encompassing gameplay marketing campaign than the one done for *Cloverfield*—and given that NBC had years over which to unfold its marketing campaign, the complexity makes sense.

Between Online and Offline

The final case study is a campaign that does align with de rigueur of ARGs. As I did with the campaign for *Cloverfield*, I followed the campaign for *The Dark Knight* on my blog from its inception, having been alerted to it by a news story on AICN.com. I did this because I am a Batman fan, going back to my childhood. Having greatly enjoyed what director Christopher Nolan did with the character in *Batman Begins*, and knowing that my favorite super-villain, the Joker, was being represented in this film, I was anxious to learn everything I could about it.

What separated this campaign from *Cloverfield's* was the requirement for cooperative activity, online and offline, to reveal information about the film, such as official images and trailers. The campaign encapsulated the three intertwining storylines of the film as a way to reveal information about these storylines. The first front of the campaign focused on the film's portrayal of the seminal super-villain, the Joker; the second front focused on the election of district attorney Harvey Dent; the third front focused on the social ambiguity of the superhero, Batman. As in the movie, each focus intertwined with the others in the overall complex virtual world created for this film, but for simplicity here, each is treated separately.

The Joker front[2]*:* The campaign began in May 2007, with the Web site www.ibelieveinharveydent.com, on which was nothing more than an image of actor Aaron Eckhart as Harvey Dent in an election poster. At that time, there had been no official studio release of any images for this film beside that of Batman in his updated suit. A few days later this Web site morphed into www.ibelieveinharveydenttoo.com, where the image of Harvey was vandalized with the black eyes and red smile of the Joker. Below this image was an e-mail request field. Upon entering my address, I received an e-mail with a code and was directed back to the site. After I entered my code, one pixel from the Dent poster was removed, as shown in Figure 10.

[2] More images of Joker-inspired activity can be found at this photo collection, http://picasaweb.google.com/ijedi7/ExamplesOfGameplayMarketing?feat=directlink, as well as examples from other gameplay marketing campaigns.

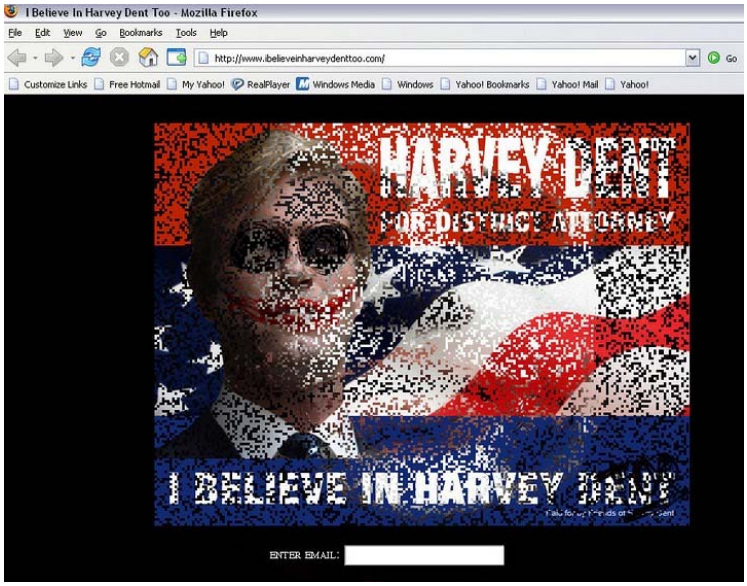

Figure 10. First Cooperative Activity for Marketing The Dark Knight.

After thousands of others entered codes, the first official image of actor Heath Ledger as the Joker was revealed. This was the first of many online and offline activities the Joker would call upon his henchmen, the moniker under which they were recruited, to perform.

The first offline activity occurred at Comic-Con that July. On Friday morning, I saw people walking around with the same face make-up as Heath Ledger in the image. They were asking people to join them and handing out fake dollar bills with George Washington's face similarly painted. It was not until later that day I found out why. They were told to go to a Web site, www.whysoserious.com, which had a fake police report about the Joker terrorizing Comic-Con to recruit accomplices, complete with a fake Joker arriving in a limousine. The activities of the conventioneers revealed the official teaser trailer for the film. That Web site subsequently changed into www.rent-a-clown.com to show the images of all those who participated in this activity. This occurred during the Warner Bros. presentation inside the San Diego Convention Center—a presentation in which there was no official information from Warner Bros. about the film.

After Comic-Con, there were numerous Joker-related activities that revealed more images, posters, trailers, film clips and even tickets for an IMAX screening of the first six minutes of the film. All these activities were initiated through some variation of the www.whysoserious.com site or by finding other Web sites deformed by the Joker, such as The Gotham Times newspaper site, shown in Figure 11, and even a site sponsored by Domino's Pizza called Gotham City Pizzeria.

Figure 11. Example of the Joker-Inspired Activity for Marketing The Dark Knight.

The Joker asked his henchmen to perform various activities in the physical world, from taking pictures of themselves as his henchmen at certain places in select cities to retrieving special cakes that contained cellphones for later instructions. Some of these online requests can still be seen at the archival Web site http://whysoserious.com/.

The Dent Front: In November 2007, with the Web site www.wearetheanswer.org, marketing began for the second main storyline, focusing on the rise of Harvey Dent as district attorney and setting up his fall as the criminal Two-Face. The Dent front was focused on electing Harvey to that position on a platform of fighting corrupt cops in the Gotham Police Department. Initially, the campaign focused on involving people to support this crusade of Dent. Activities revolved around Web sites such as www.gpdiad.com and e-mails of support for ferreting out crooked cops. My support for this campaign resulted in my receiving a phone call from a rather agitated man who wanted me to cease my support for Harvey or else. This cross-technology approach would be fundamental to the Dent front, as I subsequently received several phone calls, two of which I recorded for posterity.

In the beginning of February 2008, the focus shifted to electing Harvey with the relaunch of www.ibelieveinharveydent.com, shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Example of Harvey Dent-Inspired Activity for Marketing The Dark Knight.

This site became an "official" campaign Web site, mirroring the real Web sites of those involved in the United States presidential primary race happening concurrently. Dent's site supplied campaign material and asked supporters from around the country to upload pictures and videos showing their support for Harvey's campaign. As seen in Figure 13, people were invited to meet various "Dentmobiles" that toured specific cities around the nation to hold rallies to support Harvey.

Figure 13. Example of Harvey Dent-Inspired Activity for Marketing The Dark Knight.

All of these activities were designed to help Harvey defeat his opponents and naysayers, who had their own Web sites, such as www.ccfabg.org and www.maidenavenuereport.com. At the end of the "political campaign," before the film premiered, the elections for district attorney, as well as other Gotham public offices and propositions, were completed online, and it should be no surprise that Harvey won the election, directly leading into the story of the film.

The Batman Front: Although there were sites focusing on the titular hero, such as Citizen's For Batman (www.citizensforbatman.org), since the beginning, it was not until the end of the Dent campaign that Batman received more scrutiny. On June 16, 2008, *The Gotham Times* newspaper, in its third edition, put the story of Batman on the front page, as seen in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Example of Batman-Inspired Activity for Marketing The Dark Knight.

The fictional cable news network Gotham Cable News (www.gothamcablenews.com), sponsored by the real Comcast Cable, produced a series of videos for the *Gotham Tonight with Mike Engel Show,* which was also featured in the film, to report on how Batman broke up a mob attempt to thwart the Dent election. However, both of these news outlets focused on a question that has often been discussed in the Batman canon: Is the superhero a threat to be arrested or a savior to be praised? This question would be a central theme for the film.

Of the case studies discussed, the gameplay marketing campaign for *The Dark Knight* was distinctly structured to replicate ARGs. First, there were online clues that prompted offline actions to solve the puzzle, all of which were controlled by the unseen forces of the puppet master, personified as the Joker or Harvey Dent but actually 42 Entertainment and Warner Bros. Second, there was the need for cooperative activities, either online or offline, to solve the puzzles. One person alone could perhaps play

some of the advergames and Web site puzzles, but other activities required people working around the world and around the clock. More than the expanded experiences of *Leverage HQ, Cloverfield,* and *Heroes: Evolution*, the experience with *The Dark Knight* was the attempt to re-create virtually the world of the film, to bring to life online entities fans may wish they could engage with in real life.

Analytical Discussion

Bogost (2007) would call any digital game a "persuasive game" if it effectively used procedural rhetorics to market some product or service. With these gameplay marketing cases, I would add to his definition the marketing of some idea or experience. In these examples, it was not just the film or television series being promoted; it was the experience of engaging with the fictional diegesis more intensely than is possible when watching a film or television series. Bogost (2007) focuses on games that strive to "move the player from the game world into the material world" (p. 47). These games did not do that. Instead, they were extensions of the virtual world that people were invited to step into before, during and after engaging with the fictional diegesis. However, I would argue these are still persuasive games. From the perspective of the producers, the designers of the games, the goal is to persuade the player to consider positively the world with which he or she engages. The goal is to generate and/or maintain buzz, which could be used to spread the message about the film or television series beyond the consumer/player of the game.

These marketing campaigns use newer, interactive media to enhance an individual's experience with a media product that traditionally is non-interactive (Ross, 2008). The producers structure virtual spaces, both online and offline, to become places of playing and pleasure. It is hoped that this pleasure will translate into buzz that is then spread virally to actual and potential audiences (Ross, 2008). As Rosen (2000) indicates in his analysis of what makes buzz work, the more actively engaged the potential consumers are with the product, the more likely they will spread buzz on that product, thereby increasing the likelihood that the product will successfully diffuse within the consumer base. Using this logic, the more interesting the game and tantalizing the rewards, the more likely the consumers will want to spread their interest and "infect" their fellows to participate with them, thereby hastening the outcome of the campaign and helping to spread the enthusiasm for the media product. In this way, the consumer/players help to construct the campaign by spreading the buzz.

In other words, the goal of these campaigns is to co-opt audience activity to spread buzz (Cover, 2004; 2006; Deuze, 2007; Siapera, 2004). The idea is to use what fans and active audiences already do—talk about upcoming and existing media products—to help the industry ensure a reliable consumer-base to sell to advertisers. Instead of the traditional transmission model, in which the media industry attempts to push products onto the masses, in this approach the consumers are recruited to spread the message. The intent is for such marketing strategies to become invisible, to create an "obscured invitation" (Ross, 2008) that people in the audience spread around because they find the content interesting, not because they desire to persuade their friends and family; persuasion is a side effect, even if it is the desired result for producers.

For example, consider the way word was spread in *The Dark Knight* campaign. Fans of Batman were mobilized to perform a number of activities over more than a year in order to receive information about a movie many were highly anticipating, myself included. The campaign proceeded to expand the universe that began in the first movie from these producers, *Batman Begins*. However, the expansion was not a unilateral transmission of information, or spoilers, from producers to consumers. Instead it urged highly active consumers to complete various puzzles, which encouraged these players to energize others to hasten the achievement. What resulted were various fansites, blogs and message boards that lit up with fans' conversations with one another as they shared information about the puzzles and the means to complete them. The activities produced a feeling of engagement with the final product in a novel way as seen by the consumers, and yet in a predictable and controlled way as seen by the producers. However, Batman fans would have seen the film regardless of a campaign designed to co-opt their affection for it; director Christopher Nolan had earned their respect with his first film, *Batman Begins*. The marketing campaign was designed to capitalize on these fans, but they were the ones most likely to see the movie without it. The question is, then, why take this approach at all?

The answer may lie in the blurring of boundaries between what is real and what is virtual and between who is a producer and who a consumer.

Increasingly, players of digital games want greater immersion in reality itself, into a type of psychological realism in which the boundary between what is real and what is not is blurred (McGonigal, 2007). Blurring the line between real and virtual represents an interesting post-modern account of our lives. Nolan, in making *Batman Begins*, highlighted his desire to make the character and the universe more realistic. Perhaps in keeping with this desire for realism, the fictional city of Gotham was given realistic Web sites for what would be real services, such as banks, railways, travel agents, ferries, and cable news outlets, to further the sense that this Gotham was a real place, just as real as any other community that provides connections to such public services online. In this sense, Gotham stepped out of the comic books and into our modern notion of reality, which is increasingly mediated through our interactions with virtual entities instead of physical ones.

The construction of realistic Web sites for fake companies and people occurred in all four case studies. The gameplay marketing campaigns discussed here produced simulacra, manifestations of realities that do not and cannot exist in the physical world of consumers. Producers of gameplay marketing campaigns have taken some aspect of the fictional world displayed in a television series or film and expanded it across cyberspace and even into the physical world, to heighten the sense of this fictional world's being real by enveloping the consumer in it. By being as real, the media products have become more real than reality (Bogost, 2007). Again, the question is why.

In the media environment in which these campaigns arose, consumers have become aware of what advertisers and advertisements want of them: "to get them to buy, not to answer their needs" (Bogost, 2007, p. 150). Such awareness has led advertisers to experiment with new forms of advertising. Marketing professional Seth Godin invented "permission marketing"; instead of a linear transmission of an advertisement forced onto the consumer, the advertiser attempts to have the consumer ask for the advertisement (Bogost, 2007). Since Godin's remarks, as cited by Bogost, viral marketing has become

increasingly popular among advertisers, and it synergizes with permission marketing: Along with getting asking for the advertisement, the consumer is encouraged to send it along to the next consumer. The consumer becomes a resource for the producer in the spreading of the message.

With these marketing campaigns, it was the consumer's choice to engage or not; the consumer could choose to play in this expanded experience. In games, players have some control for, although they must follow the rules from the designers, it is their interpretations and performances of these rules that dictate the game's progress and their overall experience with it (McGonigal, 2007). These gameplay marketing campaigns, by giving some control to the success of the campaign to the consumers, are at least partly reliant upon the agency of the consumers. The players may be playing a game, but they are also playing with the notions of what it means to be consumers and what their relationship to producers is.

Traditionally, the power relationship between consumers and producers has been seen as imbalanced in favor of producers. The audience-as-commodity conceptualization of this relationship saw a linear transmission, in which the consumers were considered cogs in capitalism's system of production and consumption, a system the producers were controlling by creating the media products and using them to sell consumers to advertisers for profit (McQuail, 1997; Meehan, 2007; Nightingale, 2004; Smythe, 1977; Webster, 1998). With the emergence of media technologies, such as VHS and the Internet, that gave more control to the consumers about what, where and when they watch, academics were quick to celebrate the new conceptualization, audience-as-agent (Webster, 1998), while producers were more reluctant; the rise of fan production, file-sharing and spoilers were initially met with court orders to cease and desist (Reinhard, 2009).

However, this trend of gameplay marketing campaigns signals that we may be seeing the emergence of a new conceptualization of this relationship. Audience-as-transmitter emerges from the recognition of an active audience as a requirement in a crowded marketplace with newer interactive media (Kotler, 1986), combined with the ever-present need of the industry to create and maintain a loyal and reliable consumer base (Meehan, 2000; Ross, 2008). Transmitters can be active or passive objects through which something is communicated. From the audience-as-agent construct, an active audience produces enthusiastic energy and cultural capital that may either propel or derail a media product. From the audience-as-commodity construct, the industry must have some level of control over the consumers of their products in order to ensure revenue. The synthesis of these factors is seen in how some in the industry have begun to experiment with methods of harvesting audience activities for their own benefit. Through their actions, consciously or unconsciously for the goal of spreading the producers' advertising message, consumers become the transmitter through which the producers' goals are achieved.

The overall process of gameplay marketing is the use of players to spread the marketing campaign forward and outward to other potential consumers. In order for such a tactic to work, the producers have to willingly give up some power, some control, over the progression of the marketing by providing the space for consumers to play with what the producers have given them. However, the producers are in control of the power they are giving up, as they are not when dealing with online illegal

file-sharing. Thus, although there is recognition of the consumers' agency and a reliance on this agency for their own desires, the entire system is under the aegis of the producers.

The power relationship may be less tipped in favor of the producers but, at least with these gameplay marketing campaigns, it has not yet completely balanced out.

Conclusions

Fictional films and television series, as narratives, have always been about creating virtual worlds and inviting people into them through watching. Although it may be an active interpretive activity, watching is a passive physical activity. Now, with these gameplay marketing campaigns extending where, when, and how consumers can engage with these narratives, they are being asked to play in, with, and through these virtual worlds. Physical activity has become as actively required as interpretive activity: Indeed, without consumer/players doing something to further the virtual world, the marketing campaign could fail. But this new requirement brings up at least two fundamental questions. What does it mean for the consumer, and for producer, that consumers/players perform these actions that the producers capitalize on? And what does it say about their relationship to each other?

With gameplay marketing, producers are actively encouraging consumers to play with and in the virtual spaces they have created to promote their television series or films. Consumers are encouraged to participate in contests, to solve puzzles that take them across the Internet and around the world, and to even play with the notion of what is real and what is fictional. Producers encourage playing by creating marketing strategies that contain game features in their structure, with the goal that such playing would foster pleasure and goodwill, and would spread interest in the game. Activity required of the consumer could potentially represent a new way of conceptualizing the audience not just as a commodity or an agent but as a resource. The audience could become the means by which the message spreads as the producers use the consumers/players to move their product to as many potential consumers as possible.

Future research directions could further understanding of this new power relationship and what is involved in seeing the audience-as-transmitter. With the co-optation of audience activity present in these marketing campaigns, issues of exploitation, copyright infringement, and creative and intellectual property are raised. NBC/Universal requires a waiver, or terms of use agreement, for fans to post their *Heroes* creations; it gives the producers permission to use the fans' productions for their own purposes. This is one example of how the legal nature of copyrights clashes with the creative property of fans, inviting concerns of exploiting fans' good intentions and affections for the show to further their own economic interests. Theories such as hegemony can be applied to this relationship, and the position of people as active or passive in the cooptation is likewise applicable to theorizing this relationship.

Are the consumers aware of their being exploited and thus by their participation accepting it? To what extent are people aware of the machinations of the media industry and, if they are aware, does the knowledge affect their participation? Most players do not attend to the design of the game; they stay on the level of the fantasy world created by the game's design and their actions (Nitsche, 2008). Unless

something disrupts this immersion, why would they attend to the structure? Such questions could be answered by combining audience reception studies and political economic studies.

Research of the audience-as-commodity has tended to be purview of political economists who document structure and activities of the media industry to manufacture products and audiences (Meehan, 2007). The tendency to study the audience-as-agent through ethnographies and interviews has been the critical/cultural approach to understanding the resistance to and/or acceptance of the media industry and its messages (Meehan, 2000). The rise of the audience-as-transmitter calls for the unification of these two approaches to understand the actions of both the media industry and the people. Such a marriage of political economical and critical/cultural approaches have been called for by some (Murdoch, 2000), mirroring the call for understanding the intersection of the text and the user to understand sense-making processes by others (Reinhard & Dervin, 2010; Livingstone, 1990).

Gameplay marketing campaigns are phenomena that would benefit from close reads of the texts used in the campaign, ethnographic analysis of the consumers and structural analysis of the producers. Studying this new terrain would also bring us closer to understanding the power (im)balance that occurs between producers and consumers. With the newer media, the chasm that has separated media producers and media consumers in time and space is quickly disappearing. Phenomena such as these gameplay marketing campaigns are only one way the chasm is being filled. Understanding these campaigns, and similar fields of tension between producers and consumers, would help us to understand what steps to take next in studying audiences and the media industry, and educating each about the other.

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